

EDITORIAL

In 1950, less than 30 per cent of the world's population lived in cities and towns. Today, more than half are city dwellers. In absolute terms, while some 730 million people lived in urban areas in 1950, the figure stands 60 years later at over 3.3 billion. In the UN Population Fund's 'State of World Population 2007' report, this explosive growth of urbanization is referred to as the arrival of the 'urban millennium'.

Cities are the crossroads of political power, economic innovations and cultural affairs. They attract people because they so frequently offer better opportunities for jobs, education, housing, health services and entertainment. They are engines of prosperity and diversity, but they are also increasingly plagued by pollution, overcrowding, poor hygiene conditions, poverty, social exclusion, violence and crime.

Rapid urbanization has put resources and services under great pressure. Most of the urban poor in developing countries who are able to find work are likely to spend their lives in insecure, poorly paid jobs. And rural migrants often have no other choice than to settle in shanty towns and experience extreme poverty. Today's mass urbanization is accompanied by a growing sense of vulnerability among city dwellers faced with unsafe streets, exposure to hazards and insufficient access to basic items such as water, food and healthcare. According to the United Nations Human Settlements Programme, about a billion people live in poor-quality, overcrowded housing, in slums, or in informal settlements.

Moreover, the plight of the earthquake victims in Haiti shows how vulnerable densely populated urban areas can be to the tragic consequences of disasters and how difficult it can be for humanitarian organizations to help. In addition to natural disasters, urban violence poses a further serious challenge for vulnerable people. All problems are exacerbated when there are poverty, economic inequality, unemployment, social exclusion and marginalization. As the world grows increasingly urban, violence in many cities is reaching unprecedented levels, and is making daily life in some places almost like living in a war zone.

Urban violence and other crime – ranging from muggings to gang shootings and organized crime – are a source of growing concern and fear. Risk factors differ considerably. Violence often coincides with high levels of poverty, discrimination,

economic disparity, social inequality and drug abuse or trafficking. Other contributing factors include political or economic instability, proliferation of small arms and the presence of gangs or other organized groups. Risk factors often exist in clusters. They are not necessarily root causes, but they help to predict the occurrence of violence, its development and its escalation.

One of the best known manifestations of urban violence is the gang. Gangs are an old phenomenon. In the 18th century, many poor children and orphans in London survived by joining pick-pocket gangs controlled by adult criminals. In the early 19th century, child criminals in Britain were punished in the same way as adults. They were sent to adult prisons, “transported” to Australian penal colonies, whipped or even sentenced to death for petty theft. However, reports of gang-related killing, inside and outside of prisons, were concentrated mostly in the largest cities in the United States.

The term “gang violence” mostly refers to illegal and non-political acts of violence perpetrated against property, ordinary people or members of other gangs. The gangs generally use coercion, corruption and complicity to achieve their ends. They are usually composed of people ranging from 9 to 25 years. Tens of thousands of gangs exist worldwide, some of them huge – often criminal – organizations. The National Youth Gang Center in the United States reports that in 2006 there were approximately 785,000 active street-gang members. There are estimated to be between 25,000 and 50,000 gang members in El Salvador. The Mexican drug cartels may have as many as 100,000 foot soldiers. In Japan, there are some 90,000 known members of the Yakuza, a large criminal organization, and Hong Kong’s triads number up to 160,000 members. The different Mafia units in Italy have tens of thousands affiliates worldwide as have the “Bratvas” – organized crime groups run by Russians, Chechens, Ukrainians, Georgians and people from other former Soviet republics. The Nigerian and South African gangs are growing as well.

Drug-trafficking and institutionalized crime have profoundly changed street gangs, which traditionally were mostly turf-oriented. Today gangs are generating ever more crime and violence, often transnational, which at times even require military action. There are cases around the world where gangs have challenged the monopoly of State power. The duty to protect citizens that results from that monopoly is no longer being met in certain neighbourhoods, and even in large swathes of State territory. Instead, the criminal organizations concerned have infiltrated the social and economic life and sometimes even carry out the essential State functions.

The scale of organized armed violence and the resulting death toll are especially serious in large cities. Such violence can be more devastating than that of a conventional armed conflict. The wars that occurred in Central America in the 1980s, for instance, caused fewer casualties than the crimes today perpetrated by gangs.

Life in urban areas may be disrupted by lack of public and social services (water and sanitation, healthcare, schooling, etc.) and as a result of tight territorial control by organized groups or by State forces trying to suppress them. Certain

areas may be off-limits, even for social and humanitarian agencies, and providing the help needed is often difficult, if not impossible.

The violence of gangs and other criminal organizations and the resulting destabilization of the State may presently constitute the greatest security threat to Latin American countries. The consequences in humanitarian terms are obvious: people injured, people killed, people who disappear, people who flee their homes, sexual assault and human trafficking, and the lack of essential services. In some cases there seem to be the conditions that must exist to constitute an armed conflict under international humanitarian law, namely an organized force with a hierarchical structure and a certain intensity of fighting. The motivation for the violence is not what determines the applicability of international humanitarian law.

Gangs and other criminal entities are often highly organized, with an armed branch and military capacity equal or even superior to the armed forces of the State. They are frequently in control of defined territories and are often capable of launching sustained military, or military-like, operations. Even if they do not necessarily try to take over the government, they nevertheless aim to exercise some control over a certain population and/or territory in order to conduct their activities unhindered and to ensure impunity for their criminal acts.

Despite the possibility that international humanitarian law may be applicable to certain forms of gang activity, many doubt that this law provides an appropriate response to the phenomenon in most situations. While some aspects of international humanitarian law concern problems that arise from urban violence including gang violence, they argue that this branch of international law has little applicability to gang or purely criminal situations, which basically require a law enforcement response. In particular the distinction between civilians and combatants – or those directly participating in hostilities or not – would be difficult to apply and criminal and constitutional guarantees of the right to life might be undermined if the threshold of applicability were set too low.

The January 2010 earthquake in Haiti provided a demonstration of the vulnerability to natural disaster of densely populated urban areas. Similarly, Gaza City endured a classic armed conflict in early 2009. Many other cities such as Kabul, Baghdad and Mogadishu have been the scene of armed conflict over the years. A heavy toll has been taken in particular on civilians, who have far too often been killed or injured – the survivors often permanently disabled – as well as suffering indirectly on account of destroyed or damaged homes and the wrecking of infrastructure on which they depend. Especially in cases of aerial bombardment and shelling, people living in cities are affected more seriously by fighting than those living in rural areas. The rules on distinction and proportionality inevitably receive the most attention in these cases, and are even more put to the test in situations of asymmetric warfare. The very wording of the proportionality rule tends to suggest that military necessity will always prevail, this despite the fact that the distinction between combatants and civilians, and the concept of collateral damage, grew to paramount importance in urban settings and that humanitarian concern has

increasingly caused more attention to be paid to the interests of the civilian population when a proportionality judgment must be made.

Rapid urbanization is posing new challenges for organizations that give aid and strive to prevent conflict. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement advocates greater action by governments and local authorities to address the challenges posed by urban violence. In their role of auxiliary to the public power for humanitarian work, National Societies – provided they are strongly anchored in the communities they serve – can help governments prevent and mitigate violence by providing education and employment opportunities, thus offering alternatives to armed violence. Promoting social inclusion and a culture of non-violence and peace is one of the Movement's priorities. Towns and cities are particularly important in this respect.

While the ICRC mainly operates in connection with armed conflicts, it also has a mandate to act in what are termed 'other situations of violence', situations that also arise in cities. Often working closely with National Societies, it can respond when and where its international profile, experience, independence and neutrality are of special value to people made vulnerable by urban violence, for it is not the causes of the violence but rather its impact from a humanitarian viewpoint that justifies ICRC involvement.

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