GENEVA DECLARATION

GLOBAL BURDEN of ARMED VIOLENCE

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Executive Summary

Armed violence imposes a tremendous human and economic burden on individuals, families, and communities. More than 740,000 people die each year as a result of the violence associated with armed conflicts and large- and small-scale criminality. The majority of these deaths—as many as 490,000—occur outside war zones. This figure shows that war is only one of many forms of armed violence, and in most regions not the most important one.

Armed violence is spread across age groups but affects certain groups and regions disproportionately. It is the fourth leading cause of death for persons between the ages of 15 and 44 worldwide. In more than 40 countries, it is one of the top ten causes of death. In Latin America and Africa, armed violence is the seventh and ninth leading cause of death, respectively (Peden, McGee, and Krug, 2002; WHO, 2008b).[1] Yet certain demographic groups (especially young men) and geographic regions are much more affected than others. The full dimensions of armed violence are often invisible unless they are closely monitored and analysed.

Beyond the chilling calculus of deaths, armed violence imposes huge human, social, and economic costs on states and societies. An untold number of people each year are injured—often suffering permanent disabilities—and many live with profound psychological as well as physical scars.[2] The damaging effects of armed violence include such things as physical and mental disabilities, brain and internal organ injuries, bruises and scalds, chronic pain syndrome, and a range of sexual and reproductive health problems (WHO, 2008a).

Armed violence also corrodes the social fabric of communities, sows fear and insecurity, destroys human and social capital, and undermines development investments and aid effectiveness. The death and destruction of war—which ebbs and flows from year to year and is concentrated in a few countries—reduces gross domestic product (GDP) growth by more than two per cent annually, with effects lingering many years after the fighting ends. The economic cost—in terms of lost productivity—of non-conflict armed violence (large- and small-scale criminal and political violence) is USD 95 billion and could reach up to USD 163 billion annually worldwide.

Undertaking research and gathering data on armed violence is difficult and often controversial. Violence has political implications (even when the violence itself may not be politicized) and is seldom random. Different groups often have an interest in understating or concealing the scope of lethal armed violence, making the collection of reliable data and impartial analysis particularly challenging.

The promotion of effective and practical measures to reduce armed violence nevertheless depends on the development of reliable information and analysis of its causes and consequences. The *Global Burden of Armed Violence* report draws on a wide variety of sources and datasets to provide

a comprehensive picture of the worldwide scope, scale, and effects of armed violence. It contributes to the generation of a broader evidence base on the links between armed violence and development and is part of the process of implementing the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development.

Dimensions of armed violence

For the purposes of this report, armed violence is

> the intentional use of illegitimate force (actual or threatened) with arms or explosives, against a person, group, community, or state, that undermines people-centred security and/or sustainable development.

This definition covers many acts, ranging from the large-scale violence associated with conflict and war to inter-communal and collective violence, organized criminal and economically motivated violence, political violence by different actors or groups competing for power, and inter-personal and gender-based violence.[3]

This report provides cross-regional and international comparisons of some of the most dramatic consequences of armed violence: direct conflict deaths, indirect conflict deaths, post-conflict mortality, and non-conflict deaths such as homicide, disappearances, kidnappings, and aid worker killings. These forms of armed violence are usually the best documented, and as leading indicators can provide a good basis for understanding the scope and distribution of armed violence around the world and for exploring other, less prominent dimensions of armed violence.

The report also explores in a separate chapter the less-visible forms of violence against women, and where possible considers the gendered dimension of the most prominent forms of armed violence. While the overwhelming majority of victims (and perpetrators) of armed violence are men, there are gender-specific forms of violence that warrant greater analysis and that are poorly documented.

Key findings of the report are that:

- more than 740,000 people have died directly or indirectly from armed violence—both conflict and criminal violence—every year in recent years.
- more than 540,000 of these deaths are violent, with the vast majority occurring in non-conflict settings.
- at least 200,000 people—and perhaps many thousands more—have died each year in conflict zones from non-violent causes (such as malnutrition, dysentery, or other easily preventable diseases) that resulted from the effects of war on populations.
- between 2004 and 2007, at least 208,300 violent deaths were recorded in armed conflicts—an average of 52,000 people killed per year. This is a conservative estimate including only *recorded* deaths: the real total may be much higher.
- the annual economic cost of armed violence in non-conflict settings, in terms of lost productivity due to violent deaths, is USD 95 billion and could reach as high as USD 163 billion—0.14 per cent of the annual global GDP.

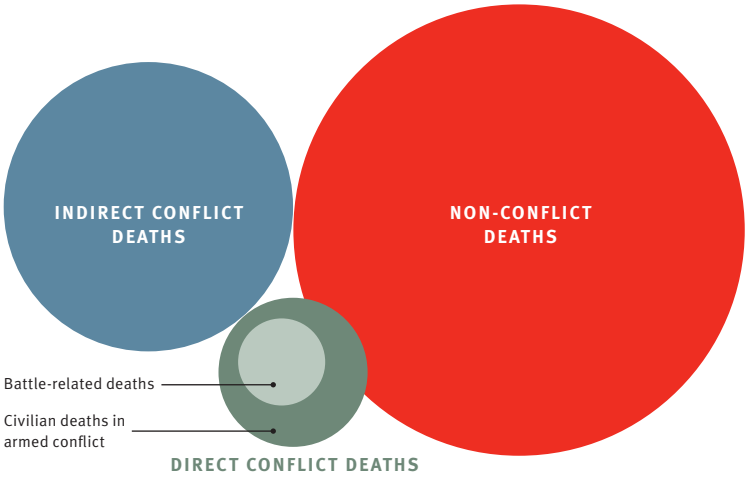
These figures, which are explained in detail in different chapters in this report, underscore that violent deaths in non-conflict settings and indirect deaths in armed conflicts comprise a much larger proportion of the global burden of armed violence than the number of people dying violently in contemporary wars.

Figure 1 captures graphically the distribution of the different categories of deaths within the global burden of armed violence. The small green circles illustrate the direct burden of *violent* death in conflict, including both civilians and combatants. It represents roughly seven per cent of the total global burden. The larger blue circle represents the *indirect deaths* from violent conflict—some 27 per cent of the total. And violent deaths in *non-conflict* settings—490,000 per year—represent two-thirds (66 per cent) of the total.[4] Beyond this lie the untold number of physically injured or psychologically harmed people who also bear part of the global burden of armed violence.

Traditionally, these various manifestations of armed violence have been treated separately, as if their underlying causes and dynamics were fundamentally different. Yet the changing nature of armed violence—including the rise of economically motivated wars, the blurring of the line between political and non-political violence, the growth of trans-national criminal gangs, the expansion of non-state armed groups, and persistently high levels of insecurity in most post-conflict situations—makes drawing clear distinctions between different forms of armed violence practically and analytically impossible.

Continuing to treat these different forms of armed violence separately also impedes the development of coherent and comprehensive violence prevention and reduction policies at the international and local level. Since one goal of the *Global Burden of Armed Violence* report is to promote a better understanding of the negative impact of armed violence on human, social, and economic development, it is critical to adopt the broader lens of *armed violence* rather than focusing on only one of its many manifestations.

Figure 1 Categories of deaths



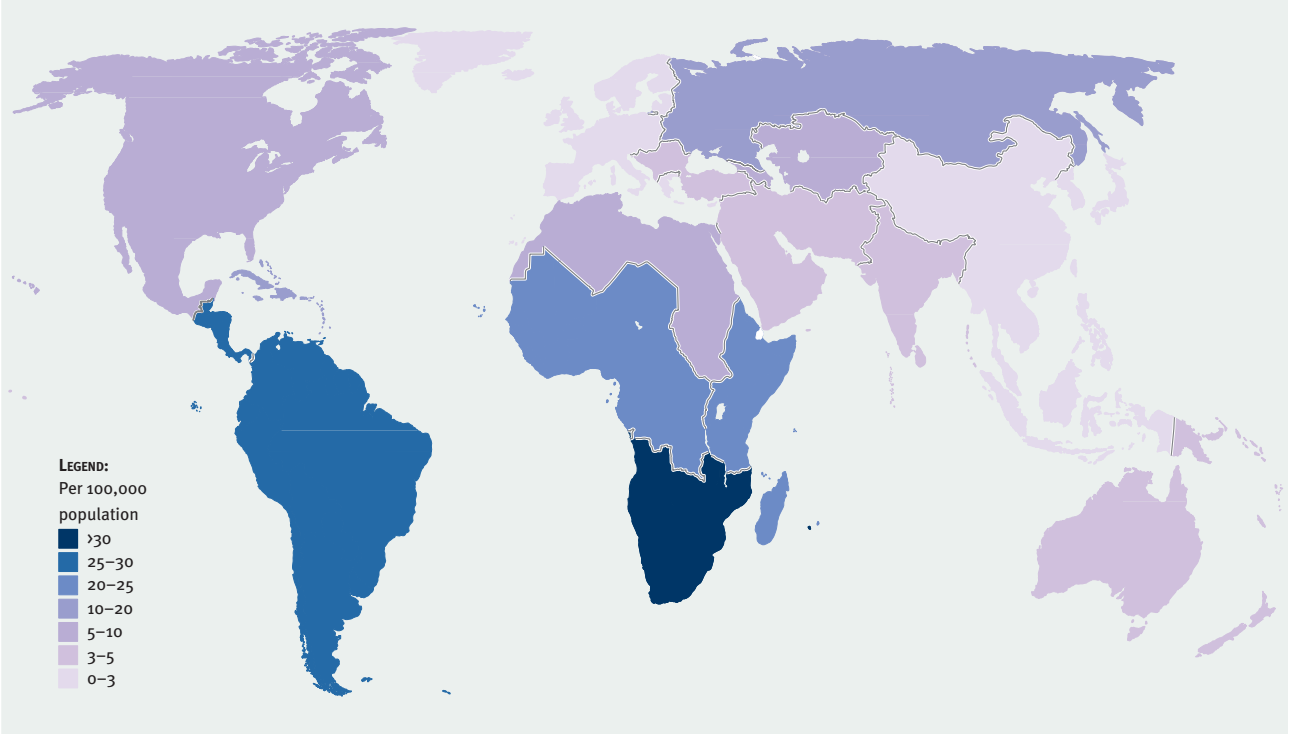
The report also presents the geographic distribution and concentration of different forms of armed violence. Conflict-related deaths, which appear to have increased since 2005, are highly concentrated: three-quarters of all reported direct conflict deaths took place in just ten countries. Ending the armed conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, and Sri Lanka in 2007 would have reduced the total number of direct conflict deaths by more than two-thirds. And within countries, armed violence is usually concentrated in certain municipalities or regions, while other areas may be relatively untouched.

Most international attention focuses on the numbers of recorded violent deaths in conflicts. While such data potentially helps decision-makers and analysts assess the intensity of a war and its evolution over time, these relatively low figures (in the tens of thousands) obscure the larger burden of mortality arising from indirect deaths in

armed conflicts. A *minimum* estimate is that an average of 200,000 people have died annually in recent years as indirect victims during and immediately following recent wars. Most of these people, including women, children, and the infirm, died of largely preventable illnesses and communicable diseases. Yet they are every bit as much victims of armed violence as those who die violently, and an adequate accounting of the victims of war has to include these indirect deaths. The scale of indirect deaths depends in part on the duration and intensity of the war, relative access to basic care and services, and the effectiveness of humanitarian relief efforts.

The ratio of people killed in war to those dying indirectly because of a conflict is explored in the chapter on indirect deaths (INDIRECT CONFLICT DEATHS). Studies show that between three and 15 times as many people die indirectly for every person who dies violently. In the most dramatic cases, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, up to 400,000 excess deaths *per year* have been estimated since 2002, many of which resulted indirectly from war. Consequently, this report's estimate of a global average of 200,000 indirect conflict deaths per year should be taken as a conservative figure.

Map 4.1 Homicide rates per 100,000 population, by subregion, 2004



Note: The boundaries and designations used on this map do not imply endorsement or acceptance.

Source: UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates

This report also finds that the aftermath of war does not necessarily bring a dramatic reduction in armed violence (ARMED VIOLENCE AFTER WAR). In certain circumstances, post-conflict societies have experienced rates of armed violence that exceed those of the conflicts that preceded them. They also exhibit a 20–25 per cent risk of relapsing into war. So long as such countries must contend with high youth bulges (exceeding 60 per cent of the total population), soaring rates of unemployment, and protracted displacement, the risks of renewed armed conflict remain high.

The majority of violent deaths occur in non-war situations, as the result of small or large-scale criminally or politically motivated armed violence (NON-CONFLICT ARMED VIOLENCE). More than 490,000 homicides occurred in 2004 alone. This represents twice the total number of people who die directly and indirectly in armed conflicts. As violent as wars can be, more people die in 'everyday'—and sometimes intense—armed violence around the world than in armed conflicts. Map 4.1 (presented in Chapter 4) illustrates the distribution of conflict and non-conflict armed violence, expressed as the number of homicides per 100,000 persons.

The geographic and demographic dimensions of non-conflict armed violence are significant. Sub-Saharan Africa and Central and South America are the most seriously affected by armed violence, experiencing homicide rates of more than 20 per 100,000 per year, compared to the global average of 7.6 per 100,000 population. Countries in Southern Africa, Central America, and South America—including Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Jamaica, South Africa, and Venezuela—report among the highest recorded rates of violent death in the world, ranging from 37 (Venezuela) to 59 (El Salvador) per 100,000 in 2005, as reported by official police statistics.[5]

Photo ▲ A policeman carries a child away during a gun battle in Tijuana, Mexico, 2008. © Jorge Duenes/Reuters

The weapon matters. As much as 60 per cent of all homicides are committed with firearms—ranging from a high of 77 per cent in Central America to a low of 19 per cent in Western Europe. And there is a gendered component to armed violence: although most victims are men, the killing of women varies by region: in 'high-violence' countries, women generally account for about 10 per cent of the victims, while they represent up to 30 per cent in 'low-violence' countries. This suggests that intimate partner violence does not necessarily rise and fall with other forms of armed violence, and may not decline as other forms of armed violence are reduced.

There are a host of other forms of armed violence that, while largely invisible, undermine the real and perceived security of people around the world. In some regions, the state (or state agents) commit or are implicated in acts of armed violence. At least 30 states register more than 50 reported extrajudicial killings per year. Forced disappearances occur 'frequently' in more than a dozen countries and 'occasionally' in 20 others. And kidnap-for-ransom is a growing phenomenon with approximately 1,425 cases reported in 2007 in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

Armed violence embodies literally thousands of inter-connected events that generate negative consequences across societies and at multiple levels. It can result in the destruction of human and physical capital and opportunity costs, and its economic consequences are often felt hardest by the poorest and most vulnerable. The economic costs of armed violence in both conflict and non-conflict settings, and the negative impact on development, are considerable. Using contingency valuation approaches, the global cost of insecurity generated by armed violence every year amounts to roughly USD 70 per person, or a global annual burden of USD 400 billion.

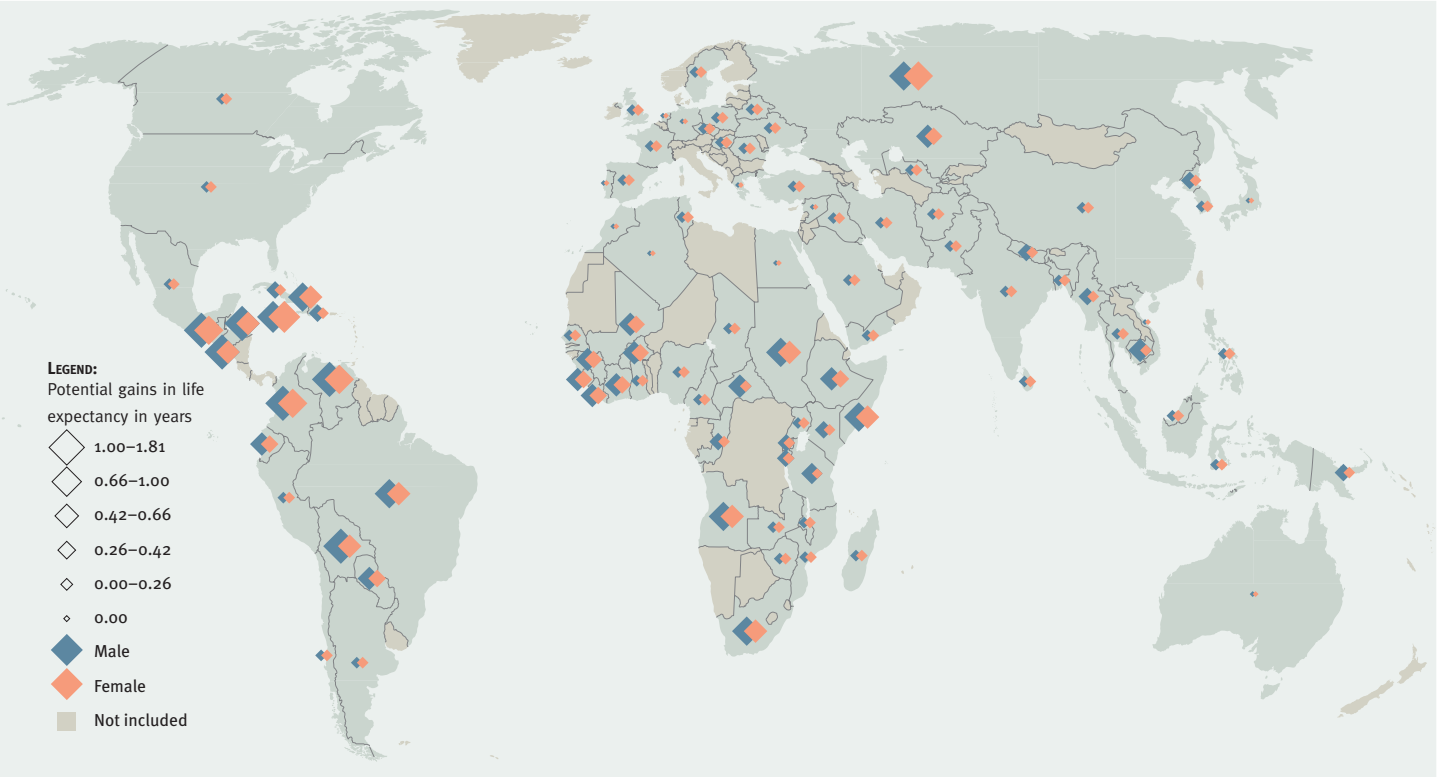
Photo ▼ People stand at the scene of a car bomb in the Campsara district of Baghdad, 2008. © Moises Saman/Panos Pictures

Preventing and reducing armed violence

Armed violence is preventable. Moreover, early interventions to save lives can significantly reduce the overall burden of armed violence. Map 5.1 (presented in Chapter 5) reveals the significant gains in life expectancy that could be realized—more than one year for men in many Central and South American countries. Although this report does not focus on concrete strategies to reduce armed violence, it points towards a number of entry-points for promoting armed violence prevention and reduction (WHO, 2008a). Grounded in up-to-date data and research, it also documents how a failure to address armed violence can impede development and economic growth. At a minimum, the report should help international aid donors and practitioners, government officials, and civil society actors recognize that promoting safety and security is central to human, social, and economic development.

At a practical level, it is critical that relevant national and international agencies enhance their regular and routine monitoring of armed violence trends. This entails making serious investments in mechanisms to measure real and perceived risks and impacts of armed violence, and drawing on social science and public health methods to quantify the effectiveness of armed violence prevention and reduction programmes. Reinforcing international, national, and local data collection and surveillance is an essential first step to planning effective interventions,

Map 5.1 Potential gains in life expectancy in years in the absence of non-conflict armed violence, by country, 2004



Source: CERAC

identifying priorities, evaluating activities, and saving lives.

Investing in armed violence prevention and reduction will also mean supporting and reinforcing the capacity of public and private actors to design, execute, and monitor interventions. It requires developing a sophisticated understanding of local conditions and concerns through surveys and other participatory research methods. It demands recognizing that armed violence has multiple and often interacting causes, and does not ebb and flow in a simple linear fashion. Finally, it requires protecting the safety and security of humanitarian and development personnel—many of whom are killed in the line of duty. As this report observes, the violent death rate for aid workers is roughly 60 per 100,000, a disturbing reminder of the acute risks facing humanitarian workers around the world.

This *Global Burden of Armed Violence* report is only the first step towards the implementation of an international armed violence prevention and reduction agenda. This report highlights the importance of developing and enhancing the evidence base—identifying who is vulnerable, from what forms of armed violence, committed by whom,

and under what circumstances—as a critical step towards achieving measurable reductions in the global burden of armed violence and tangible improvements in human security worldwide.

Endnotes

1 The figures are from the WHO Global Burden of Death database and are calculated by adding the categories of inter-personal violence and deaths from war injuries. Armed violence is overall the 18th leading cause of death worldwide.

2 According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately ten times more people are injured than killed by violence (WHO, 2008a, p. 4).

3 This definition does *not* include self-directed violence (suicide). The WHO estimates that self-directed violence accounts for even more deaths than conflict or homicidal violence (WHO, 2008a, p. 1). Its estimate of 1.6 million deaths from violence includes suicide (54 per cent of the total), and is thus broadly consistent with the figures presented here. The definition also is meant to focus on the physical use of violence, and to exclude such concepts as structural, cultural, and psychological violence.

4 Overlap between the red and green circles represents the possibility of double-counting some conflict deaths in homicide statistics (NON-CONFLICT ARMED VIOLENCE).

5 Figures are from national police sources. See: http://www.derechos.org.ve/publicaciones/infanual/2005_06/pdf/seguridadciudadana.pdf (Venezuela); http://www.fgr.gob.sv/estadisticas/homicidios2005.pdf (El Salvador); www.saps.gov.za/statistics/reports/crimestats/2007/_pdf/category/murder.pdf (South Africa); http://www.undp.org.gt/data/publicacion/Informe%20Estad%C3%ADstico%20de%20la%20Violencia%20en%20Guatemala%20final.pdf (Guatemala); CNP (n.d.).