

physical violence in situations outside of formal armed conflicts as well. Extraordinarily high levels of violence are also affecting cities — prominent hubs of power that can become flashpoints of large-scale violence between groups.¹³ As a result, human security is increasingly at risk in urban environments.

Understanding violence and conflict in urban areas

The loss of territorial control by the state is a defining feature of civil wars, often due to the existence of rebel armies, insurgents or paramilitaries which physically exert control over part of the country, and are engaged in open armed conflict with state forces. Such violence may be fuelled by groups with competing political, ideological or economic ambitions, in societies deeply divided by ethnic or religious differences, or with high levels of social inequality. As Figure 1.3 illustrates, **open armed conflict** in urban areas, with its profoundly negative human security impacts, is generally carried out by highly organized groups, and characterized by a high level of intensity (as measured by human casualties).

The horrific acts of violence wrought by these actors — atrocities, war crimes, genocide, use of landmines and improvised explosives, recruitment of child soldiers,

gender-based violence and small arms deaths — are felt in places such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where 3.3 million people are estimated to have died since 1998, or the Darfur region of Sudan, where 146,000 have perished in battle-related deaths since 2003.¹⁴ But the effects of open armed conflict are also felt in urban areas. The pillaging of Kindu in eastern DRC in 2001 and the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995 are two examples.¹⁵

The failure of the state to control urban spaces within its territory can lead to **endemic community violence**, with devastating impacts on civilians. When the state cannot provide for the needs of its citizens, the security void is increasingly filled by private actors — vigilante groups, gangs, and militia groups that seek to exert control over defined urban spaces. Areas of cities in Afghanistan, Colombia, the DRC, Jamaica, Pakistan, Somalia and South Africa have, at some point, fallen under the control of gangs with cohesive organization and demarcated territory.¹⁶ Unlawful killings, exploitation, the use of children in armed gangs, and rape are just some of the consequences of failed public security in fragile cities.

Failed public security can produce levels of violence comparable to a civil war. High rates of gang, police and civilian casualties; recruitment

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of “urban child soldiers”; social cleansing (systematic violence against “undesirable” social groups perpetrated by criminal groups or security forces); and gender-based violence are just some of the symptoms of endemic community violence, which can result in fatality rates comparable to those in situations of open armed conflict. A 2002 case study found that between 1978 and 2000, more people, particularly children, died in armed violence in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (49,913) than in all of Colombia (39,000), a country that is actually experiencing civil conflict.¹⁷ Endemic violent crime in El Salvador resulted in more violent deaths in the years following its civil war than during the war itself.¹⁸

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