

Security Council Open Debate on the Maintenance of International Peace and Security: War, its lessons, and the search for a permanent peace, 29th January 2014, Security Council Chamber

Statement by Mr. Donoghue, Permanent Mission of Ireland to the United Nations

At the outset, I would like to warmly commend the Jordanian presidency of the Council for its initiative in proposing that issues relating to reconciliation should be the focus of today's open debate.

I align myself with the statement delivered on behalf of the European Union and its member States.

Over the century that we are marking today, the scourge of war was all too visible in many parts of the world and in many forms. How to eliminate that scourge and to build lasting peace is one of the great challenges facing our Organization. The United Nations has a vital role to play in helping societies damaged by conflict to rebuild and regenerate themselves. Through its peacebuilding interventions, it can help to transform a fragile peace into something more deep-rooted and lasting. It can lay the foundations, as few other organizations can, for permanent peace.

At the heart of that endeavour is the support the United Nations can provide for reconciliation between the communities of a divided society in the aftermath of conflict. It can help communities to bind up the wounds of conflict and to move, however slowly and hesitantly, towards peaceful coexistence. The damage done to relationships at all levels by years of war and suffering is, of course, immense. It can take generations to overcome. There are legacies of profound mistrust. There are issues between communities in conflict that touch on deep sensitivities of identity and allegiance. Even if violence has ended, a lengthy healing process is needed before the rival communities can reach the level of confidence in each other that is required for a shared future.

On the island of Ireland, we have seen this at first hand. Fifteen years ago, a comprehensive political framework for the settlement of the Northern Ireland problem was agreed in a negotiation process which that the Irish and British Governments and the political representatives of Northern Ireland's communities. The achievement, the so-called Good Friday Agreement, transformed relations within Northern Ireland, between North and South, and between Ireland and the United Kingdom. It has brought lasting political stability to Northern Ireland and an unprecedented level of cooperation and interaction between the two parts of Ireland.

At the grass-roots level, however, a significant challenge remains in terms of achieving lasting reconciliation between the two main traditions in Northern Ireland. Much painstaking effort has been devoted on all sides to that process. While significant progress has been made, a number of divisive issues remain. Those include issues such as the flying of flags linked to the respective communities or how contentious parades should be handled. Intensive efforts were made recently by a respected United States third party to broker an agreement between the communities on how those issues should be addressed.

Over the years, the Irish and British Governments have worked closely together on practical steps that might help the different traditions in Northern Ireland to deal with the past and to transcend the legacy of bitterness and misunderstanding. I salute here important initiatives taken by the British Government, such as the apology given by Prime Minister Cameron for the events of Bloody Sunday, to which the Permanent Representative of the United Kingdom referred earlier in this meeting. Much valuable work is also under way at the community level to foster reconciliation and to increase mutual respect and acceptance of diversity.

At the international level, the United Nations is promoting similar objectives through a wide range of instruments available to it in dealing with the aftermath of conflict. Those include support for transitional justice and the rule of law, for political dialogue and mediation, for truth-telling processes, for reparations, for institutional reform, and for the role of women in the renewal and rebuilding of societies emerging from conflict. In such situations, the United Nations has the potential to deliver profound benefits, defusing tensions between communities at the local level through concrete actions that it supports and by thereby easing and accelerating the essential work of national reconciliation.

Reconciliation work assumes different forms in different contexts, whether at the national or community levels. There can be multiple benefits, furthermore, from individual steps taken. For example, the creation of a post-conflict system of justice can, on the one hand, serve accountability purposes in relation to egregious crimes committed during the conflict phase, while on the other it can help to restore the trust of individual citizens and to reconcile them to the new State.

Peacebuilding, with reconciliation at its core, is probably most effective if it is double-facing — a process through which a society moves from a divided past to a shared future. While reconciliation needs to be context-specific and respond to the particular nature or dynamic of each transition or conflict, a more concerted effort is required to glean and share lessons and best practices from different conflict settings. Work also needs to be done on drawing together the various dimensions of reconciliation — including development, peacebuilding, human rights, security, the rule of law and governance — into a more integrated approach in which those various pillars would complement and reinforce each other.

To conclude, my delegation believes that this area of United Nations activity has not always received the attention it deserves. The actions being taken by the United Nations under various headings to promote reconciliation in post-conflict societies merit our full support. The Organization is making a vital contribution to the creation of “a truer, irreversible peace”, as the concept paper circulated by the Jordanian presidency (S/2014/30, annex) puts it. There is much potential for developing that contribution, and Ireland looks forward to further reflection on the subject with other interested delegations. In that context, we wish to share the lessons we have learned from the Northern Ireland peace process, in the light of the continuing challenge of achieving lasting reconciliation among the differing traditions there, and also to draw on other examples of best practices from around the globe.