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Peace, Mediation and Reconciliation: The Belgian experience

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It is a great pleasure to be here today to talk about the subject of Peace, Mediation and Reconciliation. The Belgian Experience. I would rather say, a Belgian experience. Minister Michel mentioned in his opening address indeed several examples of Belgian involvement in the field of peace, mediation and reconciliation. But it is true that our experience in Central Africa, what we call the Great Lakes region, is certainly the most intensive one. Where we are faced with an African regional war, with several countries directly involved and many rebel and armed groups, working as “proxies” of involved neighbouring states.

The government’s objectives in the Great Lakes are two-fold. The first priority is to support the efforts of individual countries to foster peace and stability. Secondly, Belgium wants to encourage the involvement of the international community in the peace process in Central Africa. Current policy was set out two years ago in the Action Plan for the Region of the Great Lakes and in the objectives of the Belgian Presidency of the European Council. It focuses on the following three areas:

- Sustaining the ongoing peace process in the DR Congo and Burundi, in order to contribute to regional stability.
- Building a law based state, with the support of civil society and international co-operation.
- Furthering economic and social development.

Before sharing with you some of the guiding principles and lessons of Belgian involvement in the different peace processes in the Great Lakes region, I think it is important to ask the question why for three, four years now, Africa has been at the centre of Belgian diplomatic efforts. I read in an article that Norwegians say they have been propelled in their peace efforts by a heritage of Lutheran missionary work and socialist idealism. I don’t think this is the case for Belgium...

From the start, this government and Minister of foreign affairs Louis Michel in particular have made considerable efforts to build a “new relationship” with our former colonial territories. The message that was given was the following: our commitment is an honest one without hidden agenda. Our only goal is the well being of the population. Strictly spoken, Belgium no longer has any vital interests to protect in Central Africa, even in the Democratic Republic of Congo, despite its potential riches. But Belgium is convinced that it has a moral responsibility to demonstrate solidarity with the region in Africa it knows best and where it still has numerous ties. Is this a recognition that Belgium is responsible for all that is going wrong in its former colonies 40 years after

independence? Certainly not. But as Minister Michel often says, there is a strong feeling that we owe these countries something.

Belgium's present involvement with Central Africa is strictly impartial. We have links with every government in the region, and with respective opposition groups; with a view to creating genuine open dialogue.

An essential element in the building of this new relationship of "partnership", partnership in working together towards peace, is that you are ready to admit past mistakes, so that relations with former colonial territories can move forward. In April 2001 Prime Minister Verhofstadt and Minister Michel undertook a visit to Rwanda, seven years after the genocide, and formally acknowledged that Belgium had not done enough to prevent the genocide from happening. This made it possible for bilateral relations to start afresh, working together to build a better future. The investigative parliamentary commission into the death of Patrice Lumumba also showed that Belgium is no longer trying to evade the dark episodes of its past.

Why a State invests so much energy without direct vital interest? This is not an easy question. I referred already to the ethical dimension. This can hardly be underestimated. One finds the three countries far down on the human development list. So they deserve our support. On the long term, one could expect Belgian firms participating in the reconstruction of the region. The proximity that still exists between this region and Belgium is another important factor. The African diaspora in Belgium, the Belgian networks in Central Africa, although weakened the last ten years, Belgian expertise in all fields, make that Belgium can pretend to play the number one in the Central African dossiers and to be the motor of the international community. This is an important responsibility but let's be realistic: Africa as a whole, and the Great Lakes region in particular, is so marginalized in international politics, that you need countries to take the lead in order to draw interest of the international community to the region.

So we get something more than satisfaction out of our deeds. When Central Africa is debated, Belgium is listened to (and there are not many items where Belgian diplomacy can have such a high profile). When Minister Michel went to New York last February to discuss Iraq with the UNSG, Kofi Annan seemed more interested in hearing Michel's conclusions of his latest trip in the region. Or when Belgium, in the middle of a transatlantic row over Iraq, convenes a meeting of the contact group on Congo, US, British and French partners come on short notice to Brussels.

That for some underlying principles of our policy.

I would like to highlight now some more methodological principles that relate as well to the internal Belgian setting as to our relations with external partners.

Internal aspects

To be effective, Belgium's Africa policy will require broad domestic political support. To this end regular briefings are organised in parliament and a number of members of parliament are invited to take part in missions to the region.

Another important condition for an effective policy is that Belgium must be able to intervene across a whole range of areas; you need indeed a variety of tools. A comprehensive approach is necessary. Energetic political and diplomatic action may be essential to kick-start the different parties in the peace process. But these will come to nothing without funds for preventive diplomacy, international development co-operation, financial and even military co-operation that may be needed to support and consolidate the peace process. Therefore you need a high level of coherence in your policy covering the different ministerial departments.

External aspects

Coherence at the international level is even so necessary. Belgium cannot and doesn't want to solve the problems in Central Africa single-handedly. We want to be an engine for international action in the region. And we see our natural partners as the African actors (not only the nations), the African Union; the European Union, and the United Nations.

The Belgian government believes that a combination of internal coherence leading to a comprehensive approach and external co-operation is necessary to achieve real progress. I would like to illustrate now this two-track approach: comprehensive action in co-operation with partners.

Who are our partners?

(Africa)

Let us consider first of all Africa. It goes without saying that Belgium stays in close contact with all the countries in the region that are involved in the peace process. But this alone is not enough. It is evident that solutions to solve a conflict cannot be imposed from outside. Because of their local knowledge and expertise, African partners are often in the best position to push complex dossiers forward. Peace and mediation efforts will not be effective unless it is based on Africa's own experience and capacity to respond to crisis. On the other hand, the Belgian government does not believe that the principle of African ownership should be interpreted too literally; in other words, it may not be an excuse for doing nothing. On the contrary, it gives to both parties a great responsibility. Also on the African side, there is a case for a multilateral approach. During the latest African National Congress (ANC) conference at the end of 2002, for example, Thabo Mbeki appealed to the United Nations "to live up to its mandate, and impose the obligation on ourselves to respect its decisions".

In order to be fully credible, this African commitment needs to be supported on a broader basis. In September 2001, for example, Belgium demonstrated

its “engagement” through the participation of the Belgian Presidency of the EU, at the Durban Conference on Racism. The principles underlying our engagement, where without ambiguity defended at the African level. In other words: there are no double standards: what we stand for bilaterally, we defend at the African and European level.

(European Union)

The EU is effective only when its Member States play without ambiguity the “European Card”. Belgium is seeking support from the European Union for a more proactive policy towards the Central African region: political action to bring parties together to sign peace agreements is not enough. The Union must be prepared to make a parallel commitment in the form of humanitarian and development aid for rebuilding the social and economic macrostructure of the region.

In November 2001; for the first time ever, a European Troika comprising Minister Michel, Javier Solana, the EU High Representative on Common Foreign and Security Policy, and Chris Patten, European Commissioner for External Relations made a joint visit to Central Africa.

(United Nations)

An effective and credible United Nations is critical to addressing conflict in Africa. Belgium engaged in a substantive dialogue with DPKO in New York with the aim to improve the capacity of MONUC.

What about a comprehensive approach?

There is a growing perception that peace building need to bring together diplomatic commitment, expertise in development issues, human rights, public administration, good policing and justice systems.

(Diplomatic)

Diplomatic commitment and action can be considered as a short-term measure for peace building. It was maybe the most visible aspect of our engagement for peace in the Great Lakes region. The efforts were all clearly in support of ongoing African initiatives: the Lusaka process for the Congo and the Arusha agreement for Burundi.

Belgium has given substantial political and financial support to the efforts of South Africa, facilitator Masire and mediator Niasse in DRC. On more than one occasion, Belgian diplomatic missions have helped to keep the peace process on track. In January 2002, Louis Michel organised a meeting of the Inter-Congolese dialogue in Brussels, where representatives of civil society and the non-armed opposition on a number of important principles reached agreement. The results gave a major boost to the ongoing negotiations. On Minister Michel’s numerous visits and contacts to the region, he has also tried

to make significant contributions to reactivating the different Congolese parties in order to sustain the process.

(Development cooperation)

We in Belgium believe that it is unrealistic to wait for the ideal conditions before making commitment to development co-operation. We take the view that the ideal conditions for striking a peace deal will never be achieved unless the international community is prepared to start funding cooperation and thus supporting the countries still in conflict in their way to peace : partnership towards peace.

In 2001, Belgium therefore partially reinstated its “structural co-operation” with Congo. Aid to Burundi has also been increased in order to support its delicate transition towards peace. During the Belgian Presidency of the European Council, Belgium gained the support of other member states for an Action Plan that enables further co-operation in the current conflict situation.

(Military involvement)

Belgium’s participation in military UN missions in its former colonies have recently been restricted following a parliamentary investigation on Belgium’s participation in the UN Assistance Mission in Rwanda (UNAMIR) where 10 Belgian bleu helmets were assassinated. Nevertheless, Belgium has offered 10 staff officers to MONUC.

Furthermore Belgium is convinced that for longer-term peace building, the reconstruction of accountable military and police force along with a functioning and independent judiciary is essential. The Belgian government has therefore decided to make possible some form of military co-operation with Congo. We will provide training, know-how and support for rehabilitation, under the assumption that rebuilding a new Congolese national army which will integrate the different factions, is of utmost importance for the future stability of the country.

The disarmament and the reintegration of the various thousands of soldiers and armed people involved in the conflicts are a priority. Belgium contributed 10 m euro to the regional demobilisation fund headed by the World Bank, a demobilisation of irregular fighters is an essential and integral part of a peace strategy.

(Bretton Woods)

A co-ordinated action with the international organisations and in particular with the Bretton Woods Institutions is also essential. They are critical actors in post conflict reconstruction. As Belgium made a substantial contribution to pay off the DRC’s bad debts, the World Bank and the IMF are again able to start up new programmes with Congo. We supported Burundi in a similar way, and the IMF was subsequently able to grant it post-conflict credits.

The way ahead:

- At the Belgian level, we have to pool our resources better. Although there are budget lines for preventive diplomacy, we should think of creating a real budget for conflict prevention, managed jointly by those departments who can bring something to the table: foreign affairs, international cooperation, ministry of defence. The aim should be to device policy together.
- We should try to interact more with the academic and civil society world, in full respect with each role and functioning.
- There is still too little attention for African issues at the highest political and international level: this is due to the reduced strategic importance of Africa compared with other areas. This should change. For European policy to be credible Africa should be given a higher priority and the Member States should make an effort to formulate a real CFSP for the Great Lakes region and be consistent with it. The member States own agenda and the EU internal competition make the impact is often limited.
- The EU position at the UN Security Council: the EU does not have a seat in the UNSC.
- An improved peacekeeping capacity in Africa is essential. Concerning the broader issue of the NEPAD and African Union peace and security agenda possibilities to fund African peace support operations are currently explored by the European Union; a process that is also related to the G8 Africa Action Plan. This should be accelerated.
- We have to build a better mutual understanding between African countries involved in peace process and the international community on each respective role. All our efforts should be clearly linked to and in support of local African initiatives, but African peace initiatives should be more open to international cooperation in an early stage in order to avoid unrealistic expectations.

Conclusion:

There is no magic solution that can stop the cycle of conflict and bring peace. As wars become more entrenched, it becomes inevitable that they become less amenable to external intervention. Internal conflicts are mostly resolved when the parties involved have arrived at a stalemate, frequently a political and military balance. This only serves to emphasise the need for a long-term commitment to a broad and comprehensive framework that seeks to build on African successes, re-establish the authority of the United Nations and build on international and bilateral actions.

Today, there is real hope for Congo and Burundi. Progress has been achieved thanks to concerted efforts of African and Nordic countries such as Belgium. But the situation remains fragile. There is no other secret for success than the North and the South working closely together and combining all their efforts.

Thank you.

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