

The economic relationship of armed groups with displaced populations

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One of the ways that non-state armed groups get their funding is by exploiting displaced populations.

Practically all armed groups are heavily dependent on external support. Armed groups primarily seek support from both other states and from the diasporas, displaced populations and other armed groups, in order to prevent the burden of the war effort from falling entirely on the civil population they claim to protect, a situation that has its own political costs. States too need external support to deal with outbreaks of instability and violence; during the Cold War this was normal and it still continues today in most current armed conflicts.

The violence, discrimination and poverty that follow armed conflicts lead to forced displacements of population that often help to maintain the original conflict. Armed groups frequently use IDP and refugee camps as a source of supply and recruitment, as well as for refuge for themselves. Although the armed groups have no legitimate power, they can depend on the refugee population on two essential fronts: fighters and income.

Armed groups have been formed or have recruited members (voluntarily or forcibly) and resources from the IDP and refugee camps in regions and states neighbouring conflict zones. In some cases these camps have become important refuges and logistical bases for the armed conflict.

Most of the Afghan armed groups originated in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. The Taliban, for example, emerged from the *madrassas* (Koranic schools) of the Afghan refugee population in Pakistan. The Karen refugee population – mainly on the Thai-Burma border – supports the Karen National Union armed group against the Burmese government. The Hutu and Tutsi communities that left Rwanda and Burundi during the successive waves of violence following independence in the 1960s settled in large refugee

camps in Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Tanzania which later spawned the insurgency that destabilised both countries. Other cases of similar effects can be seen in Ethiopia, Iraq, Turkish Kurdistan, Chechnya, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tajikistan and elsewhere.

The refugee populations provide support for insurgent groups as a way of establishing protection mechanisms in host countries. Without any such protection, refugee populations are frequently extremely vulnerable given the potentially hostile local population and/or state authorities, and are thus at the mercy of other armed groups and criminal gangs.

Coercion is another important factor in eliciting contributions from the refugee population, particularly when armed groups are in control of refugee camps. The groups are easily able to take over as they are both armed and organised, whereas the displaced populations tend to be disorganised, weak and unarmed. In these circumstances it is easy for the groups to demand money, provisions and recruits from these populations, even where they are unpopular and are not supported by the populations they claim to represent.

The most extreme example of this situation occurred following the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, when the remnants of the former Rwandan Armed Forces, officials from the previous Rwandan government and the Interahamwe militias organised resistance in the refugee camps in the former Zaire. They created a de facto government within these camps, exploiting international aid to continue their armed struggle against the new government in Rwanda, forcibly abducting and training new recruits, controlling and distributing humanitarian aid, and appointing

themselves as camp managers, giving the refugee population no alternative but to let them do so.

A similar situation is happening with the displaced populations in the Sudan region of Darfur. These people have suffered repeated attacks and abductions in recent years, becoming immersed in a spiral of militarisation by insurgent groups, pro-government militias and the Sudanese Armed Forces.

The economy of armed groups

There can be varying forms of economic relationship between armed groups and displaced populations. Some armed groups persuade the populations under their control to provide resources, while others force them to. The relationship between the parties may be symbiotic, parasitic or predatory, and may move from one type to another depending on how the war develops.

In a symbiotic economic relationship the armed group promotes certain types of activity in exchange for a share in the derived benefits. In such cases the economic development of the area and the economic well-being of the population may become dependent on the armed group for security and infrastructure; the group establishes a degree of social and economic order in the areas it controls in exchange for support and income, emulating a government and providing security, infrastructure and a rule of law that allow economic activities to continue in exchange for some form of taxation on the civilian population.

In a parasitic arrangement the armed groups provide protection and guarantees of security in exchange for collaboration and economic retribution through extortion or the establishment of taxes and charges, charges for permission to access resources, looting of international aid, or payments known as 'revolutionary taxes'. The degree of extortion may be more controlled

and regulated if it stems from the leadership of the armed group, or it may be totally arbitrary where individual combatants establish the level of abuse and extortion.

In a predatory economic relationship the armed groups are unconcerned by relationships with the civilian population, intimidating and terrorising them through the use of force in order to increase their power or to gain access to resources.

Conclusions

It is important to be aware that the relationships that emerge

between armed groups and civilian populations in the economy of war do not always correspond to the standard victim-victimiser model. These relationships may be far more complex and may generate new forms of protection, authority and rights over the distribution of resources that may then play a decisive role in the outcome of the armed conflict. Understanding the economy and funding mechanisms of non-state armed groups is essential if we are to fully understand their nature. Greater understanding is needed of how these groups operate and where their funding comes from if

we are to be in a position to facilitate humanitarian action in contexts of violence and to promote the respect for and fulfilment of human rights.

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