

Conflict prevention and human rights in the Pacific Islands¹

By: Craig Collins²

Recent violent conflicts within countries of the Pacific Islands region, though not always capturing international attention, illustrate a reciprocal relationship between conflict prevention and human rights: that conflict prevention safeguards fundamental rights by promoting human security, effective governance, rule of law and sustainable development, and that the protection of human rights can in turn – by promoting these same ‘goods’ – prevent conflict from starting in the first place.

In the past, the stereotypical image of the Pacific region was one of peacefulness and tranquility. Today, violence is not the norm, but it has recently shaken a number of Pacific countries, with many others suffering from a general deterioration in capable governance, law and order, and economic viability. Economic crisis now grips Nauru, while considerable political uncertainty exists in New Caledonia, Samoa, Tonga and Vanuatu . Small size, isolation, limited resources, poor infrastructure, rapid population growth, high unemployment, increasing urbanization, and environmental degradation make Pacific Island countries particularly vulnerable to internal dynamics and global economic trends. Recent experience in three countries, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, shows that internal and external pressures can produce inter-group tensions and overt violence.

Where violence has erupted basic rights, economic development and human security have all been threatened. This experience, not unique to the Pacific, provides valuable lessons for future conflict prevention initiatives both within and beyond the region at local, national and regional levels.

Pacific countries that have recently experienced internal violent conflict are the Melanesian countries of Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands . In Fiji, the struggle over the country’s political system, culminating in an armed coup in 2000, remains largely unresolved. Indigenous and Indo-Fijians continue to seek improved social relations and a sustainable power-sharing arrangement that can effectively address inter-group tensions. In Papua New Guinea (PNG), armed struggle from 1988 to 1997 in the Bougainville province destroyed communities and claimed thousands of lives. Persistent instability elsewhere in the country has been characterized by inter-group conflict, a high crime rate and the loss of State control over certain provinces, some awash with illicit arms. In neighboring West Papua (Irian Jaya), there has been a low intensity conflict between various factions and Indonesian armed forces for the past thirty years, with an estimated 100,000 civilian deaths. Lastly, the outbreak of conflict in 1998 between two groups in Solomon Islands , a subsequent coup in 2000 and a largely ineffectual peace agreement led to economic collapse and deterioration in governance and law and order. Unable to provide security to all its citizens, Solomon Islands was labeled a “failing” State by some observers. In July 2003, a decision was taken to dispatch to the country an Australia-led regional intervention force of more than 2,000 police and military personnel – the largest force mobilization in the Pacific since World War II.

This brief exploration of the Pacific Islands context suggests a number of challenges. Democracy with capable and effective governance eludes many countries in the region. Traditional social structures and leadership processes are increasingly tested by external pressures, and in many places show gradual weakening. Citizens often find themselves protected by neither the State nor traditional systems, generating a sense of alienation from both. In a number of Pacific countries, there is a plentiful supply of weapons with the potential to intensify violence. Ethnic diversity in Melanesian societies like PNG, home to 800 languages and a multiplicity of identity groups, poses a significant challenge to inclusive, consensus-based political processes. This is not to say however

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that these conflicts are “ethnic” in nature. Root causes of tensions are often elsewhere – linked in many cases to the insufficient protection of fundamental rights and to specific claims being left unaddressed.

Proactive approaches to safeguarding rights and addressing competing claims in Pacific States are therefore crucial to more effective conflict prevention efforts, upon which both human security and sustainable development ultimately depend. A number of Pacific civil society groups and NGOs are working to that end, raising awareness of human rights issues through advocacy, education and training. Some promote constitutional reform and legal redress for violations of civil and political rights. Among national governments however, the Fiji Human Rights Commission is the only official body of this nature outside of Australia and New Zealand . At the regional level, the Pacific Islands Forum, the Pacific’s 16-member intergovernmental organization, is increasingly focused on security and conflict issues. It is actively promoting broader regional cooperation for conflict prevention through its new “Pacific Plan”.

Greater attention, however, is needed to better address the root causes of tensions – often linked to social and economic rights, land and resource use, cultural identity, and traditional and formal leadership. Had, for instance, democratic rights in Fiji, equitable distribution of the benefits of resource extraction in PNG, and employment opportunities in Solomon Islands been assured, key sources of tension would have been addressed and violence likely averted. Pacific Island governments formally recognize the range of human rights underlying these issues, but future conflict prevention will depend upon their willingness and ability to guarantee those rights.

Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, like many countries that have experienced violent conflict, have seen their governance, rule of law and economic growth undermined by it. The damage wrought by these conflicts on individual human lives and the social fabric of each country is incalculable and often irreparable. To prevent the repetition of these hard lessons elsewhere in the Pacific, and thus ensure human security and much-needed development throughout this fragile region, national governments and regional institutions will need to engage with civil society, religious and customary leaders to identify and address the underlying causes of tensions long before they lead to violence.