# URBAN VIOLENCE: WHAT ROLE FOR TRADITIONAL HUMANITARIANISM?

An event co-hosted by the International Committee of the Red Cross and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Conflict Issues

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PANEL

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- Pascal Daudin, Head of the ICRC Policy Unit
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This event brought together expert commentators on the phenomenon of "urban violence" to review urbanisation trends, how they relate to violence and what an appropriate humanitarian response to this problem might look like.

Violence that occurs in an urban setting, outside of the framework of an armed conflict, is a problem that humanitarian actors are increasingly concerned by. The clear needs that exist are leading the humanitarian community to re-evaluate both the support they are able to give to tackle the consequences of urban violence and the basis for doing do.

## URBANISATION AND VIOLENCE

As explained by Dr Robert Muggah, for five years more than 50% of the world's population has lived in cities. Rampant urbanisation is taking place in many parts of the 'global South', and we now have megacities with tens of millions of inhabitants, perhaps a billion of whom worldwide live in informal settlements and shanty towns. Cities are places of power, media and transport hubs, and centres of economic opportunity – all of which provide ample reason to fight over resources and space.

Muggah has observed that in contrast to a decline in the number of people who die each year as a result of armed conflict, nine times as many people died in 2012 as a result of non-conflict violence – 450,000 versus 50,000. In various cities across the world, a lethal cocktail of organised crime, gang and drug-related violence, as well as potential ethnic and sectarian violence, have resulted in a situation of chronic non-conflict armed violence.

## A GROWING EMERGENCY

In recent years, the names of certain cities – Abidjan, Pristina, Kingston, Rio de Janeiro, Ciudad Juarez, and Benghazi – have become synonymous with a new kind of crisis, where a vast number of armed groups are harboured amongst sprawling shanty towns and low income settlements. The challenge for commentators, Elena Lucchi said, is in understanding if there are types of violence that are specific to the city, in what circumstances they are likely to occur, and what the risk factors are.

There has been an assumption that the scale of the city naturally gives rise to high rates of violent crime. However, this is not always true – Tokyo, the world's biggest city, is also one of the safest. It is not so much city size but rather the pace of population growth which shapes patterns and gives rise to the likelihood of organised violence. Furthermore the worst violence is often concentrated in specific neighbourhoods and slums. Port Au Prince, whilst having comparatively low homicide rates when compared to the Caribbean as a whole, nevertheless features spectacular levels of violence in selected zones of the city.

A further serious problem is the relation of sexual abuse to situations of urban violence. For example, at the peak of the crisis in Haiti between 2004 and 2006, surveys conducted by humanitarian agencies such as MSF estimated that as many as 50% of young women were raped. The precarious situation of women continues to be evident among the displaced following the 2012 earthquake. Widespread rape and sexual violence combined with inaccessible health and social services generate devastating humanitarian consequences. As well as long-term health effects, research has found that rape may also expose individuals to further abuse, social stigma and exploitation.

Finally, whilst it is predominantly associated with war, displacement is another systemic consequence of violence in urban centres. Thus a small number of Mexican cities, with some of the highest violent death rates on the planet, have seen over 250,000 people to flee their homes in northern states.

## TIME TO ADAPT

It is not only humanitarians that are being forced to adapt to an 'urban century' however. The military doctrine of countries such as the United States show how the 'urban battle space' is predicted to become one of the dominant modes and sites of 21st century warfare. Humanitarian organisations have worked for decades in cities caught in the midst of armed conflicts (Grozny, Beirut, Njamena, Sarajevo, Kabul), however they have also been relatively slow to respond to the specific characteristics and dynamics of violence generated by an urban environment. In part this is because the way in which humanitarian organisations can add value and provide relief or protection in these environments is not clear, nor necessarily understood by institutions traditionally more used to working in rural settings. In addition the humanitarian community has shown caution in

developing programmes in cities where there is not an armed conflict but still violence which may be predominantly criminal in nature, because these situations sit outside of the purview of IHL.

One initiative that is examining trends in urban violence and its implications for humanitarian and security actors is the Humanitarian Action in Situations Other than War (HASOW) project. The work done by this programme explores the tipping points from chronic urban violence to outright armed conflict, as well as looking at how domestic jurisprudence meets international humanitarian law.

EXTREME VIOLENCE WITHOUT WAR

Given the scale and intensity of violence in some urban contexts, the humanitarian consequences for victims caught up in them are significant. As explained above, International Humanitarian Law provides the traditional entry point for humanitarian actors into a given situation, and is clear as to its limits. Many of the cities which experience chronic violence today, however, are not in a state of armed conflict but a situation beneath this threshold. In this case the challenge is how to apply the relevant legal framework and design the most effective and relevant programmes for those in need. As Pascal Daudin explained, in these contexts the ICRC assesses a number of criteria to determine whether its engagement is warranted. Based on this analysis, the ICRC commits to act when it can add value, violence is collective, has clear humanitarian consequences and is of a significant intensity and duration.

The humanitarian response to urban violence is not straight forward and raises a number of complex political issues related to state sovereignty. For example, national governments can be reluctant to accept that violence in their cities requires intervention by an international humanitarian agency. In contrast to their national counterparts, however, mayors of some cities have even applied the language of warfare and armed conflict to describe violence in their communities.

BELFAST: URBAN VIOLENCE ON OUR DOORSTEP

Discussions of urban violence in the UK tend to focus on major cities in Latin America and Africa – which is understandable when one considers the numbers who have lost their lives in such contexts. Nonetheless, as Geoff Loane pointed out, violence in Belfast remains a pervasive presence in the day to day lives of this society 15 years after the signing of the Good Friday agreement. Communities in Belfast are divided by so-called 'peace walls' which are decorated with sectarian murals that enforce an identity on those in close proximity. In such an environment violence can quickly and unpredictably escalate from seemingly small events, as we have seen recently with protests over the raising of the Union Flag outside a government building. Violence furthermore exists underground, 'punishment beatings' in which vigilante justice is meted out to alleged perpetrators of crimes, are a feature of life in Belfast and create clear humanitarian consequences.

In a volatile context such as this, humanitarians must ask themselves several questions. First - how should they gain access to insular communities involved in urban violence and who 'gives permission' for humanitarian action? Second, how are the victims identified and what are their needs? Thirdly, one must determine whether the state mechanisms which exist to address this violence are fully functioning, or fully invested in the problem, and thus whether they respond accordingly to needs.  Only once these questions have been answered should humanitarian actors

decide whether there is a role for them and what messages they should communicate to the populations that they wish to assist.

The operational challenges for any humanitarian organisation working in situations of urban violence are various. Firstly, understanding local power dynamics in these both physically and figuratively crowded spaces requires a significant investment of time and resources. Indeed, commenting from the other side, as a politician, Rt Hon Simon Hughes MP explained the need for long term management by authorities as well as the lasting humanitarian consequences of violence in cities through his own experience of aggression in his constituency in London.

Next, as a largely new context for traditional humanitarian organisations, the absence of an established operational space means that access must be negotiated with all actors, which in areas not controlled by state security forces may require talking to a large number of groups and individuals. Furthermore these individuals and groups are likely to be both sceptical and suspicious of agencies claiming neutrality, impartiality and that they are independent from the state. While this is also a risk in situations of armed conflict, where violence is without an overt political nature, individuals approached by agencies will have motives and rationale that humanitarians may understand less and the risk of confusion and attack, will be thus greater.

Working in urban centres is complex and will require innovation – both technical and in terms of policy - in order to identify and target beneficiaries that are most in need. In this, the involvement of local partners is crucial to extend operational reach, yet the need to maintain neutrality can present challenges when working with partners in non-conflict violence just as it does in conflict situations. One of the questions that humanitarian organisations must address is what added value they can give in such circumstances. Exactly what success for humanitarian organisations tackling the consequences of urban violence would look like should be explored prior to engaging.

For the ICRC, one of the criteria for responding to violence in urban contexts is that it would be understood to be a neutral, impartial humanitarian actor. This perception is vital for the organisation to be able to carry out meaningful assistance and protection work for victims. Obstacles to access and security risks present difficulties which must be weighed by humanitarian organisations against the opportunity for creating a positive impact. However where it is possible and where there are clear needs, it is evident that the work of humanitarian organisations is sorely needed in some of the most violent situations in the world – in our largest and most dangerous cities.

## Q & A

Topics covered in the question and answer session included the role of faith-based groups, women and violence in Northern Ireland, and the role of humanitarian organisations in preventing violence and conflict.

On faith-based groups in the Northern Irish context, Loane explained that for neutral humanitarian organisations, working alongside faith organisations is difficult, however one of the strengths of such organisations is the power to communicate concerns credibly and legitimately. In the case of Northern Ireland, however, violence can be more accurately described as stemming from racism rather than a religious divide.

On the role of the ICRC in preventing conflict, International Humanitarian Law is not designed to prevent violence as such but rather to regulate it, Daudin explained. The responsibility in such a situation for an organisation like the ICRC therefore is to ensure that the parties involved comply with IHL provisions such as proportionality, distinction and military necessity.

In situations of violence below the level of an armed conflict, the applicable law is International Human Rights Law which governs law enforcement operations by state authorities. In addition armed actors as well as the government itself are governed by national legislation. In those situations maintaining law and order is the responsibility of state civil police or security forces. Rules of engagement as well as relevant standards procedures are different from the ones set out by IHL. Thus the question on how to address the issue of violence itself (and not only its humanitarian consequences) with all actors concerned is more complex from an ICRC's perspective. Final comments focused on the fact that there has been an overwhelming focus on the Americas and cities such as Port au Prince and Rio de Janeiro in particular when discussing violence in cities. However in Africa where urbanisation is not as advanced it will be crucial to understand the link between population growth and violence, as well as to tackle its consequences. In addition, while violence in secondary cities may be less visible internationally, it is nevertheless severe and warrants attention.

## About this event:

The ICRC works in 88 countries across the world, including in some of the world's most dangerous cities. The ICRC Policy Unit is based at the ICRC headquarters in Geneva and works on issues related to humanitarian principles, multilateral organisations, civil-military relations, internal doctrine and other themes.

www.icrc.org/uk

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Conflict issues was set up in 2006 to provide a forum for dialogue between Parliamentarians. Her Majesty's Government (HMG) and civil society on alternative methods of preventing and resolving violent conflict.

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