

Can Canada help curb civil wars?; If we're serious about preventing conflict, we should introduce a gradual ban all foreign-arms sales over next decade, say James Ron and Oskar N.T. Thoms

James Ron and Oskar N.T. Thoms . Toronto Star ; Toronto, Ont. [Toronto, Ont]12 Apr 2006: A17.

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The global arms trade is big business. In 2004, according to the U.S. Congressional Research Service, the value of all international arms deliveries totalled \$ 34.8 billion U.S. Most of this went to the developing world.

The U.S. leads the pack with deliveries of \$18.6 billion, followed by Russia and France, but Canada is no bit player. In 2004, its \$900 million U.S. of foreign arms deliveries put it in sixth place, ahead of China (\$700 million) and Israel (\$500 million).

Most Canadian arms exports go to the U.S., but Canadian companies also sell to the developing world. According to Project Ploughshares, Quebec's Bell Helicopter Textron sold \$346 million worth of helicopters to Pakistan in 2004, while Pratt &Whitney Canada sold \$22 million in aircraft engines to Indonesia.

FULL TEXT

What can Canada do to help prevent civil war abroad? Policy- makers claim that economic growth and democratization will help, but in a recent study, we take issue with these claims.

The supposed link between poverty and civil war is based on the notion that poverty-stricken groups are more prone to violence. Our review of the scientific literature, however, suggests this may not be the case.

According to most experts, the poorest populations do not initiate civil war because they are too isolated, risk-averse or busy trying to survive. Civil wars do occur more frequently in poor countries, but the causal process works indirectly. For example, budget-starved states are less able to defeat challengers without resorting to indiscriminate violence.

The link between democracy and civil peace is also contested.

To be sure, full democracies experience fewer civil wars, and political inclusion is a powerful antidote to extremism.

The process of democratization, however, is fraught with peril, since it often involves traumatic regime change. As Iraq demonstrates, social groups may respond to uncertainty with violence, using private militias to secure their future.

The same is true in Afghanistan and Haiti, two countries where Canada is particularly keen to promote democracy.

Although Canada's efforts may be well-intentioned, democratization must be done carefully, lest the cure be worse than the disease.

What else might Canada do? There is no simple answer, since there is little scholarly consensus on what policies work.

Our study suggests that aid efforts should focus on inequality and discrimination, which seem more closely linked to conflict than poverty alone.

Consider Nepal, where a Maoist group has made military headway against the government, citing caste discrimination as a grievance. Canada's foreign aid effort could usefully focus on promoting greater social equality in that country. Our report focused on issues to consider in making development aid conflict-sensitive, but we should also examine our own role. Charity begins at home, so let's set our own house in order before advising others.

Consider the arms trade, which Canada participates in with great enthusiasm. In recent weeks, activists from Oxfam, Amnesty International and Project Ploughshares have launched a Canadian campaign to regulate the arms trade, and their concerns deserve a closer look.

What is the link between arms and civil war?

For starters, a study by the University of Memphis's Shannon Blanton associated arms imports in the developing world with greater levels of state repression. Our own study, in turn, noted that brutal government crackdowns are important triggers for civil war.

Military aid also prolongs conflict. From 1945 to 1997, according to the University of Minnesota's Ann Hironaka, almost three-quarters of the world's civil wars were prolonged by foreign military aid. When opposing parties thus benefited, wars lasted, on average, between three and four times longer.

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So here's a radical idea If Canada is serious about preventing civil wars, why not introduce a gradual ban on all foreign-arms sales, to be implemented over the next decade?

Such a move might be economically painful in the short term, since in 2004 alone, Canada's 10 largest military contractors did more than \$2.9 billion in business. Still, many arms manufacturers produce substantially for civilian markets, and federal tax breaks could help ease the transition.

In the long run, a Canadian ban on arms exports would prove enormously popular. Canadians cherish their peace-loving image, and a principled stand against the global arms trade would inspire individuals and governments worldwide.

Canada has championed noble causes before, including the extraordinary land-mine treaty and the new international criminal court.

As the Harper government searches for a way to make a difference in the world, why not make a splash by renouncing arms-related profits? Where Canada leads, others will follow.

Over time, we might even make a real difference.

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