

## Actual or imagined?

### British perceptions of increasing violent conflict aren't reflected in reality

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By DAN SMITH

Tomorrow UN Secretary General Kofi Annan will ring a bell to signal the start of the 25<sup>th</sup> United Nations Day of Peace. This would probably generate resounding hollow laughter if many people knew about it. Yet, strangely perhaps, the evidence does not justify that response.

A YouGov opinion poll for International Alert spells out the general gloomy view: nearly three-quarters believe that the world is more violent today than 50 years ago and that it will remain that way—or get worse—in the next 50 years. Ninety per cent think British policy on the 'War on Terror' is pretty useless. And a similar majority feel that there is nothing they can do or are unsure of what it would be.

The ever growing danger, official ineptitude and individual powerlessness that people see and feel are made more alarming because, when people explain today's wars, 70 per cent select religion as one of two major causes. This interprets the wars as being about faith and identity and therefore beyond reason.

Events in the Middle East and Afghanistan, terror attacks and conspiracies, and the measures taken in the 'War on Terror' from police raids to secret flights and prisons make it easy to understand the grim prevailing mood.

Yet there is less war under way now than at any time since 1945. Depending on definitions as well as events, by the end of 2006 we will be able to record about 25 armed conflicts active in some or all of the year, perhaps as many as 30. Ten years ago there were over 50, as there were 20 years ago. At the peak of the post Cold War surge of violence in the early 1990s, there were over 60. And today's wars are, on average, considerably less lethal than warfare ten, 20 or 30 years ago.

So the world is getting better at ending wars. In fact, a high level UN report published last year unearthed the arcane statistic that in the previous 15 years, more peace agreements had been signed than in the two centuries since the French Revolution. But the world is only slowly getting better at sustaining peace. About 45 per cent of all peace agreements break down within five years of being signed, down from just over 50 per cent ten years ago.

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Perhaps the oddest thing about the YouGov poll is that, when asked to explain the causes of war, only three per cent chose poverty as a leading cause. Yet it is a well-established finding of the last decade's research into causes of war that poverty is the most statistically significant. Take the world league table of economic performance and turn it upside down, and the countries now at the top are those with the greatest vulnerability to war and instability. And the second most common background cause of war is bad governance – arbitrary, corrupt, oppressive.

Poverty and bad governance are problems that, in principle, can be dealt with. For the international community to continue to improve at helping war-torn countries sustain their peace processes, focused efforts are needed, aimed at better governance and economic growth, together with reconciliation and security. Experience shows the effort has to be long-term – a decade or more – and it will rarely be smooth. Neither improved economic performance nor stable peace will come quickly, but in many places it is within our reach.

Events in the Middle East and Afghanistan, along with terror attacks and the 'War on Terror', are getting in the way of a clear view of the issues of peace and conflict in most of the world. They loom disproportionately large. It is the early 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of four decades of the Cold War when wars in Latin America, Africa and Asia were widely seen as mere local offshoots of the global Cold War.

The UN Day of Peace might be a moment to get things back into perspective. The speed with which war and terror attacks can turn normality into hell will always – and rightly – grab our attention. But that should not obscure the longer view – peace is certainly difficult, but it is possible.

*\*Dan Smith is Secretary General of the peacebuilding NGO International Alert. The YouGov poll was conducted 22-24 August 2006, with a representative sample of 1757 electors throughout Great Britain.*