

Preface

Fifty years ago the United Nations launched its first peace-keeping mission. Since then, much of the work that the Organization has done to promote peace and security in all regions of the world has been accomplished with the aid of peace-keeping operations, interventions designed to create the necessary conditions for warring parties to find non-violent solutions to their disputes. While peace-keeping operations have evolved to address the needs of a great variety of conflicts and conditions, it has always been clear that it is a far better alternative to prevent violent confrontations from developing in the first place by being attentive to the signs of unrest and intervening in a manner which steers the political climate back towards peace.

Mali is a country in which this kind of preventive diplomacy has met with great success. Although we mourn the loss of life which occurred in the early 1990s, we are thankful that peace was soon restored. As a result, I hope that Mali will serve as an example for others to follow in recognizing the factors which cause unrest and in acting appropriately to build a solid peace. Mali should serve as a model both for peacemaking throughout the world and also for United Nations development and security initiatives.

This study published by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR) will bring the Malian model to the awareness of Governments and policy makers around the globe. Herein lies not only a very frank account of the unfolding of the conflict and the efforts to contain it, but also an insightful analysis of which efforts to restore peace were effective and why. Moreover, the authors examine the role of the international community, and especially the United Nations, in helping the Malian Government to restore peace and to re-integrate its disaffected populations and refugees back into civilian life. One of the most important lessons is that even small actions, undertaken at the right moment, can have enormous positive impact in restoring hope among struggling people.

Another is that with proper coordination, the international community can help to prevent the outbreak of war and to provide the conditions necessary for economic development. Indeed, the coordination of the activities of the United Nations Development Programme and other United Nations agencies in Mali with those of non-governmental organizations and donor countries has been exemplary.

One highly symbolic moment in the peace process was the occasion of the Flame of Peace, held in Timbuktu on 27 March 1996. At this ceremony officiated by President Alpha Oumar Konaré, some 3,000 weapons were destroyed in a great bonfire. These were small arms that had been surrendered by the demobilizing rebels in exchange for assistance and training from the Government of Mali and the international community to help them re-integrate into society. The dramatic destruction of these weapons was a public display of the commitment to peace on both sides, and it was also a reminder of the plethora of such weapons which are available in this and in so many other troubled regions of the world. Recognizing the threat to regional security that the presence of so many small arms poses, the majority of West African States have not only established national commissions on small arms, but have also come together on a number of occasions to discuss the possibility of a regional moratorium on the trade and manufacture of these weapons.

My hope is not only that Mali will continue to work to build a lasting peace and an environment for sustainable development, but also that this country will serve as a beacon for other States to follow. Mali has for many centuries been regarded as a cultural and spiritual centre. Let Mali now be a political and economic model as well.

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