To drive home the practical realities of trying to help bring peace and development in some else’s country and society, let’s look at Canadian successes and failures in our interventions in the Horn of Africa: the hard lessons of our effort in Somalia to join the USA in providing security for humanitarian aid delivery in 1992; our more successful transitional peacekeeping role with UNMEE in Ethiopia and Eritrea in 2000; and our modest military contribution to building peace and human rights in Darfur and Sudan.

**Somalia:**

In the late 1980s, Canada had few apparent direct interests in Somalia. Somalia was known by a select group as a former Italian colony, a country of competing interests between the USA and USSR during the cold war, and an increasing source of immigrants following the fall of Said Barre’s government. There was then no Canadian Somali community with political clout to speak of, and few if any other Canadians who knew or cared about Somalia except as a country desperately needing food and rescuing from itself.

But to the USA, the Horn was a major geopolitical concern. And as warlords prevented food from reaching starving people in the midst of a debilitating famine, evening newscasts began to compel Canadians to feel that “something must be done”.

Even so, there was little thought among officials or government advisers here of getting Canadian defence forces directly involved in providing the security to have CIDA and NGO humanitarian assistance reach those most in need. And those of us in government were unsure what we were to do there beyond the humanitarian delivery of food. We knew we understood little of the impediments to that delivery, or the fundamental reasons behind a largely-man made famine.
Yet despite advice to the contrary from CIDA, External Affairs and DND, we entered on this challenging “whole of government” task. Why? In part to respond to traditional Canadian humanitarian concerns. But mostly it was because of pressure from the USA, and personal intervention from the White House. In other words, we were there for foreign policy reasons well beyond Canada’s immediate concern for the Horn of Africa.

Our Forces made it work, up to a point. Our technical competence was not questioned. We joined the USA troops of UNITAF inside their compounds at Belet Wen and in Mogadishu; our forces fulfilled our humanitarian mission, then worked to combine that with longer-term education and development, and provided protection.

Until the Canadian effort fell apart over an entirely unexpected incident involving Canadian troops rather than a serious challenge from Somalia.

And until the USA forces, as sophisticated and overwhelming as they were, met their match in local networks, commitments and clan loyalties.

Truth is, none of us succeeded in Somalia. All these years later, Somalia is still seen in the USA, Canada and the EU as an even greater international threat than it was when Canada first went there for essentially humanitarian ends - and for Canada/USA geo-political reasons - over a decade ago.

**Ethiopia and Eritrea**

In the last years of the 20th century, as both Ethiopia and Eritrea seemed on the path of sharing a new prosperity and stability in the Horn of Africa, Canada, like almost everyone else, expected peace, development, democracy and sound free market economic polices. Instead there was a senseless war.

As with Somalia, and in fact not unlike Rwanda at the start of the crisis there, this was not an immediate Canadian concern either to officials like me, or to Canadians as a whole. Few at first grasped the horror of what lay ahead.

Neither Ethiopia nor Eritrea was Commonwealth, or Francophone. Neither was well known to Canadians except for the fascinating history of a now-fallen emperor, a long Christian history and its art - and famine.

The Canadian media was not much interested, and the Canadian public barely seemed to know the conflict was going on.
Officials wanted little to do with the conflict. They did not want a repeat of Somalia; they knew Canada did not have military resources for yet another peacekeeping mission, or for a new development programme. They were more concerned with avoiding entanglements and cutting costs. And with our on-going peacekeeping mission in Yugoslavia. There was some agreement among bureaucrats that we ‘should do something’. But no inclination in National Defence to spend money or commit troops, and little enthusiasm on the part of CIDA for new programmes.

On the other hand, there were at least 100,000 Ethiopians in the Toronto area; there are 12,000 Eritreans who were well organized, even campaigned for Canadian MPs who eventually became ministers. Addis Ababa is the home of the AU and ECA. PM Meles is an articulate leader and credible international economist - one of the few among top leaders on that continent. The Horn has strategic interest and is important to the USA, and Europe.

Some did argue that Canada could revive our image - abroad and in Canada - as an effective peacekeeper (this was a now-rare conventional peacekeeping role: monitoring a cease fire between two national armies). It would bolster the pride of the Canadian Forces by reminding them and others that this was our forte. And it would support our allies.

Others wanted Canadian Forces to join in what would be the first SHIRBRIG action - a trial of our support for a UN force which actually did what it was designed to do: go in when it said it would, stay just as long as it said it would, act according to a clear mandate which said what it should it would do, and leave on time and in good order, being replaced by other UN forces behind it.

Which arguments won the day? None of the above.

The Chairman of the Organization of African Unity called Prime Minister Chretien. Chretien was making Africa a main theme of the Kananaskis G-8 Summit. More to the point, though, the Dutch PM phoned the Canadian PM. He argued for SHIRBRIG. He said the Dutch would go in - assume the leadership - if Canada would join. We did.

**The result?**

In the end: 450 peacekeepers, 12 monitors and CIDA money for reconstruction, Shirbrig was a success, Canadian troops left proud of their role; Both the Ethiopian and Eritrean governments appreciated what Canada had done. Canadian forces were justly reinvigorated. The cost was kept to the projected $40 million. Ethiopian and Eritrea were on the map in Canada. The Canadian PM and several ministers visited Ethiopia and, some, Eritrea. Ethiopia is now one of our countries of development focus.
But in terms of “whole of government” reconstruction and peace building objectives, the results are much less encouraging. The government of Eritrea has never had the election it promised well before we arrived. Indeed, even by the time our peacekeepers came to Asmara, almost all of the independent media and student leaders and even some former government ministers and officials were in jail or exile. There is no longer any serious talk of democracy or the rule of law, or even of an opposition. President Issais is there to stay. And his bellicosity towards the Ethiopian Prime Minister, a former comrade in arms, knows few bounds.

Ethiopia has been a disappointment too. There, there were indeed elections. But the opposition did rather too well. Since the election and riots that followed, much of the opposition leadership has spent much of their time in jail – many charged with treason before they were released in an amnesty. Prime Minister Meles has succumbed to pressure from his fellow Tigrayan hardliners not to accede to the findings of the AU-initiated international peace commission that gave Eritrea the symbolically important border area of Badme. And Meles reciprocates Issais’ rabid distrust and dislike to the point where another confrontation would probably have broken out before now if Eritrea had had the human resources to resume a fight they had earlier so devastatingly lost.

So what must we learn from these Canadian interventions? When Canadians call for Canada to do more in Darfur, or when the next confrontation comes up, what should the Prime Minster be advised to consider before we jump in? What should our deputy ministers, the CIDA President and the Chief of Defence staff think of as we plan the future of what we should or are able to do?

First: that we have to be ready for anything anywhere. Each of these examples suggest that the Canadian Forces, CIDA and DFAIT may find themselves involved in a peace building and reconstruction operation which they did not expect, and probably did not want – in fact, which many may have argued against.

And we should remember that the Canadian Forces, CIDA or Foreign Affairs intervene in these situations not because they decide to, but because the government sends them. At the outset, whatever the advice from bureaucrats and military officers, there is a political decision, in fact a Prime Ministerial decision. It is not a decision of the Deputy Minister, or of the Chief of Defence Staff. And Prime Ministers and governing parties have broad agendas and many priorities stretching beyond, though sometimes certainly including, the welfare of local populations in Africa.

We have to guard against naiveté, succumbing to public pressure for humanitarian action even when it is clear to experts that Canada has neither the clout nor resources to achieve the goals agreed between Canadians and at least the major players on the ground.
What’s more, we should be aware from our examples that Canada may not be in these situations only because of concern for local African people or for Canadian, African or even humanitarian objectives. Nor are we so modest in our role in Darfur, nor were we so conspicuously absent from Rwanda, simply because we judge those conflicts to be unimportant in themselves.

To the contrary, Canada participated in Somalia and the Ethiopian Eritrean operations for much broader foreign policy objectives to do with our G-8, or USA, or EU objectives as much as with our concern for African issues. And in Darfur, some have argued that we are not more involved (though in fact Canada is doing more than most Canadians realise), because our G-8 and like-minded partners are themselves not more consumed by the issue, or are similarly confounded in trying to see an effective and realistic way to bring lasting peace.

What’s even more unsettling, there is as much uncertainty in the getting out of a post conflict situation as there is in the getting in. Only once in recent peace making and peacekeeping initiatives have we actually gone in when we said we would, and left precisely when we said we would – and all very nearly on budget. That was in Ethiopia and Ertirea – and theirs was a conventional peacekeeping role, not an internal or regional confrontation.

Other lessons from Somalia that can be useful in Darfur and similar challenges:

All the sophisticated planning and firepower won’t win the day unless the local people want us there, are willing to support the intervention, with empathy flowing both ways.

Guns and troops can’t match alleys and networks, runners and civilian support.

It’s often hard to sell our concept of stability, tolerance and development to people who believe they face immediate threats to their land, political standing, economic security or, most pervasively, religion and culture.

Many conflicts are driven by non-governmental private interests, from large companies through shadowy diamond and oil traders, to well-funded and popular international religious organizations. These entities are largely outside the control or ken of either western or African governments. We have seen many times over in Africa that one can negotiate peace, reconstruction and demobilization with governments, or with apparent leaders, but if there are major private and civil interests that thrive on continuing conflict, weak government and failing economies, all the effort at restoring peace and prosperity may well be wasted.

Wherever we think of going in Africa, we must recognize that white faces in apparent control are an instinctive affront to African national pride. This was something to consider in Somalia; it is an important point to think about in Darfur, and it shapes a considerable amount of the debate in
the AU and with leaders like Thabo Mbeki when they are considering the role of NATO, US or Canadian interventions in Africa – and our advice on issues such as Zimbabwe. Understandably, Africans are tired of being told what they should do by people of European extraction.

We have to understand the context in which we are operating – not just in broad terms, but especially, who did what to whom, why, how can it be stopped, what forces and goals and methods will work in that particular society to achieve our and the country’s goals. More ominously we have to grasp who is likely to react badly to our being there, and what are they likely to do about it; and how can we persuade them not to react badly, or keep them from being successful if they do? These questions cannot be answered or decisions made according to the wisdom of Toronto or Ottawa or London or Washington. They can only be successful if their logic works according to the structures and perceptions on the ground - in Congo, Sudan and Darfur.

Thus we need a real understanding of and empathy for the way not only those we are seeking to support, but those who are their enemies, see the world - their values, their perceptions of themselves and their perceptions of Canadians.

Canada did not just discover the so-called “whole of government” approach when then Prime Minister Martin launched the 2005 International Policy Review. Interdepartmental coordination has already been well practised by Canadians in Africa. But there is room for improvement.

One area where we are still learning in our CIDA, DND, DFAIT coordination is to define who does what, and when. Our African experience suggests that immediate reconstruction initiatives – whether by CIDA experts, or more likely, by the military, are key to winning the loyalty and support of those we are trying to help. People just emerging from a violent change of government or social confrontation have neither the time nor patience to be told that they will eventually receive development assistance from Canada – if by development assistance we mean judicial training, government capacity building, or building a better education system. They will only be convinced to tolerate outside intervention, to support the local authorities on whose behalf we are intervening, if they can see fast and visible benefits – affordable food, electricity, water, local security, and functioning local markets.

In all of this, we have learned that we have to be patient. Peace, reconstruction or change will not come about in any lasting or meaningful sense because of what Canadians tell people to do, or wish to make happen. Only Africans will really fix African conflicts. We can help create the space, support the governments and strengthen the people. But we cannot and should not try to impose our solutions and ideas. Let’s stick to what we are good at, play to our strengths, and leave the fundamentals to those who know and will value them the most.