

Human insecurity in six post-conflict cities

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In early 2006, Interpeace (formerly WSP International) conducted a rapid research exercise surveying six cities in order to gain a better understanding of how human security plays out in urban areas that have been affected by violence. The cities examined were Bissau, Guinea Bissau; Bujumbura, Burundi; Guatemala City, Guatemala; Burao, Somaliland; Galcayo, Somalia; and Mogadishu, Somalia. The following are some of the study's key findings:

- > Heavy fighting causes large-scale displacement, either of a town's entire population (as in Bissau and Burao), or part of a larger city's population (as in Mogadishu). Physical destruction resulting from fighting is often aggravated by looting, and even after violent conflict has ended, temporary stability between warring groups can lead to divided cities (as has occurred in Galcayo).
- > Physical insecurity does not come only from warring parties, such as armies, rebel groups or militia, but also from paramilitary groups and death squads, criminal gangs and business people that engage in violent business competition. In a general absence of law and order, assassins are for hire, kidnappings

occur for ransom or to force a debt payment (as in Mogadishu), and petty crime and sexual violence increase (as in Bujumbura). High levels of insecurity are caused not only by violent conflict itself, but can also persist through a culture of violence that often remains after the war has ended.

- > Occasionally, part of an urban population is armed by the party that controls the city. A besieged government in Bissau, for example, released prisoners and provided them with firearms, while the authorities in Bujumbura have, in the past, also armed certain youth groups. These weapons are not normally collected in disarmament, demobilization and reintegration processes, and can remain a source of insecurity for many years. There remain today an estimated 200-300,000 small arms in circulation in Bujumbura alone.
- > Still, large cities are often comparatively more secure than smaller cities or the countryside. The more general trend, therefore, is for displaced people to migrate to these large cities, and for displaced urban dwellers to return as soon as acute fighting diminishes. An influx of

people displaced or migrating from the countryside may contribute to a (temporary) ruralization of parts of the city as they bring with them typically rural possessions, such as cattle, and may begin cultivating in the city (as has occurred in Burao and Bujumbura).

- > Large-scale violence is likely to reduce public spaces, which are taken over by displaced people, military authorities or freelance gunmen. The prolonged displacement of families may also lead to public and private properties being occupied, sold and bought by persons other than the original owners. The long-term effect can be a large number of property disputes that are irresolvable without increased security and the return of law and order.
- > War-related violence tends to quickly lead to the demise of city administrations, and the resultant power vacuum may be filled by military authorities or armed groups. The post-war restoration of a local civil administration tends to be slow and delicate due to a mix of lack of authority, resources, experience and skills. A clear national decentralization policy (which we see in