

# The Dogs That Never Barked

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As we mark the 10th anniversary of the Dayton accords that ended the war in Bosnia, it must seem to most Americans that the world hasn't really learned much, then or since, about how to prevent and resolve deadly conflict. With every night's evening news full of the grim daily death tolls in Iraq, riots in France, bombs in Jordan, ugly fighting still in Afghanistan and recurring nightmares in Africa, there doesn't seem much room for optimism.

But there is. Contrary to what just about everybody instinctively believes, there has been a dramatic decrease in the number of conflicts, down 40% since the early 1990s. There were just 25 armed secessionist conflicts underway in 2004, the lowest number since 1976, according to the meticulously documented Human Security Report 2005, a new multi-government study ([www.humansecurityreport.info](http://www.humansecurityreport.info)).

The number of mass killings has fallen 80% since the late 1980s, according to the report. And around the world, there has been a spectacular increase in the number of civil conflicts resolved — as in Indonesia's separatist Aceh province this year — not by force but by negotiation.

There are many reasons for these turnarounds. They include the end of the era of colonialism, the aftermath of which generated two-thirds or more of all wars from the 1950s to the 1980s. The end of the Cold War meant no more proxy wars fueled by Washington or Moscow, and it also hastened the demise of a number of authoritarian governments that each side had been propping up and that had generated significant internal resentment and resistance.

But the best explanation is the one that stares us in the face: the huge increase in international efforts to prevent, manage and resolve conflicts.

The best stories are the ones that do not reach the evening news: the dogs that never barked. Using the hard lessons learned from the disastrous days of the early 1990s in places such as Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia, the international community is much better now than it ever used to be at preventing conflict.

Between 1990 and 2002, the number of U.N. diplomatic missions aimed at stopping wars before they started increased sixfold, according to the Human Security report. Although sometimes an imperfect tool, economic sanctions against abusive regimes around the world increased elevenfold between 1989 and 2003. Early and sensible action in places such as Burundi, Indonesia and Macedonia has kept most Americans blissfully unaware that these were countries that recently veered away from the large-scale violence that has plagued them in the past.

Liberia's recent presidential election was a one-day news story about people peacefully voting after years of bloodshed. But only a successful peacekeeping mission made it so.

A catastrophic new civil war looked certain to erupt in Somalia this year, with a misguided decision by neighboring governments to intervene militarily in support of one side of an internal political dispute. But organizations such as mine rang the alarm bells and there was a flurry of diplomatic activity in Nairobi, Addis Ababa and New York. Wiser heads prevailed, no intervention occurred, no war broke out — and because "nothing happened," nobody noticed.

For every roadside bomb in Baghdad, international peacekeepers in places such as Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor and Sierra Leone have quietly gone about their duties in work that seems now almost routine. Between 1998 and 2004, the number of U.N. peacekeeping operations more than doubled.

Regional organizations in Europe, the Americas and Africa have also become much more forceful in standing up and taking action against intolerable abuses against civilians, helping to limit conflicts before they spread out of control. Max van der Stoep, Europe's former high commissioner on national minorities, deserves the Nobel Peace Prize for stopping as many as a dozen major ethnic and language-based conflicts from breaking out across Europe, from the Baltics to Romania.

One of the abiding lessons from the Balkans conflict was that the international community can be effective when it works together. Before the U.S. and Europe coordinated their approach in Bosnia, the situation was a bloody mess, the international response ineffectual and the world was looking at a failed, lawless state in the middle of Europe. When both sides of the Atlantic did pull together, things changed dramatically.

There has also been an emerging consensus on the international community's responsibility to protect civilians at grave risk. This has helped bridge the gap between those who want to defend traditional principles of state sovereignty and those who assert an international right to intervene in humanitarian crises. We cannot yet be said to have reached, as an international community, anything like consensus as to how and when any intervention should be undertaken and under whose authority. And while the disagreement continues, people keep dying. But we are at least now on our way.

Much hard work remains to be done around the globe in places such as Iraq, Sudan and the Congo, but there is far more good news to celebrate than you probably have been led to believe. In an often uncertain world, the lives of millions of people are now vastly safer and more secure than they were even just a decade ago.