As every year, the Institute for International Law of Peace and Armed Conflict of the Ruhr-University of Bochum (Germany) conducted in The Hague its conference on current topics relating to armed conflicts. This year’s choice was, as in 2003, conditioned by the situation in Iraq and notably by the rebuilding of the Iraqi State and nation. Hence, the conference organised in collaboration with the German Red Cross on 22 May 2004 focused on “Post Conflict Reconstruction: Nation- or State-Building”. Indeed, often, after an armed conflict the question arises as to whether what is most needed is either nation or State-building or a combination thereof.

All 80 participants in the conference met in one of the halls of the Bel Air – Golden Tulip hotel in The Hague for the plenary session where Prof. Dr. Horst Fischer, the academic director of the Institute for International Law of Peace and Armed Conflict, welcomed the audience and introduced the various speakers before leaving the floor to the keynote speaker, Dr. Dirk Salomons, director of the programme for humanitarian affairs at the School of International Public Affairs of Columbia University (USA).

Dr. Salomons pondered on whether the United Nations is able to contribute significantly to nation-building. In particular, Dr. Salomons addressed the issues of political and legal credibility, and technical and funding capacity. He first noted that it is rather surprising that the United Nations, an organisation thought of in the aftermath of the Second World War, is still relevant in modern discourse on nation-building. Yet, one notices that the Security Council has lost most of its legal and political power to stop unilateral intervention and massive human rights violations. Dr. Salomons stressed that, in his opinion, the lack of legitimacy of humanitarian
interventions is one of the main sources of nowadays difficult credibility of the United Nations. His main question is, if the Security Council is no longer the arbiter to justify international actions, who is then entitled to legitimise military interventions. To endow regional organisations with such a legitimisation power was one of the possibilities mentioned by Dr. Salomons.

Another point was that the United Nations has now lost wide support and considerable credibility due to the unipolarity of the world. Since the Security Council is only allowed to look in those crises that are not of major geopolitical importance the United Nations' interventions are not needs-based. This leads many States and nations to view the democratic and humanistic values that underpin the United Nations Charter as groundless and opportunistic. Besides, the United Nations are considered in many countries as the extension of Western powers. In fact, this perception strongly affects the work of the United Nations in particular in situations of nation-building.

The next question broached by Dr. Salomons was whether the United Nations has the capacity and the means to assist countries to recover from conflict. The craft of nation-building was developed in the colonial era and much has been recycled for modern nation-building enterprises. However, Dr. Salomons remarked that "nation-building requires vast amounts of expertise, time, resources, and commitment" and that the lessons learned during colonial times could not simply be transferred to the new situation. More specifically, at that time, the link between peacekeeping and peace-building was unknown. The newly integrated approach to post-conflict States required the proper functioning and combined work of organisations devoted to traditional peacekeeping operations and of relief and development agencies. The UN needed several years before it developed fully functioning mechanisms to tackle these issues. The same holds true for funding these operations; it took several years to the UN to develop a financing model. As a conclusion Dr. Salomons underlined that the UN is at a crossroads: while its technical and organisational capacity are improving its political and moral support is loosing ground. In his opinion, "[t]he United Nations has become the Salvation Army of the international community".1

After this excellent and fundamental introduction to the conference, the audience split into two groups, each of them offering four short presentations. In order to cover a wide range of pertinent issues the organisers opted for two groups of speakers, one focusing on particular countries and the other dealing with issues often encountered in post-conflict countries.

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