

## ON STRENGTHENING US DIPLOMACY IN AFRICA

### Testimony of Howard Wolpe Before the Senate Subcommittee on Africa

April 21, 2009

Mr. Chairman:

I welcome the invitation to testify before your subcommittee, and commend you for focusing in a timely way on a number of issues that are central to America's diplomatic capacity – and particularly to our ability to defuse or prevent conflicts within the conflict-plagued Africa continent. My reflections this afternoon draw upon my five years experience as President Clinton's Special Envoy to Africa's Great Lakes region, where I was deeply involved in both the Congolese and Burundi wars and associated peace processes, and a number of post-conflict reconstruction training initiatives in which I have been involved the past several years – in such places as Burundi, the DRC, Liberia and East Timor.

This combination of experiences has led me to conclude that conventional approaches to peace-building are deeply flawed, because they seldom involve direct engagement with the key leaders of the belligerent parties, and virtually ignore the mistrust, suspicions and fears with which they enter the reconstruction process. We spend considerable time focusing on structures and institutions, and establishing a multi-party electoral system. But the fundamental challenge of divided societies is not the absence of sufficient competitiveness. Rather, it is the absence of collaborative capacity: leaders that have been through years of conflict and war simply find it difficult to get beyond a "winner take all," zero-sum, mindset, to identify common interests, or to rebuild the trust and relationships required to enable them to work effectively together in rebuilding their societies. Yet, our governance and peace-building programs seldom have incorporated strategies or processes to build collaborative capacity. As a consequence, many peace-building initiatives are unsustainable, with countries returning to war within a few years.

From this perspective, let me now respond to the specific questions you have posed for consideration. First, with respect to the diplomatic presence and resources required to anticipate and prevent long-term threats – and, I would add, to implement post-conflict mitigation, recovery and transformation strategies to sustain peaceful transitions to democracy – I would offer the following reflections and recommendations:

- First, we need a new diplomatic paradigm – one that recognizes that the starting point for preventative initiatives in Africa is a recognition of the divided nature of most African societies. That means we need instruments and processes that are less focused on imposing Western institutional structures than in assisting nationals in divided societies develop a recognition of their interdependence and of the value of collaboration even with former enemies. Such initiatives should be directed at changing the "winner take all," zero-game conflict paradigm that characterizes most elite interactions, at building the trust and relationships among key leaders, at building a new consensus on how power is to be shared and organized, and at strengthening the communications and negotiations skills of key leaders.
- Second, the implementation of such a paradigm requires a new approach to the training of diplomats. One of the things that I learned during my five years at State is that most diplomats have little or no expertise in the techniques of institutional and conflict transformation, and are minimally trained (if at all) in mediation and facilitation techniques. Diplomats tend to think of sticks and carrots, of pressures and incentives – of anything that will bring belligerent parties to the signing of peace agreements. But if the belligerent parties feel they have been manipulated into an agreement, and have little sense of their ownership of the final product, the chances for sustainability are greatly reduced. The leaders of belligerent parties may well sign an agreement

– but that does not mean that the day afterwards they see each other any differently than the day before, or that they are any more prepared to address the issues underlying their conflict. In short, if are serious about sustainable solutions, processes that address the mind-sets of key leaders directly – their fears, their suspicions, their perceptions of one another – must be seen as a critical complement to conventional diplomacy. In this connection, I welcome the proposal laid out by President Obama in the recent campaign to establish a Mediation Unit at State – that would bring together experienced diplomats and other practitioners to build an inventory of peace-building best practices and “lessons learned.”

- Third, building a more effective approach to sustainable peace-building requires the development of new partnerships between diplomats, on the one hand, and specialists in the techniques of institutional and conflict transformation, on the other. Diplomats, as I have indicated, seldom know much about these techniques, but they do have access to national leaders, do understand the politics of divided societies, and comprehend the regional diplomatic environment. Trainers, on the other hand, though having the skills required to transform conflictual relationships, seldom have access to national leaders, generally have little background on the politics of these societies, and are generally not conversant with the diplomatic environment. In short, trainers and diplomats need each other if key leaders are to be drawn into the required training initiatives.
- Fourth, one means of building this new synergy between diplomats and trainers would be to better integrate the work of USAID’s Bureau of Conflict Mitigation and Management – the repository of most government expertise on conflict transformation – with the State Department’s diplomatic agenda. Too frequently, however, the work of CMM is viewed as a secondary enterprise, not central to the real work of diplomacy. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. Moreover, CMM knows the lay of the land with respect to the conflict transformation profession, and is best positioned to mobilize expert trainers to establish in-country training initiatives designed to support the diplomatic objective of assisting states emerging from war, or states threatening to go to war, strengthen state cohesion and the collaborative capacity of key leaders.
- Fifth, in a rather different vein, during my tenure as Great Lakes Special Envoy I was struck by how often we were flying blind – with little solid information about the various military elements involved in the conflict, or about the role of ethnic diaspora that were financing and fueling many of the conflicts. There were simply too few intelligence assets committed to Africa conflict zoners; this seemed to be a very low priority for the Central Intelligence Agency. I am hopeful, but skeptical, that this situation has changed significantly, and would argue for the resources required to enable the USG develop more informed diplomatic strategies.
- Sixth, and closely related to the intelligence deficit, was a woeful paucity of appropriate language skills. There are few within the USG government that speak indigenous African languages – and when it came to the assignment of defense attaches, several lacked even solid French. This linguistic shortcoming greatly hampered their effectiveness in working with the security branches of the host governments.
- Seventh, during my tenure as Special Envoy, I was constantly reminded of the importance of close diplomatic coordination with all of the countries that were seeking to support the peace process. One of the most important developments that occurred as we were trying to address both the Burundi and the Congolese conflicts was a very close partnership I formed with my European Union counterpart, Aldo Ajello. We worked closely together, sometimes even to the point of making joint demarches. This insured that we were communicating precisely the same message and could not be played off against each other by the belligerent parties. In addition,

regular meetings were established involving all of the key international players – most notably, the EU, Belgium, France, Canada and the United Kingdom. These meetings facilitated an important information exchange, and enabled us both to harmonize our messages, and to decide on appropriate diplomatic strategy as events unfolded on the ground. In later years, Aldo Ajello observed that he felt the international effort in the Great Lakes was compromised when the United States did not reappoint a Special Envoy with whom he could have collaborated.

Finally, it is well known that the Africa Bureau is severely under-staffed. Hopefully, this personnel deficit will be overcome with the contemplated expansion of State Department personnel – but there should be no question as to the importance of this issue. In this connection, I would draw your attention to the report issued on October 8, 2008, by the Stimson Institute and the American Academy of Diplomacy outlining very precise and reasonable staffing increases for State to “expand the diplomatic toolkit.”

Let me turn now to the second question the Subcommittee has posed – the role of Special Envoys, and how they interface with our embassies in the conflict zones in which they are engaged. I would offer two principal observations:

- First, I would underscore the importance of Special Envoys in addressing situations involving more than a single state. Sitting Ambassadors invariably come to reflect the perspective of the capitals in which they are based; it is virtually impossible for the Ambassador to Rwanda, for example, to fully comprehend the Kinshasa perspective on the Great Lakes conflict; nor do Kinshasa-based diplomats have a good comprehension of the Rwandan perspective. Special Envoys enjoy the unique position of being able to view and understand a conflict from all perspectives – thereby enabling the development of a much more balanced and nuanced diplomatic strategy. While Bureau heads in Washington do develop a broader view of conflict dynamics, they simply have too much on their day-to-day bureaucratic plate to undertake the required on-the-ground diplomatic engagement.
- Second, it is important, in my view, for Special Envoys to work very closely with the various Embassies within their area of responsibility – to insure that the sitting Ambassadors are fully in the loop, and that there are no misunderstandings or mixed messages. I always made it a practice to have the sitting Ambassadors or Embassy political officers accompany me to my meetings. Then, at the conclusion of a national visit, the Ambassador would often host a gathering of the locally based diplomatic community where I would provide a full de-briefing on the meetings I had held. This helped significantly to build trust as between the embassies, and to harmonize both analyses and messages.

Finally, the Subcommittee has asked me to comment on what embassies might do to strengthen their information-gathering function.

- Successful political, policy, intelligence and representational functions of an American embassy are dependent on the officers of that embassy – the Ambassador, the DCM, the political and economic councilors and their staff officers – understanding the politics, economies, cultures and histories of the countries in which they serve. This can only be done adequately if those officers get to know the leaders and the people of their host countries. The relationships need to be structured on the basis of openness and frankness, based on mutual respect and trust, or they result in diplomats being told what the nationals think they want to hear, rather than what is their true situation. These relationships can only develop from extended and egalitarian interactions with the community. Of course, there are security

constraints these days, with embassies and American diplomatic communities in some instances being restricted to almost “fortress” like existences behind secure walls and armored cars. Special efforts need to be made to get beyond and outside of these fortresses, both physical and conceptual.

- During my diplomatic tenure, I was struck by the great variation between embassies in the amount of political outreach that is undertaken. Some embassies were outstanding in insuring that the Ambassador and political officers were fully engaged with diverse constituencies. This is very much a function of the leadership provided by the Ambassador. The best Ambassadors placed special emphasis on reaching beyond the often closed circle of the diplomatic community, as much as security concerns allowed, to mix professionally with the host communities and, as a part of that, to engage in broad social intercourse, which is often the foundation for good political contacts.
- I was also struck by the tendency of Embassies to develop capital-centric perspectives. It is especially important, to counter this natural tendency, for Embassy officials to travel outside of the capital, to engage rural constituencies, and to reach out to opposition and unofficial elements.
- Finally, as discussed earlier, embassies are often hampered by very limited intelligence assets – and some of these deficiencies in the allocation of both human and technical resources need to be corrected – especially in volatile, conflict-sensitive areas. This will greatly strengthen the over-all diplomatic capabilities of our embassies.

I hope these reflections have been helpful, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to any questions you might have.