

**E-Discussion Summary on Failed and Fragile States
Policy Research Division, Foreign Affairs Canada
December 9, 2005**

From September 26 to December 2, 2005, Canadians were invited to share their views on failed and fragile states. Participants were provided with numerous on-line resources to foster clear and informed discussion. There were over 400 contributions to the eDiscussion, a substantial increase over participation in previous sessions.

Several strategic questions were posed to participants by policy-makers within Foreign Affairs Canada to guide and frame the eDiscussion. The main points raised in response to each of the questions are as follows:

International Policy Statement

Participants were asked for their views on the treatment of the issue of failed and fragile states in the recent IPS. Two aspects of the Statement garnered particular attention. First, the establishment of a Global Peace and Security Fund (GPSF) and the creation of the Stabilization and Reconstruction Task Force (START) were favourably received. Participants indicated that the START would improve our reaction capacity in the event of crises in fragile and failed states.

Second, discussions on the definition of failed and fragile states revealed a lack of clarity over the practical meaning of this concept. Participants stated that despite the frequent use of the term in the IPS and the eDiscussion, neither offers a clear and specific definition.

Intervention in failed and fragile states

Generally, participants agreed that Canada should be involved in efforts to combat fragility, through prevention, intervention and reconstruction, as required. They felt that Canada's historic peacekeeping role and diplomatic influence make it an essential player in this regard. Participants preferred that Canadian interventions be conducted within a multilateral framework - ideally under the aegis of the UN - though they acknowledged that this is not always possible.

Citing our limited military capabilities and financial resources, participants acknowledged the importance of setting priorities in terms of intervention and aid. Several criteria were proposed, including: 1 - available Canadian resources; 2 - the needs of the state in question; and 3 - whether our involvement is likely to have a real and lasting effect.

A number of participants supported increasing funding for the Canadian Armed Forces and advocated the strategic concentration of Canadian development assistance in a select few developing countries. Opinions, however, varied widely regarding how and where to allocate this aid.

Finally, there was lively debate over the place of national interest in the decision-making process. Some felt that Canada's interventions should be guided primarily by our national interests. Others argued that moral and legal imperatives and the notion of Responsibility to Protect (R2P) should guide our decisions to intervene.

Sustaining political and public support

The work of prevention, stabilization and recovery in failed and fragile states requires the commitment of significant resources over the long term. Participants were therefore asked how

Canada might best sustain the political and public commitment on which our contribution to the state-building process depends.

The effective dissemination of information was viewed as crucial in this regard. Participants emphasized the role of the media in promoting awareness of failed and fragile states and in generating political pressure to ensure long-term Canadian engagement is supported by the public and by politicians. The government was also seen to bear significant responsibility for providing information and education, as well as for supporting public engagement.

The fact that Canada contributes less than 0.7% of its GNP to official development assistance was harshly criticized by a number of participants. At the same time, several of them warned that a commitment to improving conditions for those abroad must not come at the expense of our domestic responsibilities. These individuals often pointed to the situation of First Nations communities as an important domestic priority.

Stability in the name of democracy, or vice versa?

Given that holding elections prematurely has often fostered instability in already fragile states, participants were asked whether Canada should support non-democratic forms of government in the medium term to foster long-term stability and democracy. There was no consensus on this issue, though a majority position did emerge. Most participants felt that, over the long term, stabilization and democratization are mutually supportive. A majority felt that Canada should work to promote stability at the outset to create a favourable context in which democratic values can subsequently be disseminated. Canada's involvement in Afghanistan was regularly cited as an example of this. In addition, most respondents affirmed the importance of local ownership, arguing that the imposition of democracy by a foreign power was ineffective, undesirable and contrary to Canadian values. Indeed, participants were generally reluctant to make democratization an explicit goal of Canadian involvement in failed and fragile states.

Much debate focused on the universality of democracy. Some characterized democracy as a western concept that is not relevant in all national contexts, while others stated that democracy is necessary and desirable as it allows for the respect of local values while protecting universal values such as human rights.

Failed and fragile cities

Since this was a relatively new and little-known theme, the response rate for failed and fragile cities was lower than that for the other topics of discussion.

Participants agreed that cities posed unique challenge, requiring targeted solutions. As examples of these challenges, they pointed to high population densities, the difficulty of locating combatants, dependence on critical infrastructure and the potential for rapid spread of infectious disease.

Conversely, they felt that some aspects of the urban environment could facilitate intervention in fragile cities. For example, in contrast to rural areas in which the population is widely dispersed, dense populations in urban centres make it easier to reach a large number of people quickly.

Participants insisted that improving urban living conditions was critical to mitigating fragility in cities. Poverty and social exclusion were identified in several submissions as primary sources of urban violence. Accordingly, it was felt that these should be a focus of preventative action in cities.

However, participants warned that investing in balanced and sustainable urban development should not come at the expense of rural development, noting that urban welfare was inevitably tied to rural conditions. For example, rural areas play a crucial role in supplying food to urban centres. Moreover, neglect and impoverishment in rural areas encourages urban migration, which can place further strain on already overcrowded cities. It was therefore felt that a strategy for failed and fragile cities must address both urban and rural concerns.

Response by the Department of Foreign Affairs

A summary of the views presented during the eDiscussion on failed and fragile states has been received within Foreign Affairs Canada and is currently being reviewed by policy planners.

Their response will be posted on the Canadian International Policy site in February 2006.