Op-ed

Who do we listen to? The human cost of war and its global impact
By Buyelwa Sonjica

The relentless conflicts in Ukraine, Israel-Palestine, and Sudan starkly expose the international community's struggle to respond to global crises effectively. These enduring confrontations challenge global governance structures and bring the imperative of understanding their profound human costs to the forefront. It is crucial to recognise the impact of these wars on those most affected - the people enduring these hardships firsthand - and to assess how their voices are represented and addressed within international diplomacy.

Wars transcend the boundaries of mere geopolitical events; they are disasters that dismantle lives and futures. The destruction of infrastructure, often in the poorest regions, is starkly visible in satellite imagery of decimated cities in Syria or Yemen, showcasing the extent of physical ruin from above. However, the emotional and psychological trauma that survivors endure is less apparent but equally devastating, with the potential to impair generations, eroding the resilience of societies and leaving them susceptible to further calamities.

The global citizenry bears the weight of these conflicts in more ways than one. The economic repercussions are immediate, with oil prices escalating and inflation rates rising as supply chains are interrupted, affecting global markets and the wallets of ordinary people worldwide. The war's toll extends beyond the battlefield, compromising the future of nations as children, the inadvertent core victims of conflicts, are stripped of education, family, and security. The looming question is: where is humanity in the calculus of war?

Peace provisions, enshrined in the Geneva Conventions and the United Nations Charter, seem to be sidelined as the world watches on. The international community often appears paralysed despite clear mandates to restore peace and reason. Voices have been raised, from the halls of the UN to the streets where children march for peace, yet the machinery of war grinds on. The conflict between Israel and Palestine, for example, has persisted for over seven decades, with resolutions and international outcry doing little to halt the suffering. At the time of writing this article, over 10,000 Palestinians were killed – more than half composed of women and children - in retaliation to the October 7 Hamas attacks that killed over 1,400 Israelis.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is pivotal yet often undermined by the veto power of its permanent members. This power to veto can silence the collective voice for peace, leaving us to question the efficacy of the UNSC in its current form. The situation in Ukraine further illustrates the impotence of international bodies when faced with the geopolitical interests of powerful nations. Richard Gowan remarks that initial cooperation on issues like sanctions in Haiti and aid to Afghanistan soon led to increasing discord, particularly between Russia and the United States.

The discord within the United Nations General Assembly, particularly over Gaza, has significantly strained the Western coalition that was previously unified on the Ukraine issue. This rift has not only impacted efforts to foster better relations with the global South but also underscored a noticeable lack of Western solidarity with Palestinians. Compounding this scenario is the increasing autonomy sought by countries in the Global South, exemplified by South Africa's non-aligned stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict. However, this pursuit of autonomy can be a double-edged sword, potentially leading to greater regional self-reliance but also risking isolation in the face of broad international challenges.

Yet, organisations like the African Union (AU) and its Peace and Security Council are still willing to act. Still, they are constrained by unpredictable funding, as seen in the protracted missions in Somalia. In addition, responses have often been blocked by its own member states, as the case of the inability of the AU to deploy peacekeepers to Burundi in 2016 show us the limitations of international interventions. When a member state can refuse AU intervention, as we also see with Israel dismissing numerous UN resolutions, the sovereignty of nations stands in stark opposition to the concept of international oversight and humanitarian intervention.

The devastating impact on humanity is not just a byproduct of war but a central concern that should shape our response to it. The reconstruction of post-conflict societies is a monumental task, often left incomplete, leading to cycles of poverty and instability. The international community's failure to address the root causes of conflict and to rebuild effectively in the aftermath poses a grave threat to global peace and security.

As we await the long-overdue reforms of the United Nations Security Council and other global institutions, we find ourselves in a precarious interim, witnessing conflicts rage and lives being tragically lost. It begs the question: what steps can we take in this interval? And which are the voices and demands that we are reacting to? It is untenable to remain passive observers, allowing the slaughter of innocents to continue unabated. If our global leaders are unable to offer concrete direction in these turbulent times, then it is a tacit admission of their failure to uphold humanity's fundamental values.

This dire situation calls for an immediate and direct challenge to world leaders: acknowledge the shortcomings in our current systems and act swiftly to prevent further humanitarian crises. The cost of inaction is too great, and the cries of those caught in the crossfire of conflict too loud to ignore. The world is watching, and it demands more than just words; it requires decisive, compassionate leadership that can guide us through these tumultuous times towards a more peaceful and just global order.

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