

Lessons from the Syria Crisis

Address to International Day of Peace Ceremony

September 21, 2013, MacEwan University, Edmonton

By Hon. Douglas Roche, O.C.

What can the world learn from the Syria crisis?

That question is certainly appropriate as we mark the International Day of Peace, for we need always to examine dangerous war clouds as we continue our search for the path to peace. The question is particularly important today because the intensity of the suffering in Syria and the debate over the suffering reveal the world has reached a crossroads in choosing war or peaceful solutions to conflict.

At the outset, let us remember the great numbers of those killed, maimed and displaced by the Syrian conflict. The suffering they have endured through chemical weapons and so-called “conventional” weapons is a dark testimony to the greed of weapons manufacturers, who are still flooding not only Syria but many other vulnerable countries with the instruments of death.

We have come perilously close to escalating the war in Syria, and the crisis is not yet over. But already we can draw three lessons that help to give us confidence that the world is by no means fated for continual wars.

1. The Obama Administration's threat to use military intervention in Syria, which means bombing sites, with uncontrollable collateral human casualties, was met with resistance around the world. It was especially notable that the American public strongly opposed going to war in Syria. The debacles that wars in Iraq and Afghanistan became have registered in people's minds. The public around the world no longer thinks that war is necessary to deal with oppression and killings and other forms of violence. The conscience of humanity is stirring.

The world is moving to a more peaceful state. Looking at the headlines of the day, that seems a preposterous statement, even perhaps wishful thinking. But it is true. More people than at any time in history are able to pursue, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights puts it, their "right to life, liberty and security of person." I am not saying that we are living in harmony, that violence is ended, that suffering is eliminated. I am saying that more people are freed from the physical acts of warfare than ever before.

Even the upsurge of violence in Syria, tragic as it is, does not change the downward trend in the world. People are inundated with ghastly images of brutality brought to them in their living rooms by round-the-clock reporting of existing conflicts. But it is the scale of the reporting that has intensified, not the total acts of violence themselves.

We have not arrived at a destination called "peace," but our journey toward that destination is picking up speed. Recognizing the journey we are on gives us hope for a future of more peaceful conditions.

2. The second lesson is that, despite the way the big powers have often over-ridden it, the United Nations matters. Both the US and Russia are turning to the UN to find common ground for action to end the Syrian conflict. When the major powers cooperate and do not paralyze the international community with their vetos, the UN can achieve great results.

The organization has a proven track record. The list of war-torn places that have given way to processes of peace and reconciliation as a result of UN mediation is long: Angola, Ivory Coast, Mozambique, Guatemala, El Salvador, Timor Leste, Sierre Leone. All of these places have stories of progress to tell in building the conditions for peace.

UN Peacekeeping Forces, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1988, have been at the heart of UN peace operations since 1948. Sixty-seven operations have been conducted in forty-two countries over the course of six and a half decades. Peacekeeping operations in Cambodia, El Salvador, Liberia, Mozambique, Namibia, and Sierra Leone stand out as success stories.

New mechanisms to improve peace keeping, peace-building and international justice, many under UN auspices, are laboriously being built. This creativity goes largely unreported and people are unaware of the great strides being made in changing the old culture of war into a culture of peace.

3. The third lesson is that the Responsibility to Protect doctrine is coming into better focus.

In 2005, the UN World Summit of 150 government leaders unanimously endorsed the Responsibility to Protect, stating that the international community, through the UN, has the responsibility to use

appropriate diplomatic, humanitarian and other peaceful means, to help protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, and also that collective military action can be taken on a case by case basis under the authority of the Security Council if peaceful means are inadequate. The Responsibility to Protect is not about human rights violations or conflict situations in general or even about other humanitarian catastrophes. Rather, it is about responding to four designated crimes: genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity.

When the Responsibility to Protect principles were first struck, the emphasis was on the protection of innocent people, not necessarily winning a war, much less deposing violently the ruler of the country. In Libya, the doctrine was mis-used in the toppling of the Gaddafi regime. If the powerful states insist that the principles include ousting an abhorred dictator, then it may become impossible to get Security Council agreement on further use of military force in atrocity crimes situations. The long impasse over Security Council action on Syria illustrates the point.

When and how to implement the Responsibility to Protect is now perhaps the major question on the world agenda. We are still in a learning process. The world is moving to preventive diplomacy to avert war. That is a reason for us to take heart on the International Day of Peace.