



Tajikistan: rising from the ashes of civil war

Despite formidable challenges in the aftermath of a deadly civil war, Tajikistan persists on the road to peace and recovery in a scarcely reported effort

At a time when much of the world's attention was focused on the raging conflict in the Balkans, civil war also engulfed a small country in another part of the world, Central Asia. In Tajikistan, which became independent in 1991, bitter fighting between the militias representing different regions of the country, led to massive destruction and tore the country apart. The conflict and its aftermath resulted in the deaths of over 50,000 people and led to a humanitarian catastrophe, with some 1.2 million becoming refugees or internally displaced persons.

Today, Tajikistan is on the way to a hard won peace brokered by the United Nations in 1997, which brought an end to hostilities and began the process of reconstruction. Scant attention has been paid to how the country overcame insurmountable divisions between the Government and the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) and laid the foundations of political pluralism. Tajikistan deserves acclaim for its little known achievements in containing internal conflict and building bridges with its neighbours in a fairly unstable region of the world. Former combatants are learning to use a common language of peace. The Tajik capital, Dushanbe, will play host to an anti-landmine conference in May to advance dialogue on the legacy of landmines in a region of the world where the conflict is over, but the struggle to build peace continues.

Spanning 12 years and several different stages, the UN's peace efforts in the country have been central to providing the tools for reconciliation and rehabilitation. The UN responded promptly to the appeal to provide political assistance in mediating the conflict and sent the first fact-finding mission in September 2002, followed by a goodwill mission two months later. Those first initiatives laid the ground for the establishment of a UN political office in Dushanbe in 1993. In 1994, in cooperation with eight regional countries, the UN succeeded in bringing together the Government of Tajikistan and UTO for several rounds of negotiations, which yielded a landmark agreement to end the hostilities. In December 1994, the United Nations Mission of Observers of Tajikistan (UNMOT) was established to monitor the Agreement and consolidate the gains achieved. However, progress towards peace was complicated and suffered a number of serious setbacks until a peace agreement was concluded in 1997.

Over the past three years, the United Nations Tajikistan Office of Peace-building (UNTOP) jointly with the United Nations Country Team has played a lead role in a wide array of UN post-conflict activities in the country aimed at consolidating peace and national reconciliation, promoting the rule of law and strengthening democratic institutions. As part of that effort, it has helped to mobilize international support for programmes promoting demobilization, voluntary arms collection and employment creation for former irregular fighters. However, the political equilibrium in Tajikistan remains fragile as the nation struggles to deal with a legacy of problems related to the civil war, including the high unemployment rate among ex-combatants, the spread of small arms among civilians, drug trafficking and the resurgence of extremist organizations. At the same time, Tajikistan has come a long way and a broad-based assistance effort by the United Nations, involving the political office and 12 aid agencies, is aimed at ensuring that the country remains firmly on its path towards peace, stability, democratization and economic recovery.

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