The UN Peacebuilding Commission and Liberia’s transition

A conversation with Ambassador Prince Zeid of Jordan

Ambassador Prince Zeid is the UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) Chair of the Configuration for Liberia

Without these essentials in place, the state could be in trouble when the UN moves out. So our job is to ensure that the courts, for example, function well, that there is a good set of correctional facilities and a well-trained police force.

What is the UN’s overarching strategy for peace in Liberia?

I chair the PBC Configuration for Liberia, but I am not a UN official [see BOX 4 for an overview of the PBC]. From my own point of view the two prerequisites for any well-functioning state are a basic security environment and a working justice system. The UN’s benchmarks for Liberia essentially focus on security sector reform, rule of law and national reconciliation, particularly ensuring that the police are well trained. But it has become clear to the Liberian government that they need help with their judicial structures. Courts, for example, have been hampered by the absence of a simple case management system.

How does PBC relate to other UN bodies supporting peace in Liberia?

There is no established pattern as to how PBC integrates itself into peacebuilding exercises. Much depends on the personality of the individual chairing the Country-Specific Configuration. The role is evolving; for me it is about being honest about the kind of help countries like Liberia need.

In Liberia, we have open discussions with the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) about how it directs its programming. I have excellent relationships with Special Representative of the Secretary General in the UN peacekeeping Mission (UNMIL) and with the Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support, who oversees PBF and the Peacebuilding Support Office. Much depends on these relationships. Over time we hope to institutionalise these, but as long as there can be frank discussion and a common position can be found, it can work.

What are the implications of the ‘Statement of Mutual Commitments’ in terms of who ‘owns’ Liberia’s peacebuilding agenda?

The Statement of Mutual Commitments is a joint framework for peacebuilding and serves as the instrument of PBC engagement agreed between the PBC Liberia Configuration and the Liberian government.
The Statement of Mutual Commitments was developed from an assessment report produced after a PBC mission travelled to Liberia in summer 2010. It was then agreed to with the government. But the more you bore into a particular problem, the more you begin to understand it and the more the original set of ideas has to change. The statement gave us foundations, but we need a peacebuilding programme that we can adapt over time.

This is why we have agreed to review the Statement of Mutual Commitments every nine months in the light of experiences on the ground.

Relationships between international and donor representatives, the private sector, civil society and the Liberian government need to be carefully balanced. If peacebuilding ideas are going to work, they must be authentically Liberian. Then, we in the international community can take them on, embroider them, and draw on lessons from other places.

Like in any post-war situation, the conflict in Liberia is still largely there. Yes, the fighting has stopped and there is a peace agreement, but things are not cohesive. Liberia is a very impressive country and there is plenty of talent from the highest level of office holder down to the district level. But on the question of who is in the peacebuilding ‘driving seat’ in Liberia, I do not like to overplay local ownership. If you hand everything over to the government they will themselves tell you they cannot achieve all their ambitions.

How does PBC engage with civil society in Liberia?

Some of the most interesting discussions I have had in Liberia have been with civil society. Civil society is integral to a comprehensive understanding. The international community will never get to know the country and its cultural rhythms the way its inhabitants do. We can only have a basic understanding, and hope that through our learning from elsewhere we can perhaps offer something useful. There are also many international NGOs (INGOs) doing outstanding work in partnership with local communities. I worry, though, about what happens when they leave. INGOs need to work towards putting themselves out of business, getting local communities to understand how to do the same work so they can continue it in the longer term.

What is happening regarding national reconciliation?

National reconciliation is vital. Some in the development community feel that you can rebuild infrastructure, train people and have peace. But bigoted, charismatic leaders can whip up sentiments that have never been dealt with after the end of war and upset the peace that was seemingly there.

There is no national reconciliation strategy yet – nothing threading all the disparate ideas together. But in 2011 we have spoken to the President and the articulation of a strategy is going to be led by the Minister of Internal Affairs, in coordination with the national Good Governance Commission and others. I hope the architecture will go beyond the ministerial level. A national reconciliation strategy is long-term, so it has to be supra-ministerial to survive changes of government.

Also, going through the motions of reconciliation without working towards a common version of history can have

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**Box 4**

**The United Nations Peacebuilding Commission**

The UN Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) is mandated to fulfil the following functions:

- Assemble and organise actors to marshal resources, advise on integrated strategies for post-conflict peacebuilding and recovery
- Focus international attention on reconstruction and institution-building in post-conflict environments
- Improve coordination of UN and other peacebuilding actors: develop best practice, promote predictable financing and sustain international attention

PBC comprises three bodies:

- **Organisational Committee**: includes 31 UN Member States to set the PBC agenda
- **Country-Specific Configurations** (CSCs): consider peacebuilding interventions in individual countries and develop Integrated Peacebuilding Strategies (IPBS); CSCs comprise the Organisational Committee, the country under consideration, regional states and organisations, financial, troop and civilian police contributors and UN representatives, and regional and international financial institutions
- **Working Group on Lessons Learned**: analyses global experiences and best practices

The Peacebuilding Support Office (PBSO) works with PBC to provide advice and accompany countries on the PBC agenda; administers the Peacebuilding Fund; foster coherence and coordination, and promote innovative peacebuilding practices.

The Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) “support[s] activities, actions, programmes and organisations that seek to build a lasting peace in countries emerging from conflict”.

For more information, please see www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/
at best a temporary `tranquiliser` effect – until the next conflict comes. In Lofa county in 2010 there were all the trappings of a reconciliation process that seemed to be working until, on the basis of a rumour, there were suddenly violent clashes and the burning of homes.

We need to anchor reconciliation in a national frame of reference: a single narrative about what happened that all can agree and subscribe to – ‘these are the injustices that I inflicted on you and that you inflicted on me’. A fundamental point is to create a historical commission and establish an archive. Most developing countries have something called an archive, but these are not archives where the documents are vetted, organised and released. Alongside this, you need a historical commission because if each group has a different version of history and its own memory, then you do not have the conditions to create a stable environment.

**How might community views or approaches be incorporated into a national vision for reconciliation?**

This has to be addressed very carefully. Once a historic commission is set up and begins to produce results, it could introduce community ‘palava hut’ mechanisms to bring in local discussions [palava huts provide space for community leaders to resolve disputes and settle conflicts; in Liberia they evolved after the war – people use them to acknowledge wrongs and seek forgiveness and acceptance from the community].

This enables ‘reckoning’, where each group examines its own past and can recognise a common point of reference. Without reckoning there can be no reconciliation.

Local communities behave in a manner far more mature than parliament. But you still need a national frame of reference. Palava huts are very useful for dealing with local community disputes, but not with deeper issues. When I was in Sanniquellie, north-east Liberia, a Liberian colleague said, “We can sort out the land dispute in the palava hut, but we will still have prejudices against one another and there will be bigotry as well”.

I worry that many INGOs believe that all the answers lie in the field and the grassroots. I think there are some key lessons to be drawn and some ingenious things that can come out of local experiences, but it does not necessarily equate to a broader strategy to develop a durable positive peace.

Every community I have gone to see in Liberia can tell you what the problem is from their perspective; but they do not really have the remedy. The remedy has to be gleaned from global experience, because most countries cannot deal with their past. Every country has something to be ashamed about, such as the treatment of minorities or of neighbours, or colonial experiences. The external impetus helps show that they are not unique as well as providing advice on how to reconcile with the wrongs of the past.

**What can Liberia learn from other experiences regarding accountability for war crimes and other atrocities?**

You cannot simply dispose of the past. People do not just forget things. You need accountability. Multiple amnesties that were issued by various South American governments to their predecessors have all been discredited. Bangladesh now has a commission to investigate crimes committed in 1971. When Liberia is able to take such measures, I think it should. If it does not, longer-term reconciliation will be threatened.

But the court system in Liberia does not currently have capacity to deal with these sorts of investigations and trials. The Truth and Reconciliation Act is very clear that the government shall implement accountability measures, but it does not state which particular government: it could be an administration in 10 years’ time. Liberia needs time to build capacity and then decide whether and when to go ahead with investigations and prosecutions. While there is appreciation that accountability is needed, there is also the realisation that the government is not in a position to pursue it at the moment.

**How might PBC work with customary and local justice and dispute resolution mechanisms?**

I have discussed this a lot with the UN Executive Representative in Sierra Leone. I agree with him that in the absence of state mechanisms you can refer to some traditional practices. They can work well for civil cases; you can embroider traditional practices onto the civil court system. But for criminal cases it is not so simple.

It is easy to empower traditional mechanisms but difficult to later say, “we are not going to fund you anymore; now we are going to work on the state”. This creates a lot of bitterness. I think it is much better to invest in a fair formal justice system in which everyone has confidence.

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Prince Zeid is Jordan’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations. In September 2010, he was nominated as PBC Chair of the Configuration for Liberia. He also serves on the advisory bodies to the Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation and for the World Development Report 2011 as well as playing a central role in the establishment of the International Criminal Court. He received his commission as an officer in the Jordanian desert police prior to serving as a Political Affairs Officer in the UN Mission in the former Yugoslavia.

Interview by Elizabeth Drew