The economic relationship of armed groups with displaced populations

Josep Maria Royo Aspa

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.

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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# Privatising security and war

José L Gómez del Prado

State security functions normally carried out by national armies or police forces are being outsourced to private military and security companies in countries where conflict is displacing many people.

The development of private military and security companies (PMSC) has produced a new breed of security guards and private soldiers engaged in war zones and highly insecure areas under murky legal restraints. Their activities blur the borderlines between the public services of the state and the private commercial sector, creating a dangerous ‘grey zone’ with no transparency, no accountability and no regulation. Their activities, together with those of paramilitaries and mercenaries, are having an increasingly negative impact by causing forced displacements and human rights violations in general.

The PMSC industry fulfills a number of tasks which were traditionally carried out by national armed forces and the police. Governments, inter-governmental and non-governmental organisations, transnational corporations, humanitarian organisations, the media and international organisations are increasingly using their services. This army of private security guards constitutes the second largest force in Iraq after that of the US Army. In Afghanistan, the figures released in April 2010 by the US Department of Defense indicate that there are 107,292 hired civilians and 78,000 soldiers.

The use of private military and security companies in humanitarian operations has blurred the distinction between humanitarian non-profit organisations and private profit-making corporations. In conflict or post-conflict areas, such as Afghanistan and Iraq, where PMSCs increasingly provide security to humanitarian NGOs, it has become difficult for the local population as well as government officials to distinguish humanitarian assistance from intervening force.

Capitalising on this, one security company regularly put an advertisement in the *Journal of International Peace Operations* in relation to its activities in Afghanistan, Somalia, Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sudan and Iraq displaying a picture of an individual feeding a malnourished baby with the following message:

“Through selfless commitment and compassion for all people, Blackwater works to make a difference in the world and provides hope to those who still live in desperate times.”

**Afghanistan**

The population of Afghanistan is concerned by the lack of regulation and accountability of the private security companies in an environment of a failed state and post-conflict situation. In armed conflicts and post-conflict situations PMSC employees, contracted as civilians but armed as military personnel, operate with an ambiguous status which can transform