

2.1 Causation and Escalation

Ongoing systemic human rights violations, as opposed to random violations akin to common criminality, can cause further violations and worsen conflict. Avoiding or reducing human rights violations can serve to de-escalate a conflict.

This is not to imply that conflict can be explained simply in terms of human rights, for they are but one of many factors or root causes of conflict, particularly of 'complex emergencies'. The term complex emergencies now common in UN discourse, refers to conflict situations that threaten societies, states, or regions. Its use has largely evolved in the post cold war period, and this timing is indicative. Cold war alignments and power politics served to mask the many factors that underlay both internal and international conflicts. Cold war ideology gave many states and individuals a way in which to rationalise away unpalatable truths including the abuse of human rights by political allies.

It is now broadly accepted that in these complex emergencies, particularly ethnic conflicts, that human rights violations often figure large as one of the causal factors in the process leading to conflict. In referring to recent ethnic conflicts, UNHCR's 1993 Report makes it clear that "tensions arising from unresolved political, ethnic, religious or nationality disputes led to human rights abuses which became increasingly violent. Left unchecked, this process frequently develops into armed conflicts..."¹⁰

When the state or the international community does not wish or is incapable of protecting in whole or in part the security and other human rights of individuals and groups, those individuals and groups will look to alternate sources of protection. Those alternate sources are invariably found within relatively coherent ethnic or social grouping. This gives rise to a security dilemma¹¹, where the steps taken to enhance a group's security will be perceived as a threat to adjacent groups who react in a similar fashion, which in turn provides an increased threat to the first group. This is simply a variation of the cold war arms race, and is equally self defeating and far less stable. Fear of retaliation engenders pre-emptive strikes and human rights violations.

In a similar process, human rights violations worsen existing armed conflicts. There is a downward spiral of violations and reprisals which not only exacerbate the day to day conflict, but make long term reconciliation and peace increasingly difficult to achieve. Silence on the part of the UN about past or ongoing violations merely serves to confirm the fear of the victims that the international community will not protect them. Fear of violations engenders self defence and creates the security dilemma that drives escalation. This whole cycle also opens the door to what has been referred to as 'conflict entrepreneurs', who capitalize on such insecurities to foster increased conflict in the anticipation of gaining personal power or profit.

¹⁰ p.121, *The State of the World's Refugees 1993: The Challenge of Protection*, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Penguin Books

¹¹ For a useful study of these issues, see *Ethnic Conflict and International Security*, Michael E. Brown Ed., Princeton University Press, 1993, pp.276, in particular the chapters by Jack Snyder and Barry Posen.