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“Failed States” List Reveals Fragility of Governments

by Zack Gross

The American Journal “Foreign Policy” and the US-based “Fund for Peace” have just released their latest Index of Failed States. The good news is that Canada is listed at 139 out of 146 countries examined by experts, a much better to place to live than number one ranked Sudan. The bad news is that many countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia are quickly becoming more poverty-stricken, less governable and more dangerous from year to year.

Twelve indicators are used to review the stability of states and then rank them. Some countries are not yet on the official list due to lack of data. Indicators include number of internally displaced people and refugees, government corruption, intervention of other states, fracture of the country into ethnic factions, progressive deterioration of social services, severe economic decline, widespread human rights violations, and control of resources by small groups. Click on www.fundforpeace.org for detailed information.

Here is the “top ten” that no country should aspire to: Sudan, Congo, Ivory Coast, Iraq, Zimbabwe, Chad, Somalia, Haiti, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Of course, the Darfur region of Sudan is well-publicized for what has been described as “genocide in slow motion”, with ethnic Arab militias the aggressors against their African countrymen. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), once Zaire, has had a succession of corrupt rulers and on-going civil war between armed factions. Both the DRC and Somalia have not had government as we know it for some time. Chad has found itself drawn into the wars and instability around it.

Ivory Coast has had armed conflict in the past year and, like the other African countries mentioned above, is abjectly poor and brings in child slave labour from neighbouring African countries for its cocoa, sugar and other export agriculture harvests. Iraq is, surprisingly, not number one on the list. Zimbabwe’s economy has failed as President Robert Mugabe has disenfranchised white farmers and businessmen and outlawed any opposition to his government.

Haiti is in a state of chaos despite attempts at elections and involvement of Canadian and other aid donors, observers and law enforcement trainers. We hear about Afghanistan now every day as Canada’s global role has changed seemingly without notice from peacekeeping to combat, setting off a number of debates about our tradition as “honest brokers”, our government’s censorship of dead Canadians’ return home, and the effectiveness of our equipment in keeping our soldiers as safe as possible.

Pakistan’s number nine position may be a surprise to some. The tough image of its strongman, President General Pervez Musharraf, may fool some into believing that his country is safe from the fragility plaguing other nations caught up in regional wars.

Causing Pakistan's downslide include the massive October 2005 earthquake, centred in Kashmir, a humanitarian disaster that killed and displaced tens of thousands and was beyond the government's ability to fully respond. Continuing ethnic tensions and Pakistan's inability to police its outlying "tribal" areas, despite the presence of outside military intervention, show it to be, in the eyes of researchers, a "failed state".

Other surprises on the chart might be Russia at number 43 and China at 57. Eastern European countries continue to recover from the collapse of the Soviet Union, suffering from arbitrary and corrupt government, political instability, poverty and a growing epidemic of HIV/AIDS. While China's economy is booming, the country is rife with strikes and protests, unemployment, the loss of state health and social programs, and the mushrooming growth of cities.

Oil-rich Nigeria is also suffering, sitting at number 22. Again, the wealth is there but few benefit. The country is divided along regional and ethnic lines, and refugee and human rights problems persist.

At the fortunate bottom of the list of failed states, based on much greater stability and tranquility, the rule of law, transparency of government and more broadly held wealth are the "real top ten", in the eyes of the Peace Fund and Foreign Policy. Norway stands first, followed by Sweden, Finland, Ireland, Switzerland, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, Belgium and Denmark. The USA stands at number 19 and the United Kingdom at number 17.

Improved states mostly reside in the Western Hemisphere as Venezuela, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic have improved their economies and stabilized their governance. Some Balkan countries have also improved, benefiting from involvement in the European Union.

It is interesting to view and compare the various nation states of our world by these "failed states" indicators. In the gush of news every day, dominated by war, a broader understanding of the causes of instability is needed, and hopefully can be used by leaders to address the issues that put their countries at risk.

Zack Gross is program coordinator at the Manitoba Council for International Cooperation (MCIC), a coalition of 36 development assistance agencies active in our province.