World's Weakest Nations Pose Greatest Global Security Threats

by Keith Porter

The most disturbing headlines in the world today all seem to share something in common. Whether in Somalia, Sudan, Pakistan, or elsewhere, too often these troubling news stories stem from a country too weak to control its own territory and provide opportunity for its citizens.

Today, these so-called "fragile states" are seen as a major contributor to (or even the cause of) many global challenges including trafficking of all sorts, piracy, terrorism, nuclear proliferation, disease pandemics, regional tensions, even genocide and more.

"In recent years, it seems we've had more security problems from states that have been in trouble than we have from strong states that have been an adversary to us in the traditional way," U.S. Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair said in February. And Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy recently wrote, "Conflict in the 21st century is at least as likely to result from problems associated with state weakness as from state strength."

In other words, the world's weakest nations can pose the greatest global security threats. Therefore, promoting stronger states and preventing actions that will destabilize more countries has become a key focus of policy analysts and policymakers alike.

Much work is being done to alleviate the symptoms or collateral damage from weak states. This includes helping refugees and internally displaced persons, putting an end to human trafficking, controlling nuclear proliferation, stopping pirates, and so on. But most of this does not promote state stability in a comprehensive, holistic manner.

At the international level, the United Nations is making this comprehensive approach to rebuilding states a centerpiece of its new Peacebuilding Commission. And the "responsibility to protect" doctrine spells out the obligations of both states and the world community to help states protect against genocide and similar, terrible and destabilizing crimes.

In the United States and elsewhere, acting on this more holistic understanding of state stability will require new directions in diplomacy, foreign aid programs, military training and deployments, and more. We will collectively need to rethink many international policies and short-term national security actions to make sure they are not actually causing more troublesome fragile states in the long run.

Of course, every case of a fragile or failed state is unique. This argues for a world with a full and flexible toolbox of response options and a strategic commitment to use them. More importantly, it means the world should be looking for ways to promote stronger states long before they are at risk of failure and conflict.

Pauline Baker and her colleagues at the Fund for Peace call this level of state stability "sustainable security," which they define as "the ability of societies to solve their own problems peacefully without an outside military or administrative presence."

As Baker explains, none of this means we support authoritarian governments that exist largely on corruption and deny their citizens the civil and political freedoms we hold so dearly. But in today's global system, a functioning state is required to even engage on human rights and other issues. Ultimately we seek, and the world needs, countries that protect their own people and participate responsibly in the international community.

In the most recent issue of *Courier*, a Stanley Foundation publication, Sean Harder examines lingering instability in Kenya following post-election violence there and whether an intervention by the international community in 2008 was one of the first applications of the "responsibility to protect" principle. And the foundation's Michael Kraig looks at what works and what doesn't in helping states move from fragility to stability. You can find *Courier* online at **www.stanleyfoundation.org/courier**.

In all of this we must remember that doing this work well is to our common benefit. As the US ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice said in a recent speech, "Our values compel us to reduce poverty, disease, and hunger; to end preventable deaths of mothers and children; and to build self-sufficiency in agriculture, health, and education. But so too does our national interest. Whether the peril is terrorism, pandemics, narcotics, human trafficking, or civil strife, a state so weak that it incubates a threat is also a state too weak to contain a threat. In the 21st century, therefore we can have no doubt: as President Obama has said time and again, America's security and well-being are inextricably linked to those of people everywhere."

About the Author
Keith Porter is the director of Policy and Outreach for the Muscatine, Iowa-based Stanley Foundation. He holds an M.S. in communication from Illinois State University. Porter was co-producer and co-host of the nationally syndicated public radio program on world affairs "Common Ground" from 1988 to 2004. He also served as co-producer and reporter for a number of award-winning radio documentaries from the Stanley Foundation.