

Civil wars

The global menace of local strife

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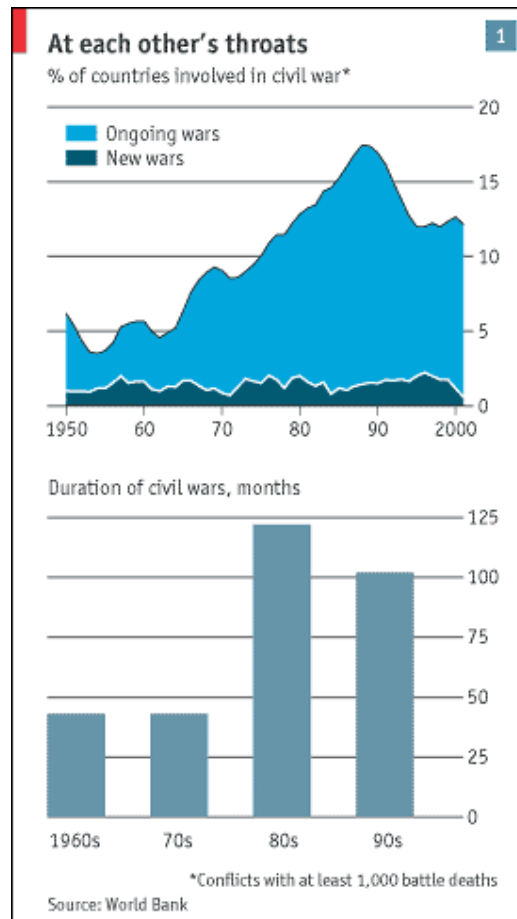
Almost all wars are now civil wars. Many of the causes are economic

IN A confetti of medicines, pens and second-hand shirts, armed looters rage through Bunia's main market-place. Startled, the local dogs stop feeding on the rotting human corpses scattered among the empty fruit and vegetable stalls. The mob, which is also looking for food, finds none, and moves on. The pack resumes feeding in quick, delicate bites.

Once a prosperous gold town, ringed by fertile green hills, Bunia, in eastern Congo, was ransacked and deserted last week. Where one gold-trader had his shop, only a gold-paint picture of a pair of scales remains. Every other stall has been gutted, too; boy warriors with AK-47s clamber in and out of jagged holes in once smoothly plastered walls.

The cyclone struck after the Ugandan army, a plunderous occupying force, withdrew. The two largest local tribes, the Hema and the Lendus, then began to fight for control. First, Lendu militiamen poured into town, killing Hemas and burning their houses. Days later, Hema warriors counter-attacked and chased the Lendus away. No one can say how many died, but the fighting seems to have put at least 250,000 people to flight.

The death toll since Congo's war began in 1998 is higher, at between 3.1m and 4.7m, than in any other ongoing war. But otherwise the conflict is typical of today's wars. The combatants are mostly irregular militias, their victims mostly unarmed, and the fighting has gone on for nearly five years. A century ago most conflicts were between nations, and 90% of casualties were soldiers; today almost all wars are civil, and 90% of the victims are civilians.



Civil wars are much more common than they were 40 years ago (see chart). This is mainly because, back then, most of the countries currently fighting were colonies, so powerful outside forces imposed stability. Counting only wars with more than 1,000 violent deaths, about one country in eight is embroiled in one. This proportion peaked around 1990, after the superpowers stopped bankrolling rebels who attacked each other's allies. But post-cold-war peacemaking seems to have fizzled, and civil wars are getting longer. An average conflict lasts eight years, more than twice the norm before 1980.

Why is this happening? Some blame tribalism: a pleasingly simple thesis that both seems to fit the facts, and gives outsiders an excuse for indifference and inaction. But the reality is more complex. Tribes often quarrel, but ethnic passions on their own are rarely enough to stoke a full-blown war. The Hema and the Lendus, for example, have been trying to wipe each other out only since Uganda started arming rival tribal militias in 1999, in the hope of controlling the mineral-rich region around Bunia. If tribalism is the problem, ethnically homogenous countries should be peaceful—but look at Somalia.

Or at Sudan, whose civil war is often seen as a simple conflict between Arab Muslims and black non-Muslims. The view from the battlefield is cloudier, however. Last year, your correspondent met David Matwok, a young militiaman in the pay of Sudan's Arab government, who was lying on his back on the savannah with both legs broken by bullets. Mr Matwok was a member of the Nuer tribe; so were the rebels who had shot him, during a pitched battle. The battlefield had

seen Nuer fight Nuer before: among the still-bleeding corpses were scattered human vertebrae and clean-picked skulls, like golf balls on a vast green fairway. Every bone had once belonged to a Nuer.

And why were they fighting? According to the rebel commander, "Even where you are sitting, there is oil." Money trumps kinship. Mr Matwok begged for water, but his fellow tribesmen told him they hoped wild animals would eat him.

All wars are different, of course. Each arises from a unique combination of causes, and each requires a different sort of solution. Nonetheless, by looking at what the most conflict-prone places have in common, it is possible to identify likely risk factors. This, in turn, might help to prevent wars in the future.

What causes wars?

A new study by Paul Collier of the World Bank and others, which examines the world's civil wars since 1960, concludes that although tribalism is often a factor, it is rarely the main one. Surprisingly, the authors found that societies composed of several different ethnic and religious groups were actually less likely to experience civil war than homogenous societies.

However, in multi-ethnic societies where one group forms an absolute majority, the risk of war is 50% higher than in societies where this is not the case. This is perhaps because minorities fear that even if the country is democratic, they will be permanently excluded from power.

The most striking common factor among war-prone countries is their poverty. Rich countries almost never suffer civil war, and middle-income countries rarely. But the poorest one-sixth of humanity endures four-fifths of the world's civil wars.

The best predictors of conflict are low average incomes, low growth, and a high dependence on exports of primary products such as oil or diamonds. The World Bank found that when income per person doubles, the risk of civil war halves, and that for each percentage point by which the growth rate rises, the risk of conflict falls by a point. An otherwise typical country whose exports of primary commodities account for 10% of GDP has an 11% chance of being at war. At 30% of GDP, the risk peaks at about one in three.

Why are poor, stagnant countries so vulnerable? Partly because it is easy to give a poor man a cause. But also, almost certainly, because poverty and low or negative growth are often symptoms of corrupt, incompetent government, which can provoke rebellion. They are also common in immature societies, whose people have not yet figured out how to live together.

Natural resources tend to aggravate these problems. When a state has oil, its leaders can grow rich without bothering to nurture other kinds of economic activity. Corrupt leaders often cement their support base by sharing the loot with their own ethnic group, which tends to anger all the other groups.

Most countries have what Mr Collier calls "ethnic romantics who dream of creating an ethnically 'pure' political entity". If oil is found beneath their home region, their calls for secession suddenly start to sound attractive to those who live there, and abhorrent to everyone else. Oil was one reason why Biafra tried to secede from Nigeria, and why the Nigerian government fought so hard to prevent it.

Secessionist leaders in Aceh, an oil-endowed part of Indonesia, told potential supporters that secession would make them as rich as the people of Brunei. This ten-fold exaggeration raised expectations that were impossible to meet, which

may explain why the rebels went back to war despite a peace deal in December promising Aceh autonomy and 70% of the cash from its oil and gas.

Guns cost money

Laurent Kabila, the rebel who overthrew the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, once boasted that all he needed to mount a revolution was \$10,000 and a satellite telephone. He was exaggerating. Recruiting soldiers in Congo (which was then called Zaire) is cheap, because the country is so poor, but it is not that cheap. Guns have grown less costly since old Soviet armouries emptied on to the black market, but they are not free. In fact, Kabila had a budget in the millions, partly because he enjoyed the backing of a foreign power, Rwanda, and partly because he used his satphone to sell mineral rights he did not yet control to unscrupulous foreign firms.

Rebellions almost always start for political reasons. But since sustaining even the crudest guerrilla war requires cash, rebel leaders have to find ways of raising the stuff. Many, including most in Africa, receive money from neighbouring governments hostile to the one they are fighting. Some rebel groups are supported by an ethnic diaspora whose members, since they live abroad, do not have to endure the consequences of the wars they help fund.

In countries with abundant natural resources, however, rebels have less need to beg. Alluvial diamonds, the sort that can be plucked from riverbeds without sophisticated mining equipment, have financed rebel groups in Angola and Sierra Leone. Illegal logging, another low-tech business, fuels fighting in Liberia and Cambodia. In Congo, half a dozen national armies and countless rebel groups have fought over some of the world's richest deposits of gold, cobalt, diamonds and coltan.



Drug money buys Colombia's rebels even bigger guns

In countries with high tariffs, rebels can make money by seizing a stretch of border and charging smugglers less than the government would. Afghan fighters, for example, have prospered from the protectionism of Afghanistan's neighbours. Rebel areas are also ideal for growing drugs. An estimated 95% of the world's opium comes from war-torn nations, and Colombia's rebels thrive on coca.

Rebels rarely pump oil. It requires capital, skills and technology, and the firms that have these things prefer to deal with legitimate governments. But rebels can still profit from oil, by extorting money from oil firms. One technique, popular in Colombia and Nigeria, is to kidnap their employees and demand ransoms. Another is to threaten to blow up pipelines. Firms usually pay up. During the 1990s, European companies handed over an estimated \$1.2 billion to rebel extortionists, a sum far greater than official European aid to the governments of the countries in question. Ransom insurance, now available, has the effect of raising ransom demands, and so increases the profits to be made from violence.

From comrades-in-arms to Cosa Nostra

Rebellions rarely begin as criminal business ventures, but they often mutate into them. Their leaders can grow fabulously rich. By one estimate, Jonas Savimbi, the late Angolan guerrilla chief, amassed \$4 billion from selling diamonds, ivory and anything else his men could steal. Besides paying for bullets, such profits give rebel commanders a powerful incentive to keep fighting. Says Mr Collier: "Asking a rebel leader to accept peace may be a little like asking a champion swimmer to empty the pool." Savimbi only laid down his weapons for good when he was shot dead.

War creates a vicious circle. When rebel groups start to make money, they attract greedy leaders. At the same time, war makes it harder for peaceful people to earn a living. No one wants to build factories in war zones. People with portable skills flee, and those with money stash it offshore. Peasants find it hard to farm when rebels keep plundering their villages.

Poverty fosters war, and war impoverishes. In Congo, a combination of violence and official neglect has all but destroyed the country's roads, telephones and organs of government. Whole regions are cut off from the centre. Rubaruba Zabuloni, for example, has been fighting for nearly 40 years. A dwarfish 69-year-old with a crew-cut and a black fur hat, he leads a 7,000-man militia in the hills above Lake Tanganyika. In the 1960s, he fought with Che Guevara; in later years, the Soviet Union continued to send arms. He is unaware of the demise of either.

The big foreign armies involved in Congo's war have more or less made peace, and a new central government is gradually forming. But dozens of smaller, local conflicts continue to blaze. They are fought with low-tech weapons: machetes, bows and a few guns. An endless cycle of atrocities creates an endless cycle of grudges, which fuel more micro-wars. "When we kill a Rwandan," said Mr Zabuloni's personal witchdoctor, "we fry up his penis and eat it. It makes you fearless. Would you like to try it?"

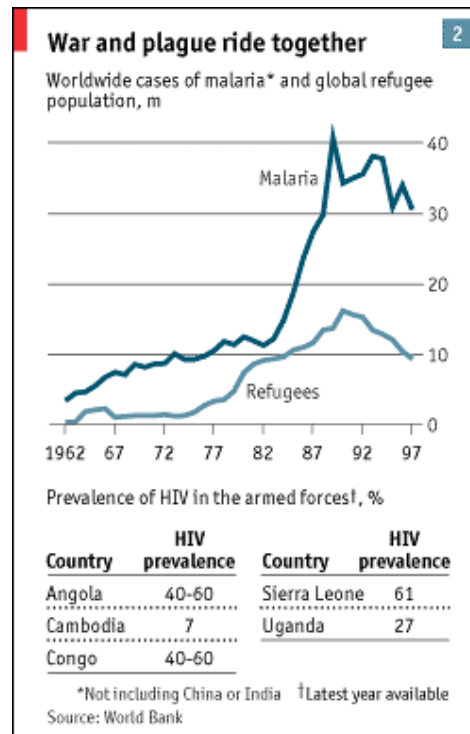
Being a rebel footsoldier is no way to make a fortune, but it may be better than the alternative, particularly if the alternative is to be a rebel footsoldier's victim. One of the gun-waving boys in Bunia put it pithily. Asked why he chose to take up arms, Singoma Mapisa fiddled shyly with his new Seiko watch—a happy acquisition on a Congolese soldier's pay of nothing—and replied: "The Lendus murdered my parents. How else could I survive?" He was later seen pilfering two Mickey Mouse satchels, which could prove useful if he ever goes to school.

A typical civil war leaves a country 15% poorer than it would otherwise have been, and with perhaps 30% more people living in absolute poverty. The damage persists long afterwards. Skills and capital continue to flee, because people do not trust the peace: half of newly peaceful countries revert to war within a decade.

Infant mortality also remains high, not least because war nurtures disease. Refugees carry malaria from areas where the population is immune to a particular strain to areas where it is not. One study found that for each 1,000 refugees who flee from one tropical country to another, the host country suffers an extra 1,406 cases of malaria.

Rampaging armies are also efficient vectors for AIDS. Soldiers are more likely than civilians to be infected, and too often inclined to spread the virus forcibly. One study found that halving military manpower correlates with a one-quarter reduction in HIV among low-risk adults. Some researchers even blame war for the first spread of the AIDS pandemic, conjecturing that a small localised infection was carried far and wide through mass rape during the Ugandan civil war of the 1970s.

Besides scattering refugees and spreading disease, civil wars often disrupt trade across whole regions. Congo's war blocked the river along which the Central African Republic's trade used to flow, aggravating the CAR's economic malaise and perhaps contributing to a recent succession of coup attempts by unpaid soldiers. In all, having a neighbour at war reduces economic growth by about 0.5% each year.



Give peace a chance

Since countries prone to civil war are poor, stagnant places, anything that promotes growth ought to help. Governments in poor countries should strive to keep corruption, inflation and trade barriers low, while attempting to build better health, education and legal systems.

To guard against future insurgency, governments of newly peaceful countries often keep lavishing cash on the army. Military spending averages 4.5% of GDP in the first decade of peace, down from 5% during the war, but up from 2.8% before it. Such spending actually increases the risk of another war, because it wastes resources that could improve people's lives, and signals to rebels and people alike that the government is preparing for another war.

Spending on health and education, by contrast, seems to provide an immediate boost to the economy of a newly peaceful nation. This is surprising. The benefits of social spending usually take years to show up in the growth figures. But in countries emerging from war, a new school or clinic shows that the government is serious about peace, which buoys confidence and may encourage private investment.

Once war gathers pace, the vicious circle is hard to break. Intervention by proper armies with orders to shoot to kill can work: British troops helped save Sierra Leone, and the French legionnaires in Côte d'Ivoire have reduced the carnage there. The UN, whose peacekeepers are often ill-prepared for actual fighting, has a less impressive record. In Bunia last week, 700 Uruguayan peacekeepers were

unable to prevent a massacre outside their barracks because their mandate was too feeble. The UN managed to broker a ceasefire on May 16th, but the only reason the fighting has stopped in Bunia is that one side has won. Out in the hills, the killing continues