

“Instead of shuttering consulates in tough corners of the world, it’s time to grow our Foreign Service and to expand USAID.”

– President-elect Obama, March 19, 2008

The Problem

The next President of the United States will take office sixty years after the Geneva Conventions of 1949 enshrined the right of civilians to be protected in times of armed conflict. Yet the fundamental principle that civilians should be protected from violence and abuse in warfare is violated in every current conflict.

The number of civilians under threat is staggering. The Democratic Republic of the Congo has lost 8 per cent of its people to conflict and the deadly hunger and disease it has unleashed. If the United States lost a similar proportion of civilians, 25 million people, more than the population of Texas, would have died. Though no other conflict causes that kind of death rate, Oxfam’s workers hear similar stories of murder, rape, and displacement from men and women from Afghanistan to Sudan every day.

Many people in the United States sympathize with those who suffer atrocities but feel impotent to do anything about it. This skepticism seems justified as multiple presidents have promised “never again” after mass civilian deaths in the Holocaust, Rwanda, and Srebrenica but failed to follow this rhetoric with concrete action that would make such a statement a reality. The wars in Darfur and Afghanistan have shown us that words and modest political will is not enough; the will to act must be coupled with capable institutions, wise prioritization, and international cooperation.

Options

- Build a 21st Century State Department by doubling the number of core diplomatic personnel and moving more personnel to potential and ongoing conflict zones, especially in Eastern and Central Africa.
- Wisely use security assistance to help states protect civilians and follow the rule of law.
- Support global arms control initiatives that seek to reduce the effects of conflict on civilians.

Short-term Recommendations – First 100 Days

President Obama should:

- Direct the Secretary of State to devise a plan to double the number of core diplomatic personnel within 10 years.
- Direct the Secretary of State to accelerate plans to move diplomats to areas of conflict or threat of conflict exists.
- Direct the National Security Advisor to hold a series of consultations with the Secretaries of State and Defense to ensure all security assistance programs underway are consistent with larger US foreign policy priorities and contribute to better adherence to international human rights and humanitarian law.
- Direct the Secretary of State to review US positions on the 1997 Ottawa Mine Ban Treaty, the 2008 Cluster Munitions Convention, and the ongoing process toward an Arms Trade Treaty.

Additional Background Information

Sixty years after the world agreed to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Conventions, it is time for new policies and strong institutions to uphold them. The world has failed the millions of victims of conflict in places such as Rwanda, Afghanistan, Darfur, and the DRC. The next President of the United States can lead by building capable institutions, prioritizing the protection of civilians in its foreign assistance programs, and cooperating with allies to remove obstacles to peace and stability.

Years of underinvestment in civilian foreign policy instruments and the prioritization of narrow interests over the rights of others has left the current President incapable of effectively protecting civilians throughout the globe. When conflict breaks out the United States should be able to facilitate negotiations between adversaries, provide mediation services, and compel adversaries to the negotiating table through a variety of economic and political tools. In other words, the State Department needs to possess crises-response capabilities that are equal to, or better than, the Pentagon. While critical diplomatic posts remain unfilled, the United States Army will add more soldiers to its ranks this year than are in the entire Foreign Service. The next administration should double the size of the diplomatic corps over the next ten years and immediately reposition diplomats skilled in conflict resolution and management to global hotspots such as East and Central Africa.

At the same time, protecting civilians requires a change in the use of foreign security assistance. Since September 11, 2001, US security assistance has focused on helping states in the developing world build the capacity required to control ungoverned space and fight terrorism. While the focus on building capacity is a welcomed development, too much of this funding has focused on supporting the security forces of abusive governments fight their enemies, and not enough helping states better protect their civilians from violence of all kinds. Improving the quality of life of civilians globally through building effective and responsible security forces should be an organizing principle of the next administration's security assistance policy.

Finally, the proliferation and irresponsible use of arms makes the protection of civilians in conflict much more difficult. The UN's former commander in the DRC saw the futility of attempting to stabilize an area without controlling the flow of arms. "You had a feeling," he told a press conference in 2007, "that you were mopping the floor when the tap was open. One moment you disarm a group, and then a week later the same group has fresh arms and ammunitions." The overabundance of small arms in unstable places like Eastern DRC and the continued use of landmines and cluster bombs in other conflicts both prolong and increases the lethality of conflicts. Arms control initiatives such as the 1997 Ottawa Antipersonnel Mine Treaty and the recently negotiated cluster munitions treaty have already made an impact. Unfortunately, the US has remained outside these agreements and hinders progress toward a mine and cluster munitions free world. The United States has also failed to join with most governments of the world to back the development of an international Arms Trade Treaty, which for the first time will bring common standards for the international transfer of all conventional weapons based on human rights and international humanitarian law. Smart arms control save lives and the next President can help reestablish global confidence in the wisdom of US leadership by supporting these initiatives.

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