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After the Fighting

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Blessed are the peacemakers, but peacemaking doesn't end when warmakers lay down their arms. Old conflicts have a habit of breaking out anew; Congo and Angola are current examples, and in Kosovo the fragile peace is barely holding.

One of the most critical facets of post-conflict management is the return of refugees or displaced persons to their former homes and their reintegration into the economy and society. The disarmament and demobilization of soldiers, often child soldiers, is another major concern in many post-conflict situations. Land mines frequently complicate the situation and demining must be done quickly and thoroughly. Security for returnees, disarmed soldiers, and relief workers is typically poor. National and local governments may be weak, corrupt, and even antagonistic to large segments of their populations.

The international community -- even when it manages to focus -- usually makes inadequate efforts to implement this complex transition of people from war to peace.

The examples are many. In Somaliland, a region of war-torn Somalia, refugees were being repatriated to barren sites lacking the most basic infrastructure for survival. The Somaliland authorities -- rightly fearing that refugees coming home to potential urban ghettos could destabilize their relatively stable region -- recently halted repatriations.

The inadequacies of the international community in helping failed societies recover is often called the relief-to-development gap. Nobody has responsibility for people in the middle -- those who are in transition between dependence on aid and economic self-sufficiency.

For instance, the return of several hundred thousand Cambodian refugees to their homeland in the early 1990s illustrates the pitfalls and complexities of reintegration. Refugees returning home were provided transport and materials for constructing a house. In addition, they were offered one of several assistance packages, including a plot of agricultural land. Most refugees chose the land option, only to find there was insufficient land and they had to settle for cash instead. Cash, however, was quickly spent when they found no way of earning income.

An important summit meeting will take place at the Brookings Institution on January 15 to take up the issue of managing post-conflict transitions around the world. The summit will bring together the leaders of the World Bank, the UN Development Program (UNDP), the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and other international organizations. The international leaders who will meet in Washington agree that the relief-to-development gap should be filled.

First, the time horizon of international agencies should be expanded. UNHCR's experience and expertise should not be shelved after a former refugee returns home and receives short-

term assistance. Even more importantly, the World Bank, the UNDP, and other development agencies should be involved from the outset to augment UNHCR's efforts and carry on the reconstruction effort.

The international agencies should plan earlier and more comprehensively for post-conflict management. The planning process should emphasize communications among agencies; input and feedback from refugees, displaced persons, and their communities; and the use of local actors to implement post-conflict programs and projects.

A leader and a lead agency on the ground should be designated before the refugees return home. In especially complex post-conflict situations, a temporary, independent organization should be created drawing personnel both from within and outside the UN. The relatively new UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs also has a valuable role to play.

Sitting at the table in all phases should be the international non-governmental organizations. NGOs have the grassroots knowledge and field experience that the big aid agencies often lack. An important result of international assistance should also be to strengthen the capacity of indigenous NGOs, often the most dynamic entities in a recovering society.

Money for post-conflict management is also essential. The lead time available in many post-conflict situations should make it possible for the international agencies to agree on a financial plan, work out budgets, and assemble resources in advance.

At the beginning of this decade, UNHCR used to say it was not "operational." But under Sadako Ogata, UNHCR has since undergone a significant evolution to take responsibility for huge relief operations including Bosnia.

Now, similar leadership is needed from Ms. Ogata, her senior UN colleagues, and World Bank President Wolfensohn to make post-conflict reconstruction programs work. This way, next week's meeting can avoid the common pitfall of failing to generate meaningful action.

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