

## **THE ROLE OF HUMANITARIAN AGENCIES IN URBAN VIOLENCE: A NEW FRONTIER FOR FRAGILE HUMANITY**

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### **Abstract:**

*The stature of international laws and legal framework of International Humanitarian Organizations need to be revisited in the contextual setting of urban violence. In recent years, the pattern of urban violence remains a concern for regulatory bodies and for those who implement that regulation on the ground. Urban violence may prevail during war, armed conflict or even in absence of both. Due to the systemic phenomenon, urban violence causes traumatic effect among the dwellers. In a situation of an apparent absence of war or armed conflict, urban violence may cause more traumatic effect than that of conventional war. The unpredictable characteristics of urban violence have particularly drawn the attention of the humanitarian agencies who remain closely involved with the affected community in an urban setting. Such concern prevails due to the regulatory lacunas that exist in the conceptual framework of humanitarian agencies within the purview of international laws. Indicating the example of humanitarian involvement in some of the Latin American cities, this paper argues that any slitting perception would create confusion and misleading discourse between the humanitarian agencies and the community they work with. In a situation of violence other than war or armed conflict, the state of delivering humanitarian assistance largely depends on the conceptual framework of the humanitarian agencies within the regulatory framework of international laws, and their acceptance to the local, regional and international communities.*

**Keywords:** Urban violence, IHL, IHRL, humanitarian agencies, ICRC

### **INTRODUCTION:**

Urban violence is drawing relatively more attention from the humanitarian agencies in a situation of violence. This is due to the close involvement of humanitarian personnel with the affected population in rapidly growing urban setting. The history of mankind has experienced structural destruction and loss of human life as common ingredients of war<sup>1</sup>. Beside such ingredients, other forms of physical, physiological and emotional violence have been observed in war and other forms of conflict. Due to the advent of rapid urbanization in present days, these forms of violent acts are not only remaining limited to war but also they are

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<sup>1</sup> A. Winton, 2004. Urban violence: a guide to the literature. *Environment and Urbanization*, 16(2), pp.165-184.

being fringed into urban landscapes as a transformative force.<sup>2</sup> In case of violence in urban area, humanitarian agencies are particularly exposed to various intricacies of parties to the conflict, and frequently they come across the agitation of the people with whom they remain associated.

Getting involved in conflicts, in urban areas, is a costly affair for both defensive and offensive actors. From the military point of view, urban areas offer good defence potentiality in case of conventional warfare.<sup>3</sup> Urban areas have significant strategic and tactical merits for unconventional forces as having been experienced in Balkan war, Iraq war and other recent conflicts. The party who retains initiative first can reap the advantages of such potential. As such, a quelling race is being observed among the warring parties to take the advantages of urban area's potential.<sup>4</sup> Beside such scenario, urban areas experience other types of violent activities that remain absent even in the hostility between warring parties. Kidnapping, ransacking, sexual abasement, vandalizing and other types of crimes exist in the context of an urban setting. Such widespread of violent acts in an urban setting has become a prime concern for the humanitarian agencies as these agencies operate in a situation that remains unstable, unpredictable, challenging and volatile.

The working place and operational framework of the humanitarian agencies, as they operate in delivering aid to the affected community, remain challenging due to various reasons. Identifying urban violence as a puzzling ground for the humanitarian agencies, Balan (2002)<sup>5</sup> has sited the examples of Latin American cities where local and international actors had questioned regarding the stature of humanitarian agencies. Bourgeois (2001)<sup>6</sup> further replicates that varying perception of different actors regarding their interest in particular socio-political scenario remains a prime challenge for delivering humanitarian assistance. Setting the example of disputed operational framework during the humanitarian intervention in Kosovo, Schnabel and Thakur (2001)<sup>7</sup> have found out that fluctuating approach and interest of actors may initiate multi-prone complicity in delivering relief and other kinds of humanitarian works. Such types of

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<sup>2</sup> H. Slim, 2001. Violence and humanitarianism: Moral paradox and the protection of civilians. *Security Dialogue*, 32(3), pp.325-339.

<sup>3</sup> R. Rolnik, 2019. *Urban Warfare*. Verso Trade.

<sup>4</sup> E.D. Arias, 2013. The impacts of differential armed dominance of politics in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 48(3), pp.263-284.

<sup>5</sup> J. Balán, 2002. *Citizens of fear: Urban violence in Latin America*. Rutgers University Press.

<sup>6</sup> P. Bourgeois, 2004. *The continuum of violence in war and peace: Post-cold war lessons from El Salvador* (p. 425).

<sup>7</sup> A. Schnabel, and R. Thakur, 2001. Kosovo and the challenge of humanitarian intervention: selective indignation, collective action and international citizenship. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 20(3).

complicacies may arise due to the actor's differences of understanding in visualizing operational charter and legal framework of the humanitarian agencies or organizations. These charter or legal frameworks of the humanitarian organizations regulate their objective, mandate and guiding principles within the purview of international laws.

## **GENERAL CONCEPTUALIZATION**

The taxonomy of urbanization and the meaning of violence is wide and ambiguous. The nature of the urban area is different from a rural area in terms of structure, size, the density of population and their living diversity. Economic, social and other trends of globalization are converting rural areas to urban areas. In urban areas, the pattern of violent acts is different and heterogeneous. In such a scenario, the existence of violence remains a socially exogenous phenomenon. According to the definition of the World Health Organization (WHO), violence is 'the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or a community that either result in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation'.<sup>8</sup> Buss<sup>9</sup> defines violence as a large number of responses that varies in terms of topography, energy expenditure and consequences; while Berkowitz<sup>10</sup> specified violence as acts of aggression. Thereby, killing, kidnapping, drug trafficking, rape, torture, threat and such other forms of action or intention may fall within the fringe of violence. Such variations of understanding in the scholarly literature symbolize that the existence and nature of violence remain in an ambiguous form.

Like the wider and ambiguous existence of violence, the definition of urban violence also remains vague in the literature. According to Muggah and Savage, there is no agreed definition of urban violence.<sup>11</sup> Abrahams<sup>12</sup> has termed urban violence as acts of excessive force in urban areas whereas Ranger<sup>13</sup> outlines urban violence as a phenomenon of a rapidly developing globalized trend. In general understanding, the existence of violent acts in an urban context can be termed as

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<sup>8</sup> World Health Organization, 2010. Violence prevention: the evidence.

<sup>9</sup> A.H. Buss, 1962. The psychology of aggression.

<sup>10</sup> L. Berkowitz, 1989. Frustration-aggression hypothesis: examination and reformulation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 106(1), p.59.

<sup>11</sup> R. Muggah, and K. Savage, 2012. Urban violence and humanitarian action: engaging the fragile city. *The Journal of Humanitarian Assistance*, 19(01), p.2012.

<sup>12</sup> D. Abrahams, 2010. A synopsis of urban violence in South Africa. *International Review of the Red Cross*, 92(878), pp.495-520.

<sup>13</sup> T. Ranger, 2006. The meaning of urban violence in Africa: Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia, 1890–1960. *Cultural and Social History*, 3(2), pp.193-228.