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Fragile states back on global agenda - This is Africa

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Fragile states back on global agenda

Photos: AFP/Getty Images

Commitments from a number of nations look set to push state-building into the spotlight, and policymakers would do well to learn the lessons of the recent past.

Goma is an NGO boom town, a sprawling fish-scale expanse of corrugated metal roofs on the edge of Lake Kivu. The airport's runway is much shortened: a third of it was covered by lava from the eruption of Mount Nyiragongo in 2002, which destroyed more than 4,500 buildings in the town. Planes caught on the wrong side sit rusting, while crews with earthmovers hack away at volcanic rock.

Goma is the capital of the North Kivu province in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo, close to the border with Rwanda. Aside from the imposing, visible threat of the still active volcano, the Kivus – North and South – sit on a no less hazardous political and ethnic fault line that has kept the region in almost perpetual unrest for upwards of 20 years. Discovered by the international media in the mid-90s in the wake of the genocide in neighbouring Rwanda, the area is an archetypal border province of a fragile state.

The protagonists in the violence have for some time been fluid and interchangeable, but the situation in the past year has crystallised, pitting the Forces Démocratiques de Libération du Rwanda – a force formed through the combination of local militias and fleeing members of the interhamwe, perpetrators of the genocide – against the Forces Armées de la République Démocratique de Congo. FARDC itself is a chimera of government soldiers, former rebel factions and untrained "Mai-mai" militia. Monuc, the UN peacekeeping mission, is tasked with supporting the government forces in their campaign against the FDLR.

It was not always so. The FDLR was, since its formation in 2000, a proxy of the central government in Kinshasa, used to move against perceived Rwandan interference in the border region. A rare passage of cooperation in January 2009 between Kinshasa and Kigali saw FARDC and Rwandan government forces attempt to squeeze out the FDLR. The operation was at best a qualified success, with the near impassable terrain – dense forests clinging to vertiginous peaks – slowing the offensive. It did, however, fragment the FDLR and cut them off from the civilian population that fed and housed them. Since then, the group has been raiding villages and engaging in retaliatory attacks on civilians. Constrained by the geography and a lack of airlift capacity, the peacekeepers risk being completely ineffective. The FARDC, lacking training, discipline and central control, and composed of more than 50 factions of differing loyalties, is often accused of atrocities against civilian populations which match the FDLR for violence.

It is into this environment that the UK's Department for International Development is preparing to deploy a new surge of development assistance, as the agency begins to shift its focus towards fragile states, as laid out in its 2009 white paper. At least half of new UK development assistance will be directed towards conflict-affected and fragile states.

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Gareth Thomas, UK secretary of state for trade and development, recently returned from a trip to North Kivu and Kinshasa, is cautiously optimistic about the opportunity to push forward development in the country, reform the security sector and police and build capacity in government. “We’re not there yet, but there is… a prospect of building a better functioning state,” he says. “It’s calmer in Kinshasa than it has been for a while, that gives us the chance to develop its effectiveness in helping its people and developing some of the slightly longer-term challenges, whereas before it’s just been about survival. We can look beyond that stage now.”

If 2009 was the year that climate change became “mainstreamed” into development, 2010 will see fragile states on top of the agenda. State building and fragility features in policy documents and commitments across Europe, particularly from those agencies – the Netherlands, the Nordics and the UK – which traditionally lead in terms of research spending and thought leadership. The US, too, is seeing an increased interest and next year’s World Bank Development Report will focus on the subject.

With so much more discussion and budget comes added scrutiny into the approaches. “I think the main issue that I would focus on is: if past efforts have not worked, why will current efforts work better?” says Seth Kaplan, whose research into what makes states fail was published in an acclaimed book, “Fixing Fragile States” in 2008. A large part of the problem in the existing international approach to state-building, Mr Kaplan says, is that the state is conflated with the central government. This perpetuates, rather than resolves instability. A “vertical model” whereby development agencies support a central government without truly understanding local context has been perpetuated, in part because it is easy to implement, he says.

"I think my fight at this moment is to really ensure that the political lessons that we have learned from fragile states, from Somalia in 93, to Afghanistan today are really being implemented," says Bert Koenders, development cooperation minister of the Netherlands. "It's not that we didn't know the lessons, the lessons are very clear: you have to be very sensitive to political context, you have to be realistic and modest in what you want to reach and you have to be extremely flexible in the way you operate."

This flexibility includes being able to work closely with other parts of government – the three 'Ds' of development, defence and diplomacy. Although he is not concerned about development workers losing their neutrality, Mr Koenders does acknowledge that the three do not always fit smoothly together. "We should openly say that there can be frictions, but we know that in certain non-permissive environments it is impossible to do development work," he says.

"What we have learned is that the three cultures have to learn to adapt to one another; that is to say that the development people have to think much more about the peace dividend and, for instance, reform of the security sector. Defence people have to adapt their culture to understand that if you just build three or four bridges, that's not development."

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Afghanistan experience

Just as with the British and the Dutch, It is largely the experience of Afghanistan that has informed the United States' recent approach to state building, and in particular the interplay between security and development agendas that is a natural consequence of the US government's focus on "ungoverned spaces" in the aftermath of 9/11. In Afghanistan, perhaps more than in any other theatre, the military has been forced to engage in so-called "non-kinetic" activities – development and capacity building.

The ungoverned states agenda, which has strong bipartisan support in the US, explains to some extent the current preoccupation in Washington DC with Somalia and was one of the driving motives behind the creation of Africom, which was an attempt to rationalise US military and development interests, albeit one handled badly from a PR perspective.

As Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute in Washington DC, explains: "You don't really expect agronomists and water purification experts to be operating in ungoverned spaces when, at any given time, they could be victimised by common thugs… Whenever someone proposes a civilian surge – which is one of the buzzwords in this town – I ask the inconvenient question: who is going to provide security. Well the answer is that it's going to be provided by the military."

Mr Preble is concerned by this blurring of the lines, not least because he feels that from a public relations perspective the military would struggle to convince anyone of its benign intent – as evidenced by 2008's Africom furore. "Also, from a security perspective, I'm worried about the military losing its ability to do what a military is supposed to do, which is kill

people and break things, as opposed to the State Department, which is supposed to relate to people and interact and facilitate the interaction between people," he says.

Few people have as much firsthand experience of modern day state-building efforts as Clare Lockhart. Ms Lockhart founded the Institute for State Effectiveness in 2005 alongside Ashraf Ghani, Afghanistan's finance minister in the years following the US-led invasion. The institute aims to harness the pair's experiences of trying to rebuild a country fractured by an ongoing insurgency to create a new model for the international community's interventions.

Far from criticising the military's involvement in development, Ms Lockhart sees a positive role for security actors. "I was actually very pleasantly surprised by finding military circles completely understanding of the concept of sovereignty and leadership," she says. "It strikes me that they come at it from an organisational perspective, they partner with the leadership of the country, they draw up an org chart and they work out how to build capacity over time, fully recognising that the key component is allowing, nurturing and growing the leadership from that country."

Furthermore, Ms Lockhart says that the military, in her experience, performs well in two areas that development agencies and NGOs are deficient. Firstly, the military has little stake in remaining in the 'hot zone' indefinitely, which gives them an impetus to speed up capacity building in domestic security forces. "They don't want to stay there a minute longer than they have to, whereas the aid agencies want to stay there for decades."

Secondly, she says, security forces are less likely to falsify development information, she believes. "One of the things the military does well is to measure the metrics of what's going on. They can't afford to make up the numbers. I have witnessed again and again and again in the aid complex a situation where people have been asked to make up numbers or change numbers. The fictional reporting that goes on is shocking."

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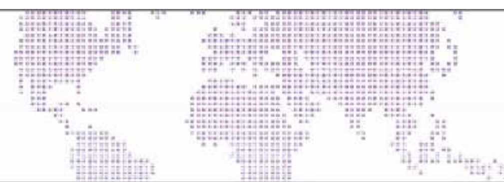

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These accusations – that development agencies and humanitarian NGOs have a stake in the persistence of a "crisis"; and that there is a systemic lack of accountability across the development industry – are appearing with greater volume and greater frequency. The anecdotal evidence, for the latter in particular, is significant. Speaking privately, even officials from within the UN system give examples of times when appeal money has been used for initiatives within the system itself – office refurbishments, consultants' salaries, paying off debts accrued in past initiatives. The shift, particularly in some areas of the UN system, away from core financing and towards financing generated by projects, has been a major contributor to this failing, Ms Lockhart suggests. She gives more than one example of what could be classed as outright corruption.

Corruption might be a strong word, but if the UN system, or the wider development system lacks transparency and is consequently perceived as corrupt, then it undermines efforts to build capacity in fragile states' institutions. Reform of the way that multilaterals work has long been on the agenda for the more progressive development agencies. As the Netherlands' Mr Koenders says, the prerequisites for operating in such environments: flexibility, the ability to work with a variety of political actors and to take calculated but very real risks, are not as strong in multilaterals as they are in national agencies. How this deficiency is overcome is a key question as the development and policy communities continue their parallel debate about the current state of multilateralism.

Back on the ground, the lesson seems to be that states emerging from conflict need accountants, not aid workers, and budgets, not blank cheques. Many chronically fragile states have significant indigenous resources, yet they remain aid dependent. Getting money into the treasury and building the domestic ability to use it for economic development is critical,

but this means injecting some dull procedure into the kinetic excitement of state building in post-conflict or fragile states.

Conditionality has been taking a battering, Ms Lockhart says, but making aid money conditional on the prompt publication of government accounts could make a tangible difference to the pace of recovery of post-conflict countries. Likewise, she advises using aid to kick-start revenue collection. In Afghanistan, under her guidance, a trust fund with a dual-key system was set up to pay customs officers.

In the DRC, Dfid country director Phil Evans says that this is now part of their evolving strategy – working with the mining industry to improve regulation and making sure that both central and local governments build their revenues.

Beyond this, Ms Lockhart advises investment in vocational training. The focus on universal primary education within the development community has meant that secondary and tertiary education has often been ignored. Without encouraging training of local accountants, civil servants, engineers and health workers, the aid industry is "not planning for success," she warns. "We're planning for continued failure." Recoveries in Spain and Singapore, two very successful and rapid examples of development, were driven by the use of external funds to build domestic capacity.

"I think we need to understand that successful transformations will be indigenously driven. Often the Western dialogue is that we are going to do state building to some other place, and that's absolutely not what this agenda is about, it's about under what conditions do people of a country begin to rebuild or transform or improve their own societies," she says. "Perhaps in some sense we need to be talking about nation building, rather than state building, but nation building not by external actors – a domestic process of nation building."

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