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A fair foreign policy

Can the UK do more to protect civilians around the world?

The UK's foreign policy affects millions of poor and vulnerable people in the war zones where Oxfam works.

Any future Prime Minister and government must be global leaders in helping to solve the world's conflicts and protecting civilians caught up in them. The UK must become more consistent in challenging war crimes — and fulfilling its responsibility to protect civilians threatened by abuses.

Any future Prime Minister and government must say 'never again' — as much to repeating the UK's past failures to stop genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda, as to repeating a misadventure on the scale of Iraq.

Summary

The UK's foreign policy does not matter for the UK only. It matters for millions of poor and vulnerable people caught up in the conflicts where Oxfam works around the world. In diplomacy, as well as development, the UK can have a real impact on men, women, and children struggling to survive in the world's war zones.

UK foreign policy is at a crossroads, as one Prime Minister hands over the reins to another. For four years, foreign-policy discussions have been dominated by the debacle in Iraq. That is understandable – but dangerous. The danger is that, after Iraq, UK foreign policy could lurch to a much more cautious approach, turning away from trying to solve the world's worst crises, with potentially catastrophic consequences for people in them. And by refusing to acknowledge some of the failings and inconsistencies of recent years, the UK could undermine many of the more positive steps it has taken.

In 1994, the UK government not only sat on its hands, but actively worked to block the UN Security Council intervening to stop the genocide in Rwanda. It was one of the first to tell the UN to withdraw peacekeepers, rather than act to stop the killing. In part, this was because it was afraid of repeating the Western intervention in Somalia, which ended in disaster and humiliation in 1993.

One million people¹ died in the genocides in Rwanda and Bosnia, to which the previous UK government failed to respond effectively. Tony Blair came to office determined that the UK would never again allow such mass murder to be perpetrated. He pursued what could arguably be described as a relatively successful foreign policy until the misadventure in Iraq.

Now, that failure poses the danger that the foreign-policy pendulum will swing back again. Will a future Prime Minister, aware of the damage done by the Iraq war, stand back from trying to help to resolve the world's most difficult crises – just as a previous Prime Minister, after Somalia, stood back from Rwanda?

The true lesson from Iraq is that the wrong policy can make a bad situation worse. But this government has been right to pursue an active foreign policy. The UK must do more, not less, to seek multilateral solutions to the world's conflicts, and find ways to protect civilians caught up in them.

Impact on poor people

Around the world, Oxfam sees the impact of British foreign policy on the people with whom it works. In Lebanon in 2006, for example, Abdullah Bakin, an olive farmer in the village of Siddiquine, was typical in blaming the UK, not only Israel and the USA, for the destruction wrought on his farm, because the British government had failed to press Israel for an immediate ceasefire. He told one Oxfam aid worker:

'I've lost all my olive trees... 30 per cent shelled, 40 per cent burnt... the rest you can't get near because of the [unexploded] bombs...

[But] I'm aware that the British people do not think the same as Tony Blair and the British government....'

In many other countries, there is a more positive view of British policy. In 2005, the UK's efforts to focus the attention of the G8 on Africa did not go unnoticed. In much of Africa, there is genuine appreciation for what the UK has done, which goes beyond a recognition of its increasing development and humanitarian assistance.

By 2000, thousands of people in Sierra Leone had been killed or mutilated in the country's brutal civil war. Edward Konte was the chairman of a camp in Freetown where some of the 'amputees' — people who had had their limbs hacked off — survived.

'Robin Cook visited [the camp] when the rebels looked like coming back into Freetown,' he told a journalist. 'He saw a 17-year-old with no arms, and said, "****, this has got to stop". The next week, in came [the] British marines. They stopped the killing and the maiming just like that.'²

The contrasting views of Bakin and Konte reflect the UK's impact on the vulnerable people with whom Oxfam works in conflicts around the world — and the UK's mixed record in helping them.

Because of that impact, the UK must help more consistently to protect civilians. As in Sierra Leone, that will occasionally require deploying troops — but only occasionally. Far more often, it will require the UK to criticise its friends, as well as its enemies, when they commit war crimes and human-rights abuses. In Lebanon, and in too many other crises to date, it has failed to do that.

Protecting civilians

In recent years, as many as three-quarters of a million people each year may have died in just three of the world's 35 conflicts: those in Darfur, Iraq, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In 2006, the number of conflicts 'carried out with a massive amount of violence' rose by 25 per cent, according to one authoritative annual study.³

Working with others, the UK can do something about this. It can do more to seek multilateral solutions to the world's inter-connected conflicts, and ways to protect civilians caught up in them. In doing so, it must exemplify the 'role in the world' that people in the UK now want — i.e. by making a positive difference, not simply by avoiding misadventures like Iraq. In 2006, an ICM poll found 'consensual level support among British people for an "ethical" foreign policy'. More than 80 per cent supported 'ethical' policies, even if they might damage the UK's economy.

In 2007 it is easy to forget that, in the 1990s, most people in the UK wanted an intervention to stop genocide in Bosnia. Today's public opposition to the war in Iraq does not reflect a desire for the UK to take a lower profile in tackling the world's great problems. In March 2007, 57 per cent said that they would still support the use of British troops to stop genocide, even if there were no direct threat to the UK. The millions of people buying white bands for the Make Poverty History campaign, and the number of voices

calling for more action to solve the crisis in Darfur, suggest a large public constituency for the UK to actively help to reduce conflict and poverty beyond its borders.

In recent years, the UK has been most successful when it has been in tune with that public sentiment, and with international law — in Sierra Leone in 2000, or at the G8 in 2005. When the UK has ‘realistically’ and uncritically followed US policy, because the USA is its most important ally, the results have been disastrous.

Now, politicians of all parties must look beyond Iraq. They must look ahead to what the world will be like in the 2010s; and learn lessons from *all* the successes and failures of the relevant past — since the end of the Cold War, not solely since the events of 11 September 2001.

Responsibility to protect

The current government has championed the principle that the UK, like the rest of the world, has a responsibility to protect civilians from genocide and war crimes. In 2005, it played a vital role in securing international agreement on this.

However, its ability to act may have been compromised by its involvement in Iraq. In November 2006, Sudan’s president was able to deflect criticism, and denounce the plans for a UN force to protect civilians in Darfur, a proposal strongly backed by the UK. ‘The impact’, he said, ‘[would] be the same as what is happening in Iraq.’

Beyond Iraq, the UK’s policy on Israel and the Palestinians, and much of the Middle East, has damaged the UK’s reputation in the world. In August 2006, during the Lebanon crisis, the Prime Minister described an ‘arc of extremism’ of insurgents and pariah governments, and called for an opposing ‘alliance of moderation’ including the USA, the UK, and Israel.⁴ To most people around the world, in the light of attacks on civilians by some of the ‘moderates’ as well as ‘extremists’, the UK’s position looked one-sided.

That is not, however, the whole story of recent UK policy. More than any other G8 government, the UK has led the way on aid, debt relief, and development. Although its record on arms exports remains inconsistent, as much as any country, the UK can claim credit for the fact that there is now a process in place to negotiate an Arms Trade Treaty, to prevent irresponsible arms sales fuelling conflicts around the world.

The damage caused by UK policy on Iraq does, however, go further. Partly because of the war, the UN is still deeply divided. The UK must help to unite UN members again. It must press the UN not only to be more effective, but also to be more representative of the changing world. The UK must pursue a new multilateralism that is both active and ‘listening’, working with other governments to galvanise the rest of the international community to protect civilians.

Guiding principles

Foreign policy is more vulnerable to changing events than any domestic policy. It is only sensible to set down principles, not rigid prescriptions, for any future UK government to consider.

Oxfam suggests five such principles:

1. *actively* working to protect civilians – implementing the UK's 'responsibility to protect' – as a cornerstone of British foreign policy;
2. consistently challenging abuses of humanitarian law and human rights;
3. delivering, through a coherent cross-government approach, a range of other policies that could help to protect civilians — pressing on until good ideas, like the Arms Trade Treaty, actually result in fewer people being killed;
4. to make all of this effective: meeting the challenges of the changing world: facing new threats and finding new approaches to influence the world's emerging powers to help protect civilians; and
5. strengthening multilateral institutions to protect civilians, in particular reducing the UN's polarisation, and increasing its effectiveness to take appropriate action.

1 Introduction: foreign policy matters

In August 2006, the Prime Minister called for a 'renaissance' in foreign policy.⁵ In January 2007, in one of his lectures entitled 'Our Nation's Future', he called for a debate on what that future policy should be.⁶

In practice, public debate over foreign policy at present focuses almost exclusively on the Middle East and the challenge of terrorism in the UK. But Oxfam sees a wider impact of the UK's foreign policy. Directly or indirectly, it affects millions of civilians caught up in the conflicts, mostly in Africa, where Oxfam is working. That is why Oxfam is publishing this paper as a contribution to the debate – a contribution that reflects its experience in the Middle East, but also in other conflicts, ranging from Uganda to Afghanistan.

The cost of conflict

The precise extent of the human toll caused by conflict is notoriously difficult to measure. In the past few years, three-quarters of a million people⁷ may have died each year in just three of the world's 35 conflicts:⁸ Darfur, Iraq, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The worst death toll has been in the DRC, where 3.9 million people died as a result of war between 1998 and 2005,⁹ a higher annual figure even than in Iraq. In one region of the DRC alone, around 25,000 women were attacked each year.¹⁰

How can the UK do more to reduce this kind of violence against civilians? In an attempt to answer that, this paper considers both the successes and failures of British foreign policy in the past few years.

Public debate

The Prime Minister is not alone in calling for a 'renaissance'. Almost every UK politician has argued for some kind of new direction for UK foreign policy.

The Chancellor, Gordon Brown, has said that the UK's future alliances must reflect the 'new world order' in which emerging powers, such as India and China, are globally important.¹¹

The Conservative leader, David Cameron, has criticised recent policy for being too closely allied to US 'neo-conservatism'. In its place, he has called for a 'liberal conservative' foreign policy whose precepts, though lacking in detail, are difficult to disagree with.¹²

Sir Menzies Campbell, leader of the Liberal Democrats, has said that the UK's international reputation, dented by its record on Iraq,

should be recovered by working 'through international institutions and... unflinching support for the rule of law'.¹³

Criticism and support

Tony Blair resolutely defends his own record. He points out that the government's international achievements are too easily forgotten in this Iraq-dominated debate. The government has certainly enjoyed very different levels of public support for different international policies.

On the one hand, there has been widespread enthusiasm for much of its earlier foreign policy, including its interventions in Sierra Leone and Kosovo, and for its leadership on development. Since 1997 the government has substantially increased overseas aid and, by 2013, it aims to reach the UN target of contributing 0.7 per cent of GNP.

More than any other G8 country, the UK has led the way on aid, debt relief, and development. Tony Blair broke with convention to put Africa at the heart of the agenda for the Gleneagles G8 in 2005. Gordon Brown has led the way in international efforts to secure funding for education, and Hilary Benn has been at the heart of international efforts to improve the effectiveness of the UN's humanitarian system. In 2005, seven million people in the UK wore the white bands of the Make Poverty History coalition, supporting millions more around the world campaigning against global poverty. The UK government took the lead in responding to this global movement by securing promises of an additional \$50 billion in aid and debt relief, although whether these commitments will be fulfilled by G8 members is yet to be confirmed.

On the other hand, at the end of 2006, 71 per cent of British people considered the Iraq war unjustified, according to an ICM poll.¹⁴ Even the most conservative estimates suggest that, by early April 2007, 60,411 people had been killed in the continuing conflict.¹⁵ The direct responsibility for this death toll lies entirely with those who order and carry out the killings. But, by taking part in the invasion, which Oxfam opposed at the time, the UK must share responsibility in part for creating the conditions for the current level of violence.

Impact on poor people

Both the positive and negative aspects of the UK's international engagement affect the poor and vulnerable people with whom Oxfam works. The positive aspects most obviously affect the millions who benefit from the substantial increase in the UK's aid funding, while people in Iraq are clearly affected by the negative aspects. But

indirectly, millions of other people, from Afghanistan to Darfur, are also affected by British foreign policy.

In 2006, for example, civilians in southern Lebanon told Oxfam that they blamed the UK government, as well as Israel and the USA, for the month of bombardment that they had suffered, because the UK had refused to call for an immediate ceasefire by all sides. One of these civilians was Abdullah Bakin, an olive farmer who returned to his village of Siddiquine on the first day of the ceasefire. He told an Oxfam aid worker:

‘I’ve lost all my olive trees... 30 per cent shelled, 40 per cent burnt... the rest you can’t get near because of the [unexploded] bombs... [But] I’m aware that the British people do not think the same as Tony Blair and the British government.’¹⁶

He was right. Only 30 per cent of people in Britain supported government policy on Lebanon, according to an ICM poll in July.¹⁷ Oxfam and other aid agencies called on the UK to press for an immediate ceasefire.

However, some people in Lebanon were not so aware of the difference between the government and the UK’s humanitarian agencies. In another village, Srifa, a 12-year-old boy called Mahmad pointed his toy gun at an Oxfam aid worker. ‘Why are you here?’ he demanded. ‘You want to hurt us. Britain is against us.’¹⁸ Oxfam has had to refuse any UK government funding for its work in Iraq and Lebanon, partly to demonstrate that there are no links between its programmes and UK foreign policy in these two countries.

Still ‘punching above its weight’

The UK has a rare role to play as a leading figure in the UN, the EU, NATO, and the Commonwealth. It is also still the world’s fifth largest arms exporter.¹⁹ The analysis that the UK ‘punches above its weight’ (a phrase coined by Douglas Hurd in 1993)²⁰ remains true today. In 2006, when Kofi Annan described the UK’s standing in the UN Security Council, he used exactly the same phrase.²¹

Such influence brings with it responsibility. Firstly, the UK must seek multilateral solutions to the world’s inter-connected conflicts, and ways to protect civilians caught up in them. Secondly, it must exemplify the ‘role in the world’ that people in the UK now want – by making a positive difference, not simply pursuing the UK’s immediate self-interest.

The UK's 'role in the world'

In an ICM poll in 2006, more than 80 per cent of respondents supported 'ethical' policies on arms exports and international trade, even when reminded that such policies might damage the UK's economic interests.²² From disaffection over Iraq to debate on Darfur, the public recognises what Oxfam has experienced on the ground: that, in small or large ways, UK foreign policy can play a significant role in making things better or worse for people in different conflicts.

Public criticism of foreign policy, including voices from within the UK's Muslim community, is not necessarily a criticism of the government for being too active. For some, it has not been active enough: on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, for example. Most criticism focuses on the war in Iraq, Britain's role in Afghanistan, the UK's tendency to offer 'default' support for the USA rather than for multilateralism, and a suspicion of what are seen as double standards in dealing with different governments and communities around the world.

In February 2007, Lord Ashdown wrote about the wider lessons from this disenchantment. 'It would [now] be a tragedy', he said, 'if the response to failure in Iraq were to be not "How do we do it better?" but "We must never do it again".'²³ Ashdown clearly spoke for others who are seeking a new direction in foreign policy that avoids misadventures like Iraq – but a direction that is no less active in tackling the world's most difficult problems.

Fundamentally, this is a moral view of the UK's role in the world. But it is also a pragmatic one, recognising an interdependent world in which the impact of conflicts is not contained within borders. It is not only terrorism that can be fuelled by wars across the globe. International crime, global poverty, and forced migration are all likely to increase too.

The UK's interests lie in a more peaceful, prosperous world, governed by international law and managed through an effective multilateral system. Traditional political 'realism',²⁴ in which ethics in international relations can be disregarded, and which focuses on power and self-interest as driving forces, is simply no longer an acceptable option. As Robert Cooper, the EU's Director-General for External Affairs, wrote in 2003:

"Realistic" doctrines are not realistic... Foreign policy will be... influenced by the media and by moral sentiment. We no longer live in a world of purely national interest. Human rights and humanitarian problems inevitably play a part in our policy-making.'²⁵

He was right. In recent years the UK has been most successful — in Sierra Leone in 2000, or at the G8 in 2005 — when it has been driven by the desire to reduce poverty, suffering, and human-rights abuses, in tune with both international law and public sentiment. When the UK has ‘realistically’ followed US policy, in part because the USA is its most important ally, it has ended in disaster.

To succeed, the UK’s foreign policy must be both pragmatic *and* ethical. The question that remains, after the successes and failures of the past few years, is: how?

2 Learning from the past, preparing for the future

In December 2006 Victor Bulmer-Thomas, the Director of Chatham House (the Royal Institute for International Affairs), summed up the government's early foreign policy as a 'qualified success'. Since 2001, however, it had been dominated by the 'terrible mistake' of Iraq.²⁶

This contrast between the Labour government's early and later foreign-policy record has been frequently pointed out. From Oxfam's viewpoint, working on the ground to assist civilians in many of the conflicts that constitute the UK's 'foreign policy crises', another contrast stands out. UK policy in the Middle East is at variance not only with the government's much more successful record on development, but also with its more positive overall diplomatic record in parts of Africa, and with its genuine successes in negotiating international agreements that may have a profound impact in the future.

However, future foreign policy should not simply be a reaction to today's most high-profile successes and failures. As politicians of all parties consider the future, they should look ahead to what the world will be like in the 2010s; and learn all relevant lessons from the recent past. That means the world since the Cold War, not just 2001.

Future imperfect

The uncertain futures of both Iraq and Afghanistan, and the continuing threat from terrorism, are only the beginning of the challenges that the UK may face in the next decade. In 2005, the US journal *Foreign Policy* calculated that around two billion people were living in countries with governance in danger of collapse.²⁷ There were then around 30 wars in progress around the world. That was 40 per cent fewer than at the end of the Cold War, but this declining trend may not continue. The number of conflicts 'carried out with a massive amount of violence' rose from 28 in 2005 to 35 in 2006, according to an authoritative study from the University of Heidelberg in December 2006.²⁸

New wars have been started. And the resolution of a number of recently ended conflicts rests upon precarious peace deals. Experience suggests that almost half of these countries could revert to war within five years of the deals being agreed. A substantial portion of Oxfam's humanitarian work takes place in situations like this, of 'half war, half peace', where violence remains endemic. Southern Sudan, where a peace agreement was signed in 2005, and the eastern part of the DRC, where elections were held in 2006, are cases in point.

This matters for the UK. It played a significant role in the peace negotiations in southern Sudan, and has been an important contributor to the UN's peacekeeping mission in the DRC. The demands made on it by such crises may not be any less significant in the second decade of this century.

According to Adam Roberts, Oxford Professor of International Relations, in January 2007, 'it is not difficult to see [other] potential causes of future conflict'. He pointed to:

- acts of terrorism leading to international war;
- internationalised civil wars getting out of hand;
- clashes between powers over resources and environmental issues;
- rejection by certain societies of what they perceive as the crude imposition of globalisation; and
- clashes over international normative regimes (such as nuclear non-proliferation, human rights, and the spreading of democracy) that are seen in certain states as hypocritical and discriminatory.²⁹

In other words, it is wrong to think that terrorism will be the only, or even the main, security challenge to the UK in the next decade. And it is also wrong to ignore the fact that some of the tactics pursued by the UK and others in the 'war on terror' have helped to polarise the world, and increase rather than reduce instability.

Among the world's current conflicts, almost all are fuelled by the continuing supply of weapons. Unfortunately, one global trend that is likely to continue, unless checked by effective global rules, is the growth in the arms trade, increasingly globalised and largely unregulated. New exporters such as China, India, and Israel, some of whom have very weak export controls, supply an increasing proportion of the world's arms.³⁰

'New world order'

Other major challenges range from climate change to epidemics of infectious disease, from energy security and the decline of oil reserves, to increasing poverty in the midst of global affluence. Different parts of the world, and different sections of societies, will continue to be 'winners' and 'losers' from globalisation and from wealth creation that depends increasingly on the question of who controls new knowledge and technology.

Sub-Saharan Africa and other regions that have done least to cause climate change will suffer most from its effects. The world may continue to be polarised between the North and South, and the UN and other multilateral institutions may be weaker as a result. Indeed,

if the Millennium Development Goals are not achieved by 2015, the disillusionment of developing countries with the industrialised world could increase, with uncertain consequences.

Furthermore, the UK will have to navigate a changing international political environment. It is not yet certain how many of the world's regional giants, from South Africa to Brazil, or economic giants such as India or Japan, will develop into global 'megapowers' in the 2010s.³¹ What is clear is that some kind of 'multi-polar' world is emerging. As far as anything in international relations is certain, the rise of China will continue. As William Hague, Shadow Foreign Secretary, said in January 2007, 'decades of Chinese passivity in international affairs have come to an end'.³²

Earlier that same month, during a visit to India, Chancellor Gordon Brown said that already this 'new world order is a fact'. In future, he said, UK foreign policy would have to be based not only on traditional alliances with the USA, Europe, and the Commonwealth, but also with the world's new powers. Multilateral organisations would have to adapt to accommodate the changing world.³³

The United Nations will have to be more inclusive and united. Yet in 2007, its members are as divided as ever, with implications for their ability to make effective decisions on every challenge mentioned above, from conflict to climate change. The UK can help to change that. It should seek multilateral solutions to the world's problems, and continue to press the UN to become both more effective and more representative of the changing world.

More than one lesson from history

While trying to predict the future, foreign policy should also learn from the past. That means more than since 9/11. At the least, it should mean since the early 1990s, when the initial post-Cold War euphoria had worn off, and the Foreign Secretary, Douglas Hurd, pointed out that we faced a 'new world *disorder*'.

According to a conservative estimate, 55,000 civilians were killed in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995,³⁴ and tens of thousands of women were raped.³⁵ Two-thirds of people in the UK wanted an armed intervention to stop this happening.³⁶ Many British Muslims felt appalled that their government did not do more to protect Muslims in Bosnia; some of them went to fight in person.

The UK eventually contributed almost half the UN peacekeepers sent to Bosnia — half of a totally inadequate force, only one fifth of the size that the UN Security Council had called for. More importantly, the government rejected the call for further military action, arguing that it would impede the delivery of humanitarian aid from the UN

and agencies like Oxfam. In fact, aid workers knew very well that the greatest threat to civilians was not the lack of aid, but shelling, shooting, and rape.

Aid workers were not alone in this view. In August 1992, an ITN news team and a *Guardian* journalist – Ed Vulliamy – discovered Muslim prisoners in concentration camps at Omarska and Trnopolje. ‘For three-and-a-half years’, he later wrote, ‘a chorus of aid workers, military men, reporters, some diplomats, and others called for robust air strikes, backed by the threat of ground troops.’³⁷

But the UK government did not listen. In international discussions, Vulliamy reported, ‘Douglas Hurd was the leading critic of any attempt to check the Serbs by military means... right up to the final bloody carnage after the UN handed over its own declared “safe area” of Srebrenica.’

In September 1992, Douglas Hurd had said that it was ‘hard to work out a practical [military] scheme which would not merely add to the number killed, without ending the fighting’.³⁸ In the next three years, tens of thousands more were to be killed until, after the massacre in Srebrenica on 11 July 1995, the pressure for effective action proved unstoppable. But even this was resisted, rather than led, by the UK.

A week after the massacre, Tony Blair, then Leader of the Opposition, attacked Prime Minister John Major for his failure to help prevent it. ‘Threat after threat has been made to the Bosnian Serbs’, he said, ‘but not carried out. Over the next few days we must work out our bottom line, and this time stick to it.’³⁹

Even then, that was not the government’s plan. The Prime Minister dismissed the possibility of a practical military response, short of ‘full-scale war’ fought by ‘a huge NATO force’.⁴⁰ In effect, the UK dismissed the possibility of doing anything substantially more to prevent further atrocities. Meanwhile, France and the USA pressed for air strikes against Serb forces. After a mortar attack on Sarajevo killed 38 civilians on 28 August, the UK finally agreed. Despite everything that the UK had said for three years, the war *was* brought relatively swiftly to a halt, and the Dayton peace deal was signed in November 1995.

In December 2006, *The Economist* summed up the mixed progress since that time. Bosnia is now ‘peaceful, rebuilt, but still divided’,⁴¹ and small-scale violence continues. Although almost all British troops are now preparing to leave, 2,500 EU peacekeepers will remain. In other words, it is neither quick nor easy for the international community to help to rebuild a country devastated by war. The ultimate responsibility for that war rested upon the Serb, Croat, and Bosnian men who ordered and committed the many atrocities. But

tens of thousands of lives might have been saved if the international community had not waited three years to take effective action.

The UK was not solely responsible for that failure. For most of the war, France too had rejected calls for more action, and the USA was largely disengaged. But, as one of the most powerful members of the EU, with the military capacity to act, the UK was in part responsible for allowing genocide to return to Europe in the 1990s.

Rwanda

In the Rwandan genocide, many more people were killed than in Bosnia – perhaps 800,000 – in a far shorter period, in April and May 1994. Almost everyone in the country was affected; one member of Oxfam's staff lost more than 30 members of her family.

The UK was not directly involved, but was one of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council that failed to stop the violence, argued about whether a 'genocide' was happening, and ordered a reduction in the UN peacekeeping force in the country. Indeed, the UK appears to have played a key role, alongside the USA, in influencing the UN Security Council *not* to act. According to an authoritative account of the genocide published in 2004, it was the UK that first suggested withdrawing nearly all the UN peacekeepers, citing the disaster in Somalia in 1993 as a reason.

'It was Oxfam', wrote the study's author, Linda Melvern, 'that first publicly acknowledged the genocide... [However] the British government chose to obscure the reality and described what was happening only as "civil war"... At the end of April, in an eight-hour [Security Council] debate about the use of the word genocide in relation to Rwanda, the UK argued strenuously against.'⁴²

In May 1994, the Security Council belatedly authorised a UN force to intervene, but to no effect. The UN asked governments to send troops to make up that force: no government did. At the time, the UK was one of the three or four countries in the world most capable of rapidly deploying troops over long distances. Eleven years later, in 2005, the Commission for Africa concluded that 'just 5,500 troops with robust peace enforcement capabilities could have saved half a million lives'.

The 'ethical dimension'

Shortly afterwards, Robin Cook, then Shadow Foreign Secretary, travelled to Rwanda with Oxfam to see the aftermath of the violence. Labour was preparing for government by developing a more activist approach to international affairs.

Within days of the party's election victory in 1997, Cook announced that foreign policy would have an 'ethical dimension'. Almost immediately, the UK banned the use of landmines by its own forces. In 1998, it was one of the most prominent governments pressing to establish the International Criminal Court, the permanent equivalent of the tribunals set up to try those responsible for the worst atrocities in Rwanda and the Balkans.

In the same year, the UK's Presidency of the EU showed that the new government could combine a more engaged strategy in Europe with a more active approach to solving some of the world's problems. Notably, it led the EU to agree its first Code of Conduct to regulate arms exports.

Kosovo

Meanwhile, between March 1998 and March 1999, 4,000 Kosovar Albanians and Serbs were killed in violent clashes and sectarian murders by both Serb security forces and the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).⁴³ In January 1999, ten years after passing repressive laws against ethnic Albanians, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic sent 44,000 troops to crush the KLA.⁴⁴

As violence increased, Prime Minister Tony Blair said that Britain had to learn from 'bitter experience throughout this century, most recently in Bosnia, that instability and civil war in one part of the Balkans inevitably spills over into the whole of it, and affects the rest of Europe too'.⁴⁵

Blair was credited with persuading President Clinton to initiate NATO's bombing campaign, in which UK aircraft also took part, at the end of March 1999. The UN probably would have authorised NATO's campaign, had it not been for Russia and China's ability to veto such a resolution. Twelve of the Security Council's 15 members for example, rejected a draft resolution criticising NATO's air strikes.⁴⁶

Not surprisingly, most of the Islamic world supported the action. In the light of later events, it is worth remembering that there has been widespread Muslim agreement with active international action to protect civilians, when it has been seen as justified.

The 1999 Kosovo campaign did, however, kill civilians. NATO pilots mistook civilians for military targets, apparently because they had to fly above 15,000 feet for fear of anti-aircraft fire. Mary Robinson, now President of Oxfam International, then UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, had to remind NATO of its obligation to minimise civilian casualties. During the war and for years afterwards, many

casualties were caused by leftover sub-munitions from unexploded cluster bombs, which were widely used in the conflict.⁴⁷

Privately, the UK pressed the USA to prepare for a ground invasion which might have reduced civilian casualties by cutting the number of inaccurate air strikes. The invasion never happened, but when the threat of it grew more real, Milosevic conceded defeat. By June, NATO's campaign had succeeded, putting an end to the conflict and the repression that had preceded it. But other questions remained.

After the conflict, there were reprisals against both Serbs and ethnic Albanians. NATO provided inadequate protection for those targeted,⁴⁸ although the UK forces that controlled Kosovo's capital, Pristina, had one of the best reputations of all national NATO contingents for doing what they could. Eight years later, most Serbs have fled, Kosovo's population is 90 per cent Albanian,⁴⁹ and a UN plan for a form of independence is yet to be agreed.

In the midst of the Kosovo war, Tony Blair, speaking in Chicago,⁵⁰ set out the points for a government to consider when facing the grave responsibility again of deciding whether to send troops to protect civilians. Had peace been given a chance? Was there really a prudent military option? Was there a long-term strategy beyond an intervention? And did the UK's interests overlap with whatever was the right thing to do?

Sierra Leone

These principles were tested soon afterwards. In the middle of 1999, as British troops entered Kosovo, British diplomats were leading a coalition of 16 governments that cajoled the parties to Sierra Leone's civil war, which had started in 1991, to make peace. On 7 July, they signed the Lomé Accord, which gave a blanket amnesty for atrocities committed, including those by the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF).⁵¹ But in May 2000, the RUF went back to war and marched on the capital, Freetown.

President Ahmad Kabbah asked the UK for troops, and 2,000 were duly despatched. They freed 11 British paratroopers seized by the 'West Side Boy' rebels and, by defeating them, helped to bring the whole conflict to an end. Later, the mission of the British troops was extended to help to equip and reorganise Sierra Leone's army.

As with Kosovo, the relationship with the UN was somewhat ambiguous. The British troops were deployed in support of UNAMSIL, the UN peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone, but were not part of it. Nevertheless, the UK's intervention almost certainly saved the UN mission from failure, and helped to end a war that had cost 50,000 lives.⁵² Seven years later, the country remains at peace.

However, the poverty that was one of the underlying causes of the conflict has not been resolved: in 2006, the UN reported that over 70 per cent of the population were still living below the poverty line.⁵³

Afghanistan — and the ‘war on terror’

‘Put simply, September 11 2001 changed everything,’ the Prime Minister said in January 2007.⁵⁴

It certainly changed a lot. The difference is not that the government has stopped many of the important initiatives of the late 1990s. It is rather that it is fighting two wars at the same time, neither of which much resembles the broad successes of Kosovo and Sierra Leone. And its failure over Iraq is arguably undermining the positive diplomacy and leadership that it continues to pursue elsewhere.

Post-9/11 policy began in Afghanistan. In October 2001, the Prime Minister told the House of Commons that ‘we will not walk away from [the Afghan people], once the conflict ends, as has happened in the past. We will stand by them and help them to a better, more stable future.’⁵⁵ By the end of that year, the Taleban had dispersed or fled, and Hamid Karzai had become President. The UK led the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), with 2,100 British troops.

Overshadowed by the build-up to war in Iraq, however, the UK’s efforts to secure the future of Afghanistan steadily diminished. The UK’s Department for International Development (DFID) continued to give Afghanistan around £75m a year from 2002 to 2005, but the UK’s military commitment was diverted elsewhere. In the middle of 2002, all but 300 of the British troops were withdrawn. Meanwhile, the UK, like other governments, was unwilling to challenge clear cases of corruption and impunity for known human-rights violators in Afghanistan.

Few international forces were deployed outside Kabul, and the security situation throughout the country deteriorated significantly. Oxfam was forced to curtail its operations in southern Afghanistan, and a bomb exploded outside its Kabul office in November 2005.

After security deteriorated still further, substantial numbers of British troops returned to Afghanistan in 2006. During the year, Oxfam’s staff reported that the security situation in many areas of the country, not only the south, was getting worse. By the end of 2006, more than 4,000 Afghans, including several hundred civilians and 170 foreign troops, had been killed, in the bloodiest year since 2001.⁵⁶

At least one hundred of these civilians were killed by coalition forces, not by the Taleban. In December 2006, UK aid agencies reported

incidents in which 13 Afghan civilians had apparently been killed by coalition troops, alongside 170 killed or injured by insurgents.⁵⁷

In the same month, President Karzai accused coalition forces of 'shooting around' after such incidents. In January 2007 a senior British officer, Brigadier Richard Nugee, said that NATO's biggest mistake in 2006 was killing civilians.⁵⁸

In 2007 the conflict continues. In early March, following a suicide bomb attack in Jalalabad, US forces opened fire on crowds, killing at least eight Afghans and injuring 34. Despite the seriousness of this and other incidents, and their potential to cause widespread unrest, it is not clear that there is full recognition throughout NATO and coalition forces of the fundamental importance of avoiding civilian casualties.

At the beginning of the year, Pakistan proposed to deploy landmines along its border with Afghanistan, a policy denounced by President Karzai as a clear threat to civilians. Despite its support for a ban on landmines being one of the highlights of Labour's first years in office, the UK offered little public support to the Afghan government in their efforts to oppose the plan.

The shadow of Iraq

Iraq too became more violent in 2006. According to the UN envoy, Gianni Magazzeni, 34,452 people were killed during the year (a figure based on data from Iraq's health ministry, hospitals, and mortuaries).⁵⁹

Besides the crisis in security, however, there is another crisis, represented by the 25 per cent of children who are now malnourished⁶⁰ and, according to the UN World Food Programme, the four million Iraqis who do not have enough to eat.⁶¹ One in eight children now dies before the age of five.⁶² In 2005, the unemployment rate passed 60 per cent, and grew further in 2006.⁶³

Iraq's twin crises are linked. As Joseph Stiglitz, the Nobel economics laureate, said in January 2007, 'the combination of unemployed young men and arms has proved to be explosive'.⁶⁴ In that way at least, Iraq is like most other conflicts where Oxfam works, where poverty and violence feed off each other.

Iraq remains one of the most dangerous places in the world for humanitarian agencies to operate. Oxfam continues to fund Iraqi organisations, but has not had staff based in the country since they were evacuated in the second half of 2003, after attacks on the UN and International Red Cross.

The UK government believes that it has not received credit for what it has done well elsewhere, because its policy on Iraq has been unpopular at home and abroad. In January, Cabinet Minister Peter Hain summed this up:

‘All that we have achieved on the international agenda, whether it’s trebling aid to Africa, or leading the fight for trade justice, or lifting billions in debt off the poorest countries, or whether it’s a new arms export policy which imposes tough controls – all of Robin Cook’s policy agenda, including the focus on human rights that he brought in – all of these things people have forgotten about because of the Iraq conflict.’⁶⁵

However, the damage caused by its intervention in Iraq goes well beyond the UK government’s failure to get due credit for its positive achievements. The war has helped to sour relations between many developing countries and the USA and UK. This has not been solely because of the 2003 invasion, which took place without either UN authorisation or widespread global approval. It has been because the UK has continued to present a view of the Middle East that few in the region or around the world recognise. In August 2006, during the Lebanon crisis, the British Prime Minister described an ‘arc of extremism’ of insurgents and pariah governments, and called for an opposing ‘alliance of moderation’ including the USA, UK and Israel.⁶⁶ To most people around the world, who have seen the terrible consequences of attacks on civilians by almost *all* parties, the UK looks simply one-sided.

Most importantly, the perception of one-sidedness has undermined the UK’s ability to conduct a positive foreign policy in other areas, not least because it allows recalcitrant governments to ask, for example, ‘Why should we listen to the UK when it has made such a terrible mess of Iraq?’ Arguably more relevant than any other example at the present time, one government that asks this question is that of Sudan.

Darfur

The fundamental responsibility for what is happening in Darfur lies with President Bashir and the government of Sudan, the numerous rebel groups, and all those in Sudan who are still failing to protect their people and uphold international humanitarian law. However, the ability of the UK to engage positively in the crisis has arguably been hampered by its tarnished international reputation, substantially over Iraq, and the ability of both the government of Sudan and potential allies in the region to exploit this.

In November 2006, President Bashir, on a visit to Beijing, denounced the plans for a UN force in Darfur, which were strongly backed by the UK. 'The impact', he said, '[would] be the same as what is happening in Iraq.' He backed up this argument by pointing to one estimate of the death toll in Iraq, of around 655,000, which is considerably higher even than that in Darfur.⁶⁷

In addition, nearly all the governments that have an influence over Sudan, such as Egypt, Libya, and China, believe that the USA and the UK made a terrible mistake in invading Iraq, and this influences their reaction to UK and US attempts to bring peace to Darfur.

Tony Blair has in fact made a number of statements expressing his concern at the worsening plight of Darfur's civilians, and attempted to take a lead in galvanising the international community to act. In 2006, Hilary Benn too played a key role in the negotiations of the Darfur Peace Agreement, which sadly has not been implemented or agreed by all parties. The UK remains the second largest funder of the African Union's force in Darfur, and for the first half of 2007 gave a further £15m, beyond the £20m already given in 2006/7.⁶⁸ At the Gleneagles G8 and elsewhere, it has championed the case for greater international support for the AU's conflict-management capacity as a whole.

Despite this, it does not appear that the UK has gained significant diplomatic benefits from its support of the AU - in part because of Iraq. In March 2007, Oxfam's International Director, Penny Lawrence, said on a visit to Darfur, 'I am struck by the hostility felt here against the UK government as a result of Iraq.'

The UK is not of course the only country in a position to help Darfur. The UN Security Council as a whole has failed to agree a common approach that could bring the violence to an end. In part, this too is because of the continuing divisions among UN members that the Iraq war has helped to create. The EU too remains on the whole collectively silent.

Meanwhile the ongoing violence in Darfur means that around half a million people cannot reach the emergency food, water, and health care they need, and in January 2007, more than eighty thousand more people were forced to flee their homes.

Responsibility to protect

Even as Darfur's conflict continued, elsewhere the UK scored a notable diplomatic success, helping to secure international agreement that every government in the world shares a 'responsibility to protect' civilians from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. At the UN World Summit in September

2005, Tony Blair joined almost every other world leader in agreeing that, first and foremost, national governments must protect their citizens – a duty not as obvious as it should be – and that, when governments fail to protect their citizens, the international community has a responsibility, in one way or another, to act.

After helping to persuade the international community of the validity of the theory, the UK has so far been less successful at persuading the world to put it into practice in Darfur.

Arms control

When it came to power in 1997, the present UK government adopted a new focus on human rights, and many of its most important initiatives, from arms control to the establishment of the International Criminal Court, reflect this approach. But to be credible, human rights must be upheld consistently for all people, whatever other interests apply. The government's record on arms control is a good example to test this principle.

On the one hand, the government has tightened its controls on exporting British weapons, and has led the EU's efforts to do the same. Since 2005, with others, it has championed a process in the UN to agree an international Arms Trade Treaty to prevent irresponsible arms transfers fuelling conflicts or human-rights abuses.

In November 2006, however, the House of Commons' Quadripartite Select Committee, which reviews arms policy, asked Oxfam to give evidence on the success of the 2002 Export Control Act, the latest attempt to prevent British arms falling into the wrong hands. Oxfam told MPs: 'Three years on from its entry into force, there are concerns that the new regime is struggling to address the increasingly globalised nature⁶⁹ of arms production and the arms trade.'⁷⁰ Compared with the USA, for instance, the UK still has weak controls on arms brokers, the 'middlemen' who play a major role in supplying weapons to the world's conflicts. The 2002 Act introduced controls on these brokers when they are operating within the UK. But, in the words of a paper prepared for the 2005 Commission for Africa, 'it is still possible for a UK broker operating overseas to transfer small arms and tanks to countries such as Rwanda, Uganda, and Ivory Coast without needing a licence'.⁷¹

As well as the USA, eight EU countries, including France, Belgium, and Germany, have tighter controls than the UK on 'extra-territorial' arms dealing. In 2007, the government must seize the opportunity of its review of the 2002 Act to bring UK controls into line with best practice.

The UK's record on other arms issues is also mixed. One of them is the urgent need to control cluster bombs, whose sub-munitions fall and explode indiscriminately, and, when they fail to explode, can lie in the ground like landmines, killing civilians for years to come. The government's repeated claim that it has struck an acceptable balance between their military utility and the need to protect civilians is not backed up by substantial evidence. Its March 2007 announcement that it will no longer use 'dumb' cluster bombs⁷² is a welcome first step, but not yet enough.

In February 2007, the UK joined other governments at a conference in Oslo called to negotiate a treaty by 2008 to protect civilians, by applying international humanitarian law specifically to cluster munitions. But the UK argues that the best way forward is through negotiations based on the existing Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons. To other governments, this is the diplomatic equivalent of the long grass. Urgently concluding the treaty in the fast-track 'Oslo process' should now be the UK's priority.

Crucially, the UK must be more consistently rigorous in regulating its own exports. Without that, its credibility in helping to lead any international arms-control efforts will be sorely tested.

A blind eye to corruption?

Another example of a lack of consistency across overall UK foreign policy, where one set of actions can undermine another, is its record on corruption and governance. The efforts of DFID, for example, in promoting good governance, in rich and poor countries alike, have been seriously undermined by the government's overall failure to practise what it preaches on bribery in the arms trade. In January 2007, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) said that it had 'serious concerns' about the UK government's decision to suspend the investigation by the Serious Fraud Office (SFO) into alleged corruption over an arms deal between manufacturer BAE and the government of Saudi Arabia; the OECD said that it doubted whether the suspension was 'consistent with the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention'.⁷³

The SFO is also investigating possible corruption in a 2002 deal between BAE and Tanzania for the supply of air-traffic control radar. According to an investigation published in the *Guardian* in January 2007, Tanzania paid \$40m for the radar, including \$12m to a 'middleman'.⁷⁴ In 2002, Oxfam condemned the deal as unnecessarily expensive for one of the poorest countries in the world. The \$12m allegedly paid to the middleman could have paid for health care for more than one million Tanzanians.

One standard for all

The other area where the government's consistency is most questioned is its record on challenging war crimes and human-rights abuses. In November 2006, Human Rights Watch condemned the UK for being too reluctant to 'criticise Washington for... the systematic abuse (sometimes amounting to torture) of terrorism suspects in detention facilities in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Guantánamo Bay'.⁷⁵

In the first months of 2007, similar criticisms have been made of the UK's silence over US and Ethiopian attacks in Somalia. In January, both the UN and EU expressed concern at air strikes in which 70 people were killed.⁷⁶ Somali organisations told Oxfam that nomads and around 1,000 head of livestock had died.⁷⁷ Bombs fell at night, as herders gathered around fires to ward off mosquitoes. EU Development Commissioner Louis Michel criticised the attacks not only for the civilian deaths, but also because they might lead to a dangerous escalation in fighting.⁷⁸ The UK made no such criticism.

In respect to some other countries, the UK has spoken out strongly against abuses. Launching the Foreign Office's annual report on human rights in October 2006, Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett cited cases of men and women from Cuba to Uzbekistan whom British diplomats were trying to help.⁷⁹

In July and August 2006, however, while the government rightly joined the worldwide condemnation of Hezbollah's attacks on civilians in northern Israel, it stood almost alone with the USA in failing to demand an immediate ceasefire to end disproportionate attacks, with significant civilian casualties, by Israel as well. The UK thus appeared to give a green light to Israel to continue its military campaign. At the same time, it allowed the transfer of US weapons to Israel via the UK. This was despite the fact that the UK, like all states that have ratified the Geneva Conventions, has a responsibility to uphold the basic precept that no warring party – in this case, neither Israel nor Hezbollah – should take military action that is likely to have a disproportionate impact upon civilians. When it came to the Middle East, the UK, champion of the 'responsibility to protect', seemed rather inconsistent in its application of the principle.

The Foreign Office 2006 human-rights report *did* condemn Israel's targeted assassinations and the firing of shells near Palestinian civilians, as well as criticising the Palestinian Authority's failure to prevent militants attacking Israeli civilians.⁸⁰ But the tone and perception of UK diplomacy on Israel/Palestine have changed dramatically since 1998, when Robin Cook visited and condemned controversial Israeli construction work at Har Home.⁸¹ More importantly, the sanctions that the UK applies to Israel and to the

Palestinians contrast sharply. Its arms embargo against Israel, which was revoked in 1994, has never been reinstated, despite Israel's use of military aircraft, containing British components, against civilians.

In contrast, after Hamas won elections in January 2006, the UK suspended aid to the Palestinian Authority (PA) and, with the EU, helped to establish the so-called Temporary Interim Mechanism (TIM) to provide aid to Palestinians without co-operating with the PA. The suspension of normal aid has left hundreds of thousands of Palestinians without a regular income, something which the TIM has failed to address properly. Oxfam has seen the effects of this in the increasing poverty in many of the 42 Palestinian villages where it works.

Like the invasion of Iraq, this is exactly the kind of perceived 'double standard' that makes the UK less relevant in helping to find a just and sustainable peace in the Middle East. It undermines the credibility of the UK's claims to promote 'democracy'. And in much of the Arab world it fuels the perceptions of pro-Israeli bias in UK foreign policy that those seeking to block the UK's policy on Darfur have successfully exploited.

3 Principles for the future

Foreign policy is more vulnerable than domestic policy to changing events, over which no individual Prime Minister or government has great control. It is therefore sensible to set down principles, rather than rigid prescriptions, for any future government to consider. Oxfam suggests five:

1. Actively working to protect civilians – implementing the UK’s ‘responsibility to protect’ – as a cornerstone of British foreign policy. The lesson of Iraq is not to be *less* active in trying to solve the world’s crises, but to make better decisions, based on international law, on how to do so.
2. Consistently challenging violations of humanitarian law and human rights abuses.
3. Delivering, through a coherent cross-government approach, a range of other policies that could help to protect civilians – pressing on until the UK’s constructive ideas, like the Arms Trade Treaty, actually result in fewer people being killed, and ensuring that all government policies bolster rather than undermine these efforts.
4. To make all of this effective: adapting to the challenges of the changing world – facing new threats, including climate change, and finding new approaches to influence the world’s emerging powers, and the right balance of allies.
5. Strengthening multilateral institutions to protect civilians, reducing the polarisation of the UN, and increasing its effectiveness to take appropriate action.

1: Actively working to protect civilians

From a survey of the post-Cold War period, one lesson appears to be clear. An active approach to foreign policy is vital, to avoid repeating failures such as doing too little, too late in Bosnia and very little at all to prevent genocide in Rwanda.

In future, however, a moral and effective foreign policy must do more than simply avoid mistakes. It must uphold the UK’s responsibilities to be a positive force for good. It must help to lead other governments to resolve conflicts, and protect civilians caught up in them.

These are not only the responsibilities shared by all governments that have ratified the Geneva Conventions to protect civilians around the world. They are also the responsibilities that come with the UK’s rare role as one of only five permanent members of the UN Security

Council, combined with its influential position in the European Union, NATO, and the Commonwealth.

The UK no longer has the global power that justified its seat on the Security Council in 1945. Its justification for remaining there should be its success in helping the Council to achieve its primary purpose: to uphold 'international peace and security'. The UK should be at least as engaged as it has been since 1997 in actively trying to resolve the world's conflicts – while never again engaging in misadventures like Iraq.

The key challenge for the UK will be to judge which of the world's great problems are best 'contained', as Iraq arguably was up to 2003, and which problems demand active intervention. As Yale's Professor of Political Science, Ian Shapiro, wrote in March 2007, 'containment' would be a far more intelligent way of dealing with terrorism or WMD than pre-emptive war:⁸² a particularly salient lesson when considering the continuing crisis over Iran's nuclear programme. But it is equally a woefully insufficient response to crises like that in Darfur, where the UK's 'responsibility to protect' must be put to the test.

In future, the UK's responsibility to protect civilians should form the cornerstone of its policy on responding to the world's conflicts. That means taking appropriate and timely action in each crisis, both to prevent threats to civilians, and, if that fails, to act immediately to deal with such threats. This should be a government-wide mission that unites the work of different departments. It should include:

- the active diplomacy of the Foreign Office;
- DFID's contribution to preventing conflicts, as set out in its new *Preventing Violent Conflict* policy, published in March 2007;
- the control of arms exports by the Department of Trade and Industry;
- and sometimes even the deployment of troops by the MoD.

The first preference should always be to use peaceful means, including diplomacy, sanctions, and incentives, to persuade and support governments to protect their own citizens, together with legal approaches such as action by the International Criminal Court. It can also mean supporting local communities to protect themselves without resorting to violence.

Pressing the UN to authorise military force to protect civilians should always be a last, though not a late, resort. Sending UK troops, as part of multilateral forces to do so, should never be taken lightly, but should remain an ultimate option.

The UK should redouble its efforts to improve the African Union's own capacity to protect civilians, including support for the AU to set up an effective African Standby Force. It should encourage other EU members to provide more generous support for the AU, and ensure that, when necessary, the EU uses its diplomatic, civil, and military resources to complement both the AU and the UN.

The UK should consistently champion the idea of the 'responsibility to protect' in the international arena, in the UN Security Council, the European Union, and elsewhere. It should start by developing a joined-up strategy across Whitehall.

The Iraq war may have blighted the UK's credibility in leading international discussions over when, as a last resort, force should be used to protect civilians. But clear principles are undoubtedly needed, so that the UN Security Council is better able to prevent misadventures and, just as importantly, so that it is more effective in authorising and encouraging action to prevent and stop genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.

When the UK's credibility has recovered, the government should help to lead the debate on this, to agree principles in the EU, UN, and elsewhere. These principles should include not only a clear understanding of what constitutes 'last resort', but also the necessity for a rigorous assessment of whether any UN or multilateral military action will have a reasonable prospect of success in protecting civilians. The five principles drawn up in 2004 by the former UN Secretary-General's panel of experts provide a good broad basis for such agreement.⁸³

2: Consistently challenging war crimes

The current government has given a higher profile to human rights than ever before. But it has been inconsistent in challenging those who abuse human rights and the Geneva Conventions. It has not done enough to protect some of the world's most vulnerable people, nor to enhance the UK's reputation as a consistent supporter of international law. In future, the UK should consistently challenge *any* party that violates humanitarian law and abuses human rights.

It is, of course, difficult to decide how and when it is best and most effective to do this. But the bottom line is that the UK should be prepared to challenge anyone when necessary — whether they are friends or allies, governments, rebels, or terrorists. Any future government must end the impression that the UK condemns abuses committed by some people more strongly than abuses committed by others.

While the UK should support genuine efforts to counter terrorism within a human-rights framework, it must never remain silent when governments exploit the pretext of counter-terrorism to commit atrocities themselves. The UK should recognise that, from Sri Lanka to Uganda and Colombia, the vulnerable people that Oxfam works with often feel at least as threatened by their governments as they do by 'terrorists'.

Applying such a new, genuinely rights-based foreign policy is not only the proper thing to do. It is also vital for restoring some of the UK's lost credibility in some parts of the world.

3: Delivering priority policies to protect civilians

One lesson from the past is that the UK's ability to act on its priorities in one area – such as saving lives in Darfur – can be compromised by its inconsistent record, perceived or genuine, on other matters – such as support for human rights in the Middle East. Greater consistency in challenging war crimes and human-rights abuses, and in upholding the 'responsibility to protect', will help. But these will not be enough.

The UK should continue to push to achieve other key policies, such as an international Arms Trade Treaty, that could have a profound impact on reducing the human toll from conflicts in the future. The ATT must be vigorously pursued until it is agreed, incorporated into national laws around the world, and implemented effectively.

The government should continue to strengthen the UK's arms-export controls – including regulations to limit the 'extra-territorial' activities of brokers – and apply them consistently, irrespective of commercial or other interests. It should also work with Norway and others to conclude a treaty by 2008 that specifically applies international humanitarian law to cluster munitions.

Equally importantly, the government should pursue its various international priorities coherently. Protecting civilians, reducing poverty, addressing conflict, countering terrorism, supporting the creation of effective, accountable states in poor countries, and combating climate change are all important in their own right and also essential for the UK's own long-term security.

It is vital, however, that separate government strategies on each of these goals should help, not hinder or undermine one other. International aid *can* improve security for poor people in developing countries, as well as reducing poverty, by targeting the vicious circle of poverty and conflict. At the same time, the government should

make sure that aid is never used in any way that undermines DFID's core responsibility to reduce poverty.

4: Adapting to a changing world

By itself, the UK can do relatively little to protect civilians. By working with and influencing others, however, it can do a great deal.

Europe

The UK should continue to press the EU to take a more consistent approach to its responsibility to protect civilians around the world. On its own, the UK will never be one of the new poles in a multi-polar world. But it can help Europe to become such a pole, and a positive force to protect civilians everywhere. In January 2007, Gordon Brown called for the EU to adopt a more genuinely 'global' foreign policy, less 'inward-looking' than it has been so far.⁸⁴ The UK should press the EU in this direction, to put a higher priority on its relations with regions beyond its neighbours and the Middle East – and to build up the African Union as a truly effective organisation.

At the same time, the UK should help the EU's common foreign and security policy to work more effectively. That requires many changes. The UK alone cannot overcome the disunity that still bedevils EU external policy. However, it can put a higher premium on reaching EU consensus on key crises – such as Lebanon in 2006 – and be more willing to compromise to achieve this.

United States

The UK should reject both uncritical support for the USA and unthinking opposition to it. Any future government should be willing to distance itself from misjudged US policies, in accordance with the UK's firm support for multilateralism and international law. This is more than an ethical imperative: it is also a pragmatic choice in a world in which the USA's unrivalled power is ultimately likely to decline.

The UK should therefore rebalance its relationships between the USA and the EU. That means working on the assumption that winning both US *and* EU support for a particular policy is the best course of action. There should be no assumption that one is more important than the other. The only 'defaults' should be the need to negotiate common positions that are based on multilateral solutions to the world's problems, and support for international humanitarian law.

A new polarisation and rising powers

It is clear that achieving an appropriate balance between the EU and the USA is no longer the dominant or only choice to be made in UK

foreign policy. There is a wider world to consider, riven by an inequality that affects almost everything: wealth and poverty, access to information, the benefits of globalisation, and the impact of climate change. This inequality fuels resentment that makes international agreement more difficult on a wide range of issues, in a wide range of multilateral forums. The UK can help to overcome that by working with developing countries as they become increasingly assertive, as, for example, Brazil, South Africa, and India did in the World Trade Organisation talks in 2005.

With the EU, the UK should find increasingly effective ways to work with all the world's emerging powers, from India to Japan, Brazil, and South Africa, a resurgent Russia, and, of course, China. It should also influence some of these emerging powers, and indeed the wider world, to have far higher respect for human rights, both at home and in their own foreign policies, and to respect the principles of multilateralism.

5: Strengthening multilateralism

The UK should help to unite UN members after the continuing divisions that Iraq has helped to create. The UK should help UN institutions to become both more effective and more relevant to a new multi-polar world. It should press the UN (including its vital humanitarian agencies) not only to become more effectively managed and co-ordinated, but also to make the whole of the UN, including the Security Council, more genuinely representative. The abortive effort to reform the Security Council in 2005 must be re-attempted.

The UK should seek multilateral solutions to the world's conflicts, and multilateral protection of civilians caught up in them. But it must be an *active* multilateralism. The UK cannot sit back and wait for an international consensus to emerge on how to stop civilians being killed in particular conflicts or by the unregulated arms trade. Often, this will need strong leadership from the UK. But it must be a humble style of leadership, working with other governments to galvanise the rest of the international community to take action and, sometimes, to make tough decisions. Wherever possible, the UK should support other governments' good ideas as well as its own.

Occasionally, this may require the UK to help to lead coalitions of governments outside the UN – as Canada did to deliver the global ban on landmines - which now seems the most likely way of establishing effective controls on cluster munitions.

4 Conclusion

In early 2007, representatives of UK political parties are laying out the principles that, if elected, they would apply to the conduct of UK foreign policy in the years ahead.

UK foreign policy matters for poor and vulnerable people caught up in conflicts where Oxfam works around the world. That is one reason why the government should learn from both the successes and the failures of the past – and look ahead to the changing and challenging world of the next decade.

The UK should continue to be at least as active in helping to protect civilians, and in helping to solve conflict, as it has been in recent years. Where the UK has helped to lead, as it has on the Arms Trade Treaty, it should continue to do so.

But there is also much room for improvement. UK foreign policy should challenge more consistently those who commit war crimes and human-rights abuses, whoever they may be. The UK should, above all, act to uphold its responsibility to protect civilians – but never using force without adequate justification and the reasonable prospect of success.

Never again

What the UK should *not* do is draw the wrong conclusion from Iraq.

It would be disastrous if that failure led the UK and other governments to stand back from trying to help resolve the world's most difficult conflicts.

Any future Prime Minister and government must say 'never again' - but as much to repeating the UK's past failures to help stop genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda, as to repeating a misadventure on the scale of Iraq.

Notes

¹ The figures of 200,000 and 800,000 have been commonly given for the death tolls in Bosnia and Rwanda respectively. Some more recent figures, however, suggest that the number of deaths may have been higher in Rwanda and lower in Bosnia. On the tenth anniversary of the genocide, in 2004, the Rwandan government issued a figure of 937,000 (Asiimwe, A. (2004), 'Rwanda census puts genocide death toll at 937,000', Reuters, 4 April 2004: <http://www.alertnet.org/thefacts/reliefresources/108117321274.htm>, accessed 13 March 2007). Since the end of the Bosnian war, various estimates have been made, many nearer 100,000 than 200,000 and down to 55,000 (see also note 34).

² Henley, J. (2003), 'Sierra Leone 2000', *Guardian*, 29 May 2003. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/westafrica/story/0,,1008080,00.html> (accessed by the author 6 February 2007).

³ Please see note 28.

⁴ Blair, T. (2006), speech to the Los Angeles World Affairs Council, 1 August 2006. <http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page9948.asp> (accessed 28 February 2007).

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⁶ Blair, T. (2007) 'Our Nation's Future — Defence', lecture, 12 January 2007. <http://www.pm.gov.uk/output/Page10735.asp> (accessed 28 February 2007).

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