

Managing powerful change

INTERVIEW WITH RT HON LORD ASHDOWN OF NORTON-SUB-HAMDON GCMG KBE PC

A PRESIDENT OF CHATHAM HOUSE



LORD ASHDOWN was formerly the High Representative of Bosnia Herzegovina. He is a President of Chatham House, and is currently writing a book on his experiences.

What in your view were the main issues and obstacles that the peace process and the Coalition of the Willing came up against in Bosnia Herzegovina?

Undoubtedly, the first was the fact that we had to cope with the fact that the international community did not make the establishment of the rule of law the top priority on day one. This is the key lesson of interventions. The first overriding task straight after a war ends is to dominate the security space, and the failure to do that in Iraq has been devastating to the whole of the Iraq intervention. The second is to establish the rule of law as quickly as possible. If you do as they did in Bosnia, which was go for elections, all you are going to do is elect the people who ran the criminal structures during the war and then you have corruption and organised crime even more deeply embedded in the system.

Because this was not made a top priority from day one, it became a very tough job indeed to eradicate the criminal elements from the system. These elections did not result in a modern democracy. Thirdly, it was very unfortunate that the international community was fractured and did not speak in a clear voice.

Fourthly, since the stabilising task had largely been completed by the time I arrived in Bosnia, my task wasn't stabilisation, it was State building. We had to try and build a State within the very clumsy structures that had been created. But the most important thing of all was the failure to make the rule of law the first priority.

You stated recently that you made large changes to the UN mission in Bosnia Herzegovina on taking up your position as the High Representative – what were they, why did you think they were necessary and how effective were they?

Well, it's absolutely crucial that when the international community goes into one of these operations – which is difficult enough – it learns to speak with one voice.

Regrettably, very regrettably, by the time I got to Bosnia, the international community was characterised more by the tendency to criticise each other, rather than the tendency to speak with a single voice, and of course this meant that our capacity to get things done was significantly diminished. In addition it significantly enhanced the ability of the Bosnians to drive a wedge between us.

Our response was the creation of something called

the Board of Principles, which is very similar to what I believe now is being planned in Kosovo. This was a single structure which brought together all the heads of the major international organisations, and ensured that we acted in unison and spoke with a single voice.

The massacre at Srebrenica has almost become a shorthand term for describing the ineptitude of UN peacekeeping missions – what allowed it to happen, and has the UN learnt from it?

I think it seems that the UN has learnt something from this but I also think that the UN is blamed somewhat unfairly for it. The Dutch troops in Srebrenica have obviously taken the blame for what happened in tactical terms on the ground. The UN has owned up to its failure to be able to act on time. But the real failure, the one that so far has gone unnoticed, was not that of the UN, it was the failure of the member states who had contributed contingents on the ground.

Those major member states, Britain, France, Italy, I think, Germany and others took the secret decision, in Easter 2005, that they would no longer defend the safe havens if they were strenuously attacked. This decision made the massacre almost inevitable. And although it was a secret decision, it wasn't long before Ratko Mladić knew it had been taken.

So the people, I think, to blame here are not only the UN, but also to a large measure the international community. They comprehensively failed to give its troops a strong enough mandate and to back that with political will.

There are clear lessons for the future: the UN can only do what its member states allow it to do, and if its member states block it from taking effective action, then it will not be able to carry out its mandate and in many cases, in these circumstances, the UN is unfairly blamed.

Do you think UNIFIL could have somehow helped to avoid the recent war between Israel and Lebanon?

No I don't think so. I think the origins of that war were beyond the control of a few UN peacekeepers. You can't expect to avoid a war by ignoring the politics of a region and placing a small force in between potentially warring parties. If you want to avoid wars, you have to understand the political causes of the war. The red hot coal at the heart of the Middle East is the Palestine problem, and our failure to resolve that, our failure

to restrain Israel and our failure to act earlier to stop Hizbollah taking over the Southern part of Lebanon, were all ingredients for a war that, at the end was pretty well inevitable.

This is once again a political failure, not a failure of UN troops on the ground.

Could the UN have done more, or should it have done more, in order to bring about a swifter end to the conflagration?

No, I don't think the UN could have done more and I think it did what was possible to do. Those who blocked the UN's actions were not the UN itself but rather those member states who weren't prepared to take the action that was necessary. The ingredients of wars build up over a long period. Our failure to act then was *the* failure, not the failure of the UN to act in the moments or hours before the war broke out.

What do you see as UNIFIL's primary tasks and responsibilities at the moment?

I think UNIFIL has to carry out its mandate, as laid

down by the UN Security Council, in full, and their success will be measured by the extent to which they do that.

The UN has made changes to its command structure which will apply for UNIFIL; authorising ground commanders to make decisions regarding the immediate use of force, and enabling all relevant officers to be present in a single headquarters in New York – do you think these will make a difference to the force's performance?

Well there's no doubt that this is an improvement to the architecture of intervention, and improvement is welcomed. But peacemaking missions are not determined by architecture, they are determined by the political will that lies behind that. You can create all the architecture you want, but you are not going to be successful unless you make that architecture work. The UN must give its commanders on the ground room to take their own decisions rather than interfering all the time. It is also necessary to back the mandate with political will to make sure it becomes a reality on the ground.

**The
fundamental
red hot coal
at the heart
of the Middle
East is the
Palestine
problem**

Lord Robertson a President of Chatham House in discussion with Lord Ashdown, also a President of Chatham House



Would you say that these changes are sufficient, or would you like to see some other architecture or mechanisms that would be of more help?

They key architecture is the architecture that allows political decisions at the international level at New York. One of the most debilitating aspects of Kosovo is the UNDPKO's attempts to micromanage the situation on the ground, frequently, if unintentionally destroying some of the initiatives that have been taken. One of the key principles of peacemaking is to have trust in your people on the ground; give them the scope to use their initiative and don't interfere from the side.

The 2005 World Summit, a General Assembly Declaration and the Security Council's Resolution 1674 have all recently promoted the notion of a "right to protect" to be included in the definition of state sovereignty. What, in your view, are its international implications?

I think its international implications could be very great and very beneficial. It legitimises the right to intervene where the Human Rights of a population of a country were are being abused by a government that was breaking international law. That was of course the reason for intervention in Kosovo which I supported at the time.

My fear is that post Iraq and post Afghanistan the whole cause of intervention in the world may well be brought to a halt. If that happens, then I think the world will be a much more dangerous place.

So it's an important step forward but whether it turns out to be as beneficial as it appears depends not so much on the words on the paper but on the political will behind them.

The current crisis in the Sudan's Darfur region has been said to be a first test for this new principle, do you think this "right to protect" would legitimise a UN peacekeeping mission to be deployed to the Sudan with or without the Sudanese government's acceptance?

I think that's a difficult question and I'm not a lawyer but what I'm clear on is that the right to protect must be action orientated. Now whether Sudan conforms to that case is a matter which for lawyers comment on, whether or not it's a legitimate case for it is for them, not for me. However, if we are serious about a right to protect in cases where a humanitarian catastrophe is imminent or genocide is being carried out, then that does mean action on the ground. This situation is not made easier because the Sudanese government has refused to allow access to UN legitimised forces. This is an important moment and we should be watching to

see whether or not we are serious about the right to protect or not.

What do you think the future holds for peacekeeping?

The crucial issue is to what extent do the burnt fingers of Iraq and Afghanistan upset the future. The truth is we are living in an increasingly globalised world and an increasingly interdependent world, and I think an increasingly unstable world. The years ahead will be very dangerous and very difficult. I do not believe we have seen the end of the period of major wars, I think what we are seeing at the moment are that the small wars which are the pre-shocks to something potentially much bigger.

Our capacity to resolve major wars will depend on our capacity to manage the smaller, potential areas of conflict in the world, and that means that intervention must be part of the bloodstream of the international community.

But our record on this is not particularly good. As it happens, the UN Security Council now takes a decision about once every six months to intervene. The US leads international coalitions about once every two years. The UN strike record of success is about fifty percent in its various interventions; defining success is to prevent conflict reoccurring. The US and international coalition's record of success is rather less than that, but that is probably because they take rather more difficult cases.

So, we need to start taking this seriously. It's very important that the reaction to Iraq and Afghanistan is not 'never again' but 'how can we do it better?'.

You say that these small wars are the pre-cursors to larger ones – what do you think are some of the major issues around which these future problems will revolve?

An increasingly interdependent world; a more crowded world; a world in which there are resource conflicts which will be very difficult to handle. A world in which the tectonic plates of power are shifting away from the nations of the Atlantic rim and toward the nations of the Pacific rim.

All that adds up to extremely unstable times. It's going to be tough to manage security and peace in the period ahead. The truth is that we're living in one of those periods in history of powerful change and managing that process of change and creating a system of international law which brings good governance to the global stage is the only way we can succeed. **F**

Interview conducted by Markus Coleman.

A shorter version of this interview appears in The World Today, October 2006, published by Chatham House.

The years ahead will be very dangerous and very difficult