

Violent conflict, within states as well as between states, remains a major threat to human security. The post-Cold War world has seen an upsurge in armed conflicts within states, conflicts which engulf entire societies, pitching neighbour against neighbour. The whole social fabric of life is destroyed; homes, schools and communities are on the front line. Distinctions between combatant and non-combatant disappear. In such total war, terror against civilians is deliberate. The great majority of casualties are civilian and well over half of those are children, deliberate victims of armed conflict. In the last decade, millions of children have been killed and disabled in such conflicts, tens of millions displaced, hundreds of thousands conscripted as combatants (7).

The predominance of intra-state conflicts should not obscure the fact that international conflicts also impact heavily on children. The war against Iraq and the subsequent imposition of economic sanctions on that country, have had a disastrous effect on child morbidity and mortality in Iraq. The recent cross-border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea caused significant civilian casualties. The conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which now involves the armed forces of several African states, is fought in Congolese communities. Children are both victims and combatants.

Thus *de facto*, a concern with child rights and protection must be at the centre of any international deliberations on security and conflict. Violent social change and turbulence are likely to continue - and perhaps increase - in many parts of the world as old political orders dissolve, as the gap between the rich elites and the most disadvantaged grows and as competition for scarce resources grows. Attention to child protection is essential, given the increasing frequency of armed conflicts, their disproportionate impact on children and by the large numbers of children affected.

Violence breeds violence: research confirms a strong correlation between the early childhood experience of violence and consequent violent and other antisocial behaviour later in life. The violence, threats, grief and anxiety experienced by children during armed conflict have a long-term effect on their mental health, quality of life and adult comportment. Violence to children is inextricably linked to violence by children and to manifestations of adult violence. One of the most effective ways of preventing violence in society is to reduce violence against children and to raise children who reject violence as a method of problem-solving.

A final, but no less important rationale for placing children in armed conflict high on the foreign policy agenda and in deliberations on international security, is an ethical one. In every society, there exist fundamental norms for the care and protection of children. The involvement of children in armed conflict represents an attack on these most basic ethical foundations of society. Protection of children and their rights in the face of armed conflict is one of the strongest ways of asserting a commitment to human security and of re-establishing respect for human rights within states and in international relations.

At the root of the violence committed against children in civil conflict is the