Everyday Dangers

NON-CONFLICT ARMED VIOLENCE

Between 2004 and 2009, an average of 526,000 people died violently each year, but only 10 per cent of them qualified as direct conflict deaths. International attention, however, has traditionally focused on interstate or civil wars, even though academic research shows that since 2005 war between states has accounted for only a small portion of all armed conflicts.

The term *post-conflict* gained currency at the end of the cold war. Yet since armed conflict does not always produce a clear outcome—such as a military victory or a peace agreement—it may be unclear when a *post-conflict* period begins, especially if armed violence remains widespread.

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Armed violence that occurs neither in *conflict* nor in *post-conflict* settings is broadly identified as *non-conflict*. The concept of non-conflict armed violence cuts across a range of sectors—from criminal justice to public health—and includes violent events that may be categorized according to the perpetrator's *motivation* (such as political or economic), the *setting* (such as domestic or urban), or the type of *victim* or *perpetrator*, or their *relationship* (such as gender-based violence or organized crime). The definition of non-conflict armed violence overlaps with those of terms such as *crisis* and *fragile situations*.

While access to weapons does not, in and of itself, drive armed violence, it is worth noting that civilians hold roughly 75 per cent of the approximately 875 million firearms possessed worldwide, as estimated by the Small Arms Survey. Non-state armed groups and gangs hold a small proportion of these weapons (just 1.3 per cent). National armed forces and law enforcement agencies account for less than one-quarter of the global stockpile.

An estimated 42–60 per cent of lethal violence around the world is committed with firearms. For each person killed with a firearm, at least three more survive gunshot injuries. The vast majority of violent deaths occur in countries and territories not considered conflict or post-conflict environments.

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Armed violence in non-conflict settings encompasses different armed actors and various forms of violence. Armed actors include individuals and groups that have access to weapons; the groups can vary in size, affiliation, and structure.

The relations between armed actors and types of armed violence may evolve over time, with armed actors potentially involved in several forms of violence. Furthermore, different types of armed violence may overlap, interact, and mutually reinforce each other. In countries where armed violence is endemic, large-scale organized violence may coexist with criminal violence, human rights violations, and terrorist attacks, along with various forms of interpersonal violence.

It is generally accepted that the state must retain the monopoly on the legitimate use of force in order to guarantee its citizens a certain level of physical security. States may decide to delegate or outsource the use of force to others, such as private security

Roses bearing the faces of people killed in a shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newtown, Connecticut, January 2013.
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companies. In other cases, rebel groups, gangs, and other criminal organizations challenge the state's monopoly, often leading to the loss of the state's capacity to control violence in part or all of its territory.

Governments may also abuse their monopoly on the use of force, using violence against their citizens for policy ends. Weak institutions and poor performance with respect to the rule of law damage a state's legitimacy and citizens' trust. In such situations, citizens may pursue their own means of security, often by procuring arms, supporting local vigilante-type defence forces, or refusing to disarm. These steps can lead to a downward spiral as violent private actors increase their power at the expense of governments.

The desire to secure access to land and to natural resources has long acted as a driver of armed violence. Indeed, the relationship between land, territory, and community is crucial to understanding non-conflict armed violence. In general, the more a group is organized, the more likely it is to be interested in dominating territory. Highly organized groups use violence to establish and preserve their power. Groups that have close links to their communities, such as *pandillas* in Nicaragua, use violence more sparingly and may function as security providers for the communities in which they operate—either formally, as private security companies, or informally. In contrast, groups with transnational origins (such as the *maras* in Latin America) are often less constrained in their use of violence.

Whether violence is tied to an 'armed conflict', 'post-conflict', or 'non conflict' situation is more than semantics. The populations involved in a clearly defined armed conflict can access international resources that may be denied in the absence of explicit labelling. More specifically, the armed conflict label can trigger UN Security Council interventions, the deployment of international peace-keeping missions, and the provision of aid.

Yet states that experience high levels of *non-conflict* armed violence tend to be left to their own devices to combat the scourge, regardless of whether they have the necessary tools or means. In response to such situations, some countries have declared 'war' on organized crime groups, for example by using military tactics in an effort to curb the threat. Yet this can lead to an escalation of violence.

New practices in dealing with non-conflict armed violence are emerging, including humanitarian deployments to non-conflict zones and the granting of refugee status to persons fleeing forced gang recruitment. Nevertheless, multilateral and multi-sectoral initiatives—such as the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, which aims to reduce armed violence in both conflict and non-conflict settings—have just begun to play a role in this respect. ◼