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Violence in the Third World

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"Violence is a sign of institutional failure and system overload", writes Professor Nazli Choucri.* These conditions are by no means unique to the Third World, but it remains a fact that the vast majority of wars and war-like incidents that have taken place since the second World War have been fought in the Third World. Furthermore, the daily turmoil and frictions of life under circumstances of economic struggle and rapid social change give rise to violence among groups and individuals within Third World societies.

Despite their great diversity, the countries of the Third World have some characteristics in common, apart from their location in Africa, Asia or Latin America, that make possible some generalizations about violence as they experience it. In the first place, most developing countries share the experience of colonial domination, though the nature and duration of it vary tremendously among them. Most of them are poor. Perhaps most

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* Nazli Choucri, "Demographics and Conflict", Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, Vol. 42, No. 4 (April, 1986).

importantly, most are engulfed in a process of very profound social and economic transformation that, though a necessary condition for development, is in itself is a source of instability.

For many of the countries of the Third World, one can begin the search for the roots of violence with the circumstances of decolonization. For those countries that gained their independence by armed struggle, the fight for independence gave a legitimacy to the use of violence that still clings to it in many settings. A further legacy of colonial rule is the forced cohabitation within a single state of antagonistic groups that are artificially bound together within the borders established by the colonizers. In many instances quarrels that were submerged but not resolved during the colonial period have re-emerged and, often, burst into violent conflict after independence.

Poverty is not necessarily a cause of violent conflict-- though many argue that it is in itself a form of violence. It can be seen as such when it is the product of maldistribution of resources and denial of opportunity, and exists in the midst of plenty or even excess. Under these conditions, poverty is usually the result of social and economic relations that can only be maintained by the threat or the use of violence. One major feature of recent decades has been the growing self-assertiveness of poor and traditionally powerless groups. In some cases, groups of people have managed to move up the economic ladder, though many have met with violent resistence on the way. However, it is not poverty but the attempt

to break out of poverty that generates violence both as a tactic and as a response.

Heightened aspirations and a refusal to accept a miserable lot have also contributed to massive population movements, within and across national boundaries. Violent clashes with established residents are a common result of migration. For example, in the Indian state of Assam, many lives have been lost in attacks by the Assamese on illegal immigrants from Bangladesh. In Honduras, the migration of Salvadorans in the early 1960s not only produced local clashes, but led to a build-up of tensions that culminated in war between the two states. Even in cases where migration is received peacefully or the initial violence simmers down, the long-term basis may be laid for communal tensions that erupt into violence at later stages-- as has been the case throughout South and South-east Asia as well as in many parts of Africa.

The process of development itself is always a source of turbulence and often a source of violence. Developmental success inevitably brings about structural change, upsetting traditional hierarchies and often generating violent reaction. The failures of development lead to even greater strains on the social fabric. The global recession of the early 1980s, the debt burdens of many of the developing countries, the prospect of slow and uneven growth for many years to come, the drawing down of the financial and ecological capital of whole nations have created intolerable strains. In many parts of the Third World, communities are on the verge of

breakdown. Societies are beginning to come apart at the seams as the despair, frustration and rage of the "have nots" clashes with the fear, reluctance or intransigence of the "haves" and erupts into religious, ethnic, tribal, racial and class violence.

The dislocations caused by rapid and extensive change make countries vulnerable to conflict arising from both internal and external sources. Adjustment to the developments of the late twentieth century is threatening enough to the equanimity of any society without the further challenge of trying to compress centuries of technological change and nation-building into the span of a few decades.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the process of social transformation is by no means confined to the Third World. All countries are in some measure caught up in sweeping value changes that respond to new technologies and modes of organization, and to a pace and scale of change that is unprecedented in human experience. It is not only in the Third World that the reexamination of old and newer values has led to challenges to the state, for example. The function, purpose, character and structure of the state encounter challenges from neo-conservatives and religious fundamentalists in the United States, from "green" parties in Europe, from minority nationalities in the Soviet Union, as well as from numerous social and political movements in the Third World.

The fragility of young states in the face of internal turbulence and external pressure leads many governments to attempt to centralize power and to rely upon the armed forces to maintain stability. The ease with which this tendency slides into a cycle of militarization, repression and internal conflict is all too familiar to students of Third World political development.

Many of today's violent conflicts are products of the inability to manage change. Others have their roots in contradictory perceptions of and beliefs about change. The complexity of the interlinkages among problems creates in many minds a longing for simple, reductionist explanations, whose foundations in reality are so insecure that they have no capacity for tolerance of other approaches.

No region has quite mastered the dislocations of the twentieth century, with its dizzying growth of populations and massive movements of people, its instant communications, alienating technologies, shrunken spaces, and horrifying destructive power-- and so all remain vulnerable to conflict. The Third World is not unique in this. It would be difficult, for example to draw a clear distinction between the violence in Northern Ireland and many of the ongoing conflicts in the Third World. Nonethless, three of the widely shared qualities that have been mentioned- colonialism, poverty, and accelerated change-- do give the Third World some distinctive preconditions for violence.

There is also a psychological sense of belonging to the Third World, which arises from the recognition that the international system is dominated by and directed for the primary benefit of countries that exclude the Third World from decision-making and a fair share of the benefits of interaction. The resulting sense of vulnerability and exclusion -- and the often angry sense of injustice that accompanies it-- gives the countries of the Third World some sense of solidarity despite their differences and leads them into conflict with the North. This kind of conflict has not often been pursued through armed conflict between states, but it undoubtedly feeds the atmosphere of confrontation that leads to isolated acts of violence. And isolated acts can all too quickly fall into a pattern of mutual escalation of violence, with states entering into conflict as patrons, sponsors or perpetrators of terrorist incidents, punitive responses, campaigns of destabilization and overt or covert interventions. Uncontrolled, indiscriminate and self-perpetuating cycles of violence are thus set in motion.

One further source of violence in the Third World should be mentioned: with the achievement of functional nuclear parity between the superpowers, and the virtually uncontested recognition of spheres of influence dominated by one or the other in the North, the Third World has become the only "safe" battleground for the contest between East and West. Neither superpower is yet willing to run a serious risk of direct nuclear confrontation, which is implied by any armed conflict between them in the industrialized world. Thus the Third World has become a theatre, in both

the military and the dramatic sense, of East-West competition. Of course this competition is not a factor in all violent conflicts in or among developing countries, but it has prolonged and intensified many of those in which it is not a prominent cause. Inevitably, it adds to the complexity of South-South or North-South confrontations.

The sources of violence in the Third World are thus an admixture of internal pressures resulting from rapid change and external pressures resulting from the clash of outside interests. Efforts to minimize and control violence must recognize that these two aspects require rather different approaches. The effort to minimize internal violence must focus on ways of increasing the resilience of societies; the effort to minimize external violence must focus on restraint in the definition of and response to threat.

One might characterize the kinds of violence within Third World societies as violence that reacts to change, violence that attempts to force change, violence that reacts to the lack of change without any positive programme, and violence that attempts to prevent change. Many communal clashes are examples of the first type, as one segment of a community sees another getting ahead and perceives this movement to be at its own expense. Revolutionary movements and liberation movements are examples of the second type. Common urban criminality typifies the third type, which is nourished by the hopelessness and despair generated by widespread unemployment and economic stagnation. Criminality often

engenders from the state authoritarian reactions that are equally lawless, in the name of law and order. The fourth type of violence is typified by repressive regimes that violate the human rights of their citizens and subject them to arbitrary arrest, disappearance, torture and execution for the sake of preserving an existing order.

A prevalent aspect of the fourth type of internal violence is militarization, though militarization has origins that are broader than domestic tensions alone. Militarization establishes a niche for violence within a society. When it is combined with lack of discipline in the armed forces, (as it has been recently in Uganda, Sri Lanka, and Lebanon) it holds civil society by the throat. The rationale for militarization, that it is needed to preserve security, is turned on its head, as the armed forces become the primary source of insecurity for substantial segments of the population.

Political systems may respond to the build-up of potentially explosive social tensions in one of several ways. They may learn to tolerate a high level of violence in ordinary political life, reacting with indifference to killings and destruction as long as they do not threaten the political system as such. In India, for example, inter-caste, inter-class and inter-communal violence is a fact of civic life. Only rarely does it become a problem for the continuity of a regime.

A second possible reponse is for the political system clearly to

favor one group within the polity over others (often under pressure from the dominant group) and place the resources of the system at its disposal. The result is polarization and an escalation of tensions, as has been the case in Sri Lanka in the 1980s, for example.

A third kind of response is a serious programme of gradual change that brings all contending groups into the system and mediates among them, moderating the impatience of the ascending groups and the defensive reactions of those whose relative position is descending. The Malaysian experiment in bringing the Malay majority into the economic mainstream, though not without violence, is perhaps one such attempt, which was engineered as a response to racial violence in the late 1960s.

The first two of these alternatives are violent responses. Under the first, the violence is sporadic, dispersed and systemic. In cases of the second, violence becomes concentrated in a struggle for control of the system. Only the third response makes possible the peaceful management of social tensions, but it is extremely difficult to implement.

National governments are not in full control of the processes of change. Their ability to direct the course of events in their countries is being eroded from two directions at once: from below by sub-national groups that have lost faith in the government's commitment to represent their interests, and from above by transnational processes and institutions.

The nation-state is on the defensive, which in many cases has prompted governments to respond to internal challenges with repression, and to external pressures with a refusal to cooperate in common endeavors. The pursuit of national security has come to place excessive reliance on the use of force, to the neglect of the economic, social and political factors that determine a nation's vulnerability in large part.

Given the incapability of governments to control the effects of change, it is important to consider what other kinds of institutions and modes of organization might help to enhance adjustment. Learning to manage conflict without resort to violence is a process in which the whole society must participate. It poses a particular challenge to the emerging nations. In many of them, the development of civil society was arrested, even destroyed, by colonialism. Indigenous forms of participation, indigenous vehicles of consensus and conflict-resolution and indigenous sources of legitimacy have only rarely survived or been restored; indeed, they have often been further suppressed by the modernizing bureaucratic state.

It is often simply impossible to know, through any ordered, rational investigation, which institutions or practices may prove to be the most effective. History tells of the rise of spontaneous, unexpected currents that have altered the course of history in a given area-- such as the Gandhian movement in India, for example. The present time is characterized by profound shifts in the values held by significant groups of

tools of only one among many contending groups and thus lose their legitimacy in the eyes of society as a whole.

Much is made of the role of private-sector institutions in the health of the economy these days. A case at least as strong can be made for the role of private groups in the health of the polity as well. Private think-tanks are often better positioned than government-sponsored ones to analyze social issues from an independent stance, and to devise socially creative options for dealing with them. Traditional conflict-resolution mechanisms which operate at the local level often can tap springs of compromise that elude the government official or the formal judicial structures.

The cohesiveness of a society does not depend exclusively, or even primarily, on its laws. Cohesion depends much more on the existence of a general social consensus that the institutions of society are reasonably fair, just and accessible. Without this basic consensus, the rule of law becomes entirely dependent on enforcement, with the police and the army functioning as an occupying force within their own countries. The consent of the governed is not just a moral desideratum but a practical necessity for a non-violent society.

A society that has achieved a workable consensus is not necessarily a society without conflict. It is questionable whether such a society exists anywhere-- it certainly does not exist in the developing countries

that are caught up in the tumultuous processes of economic development and nation-building. The crucial question for these Third World societies is how to reduce the human cost of the necessary and in many cases desirable changes they are experiencing. How can they reconcile the need for change with the need for order and the need for justice? The dynamic equilibrium among these three defines the space for freedom and the realization of both collective and individual aspirations.

Social resilience is the quality that permits people and institutions to interact with each other in each of the three dimensions without their conflicts erupting into violence. Resilience allows a people to accept change without losing their own cultural identity. Resilience permits faith in a system of justice to be maintained even in the face of flaws in the system; a single travesty or even a series of them will not bring about rejection of the system as a whole. The concept of resilience is quite different from that of stability. Stability under oppressive conditions means the perpetuation of violence. The interaction of resilience and order creates a capacity for adaptation without chaos. The lack of resilience in any of the three dimensions creates the conditions for violence. Change without resilience leads to alienation and loss of identity; a system of justice without resilience turns predictable human failures into catalysts for polarization; order without resilience leads to oppression and a corresponding resistance.

Building social resilience is not a task only for the state, though the

state can play an important role. But the quality of resilience lies in the much broader sphere of civic culture. A collective commitment to the public good, to managing conflict without violence, depends as much on community groups, non-governmental organizations, religious institutions involving both clergy and laity, volunteer groups, political parties, educational institutions, the media and so forth-- all of which have the responsibility and the capability for nurturing a sense of civic responsibility.

The spontaneous actions of inspired individuals also can be extremely important at times when the resilience of a society is stretched to the breaking point. In the aftermath of the 1985 Mexican earthquake, the unorganized actions of citizens were far more effective in the early stages than offical relief efforts both in rescuing and sustaining people, and in preventing the development of an atmosphere in which looting and violence could have become widespread. Similarly, citizens intervened spontaneously in New Delhi after the assassination of Prime Minister Gandhi in 1985, to interrupt the attacks on members of the Sikh minority. There are many such examples, and they underscore the importance of a public philosophy in which the citizens bear a sense of reponsibility fur the collective good.

Existing social institutions must become the vehicles for creating and expressing this sense of responsibility, but it may also be necessary to create new kinds of institutions at the national level to cultivate the habit

of thinking collectively but pluralistically about the public good. Political culture is nurtured by a broad approach to public affairs education, including a multiplicity of forums, journals and research institutions engaged in a continuous process of dialogue and reflection across the divisions within the nation. For example, the concept of the national defense college could and should be broadened in scope, purpose and composition to provide a setting in which leaders from the military, the civil service, the private sector, the non-governmental sector, and the political cadres could be trained in thinking about the overall national interest. National security issues should be high on the agenda of any such institution; they should never be regarded as the exclusive concern of the military. Pluralism in the selection of students and staff would be essential, so that the political opposition also becomes familiar with the sources of social resilience and the dangers to it.

If resilience is a key concept in coping with the strains that lead to domestic violence within societies, restraint is one of the strategic concepts in minimizing violence imposed or inflamed by external forces.

Restraint has two major dimensions, one internal to the decision-making structures of Third World countries, and one to be exercised by external powers. The first of these applies chiefly to the ways in which actors in the developing countries express and pursue the very real disputes among themselves. All have a stake in the peaceful resolution of conflicts, limits on the production and importation of arms,

and the vigorous application and extension of humanitarian law.

Above all, it is in the interest of the developing countries to wean themselves from external military support and involvement, for two compelling reasons. One is that external involvement almost always increases the scale and destructiveness of violent conflicts, by providing weapons that multiply the number of casualties (especially, in recent decades, civilian casualties) and do considerable damage to the social and economic infrastructure of the area of conflict.

When one party to a dispute turns to outsiders for support, its adversaries are encouraged to do the same, thereby subjecting the country or region to the expression of rivalries and antagonisms in which it has no direct stake. External military aid is often the trigger for region-wide arms races, which drain the resources and heighten the tension-level of the countries involved. The external patron may discourage client governments or factions from entering into negotiations or seriously pursuing negotiations that do get started. It may prefer to continue an armed conflict that costs it relatively little but is an effective source of discomfiture to its rivals.

The second compelling reason to forego external assistance is that such assistance undermines the autonomy of the recipient to such an extent that even the winner of a battle for control of a state may end up with a Pyrrhic victory. Measured against the loss of political independence and

the danger of re-subjugation to the interests of external powers, the political or ideological goals of the combatants must be reassessed. Furthermore, the acceptance of external aid often entails a serious sacrifice of legitimacy, as the American-backed regimes in South Vietnam, the Soviet-backed regimes in Afghanistan, and the Vietnamese-backed regime in Kampuchea have discovered to their own and their patron's frustration.

For the sake of limiting the destructiveness and the duration of violent conflicts, as well as to protect claims to legitimacy, restraint in seeking external military assistance is a serious consideration for all parties to armed conflict in the Third World. But such a regime of self-restraint is unlikely to hold up without a symmetrical restraint on the part of the external powers themselves. In increasing numbers of armed conflicts in the Third World, the external intervenor is not one of the superpowers nor one of the former colonial powers but rather one of the more powerful Third World states-- such as India, Libya, Vietnam, and Tanzania, to name just a few. Therefore, any code of conduct that might be devised to discourage interference in armed conflicts will have to be negotiated on an inclusive basis, though regional organizations are often promising venues for initiating such discussions.

Restraint on the part of potential interventionist states has a powerful potential for limiting the scope of armed conflict in the Third World, given that few developing countries have sophisticated arms industries of their

own. Only Brazil, China, India, Israel, South Africa and Taiwan have significant arms manufacturing capacity. Few other developing countries even approach self-sufficiency. Although the arms imports of the Third World countries as a whole increased dramatically in the 1960s and 1970s, they have been constrained by the global recession and the collapse of commodity prices. Many states are thus increasingly dependent upon military aid or credit.

A more demanding form of restraint on the part of external parties requires a narrow interpretation of the kinds of political developments that constitute threats to their national interests. Demanding as this is, however, it is not the same as insisting that states subordinate their national interests to higher principles such as respect for self-determination-- for this, the realist must admit, is not likely to be accepted by powerful states in the near future.

Restraint in defining one's legitimate national security interests requires making a distinction between developments that are threatening and those that are merely distasteful. The accession to power of a leftist regime in Nicaragua is certainly profoundly distasteful to the current U.S. administration, as was the prospect of a non-Marxist regime in Afghanistan to the Soviet Union, but it is difficult to convince most of the community of nations that either constitutes a genuine threat to the security of the superpower in the region.

Governments and non-governmental actors are motivated to observe restraints either because they recognize a moral imperative shored up by the approbation of the international community, or because they calculate the utilitarian value of reciprocal restraint on the part of adversaries. Any state that chooses to ignore restraints must calculate that its willingness to do so will inevitabley encourage others to do the same; its calculations of self-interest must weigh the short-term advantages that might be gained in a particular conflict against the cost of achieving its objectives in an environment made more dangerous and difficult by a generalized lack of restraint.

The primary obstacle to restraint is desperation, and in that the Third World abounds. To reduce the sources of armed conflict there, as in the North, will call upon the deepest reserves of political innovation that governments and other political actors can command. The task is obviously not one for the Third World alone, given how closely its turbulence is tied to that of the international system as a whole.

The record of violent struggle in achieving objectives is in recent years a dismal one: witness the intense and spreading destruction in the Middle East, the stalemate in the Gulf war, the growing intransigence of the South African government in the face of armed attacks. In the latter case, non-violent demonstrations have exerted more effective pressure for change, both domestically and internationally, than violence-- violent resistance has in fact given the government an excuse for greater use of

violence itself.

Non-violence is not just an ideal; it is also a tactic or even a strategy. Its effectiveness as a strategy of the outgunned has been repeatedly demonstrated-- most recently in the Phillipines where the heavily armed Marcos government was unable to resist the massive demonstration of popular support for the opposition led by Corazon Aquino. Also, it should not be forgotten that for all its violent rhetoric and the subsequent record of violence, the Iranian revolution was a non-violent revolution-- a revolution of the popular demonstration, the sermon, the cassette, all leading up to a massive withdrawal of support for the Shah's government.

It may be that the practical appeal rather than the moral appeal of non-violent struggle may provide the impetus for reducing violence in the Third World. Non-violence is often described as the weapon of the weak. But this is true only in the sense of comparative arsenals. Confronting a tank with only one's body requires greater courage and entails greater risk than confronting it with another tank. Non-violent struggle is not easy; it is not risk free; and it does not always work. But the physical and psychological and moral costs of violence are so great that an alternative form of political struggle deserves to be given the most serious consideration and trial.

There is little doubt that violence will be a constant companion to

life in the Third World for the foreseeable future. There is little that the developing countries can do to extricate themselves single-handedly from the geo-political competition of the world system dominated by the superpowers. This fact gives the Third World a vital stake in the strengthening of collective, multilateral institutions of conflict resolution at the global and regional levels. Internal violence is also likely to persist. Within many developing societies, the disparities are so great, the injustices so gross, and the privileged so fearful of and resistant to change that violence will be turned to as a last resort. The irony that history has taught us so often is that the use of violence, however justified, may demolish the very goals and ideals that were sought, and create the mirror image of the injustice it sought to destroy.