

For all the children deliberately massacred or caught in crossfire or maimed by anti-personnel land mines, many more have been deprived of their physical, mental and emotional needs in the context of societies long at war. Millions have lost their homes and their parents, not to mention years of education and socialization. Some have been permanently traumatized by the events they have witnessed and experienced. In today's internecine conflicts, children are specifically targeted in strategies to eliminate the next generation of potential adversaries. To the same end, children, and especially girls, have been made the targets of sexual abuse and gender-based violence on a large scale. Most cynically, children have been compelled to become instruments of war, recruited or kidnapped to become child soldiers, forced to give violent expression to the hatreds of adults. In all, an estimated two million children have been killed in situations of armed conflict since 1987, while three times that number have been seriously injured or permanently disabled. Countless more have been psychologically scarred and socially dislocated.

This brutal reality has been exacerbated by a qualitative change in the nature and scope of conflicts in recent times. Today's conflicts are primarily internal, often fought by multiple, semi-autonomous armed groups within existing state boundaries. The international rules of warfare, which have governed inter-state wars fought by regular armies, are routinely ignored in these situations of "total war." Often protracted, such conflicts can expose successive generations of children to horrendous violence.

Against a backdrop of increasingly accessible and destructive conventional weapons and ordnance, many of these conflicts pit compatriot against compatriot, neighbor against neighbor. They are often characterized by the demonisation of the "enemy community" and the orchestration of vicious hate campaigns. In the intense and intimate setting of today's internecine warfare, the village has become the battlefield and civilian populations the primary target. In World War I, civilians counted for some 5 percent of casualties. In World War II that figure rose to 48 percent. Today up to 90 percent of conflict casualties around the world are civilians. A large and increasing number of these are children.

At the heart of this growing phenomenon of mass violence and social disintegration is a crisis of values. Perhaps the most fundamental loss a society can suffer is the collapse of its own value system. Many societies exposed to protracted conflicts have seen their community values radically undermined if not shattered altogether. This has given rise to an "ethical vacuum", a setting in which international standards are ignored with impunity and where local value systems have lost their sway.

The international community has an obligation to be concerned about the protection of all non-combatants caught in the midst of violent conflicts. Yet there is an urgent need to focus special attention on the plight of children. They are the ones least responsible for the conflicts, yet most vulnerable to their excesses. Children, as the most innocent and powerless victims of war, require special protection.

Children represent the future of human civilization and the future of every society. To permit them to be used as pawns in warfare, whether as targets or perpetrators, is to cast a shadow on the future. From generation to