

An Explosion of Complex Humanitarian Emergencies

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Violent civil conflicts are engulfing many developing and former communist countries, putting 100 million people at risk of hunger. This proliferation of "complex humanitarian emergencies" stands in sharp contrast to the high hopes for a more peaceful and food-secure world expressed by many analysts as the Cold War came to a close.

The character of emergencies is changing rapidly. Today, war and oppression, not mere shortages of food, are the principal, acute threats to large populations. While grain from Asia, North America or Europe can be delivered readily to ports anywhere in the world, more people are forcibly uprooted than at any time in the past,

as they flee in search of safe haven.

Complex emergencies combine internal conflicts with large-scale displacements of people, mass famine, and fragile or failing economic, political and social institutions. These crises are slaughtering people and devastating their environment, from shattered urban neighborhoods in Afghanistan to refugee camps in Zaire, as well as in newly independent republics of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslav Federation.

Table 1, "Complex Humanitarian Emergencies, 1995" shows the degree of vulnerability and key political factors in 21 developing countries currently experiencing or emerging from long-term civil conflict.

Complex emergencies disrupt

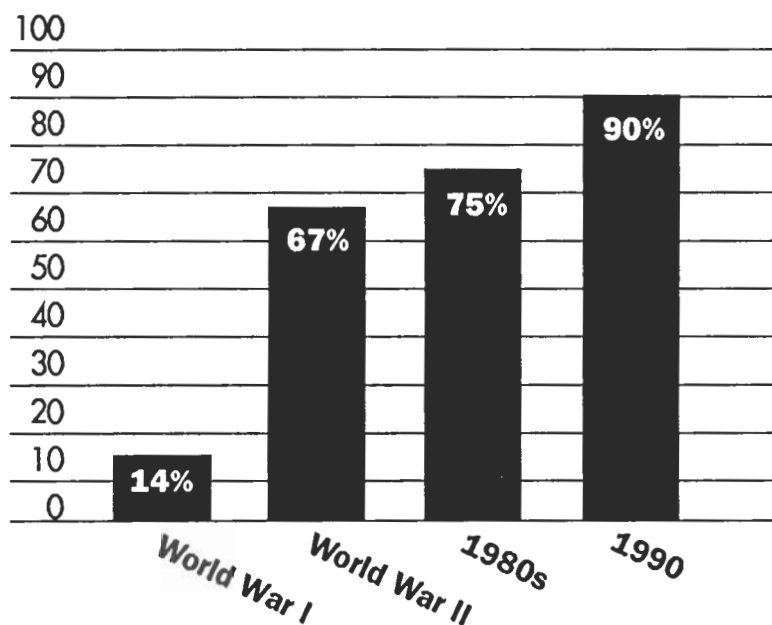
economies, devastate physical and social infrastructure, and often lead to banditry and other breakdowns in social order. Governments sometimes collapse, or rulers coerce and attack civilians. Ensuring food security—access at all times by all people to adequate food for an active and healthy life—becomes extremely difficult. Conflict complicates the delivery of emergency relief supplies, and local food output declines.

In 1994, 164 armed conflicts raged around the world. Increasingly, this violence occurs not between nation-states, but within them. Twenty-two of these conflicts caused over 1,000 casualties and 82 others caused 100 to 1,000. Up to 80 percent of the casualties are civilians, mainly women and children, often deliberately targeted by the warring parties. Table 2, "Civilian Deaths", shows that civilian deaths in conflict average from an estimated 14 percent in WWII to an estimated 75 percent in the 1980s.

All too typical is the case of Amer Kuay, a young southern Sudanese woman, as she reported to Oxfam:

We were attacked by cattle raiders working for the government. They took all of our cattle. They burned our houses. They took all our belongings...We were left with no tools and hardly any seed, so we harvested very little. By February we started to starve. There were still attacks....So we decided to cross the Nile to . . . where it was safer. We had to wait in the marshes for some time to get a fishing boat to take us across. We had no money to pay, so I had to give my daughter's clothes to the fisherman. Some of the people in our group were dying of hunger even as we started to walk from our village. Young children and old people died. I lost my youngest girl. She was just two years old.

Table 2
Civilian Deaths
(as percentage of all deaths in 20th-century wars)



Sources: Casualties of Conflict, by Christer Ahlström, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Sweden, 1991; World Military and Social Expenditures 1991, by Ruth Leger Sivard, World Priorities Inc., Washington, D.C. 1991.

Table 1
Complex Humanitarian Emergencies, 1995

Country	Population at Risk ¹	Political Environment
Afghanistan	4.2 million Includes over 3.2 million refugees, primarily in Iran and Pakistan	Escalated fighting 1994, Little government control 1994; Land mines
Algeria	N.A.	Insurgency; Government consent to relief unlikely
Angola	3.7 million Includes 300,000 refugees in Congo, Zambia and Zaire	Civil War; Intensified hostilities; Limited government ability to support relief operations; Corruption in security forces; Land mines
Armenia	300,000 Includes 250,000 refugees in Azerbaijan and Russia	Government support for relief limited to ethnic Armenians
Azerbaijan	1 million Includes 300,000 refugees in Armenia and Russia	Limited government control in west; Resistance to relief for Armenians
Burma (Myanmar)	N.A. Estimated 200,000 refugees in Bangladesh and Thailand	Civil War
Burundi	900,000 Includes 300,000 refugees in Rwanda, Tanzania and Zaire	Unstable; Ethnic violence
Cambodia	300,000	Fractional strife; Land mine; Government supports relief Theft; corruption
Ethiopia	4.3 million Includes 200,000 refugees, primarily in Sudan	Anti-government activities in eastern southern; western Ethiopia and Islamic Jihad anti-government activities in Eritrea not a threat to regimes Military could provide minimal support to relief operations Land mines
Eritrea	1.6 million Includes 400,000 refugees in Sudan	
Haiti	1.3 million	Minimal government capability to support relief operations
Iraq	1.3 million Includes 8,000 refugees in Iran	Government can deliver support through country Government hinders relief to Kurds and Shi'ites; Land mines
Liberia	2.1 million Includes 800,000 refugees, primarily in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Guinea	Civil War
Mozambique	1 million Includes 200,000 refugees, primarily in Malawi, South Africa and Zimbabwe	Fragile security; Bandits; Returning refugees; Demobilized military Devastated economy; Government welcomes aid; Land mines
Rwanda	4 million Includes 2 million refugees, primarily in Burundi, Tanzania and Zaire	Ethnic warfare
Sierra Leone	1.5 million Includes over 300,000 refugees in Guinea and Liberia	Collapsed state; Insurgents along Liberian border
Somalia	1.1 million Includes over 200,000 refugees, primarily in Ethiopia and Zaire	No local authority can assist relief; Opposition from clans; bandits; religious radicals; Land mines
Sri Lanka	700,000 Includes 100,000 refugees in India	Ongoing insurgency Government can provide limited support for relief operations
Sudan	3 million Includes 400,000 refugees, primarily in Ethiopia, Uganda and Zaire	Ongoing insurgency; All sides use relief as a weapon; Government opposes relief to south and to non-Muslims in north; Land mines
Tajikistan	1 million Includes 300,000 refugees, primarily in Kazakhstan, Russia and Uzbekistan	Government cannot assist relief in south; Armed opposition
Zaire	600,000 Includes 75,000 refugees, primarily in Burundi, Tanzania and Zambia	Government cannot assist relief; Little or no civil authority Crime and extortion

¹The term "population at risk" indicates those people who are in need of or dependent on international aid to avoid large-scale malnutrition and deaths, including refugees, internally displaced persons and others in need.

Source: U.S. Mission to the United Nations.



In Afghanistan, two land-mine victims learn to walk with artificial limbs. Photo: UNICEF

Table 3
Land-mines:Hidden Killers



Total Land -mines
 110 million in 64 countries

Dollar cost of land-mines
 to buy one:\$3-\$10
 To remove one: \$300-\$1,000

Human Cost of land-mines
 800 deaths a month, mostly innocent civilians,
 with thousands more maimed for life.

Most heavily mined countries

Country	No. of land-mines per square mile	Estimated total no. of land-mines
Bosnia and Herzegovina	152	3,000,000
Cambodia	143	10,000,000
Croatia	137	3,000,000
Egypt	60	23,000,000
Iraq	59	10,000,000
Afghanistan	40	10,000,000
Angola	31	15,000,000
Iran	25	16,000,000
Rwanda	25	250,000

Source: United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs.

Note: There is too little information about some countries, such as Viet Nam, to include them in the estimates.

The Roots of Crises

Civil strife stems from conflicts based on race, religion and ethnicity; competition over resources such as land, water and other assets and political power; ideological disputes, e.g., religious fundamentalism vs. political, social and economic modernization. Hunger and poverty often cause or contribute to the flare-up of violence.

Some analysts stress the environmental context of complex emergencies. Global fish harvests are decreasing. Topsoils are eroding at ever higher rates and large-scale population movements tax ecosystems beyond carrying capacity. In resource-poor areas, population growth rates are high and problems of food insecurity, poverty and environmental degradation are severe. These areas are prone to conflict, and conflict in turn is a cause of further environmental, social and economic stress. Hunger (such as

food shortages in northern Ethiopia) leads to mass refugee flight, which causes yet more environmental damage. Other analysts emphasize the Cold War and its aftermath as causes of conflict. The Cold War contributed to civil strife in a number of countries, some of which are now at peace (for example, El Salvador). Others, such as Somalia, are still coping with a legacy of conflict and arms. Superpower intervention suppressed factional and separatist conflicts in some countries such as Yugoslavia. The end of the Cold War has let those old demons loose.

Most complex emergencies result from some combination of these social, environmental and political factors.

The Impact of Conflict:

Violent conflict undermines economies. It kills and maims people, and forces them to flee from their

communities. It destroys productive assets, and interrupts or demolishes marketing and transportation networks. In a study of 16 developing countries at war between 1970 and 1990, Frances Stewart, of Oxford University, found that per capita incomes fell in every case. The worst performances were in Mozambique, Liberia, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Guatemala and Uganda, all of which experienced civil wars. All 16 countries experienced heavy destruction of productive and social infrastructure. For example, Mozambique's civil war ruined transportation and energy systems, including 44 percent of the rail fleet, and 40 percent of the primary schools.

These conflicts also had enormous human costs. Civilian deaths accounted for over two-thirds of war-related deaths in 14 of the countries. Families disintegrated as adults were killed or migrated. Rape, pillage and witnessing the death of family members caused psychological shocks. Even when a civil war ends, land mines (see Table 3) remain a major threat in many countries. Also, peace means having to cooperate with the former enemy, whereas international war tends to unite a population against a common external foe.

All these factors make the restoration of normal life—including secure communities and livelihoods, and food security—an enormous burden on poor societies. □

Hansch is a Senior Program Officer for the Refugee Policy Group. This article was excerpted and slightly adapted from, "Hunger 1996 Countries in Crisis", Sixth Annual Report on the State of World Hunger, Bread for the World Institute, Ch. 1, pp. 8-12, October, 1995. Copies of the report may be obtained by writing Bread for the World Institute, 1100 Wayne Ave, Silver Spring, MD 20910; telephone 301-608-2400; fax:301-608-2401; e-mail: bread@igc.apc.org.