A New Concept: Security for People

New Global Realities

In his report to the UN Millennium Assembly and Summit, Secretary-General Kofi Annan set out a key paradox of our age: that while the world is now in its 55th year without war among the major powers — the longest such period in the entire history of the modern system of states — vast numbers of people continue to live in very dangerous times.

The end of the Cold War was greeted as the beginning of an era of peace and prosperity, a turning point that would make it possible for the world to focus attention on problems such as underdevelopment, poverty and the environment. The reality of the past decade has been more sobering, however. If the security of the world's states has improved, the security of its peoples has declined.

Armed conflict in particular has become more brutal and deadly, and often rooted in religious or ethnic discord. While the number of armed conflicts between states has declined over the last 25 years, the number of intra-state conflicts has increased. Of the 108 armed conflicts since the end of the Cold War, 101 have been fought within rather than between states. The crises in the Great Lakes region of Africa, in Bosnia and Kosovo, in East Timor, in Angola and in Sierra Leone are only some of the more notable examples in a series of conflicts that have had tragic implications for the affected populations.

Civilians are increasingly the principal targets and instruments of these modern wars. It is they who are paying the highest price, as they suffer disproportionately from the rise in civil conflict, the abuses of aggressive states or the failures of weak ones, and the new practices of war — the deplorable use of child combatants, the actions of savage paramilitaries and rebel factions, and the use of inexpensive yet readily available weapons such as landmines and military small arms and light weapons. Casualties from armed conflict have doubled in just the last decade, with approximately one million people losing their lives each year. Whereas during the First World War only 10 percent of casualties were civilians, today that figure is closer to 80 percent.

Threats to individual security are not limited to situations of violent conflict, however. Transnational phenomena such as terrorism, international crime, and trafficking in small arms, drugs and even people potentially put all of us at risk. For all its promise, globalization has shown a dark underside that requires us to broaden our understanding of security and develop new approaches.

A New Approach to Security

Canada's commitment to human security is a response to these new global realities.

Human security places a focus on the security of people. This constitutes a major and necessary shift in international relations and world affairs, which have long placed predominant emphasis on the security of the state. By broadening the focus to include the security of people, human security encompasses a spectrum of approaches to the problem of violent conflict, from preventive initiatives and people-centred conflict resolution and peacebuilding activities to — in extreme cases, where other efforts have