Excerpt: His Highness the Aga Khan on why the international community is unable to preempt predictable breakdowns in governance

"If we were to look at a map of the world that charted armed conflicts in the last 15 years, it would show that nearly two thirds have occurred in the developing countries of Asia and Africa. More than 80 per cent were internal conflicts, either full-blown civil wars or state-sanctioned aggression against minorities in those countries. In nearly every instance, these internal conflicts were predictable because they were the culmination of a gradual deterioration in pluralist, inclusive governance. In too many cases -- and I can speak here of our experiences in Uganda, Bangladesh, Tajikistan and Afghanistan -- this sad but foreseeable turn of events has had severely adverse effects lasting more than a generation.

"The question I have is this: if these breakdowns in governance were predictable, why was the international community powerless to get engaged at the early stages to help arrest the deterioration and avoid the suffering that resulted? Secondly, are there common factors in the majority of these situations which are insufficiently recognised?

"I suggest to you that a major problem is that the industrialised world too often is severely lacking in credible information about the forces at play in the developing world. Take as an example the phrase 'clash of civilisations' which has travelled far and wide. I have said many times previously, and I would like to reconfirm today my conviction that what we have been observing in recent decades is not a clash of civilisations but a clash of ignorance. This ignorance is both historic and of our time. This is not the occasion to analyse the historic causes of the deep ignorance that exists between the Judeo-Christian and Muslim worlds. But I am convinced that many of today's problems could have been
avoided if there had been better understanding and more serious dialogue between the two.

"The issue of ignorance, or lack of solid information, and its impact on our world today, is illustrated by events in Iraq. No less deplorable is that the 9/11 attack on the United States was a direct consequence of the international community ignoring the human tragedy that was Afghanistan at that time. Both the Afghan and Iraqi situations were driven by lack of precise information and understanding.

"My fundamental point is this: since the collapse of the Cold War, the need has grown exponentially for the world's leaders to be able to understand, and properly predict, what is likely to happen in parts of the world in which they previously had no reason to be involved. The task of addressing this need cannot be met by the resources presently being engaged. I note that Norway's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jan Petersen, spoke of this very problem just last week in Beijing. He called for the international community to provide assistance in governance for fragile states that is, and I quote: 'more systematic, more strategic, more persevering and more reliable.' My suggestion is to examine this question in depth."

His Highness the Aga Khan's Acceptance 2005 Keynote Address to the Nobel Institute's Seminar: 'Democratic Development, Pluralism and Civil Society' (Oslo, Norway)

http://www.nanowisdoms.org/nwblog/7255/

See also: His Highness the Aga Khan explains the Clash of Ignorance: foreign policy compromised by ignorance and no foresight

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