

Introduction

“Alert 2008: report on conflicts, human rights and peace-building” is a yearbook published by the School for a Culture of Peace of Barcelona Autonomous University, which synthesises the information about the state of the world at the end of the year based on an analysis of various indicators, and highlights the most important information related to conflicts and peace-building.¹

In this current report “Alert 2008”, 22 indicators have been used, grouped under five general headings, namely: conflicts and peace building, humanitarian crises, disarmament, human rights and transitional justice, and the dimension of gender in peace building. The description and analysis of what has happened in the world during the year based on these indicators can help to give a better understanding of the advances, the setbacks and the different types of dynamics that affect humanity as a whole. Most of these indicators, once they are cross checked, may also help us to understand the influences of certain factors on others, and a comparison of these data with those for previous years gives the report the nature of a preventive warning on some of the general trends and on the situation of certain countries and regions. This can certainly be useful, among other things, for redesigning foreign policy, cooperation for development, control of arms trading, as well as initiating specific policies for the prevention of armed conflicts which will allow the consolidation of peace processes, human rights and contexts of post war rehabilitation.

A general glance at the set of indicators for 2007 shows a consolidation or permanence of many negative trends that should have been given greater attention or handled differently to the way in which they are currently dealt with. The number of armed conflicts has remained stable at levels similar to those in previous years, as has the intensity of many of those conflicts. It should be pointed out that most of these conflicts are not of a very ideological nature. Half of them have had serious repercussions at a regional level, and the situation in the Sudanese region of Darfur is, in this sense, a paradigm of the repercussions that an internal conflict may have on its neighbours, as well as a spotlight on our inability to prevent and mitigate the suffering of hundreds of thousands of people. It is also significant that the number of conflicts involving aspirations to identity is on the increase and consequently adequate formulas of self government are sought in many negotiations. Therefore the achievement of an “intermediate political architecture” which satisfies the conflicting parties is still a matter to be resolved in peace building policies, despite the fact that in recent years a wide

range of proposals have been put forward that may lead to positive results in the short term. We can also see the perverse relationship between the possession of important natural resources, especially sources of energy and minerals, and the perpetuation of armed conflicts in the regions which possess such wealth. Added to this are the problems of poverty and marginalisation, and this calls into question the policies of many transnational companies and their lack of social responsibility in those areas where they operate, as well as the complicity of various governments in maintaining situations which provide dividends to the very limited sectors of the population who hold the power.

The report also focuses on the numerous situations of political or social tension found in many countries, whether due to a lack of democracy, of governability, or of respect for human rights, or to economic crises, external dependency or adverse natural factors – the latter being linked to a large extent to global climate change and its negative impact on areas of the world which were already extremely vulnerable. There is an urgent need, therefore, to create global strategies to fight poverty that are linked to global environmental improvement, since the link between many humanitarian crises and the deterioration of the environment is clear, as is the negative ecological impact on some continents, caused by irresponsible industrial and consumer policies whose origins lie far from the lands that they affect.

Unlike the previous two years, 2007 was not a year characterised by the initiation or the finalisation of peace processes. With the exception of the Côte d’Ivoire, which in 2008 may be able to resume a certain degree of normality, the negotiations underway to bring an end to armed violence have run into serious difficulties, and the level of women’s participation in such negotiations along with issues of gender in the agreements that have been reached has continued to be extremely low. Despite this, it is still positive that in three out of four conflicts negotiations at a greater or lesser degree of formality are in place, although they face the same type of challenges that occur year after year (splits in the armed groups that have to enter into negotiations, problems with the mechanisms of mediation or facilitation, insecurity and mistrust between the parties, etc.), but an awareness of such difficulties may help us to avoid some of the most obvious obstacles in these processes. It has also become obvious that it is extremely difficult to begin peace processes in countries that have suffered foreign occupation, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, and this forces us to think again about the militarist strategies of the last few years.

1. The “Alert 2008” report completes and analyses the information that the Programme on Conflict and Peace-building publishes fortnightly in “Semáforo”, which covers international current affairs. In turn, “Semáforo” is analysed every quarter in the publication “Barómetro”. Other aspects analysed in this report are also examined in more depth in other publications which can be consulted on our website: www.escolapau.org

Similarly, 2007 has shown that it is enormously difficult to rehabilitate countries in which armed conflicts continue to exist alongside the fears that prevent refugees or displaced persons returning home.

Although there was a slight decrease in the number of humanitarian crises in 2007, there was an increase in the number of refugees caused by armed conflicts and the number of people who, as a result of armed conflicts and natural disasters had to move from their places of origin in conditions of extreme fragility and uncertainty. These conditions also affected the work of the humanitarian organisations, and highlight the decline in many situations caused by a combination of tensions, insecurity, underdevelopment, poor government, accumulation of arms, marginalisation and the looting of natural resources. Related to this situation is the changing trend taking place in the arms race, with a return to the dynamics of the past (increase in military spending, nuclear proliferation, increase in arms exports, lack of control of light weapons traded on the black market, etc.)

Fortunately, a hopeful sign is that societies are becoming more aware of these problems, and many groups are participating in international campaigns aimed at countering these trends. The fight against the mass production of anti-personnel landmines, the recruitment of child soldiers, the degradation of the environment and the proliferation of light weapons, are just a few examples of topics which have moved into the public domain and are appearing on the agendas of many governments and international organisations. Nevertheless, the data provided in this "Alert 2008" report are

an example of the ambivalence that dominates the world, where advances and setbacks occur at the same time. A glance at the situation of human rights throughout the world offers a palpable evidence of the fact that negative dynamics exist and are able to relegate into second or third place what appeared previously to be consolidated advances achieved after many decades of effort. Thus, in this report we have attempted for the first time to include a list of the opportunities for peace that could be resolved satisfactorily during the year, as a way of examining our own ability to transform the present situation. Never in the history of mankind have there been so many possibilities for communication, and that means being able to share information, design strategies to influence and alter what seems negative or destructive and to feel ourselves to be members of a single community, the human community, in which we have to learn to live together in such a way that we do not alter the fragile balance that ensures that the world we live in, although seriously ill, remains alive.

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