Complex emergencies and humanitarian responses
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Undergraduate study in Economics, Management, Finance and the Social Sciences

This is an extract from a subject guide for an undergraduate course offered as part of the University of London International Programmes in Economics, Management, Finance and the Social Sciences. Materials for these programmes are developed by academics at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).
For more information, see: www.londoninternational.ac.uk
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins of humanitarianism</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian assistance</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding humanitarian assistance</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criticisms of humanitarian assistance</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarian intervention</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention in Somalia</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanitarianisms now</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminder of learning outcomes</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample examination questions</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part 2: Learning about the actors</strong></td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aims of the chapter</strong></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning outcomes</strong></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Essential reading</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Further reading</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supplementary reading</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of the media in a complex emergency</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flows of information within the ‘humanitarian system’</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War reporting</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information stereotypes</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencing an emergency through information</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminder of learning outcomes</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample examination questions</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 4: The politics of information</strong></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aims of the chapter</strong></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning outcomes</strong></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Essential reading</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Further reading</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supplementary reading</strong></td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of the media in a complex emergency</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flows of information within the ‘humanitarian system’</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War reporting</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information stereotypes</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencing an emergency through information</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminder of learning outcomes</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample examination questions</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter 5: Behind the violence</strong></td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aims of the chapter</strong></td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning outcomes</strong></td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Essential reading</strong></td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Further reading</strong></td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supplementary reading</strong></td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural violence</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grievances</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity politics</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three approaches to ethnicity</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The psychology of perpetrators and victims</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reminder of learning outcomes</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample examination questions</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Part 3: Intervention</strong></td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Aims of the chapter</strong></td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning outcomes</strong></td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Essential reading</strong></td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Further reading</strong></td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supplementary reading</strong></td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who are the actors and what is their role?</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>War economies</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The international arms trade</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Impact of aid and humanitarian assistance ....................................................... 110
The role of the military ...................................................................................... 110
Conclusion .......................................................................................................... 111
Reminder of learning outcomes ........................................................................... 112
Sample examination questions ......................................................................... 112

Chapter 7: Peace and justice .............................................................................. 113
Aims of the chapter ............................................................................................. 113
Learning outcomes ............................................................................................. 113
Essential reading .................................................................................................. 114
Further reading ................................................................................................... 114
Supplementary reading ....................................................................................... 114
Humanitarian responses in southern Sudan and northern Uganda .................. 116
The legal rights of refugees .................................................................................. 119
Post-Second World War agreements and criminal justice ......................................... 123
A resurgence of international criminal trials ....................................................... 125
The creation of the International Criminal Court ............................................... 129
Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 134
Reminder of learning outcomes ......................................................................... 135
Sample examination questions ......................................................................... 135

Chapter 8: From emergency to human security ............................................... 137
Aims of the chapter ............................................................................................. 137
Learning outcomes ............................................................................................. 137
Essential reading .................................................................................................. 138
Further reading ................................................................................................... 138
Supplementary reading ....................................................................................... 138
War, peace and ‘non-peace’ ................................................................................ 138
The challenges of peace ..................................................................................... 139
From emergency to development: reprogramming aid flows .............................. 140
Keeping the peace .............................................................................................. 141
Human security .................................................................................................... 142
Planning for security .......................................................................................... 145
Information and peace-building ....................................................................... 146
Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 149
Reminder of learning outcomes ......................................................................... 149
Sample examination questions ......................................................................... 149

Part 4: Case studies ............................................................................................. 151

Chapter 9: Humanitarian responses in southern Sudan and northern Uganda .... 153
Aims of the chapter ............................................................................................. 153
Learning outcomes ............................................................................................. 153
Essential reading .................................................................................................. 154
Further reading ................................................................................................... 154
Supplementary reading ....................................................................................... 154
Introduction .......................................................................................................... 156
Historical and political context .......................................................................... 158
Key international interventions ........................................................................... 160
Southern Sudan .................................................................................................... 162
Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 175
Reminder of learning outcomes ......................................................................... 177
Sample examination questions ......................................................................... 177
Chapter 10: International humanitarian responses in Liberia and Sierra Leone

Aims of the chapter
Learning outcomes
Essential reading
Further reading
Supplementary reading
Negative impacts of humanitarian action
Challenges to humanitarian principles
International political responses
Narrative chronological account of the conflicts and responses
Historical background
Phase 1 – The start of the conflicts in the early 1990s in Liberia
Phase 1 in Sierra Leone
Military and political developments
Humanitarian developments
Local NGO sub-contractors
Challenges of impartiality
Phase 2 – Intensification of the conflicts in the mid-1990s in Liberia
Phase 2 in Sierra Leone
Military and political developments
Humanitarian developments
Phase 3 – Resolution of the conflicts in the early 2000s in Liberia
Phase 3 in Sierra Leone
Military and political developments
Post-conflict peace-building developments
Conclusion
Reminder of learning outcomes
Sample examination questions

Part 5: Working as a humanitarian in a complex emergency

Chapter 11: Activity chapter: Role play: Working as a humanitarian in a complex emergency

Aims of the chapter
Learning outcomes
Essential reading
The Early Recovery Adviser’s job description
UN cluster arrangements
Discussions with UNDP staff based in Rata, the capital city
Arrangements with the Tala district administration
Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
Reflections on the first week in post
Scenarios: Decision points
Learning outcomes

Appendix 1: Sample examination paper

Appendix 2: Guidance on answering the Sample examination paper

Appendix 3: Full reading list for this course

Essential reading
Further reading
Supplementary reading
Part 1: A framework for the course
Welcome to **162 Complex emergencies and humanitarian responses**, a 300 course offered on the Economics, Management, Finance and the Social Sciences (EMFSS) suite of programmes. We assume that you want to take the course because you are concerned about the dreadful plight of populations in various parts of the world. Dramatic media images highlight their suffering on a daily basis. Something awful always seems to be happening somewhere. Why do these events occur? What is really going on? Are such disasters and upheavals becoming more frequent? What can be done about them? The course grapples with these questions. We really wanted to call this course ‘Complex emergencies and complex humanitarian responses’, but that was a bit of a mouthful. However, that is what the course is about: the complexity of both emergencies and the ensuing humanitarian responses.

The terms ‘complex emergency’ and ‘humanitarian responses’ are discussed at length in Chapters 1, 2 and 3. The former is a term that has been adopted by the United Nations to describe situations where armed conflict and the absence of effective governance have led to crises, characterised by extreme social upheavals. Humanitarian responses refer to a wide range of strategies, from small aid projects, perhaps supported by Oxfam or Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), to full-scale military intervention, which might even include aerial bombing.

Some of you may start by thinking that decisions on appropriate humanitarian responses to complex emergencies ought to be straightforward. There may be harrowing scenes to cope with, but the required actions are surely obvious. They are likely to include: getting food to starving people, providing basic health care, protecting refugees, supplying clean water, taking care of orphans, stopping atrocities and supporting peace negotiations. You might also suppose that in most conflict situations, there are two parties fighting each other, and that the killing
is between soldiers. Perhaps you also imagine that it is usually possible to know who are the ‘good guys’ and who are the ‘bad guys’.

The reality, however, is quite different. Not every humanitarian operates within a set of higher morals or behaves humbly or even appropriately. Humanitarians are sometimes referred to as ‘cowboys’, alluding to the fact that they can behave in a way that is not far off the behaviour displayed in the Wild West. This can apply even to those people who do not come wearing cowboy hats, but blue helmets – the United Nations’ peacekeepers, easily recognisable by the blue helmets they wear.

Humanitarians, we shall find, have to make very difficult choices, many of them contradictory and full of uncomfortable compromises. Sometimes they try to do a little to help while being acutely aware of the need to ‘do no harm’ (a term that has been adapted from the Hippocratic Oath of medical doctors). They avoid attempts to impose solutions, and are open to the criticism that they achieve almost nothing. In contrast, there are those who are more confident, and who insist on a duty to interfere where collective human pain is most acute. But it can be shown that their activities may be very counter-productive. As both the set books argue, putative humanitarian solutions have sometimes been an integral part of the horrors they are supposed to mitigate.

Another common misunderstanding is that a crisis situation arises simply from what is happening in the immediate crisis area. Very often it is overlooked that reasons for the creation or continuation of a crisis need to be sought elsewhere. There are likely to be national and international factors to assess: from the trade in weapons to that in diamonds, and from power politics in capital cities to global security interests. Even an apparently natural disaster, such as a famine, may have less to do with local crop failures than it seems. Often people do not starve because no food is available, but because they cannot access it. Famines can be politically engineered. They may be part of a strategy to make people act in a certain way, for example to leave a geographical area. Noting such things is crucial. As you will see, there are plenty of examples where food relief and other assistance has ended up making a situation worse by indirectly, or even directly, providing help to those with a vested interest in sustaining the circumstances that humanitarian actions were supposed to alleviate.

Understanding the reasons why groups become involved in war is just as tricky. We have often been led to believe that there are self-evident factors propelling particular populations towards organised and brutal violence. Especially in the last few decades, many wars have been presented to us as ‘ethnic’ conflicts, grounded in ancient hatreds. More recently, this conceptualisation has been broadened to include a supposedly growing number of religious wars, inspired by fundamentalist or millenarian ideologies. Another common perception is that wars are driven by evil individuals, who play upon ethnic and religious ideas for their own purposes. The wicked warmonger has come in many guises in recent years: Joseph Kony in Uganda, Foday Sankoh in Sierra Leone, Slobodan Milošević in former Yugoslavia, Charles Taylor in Liberia, Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan (and several other places too). Some analysts would add US President George W. Bush.

But such perceptions about contemporary wars are superficial and partial. The focus on identity politics and the obsession with individuals obscures other aspects of the violence, such as its economic functions. Perhaps most importantly in this context, over-simplified ideas about a conflict will lead to misconceived responses – ones that fail to address the underlying causes of an emergency or the realities on the ground.
What we are offering is a perspective on complex emergencies that may be new to you and may go against much of what you usually read in the newspapers or watch on television. We will do that by addressing various issues more generally and then using case studies to look more closely at the mechanisms at play. Gaining an in-depth understanding of particular places not only makes it possible for us to understand why it seems so impossible to improve a situation or why conflicts continue for decades, it can also teach us to ask different and better questions.

Such critical understanding is particularly relevant if you plan a career in the humanitarian aid industry, advocacy or in policy making or if you expect to deal with information regarding crisis areas. These careers will require you to assess which action might be the lesser of two evils, and being able to look at circumstances without ‘rose tinted spectacles’ and misleading assumptions is essential. Naïve humanitarians can be very dangerous people indeed.

At the Development Studies Institute (DESTIN) at LSE, similar topics have been taught to graduate students for many years. ‘Complex emergencies’ and ‘Managing humanitarianism’ are two of the most popular courses. Both of us writing this course have lived and worked in war-affected areas, mostly in Africa – in Tim’s case for well over 20 years. We anticipate that at the end of the course you will catch yourself re-evaluating much of what you thought about war and peace and the aid industry. We look at emergencies as a complex political web, keeping in mind that this web is the reason why millions of people suffer tremendously every day. We hope that you enjoy studying the course, even if some of what you will find out will be challenging and disturbing. Our intention is to inspire you to look at awful events in new ways, grounded in rigorous analysis, so that you can engage in crucial debates of our time with an informed passion.

Aims and objectives

The overall aim of this course is to provide you with an interdisciplinary introduction to the processes, events and policy debates shaping responses to war-related humanitarian crises, including emergency interventions in situations of ongoing armed conflict, and post-conflict recovery. Using recent case studies, this course will give you insights into the complexity of local realities in afflicted regions and the ways in which knowledge of those realities relates to policy making. It will also examine the financial and political constraints under which aid agencies, donors and governments operate. In so doing it will explore the divergence between the rhetoric and the reality of providing assistance to the world’s populations that are most acutely in need.

The specific objectives of the course are to:

- describe and evaluate the main theoretical concepts, histories and policies behind humanitarian aid and interventions
- demonstrate that common concepts about war and emergency are often misleading
- gain an understanding of the actions of perpetrators and victims
- use case studies to show how perceptions shape international responses to a conflict and how this influences the conflict
- understand the role of war economies
- analyse the difficulties in peace making
- illustrate how complex emergencies shape development policies.
To achieve this we will look in depth at the following key themes: definitions of complex emergencies, perceptions of war and violence, the history of humanitarianism, international responses and dilemmas, information policy and media in conflict, and challenges faced in making peace such as the implementation of peace agreements, establishing security and balancing peace and justice.

**Learning outcomes**

At the end of the course and having completed the Essential reading and activities you should be able to:

- demonstrate how responses to complex emergencies have shaped development in post-conflict societies
- analyse and explain the dynamics and violence of emergencies and their impact on development
- critically evaluate external factors, know and understand the international mechanics of conflict interventions
- use a range of case studies in the analysis of conflict intervention
- assess what role information plays in an emergency
- discuss general challenges faced in implementing a peace deal.

**Syllabus**

**Defining emergencies:** common perceptions of emergency and development; rethinking war, meanings of humanitarianism and population displacement.

**Politics of information:** influencing an emergency through information; flows of information within the ‘humanitarian system’; war reporting; information stereotypes.

**Behind the violence:** the rationality of violence; the psychology of perpetrators and victims; women and violence; analysing ‘ethnic violence’.

**Keeping the war going:** war economies; the international arms trade; the aid business; impact of aid and humanitarian assistance; the dilemma of humanitarian intervention; peacekeeping; who are the international actors and what is their role?

**Making peace:** management of peace processes; implementation challenges; displacement and repatriation of refugees and internally displaced persons; principles of refugee protection; disarmament; demobilisation and reintegration of combatants; justice and social healing.

**From emergency to development:** the challenges of reconstruction and re-programming of aid flows from an emergency to a development approach; best practice guidelines.

**Case studies:** The themes in this course are illustrated by the use of case studies. These demonstrate the specifics of complex emergencies and humanitarian responses in particular places, and make connections between debates and new institutional arrangements and how these work in practice.
How to use this subject guide

The subject guide outlines what you are expected to know for each area of the syllabus as well as suggesting relevant reading to help you understand the issues more fully.

Unlike many of the courses available on the International Programmes, we only ask you to read two textbooks as you work through this subject guide. We will assign readings from these two books at various points, but reading them both right through at the start would be useful. They will provide an excellent general overview.

In addition, each chapter of the subject guide refers you to specific articles that are available online or in the University of London Online Library (see details below). These accompany the information set out in the subject guide and supplement the analyses presented in the two textbooks. You will also need these various readings to do some of the activities. Do spend some time on the activities as they will help you to think about what you have read and make it easier to revise for exams.

We recommend that you stick to the chapter order of this guide, because each chapter presumes that you have gained knowledge from earlier chapters. At the end of each chapter you will find a list of supplementary reading if you wish to go deeper into a subject area. Don't be scared if that list looks too long – just pick whatever you find interesting. You may start to recognise author names from the subject guide so you can familiarise yourself more with one person's ideas should you wish to do so.

One thing you will notice about this course is that all topics are connected. It is in the nature of the complexity of the issues that topics will overlap and chapters are cross-referenced. This is deliberate and necessary for you to understand and see the connections that make up a complex emergency. So while you will be fine going through each chapter as a self-contained course of study, you will have to gain an understanding of the subject as a whole come examination time. At the end of the subject guide are detailed case study chapters, and an equally detailed role play chapter. These come at the very end of the course because they touch on many issues you will have learned and read about. The case studies and role play will help you see connections between the more general discussions and the specific circumstances on the ground. With the exception of the role play chapter, we will give you a checklist of expected learning outcomes at the beginning of each chapter. It is a list of the main points you should understand after working through the chapter and the associated readings.

Structure of the guide

The syllabus topics covered in this course are as follows:

**Part 1: A framework for the course**

Introduction
Chapter 1: What are complex emergencies?
Chapter 2: Contemporary war
Chapter 3: Humanitarianisms

**Part 2: Learning about the actors**

Chapter 4: The politics of information
Chapter 5: Behind the violence
Part 3: Intervention
Chapter 6: Keeping the war going
Chapter 7: Peace and justice
Chapter 8: From emergency to human security

Part 4: Case studies
Chapter 9: Humanitarian responses in southern Sudan and northern Uganda
Chapter 10: International humanitarian responses in Liberia and Sierra Leone

Part 5: Working as a humanitarian in a complex emergency
Chapter 11: Activity chapter: Role play: Working as a humanitarian in a complex emergency

Reading and resources advice

Essential reading
You only need to purchase two books:


David Keen, the author of Complex Emergencies, is a professor in DESTIN, the Development Studies Institute at LSE. He has written several other books, including an important study of famine in Sudan during the 1980s, in which he shows how a wide range of actors benefited from the food shortages and actually sustained them (The Benefits of Famine: A Political Economy of Famine and Relief in Southwestern Sudan, 1983–1989, Princeton University Press, 1994). In a similar vein, he has drawn attention to the functions of violence in complex emergencies, both at the local and global levels. He develops this theme in Conflict and Collusion in Sierra Leone (James Currey, 2006) and in Endless War? Hidden Functions of the ‘War on Terror’ (Pluto Press, 2006). The book chosen as a set text for this course summarises his views. It is based on lectures he has given on the DESTIN course on complex emergencies.


David Rieff is a well-known American journalist and political commentator. He is based in New York, and is a Senior Fellow at the World Policy Institute. In addition to A Bed for the Night, he is the author of numerous other books, including Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West (Simon & Schuster, 1995) and At the Point of a Gun: Democratic Dreams and Armed Intervention (Simon & Schuster, 2005). He is also co-editor of Crimes of War: What the Public Should Know, which can be accessed online and is listed below with ‘Other resources/interesting websites’. A Bed for the Night is a very critical examination of humanitarians in action. At one time Rieff was in favour of military intervention to resolve humanitarian crises, but by the time he wrote the book, his experiences on the ground in war zones had led him to change his mind. He has become an advocate of a less ambitious approach, one that returns to ideas of low-key, humanitarian neutrality.
The rest of the Essential reading for the course is available online.

We will assign specific parts of these books for each chapter. They present two very different perspectives, and will give you a good overview of the breadth of thought on the subject.

Other Essential reading will be assigned in each chapter and a full list of all reading for the course is presented in Appendix 3 at the end of the subject guide. Please note that weblinks in this guide may go out of date as you study this course; you should refer to the virtual learning environment (VLE) course page regularly for an up-to-date list. There is no need to read all the Essential readings before you read the chapter. We will tell you in each chapter what to read when. Most Essential readings are documents that can easily be downloaded from the internet. Sometimes, the list of readings at the start of a chapter might look very long. Don’t despair – many of the readings are very short articles and you can just read them online. In addition we will also give you some suggested Further reading for each chapter at which you might want to take a look if a topic particularly interests you. And if you really want to dive in, we will also give you a list of Supplementary reading. These might be useful when you are focusing on a specific area for your examination.

It should be noted that this subject builds on the previous knowledge and understanding that you will have gained in studying previous courses, if you are studying this course as part of a BSc degree.

Further reading

Please note that as long as you read the Essential reading you are then free to read around the subject area in any text, paper or online resource. You will need to support your learning by reading as widely as possible and by thinking about how these principles apply in the real world. To help you read extensively, you have free access to the VLE and University of London Online Library (see below).

Other useful texts for this course include:

Supplementary reading
In addition, we also provide you with a list of supplementary readings. This is helpful if you are really interested in a topic or if you want to concentrate on an issue for the exam. Don't be intimidated by the long list, but do have a browse if you feel inspired.

Online study resources
In addition to the subject guide and the Essential reading, it is crucial that you take advantage of the study resources that are available online for this course, including the VLE and the Online Library.

You can access the VLE, the Online Library and your University of London email account via the Student Portal at:
http://my.londoninternational.ac.uk

You should receive your login details in your study pack. If you have not, or you have forgotten your login details, please email uolia.support@london.ac.uk quoting your student number.

The VLE
The VLE, which complements this subject guide, has been designed to enhance your learning experience, providing additional support and a sense of community. It forms an important part of your study experience with the University of London and you should access it regularly.

The VLE provides a range of resources for EMFSS courses:

• Self-testing activities: Doing these allows you to test your own understanding of subject material.

• Electronic study materials: The printed materials that you receive from the University of London are available to download, including updated reading lists and references.

• Past examination papers and Examiners’ commentaries: These provide advice on how each examination question might best be answered.

• A student discussion forum: This is an open space for you to discuss interests and experiences, seek support from your peers, work collaboratively to solve problems and discuss subject material.

• Videos: There are recorded academic introductions to the subject, interviews and debates and, for some courses, audio-visual tutorials and conclusions.

• Recorded lectures: For some courses, where appropriate, the sessions from previous years' Study Weekends have been recorded and made available.

• Study skills: Expert advice on preparing for examinations and developing your digital literacy skills.

• Feedback forms.

Some of these resources are available for certain courses only, but we are expanding our provision all the time and you should check the VLE regularly for updates.
Making use of the Online Library

The Online Library contains a huge array of journal articles and other resources to help you read widely and extensively.

To access the majority of resources via the Online Library you will either need to use your University of London Student Portal login details, or you will be required to register and use an Athens login:
http://tinyurl.com/ollathens

The easiest way to locate relevant content and journal articles in the Online Library is to use the Summon search engine.

If you are having trouble finding an article listed in a reading list, try removing any punctuation from the title, such as single quotation marks, question marks and colons.

For further advice, please see the online help pages:
www.external.shl.lon.ac.uk/summon/about.php

Unless otherwise stated, all websites in this subject guide were accessed in November 2008. We cannot guarantee, however, that they will stay current and you may need to perform an internet search to find the relevant pages. You should also refer to the VLE course page where you will find an online reading reading list with updated article links.

Other resources/interesting websites

Websites

Action Aid www.actionaid.org/
Aid Workers Network www.aidworkers.net/
ALNAP www.alnap.org/
Center for Disaster and Humanitarian Assistance Medicine www.cdham.org/
Court TV – good current information on Hague War Crimes Tribunal for Yugoslavia www.courttv.com
DIANA – International Human Rights Database www.law.uc.edu/Diana/
Human Rights Institute www.hri.ca
Human Rights Institute, Columbia Law School www.hrcr.org
Human Rights Watch www.hrw.org
Humanitarian Resource Institute www.humanitarian.net/
International Center for Transitional Justice www.ictj.org
International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda www.ictr.org
International Crisis Group www.crisisgroup.org
IRN Humanitarian News and Analysis www.irinnews.org/
Medécins Sans Frontières www.msf.org/
Minority Rights Database – various, including useful links to international law sites www.uel.ac.uk
Newsvine International Aid Workers Today http://aidworkers.newsvine.com/
Overseas Development Institute, Humanitarian Policy Group www.odi.org.uk/hpg/publications_date.html
Oxfam www.oxfam.org/
Reliefweb www.reliefweb.org
Reuters Alert Net www.alertnet.org/
The Other World News http://theotherworldnews.blogspot.com/
The Road to the Horizon http://theroadtothehorizon.blogspot.com/
The Sphere Project www.sphereproject.org/
World Bank www.worldbank.org/
UN Humanitarian Affairs www.un.org/ha/
UNHCR www.unhcr.org/research.html
UNICEF www.unicef.org/
University of Minnesota website – good for accessing human rights information, with links to NGOs, UN Agencies etc.
www.umn.edu/humanrts/
UN OCHA ReliefWeb www.reliefweb.int/rw/dbc.nsf/doc100?OpenForm

Journals
A list of the most relevant journals is available at:
www.devstud.org.uk/publications/journals.htm
Particularly relevant journals include:
Development in Practice
Disasters: The Journal of Disaster Studies, Policy and Management
IDS Bulletin
Journal of Refugee Studies
Refugee Participation Network www.reliefweb.int/library/RSC_Oxford/data/type-rpn-01.htm

Examination advice

Important: the information and advice given here are based on the examination structure used at the time this guide was written. Please note that subject guides may be used for several years. Because of this we strongly advise you to always check both the current Regulations for relevant information about the examination, and the VLE where you should be advised of any forthcoming changes. You should also carefully check the rubric/instructions on the paper you actually sit and follow those instructions.

The examination paper for this course is three hours in duration and you are expected to answer three questions, from a choice of eight. You should ensure that all three questions are answered, allowing an approximately equal amount of time for each question.

The Examiners attempt to ensure that all of the topics covered in the syllabus and subject guide are examined. Some questions could cover more than one topic from the syllabus since the different topics are not self-contained. A sample examination paper appears as an appendix to this guide, along with guidance on answering the sample examination questions.

The most important thing when taking the exam is to read the question very carefully and to really think about what it requires from your answer. In addition, it is almost always good to answer an exam question with a clear argument. That does not mean a series of assertions, but an analytically robust case presenting a particular position. It makes for a better exam paper if you clearly present even a contrary point, as long as you show that you are familiar with the issues and problems around your
argument. You can still pass well with a more detached approach, but it is more difficult to obtain a really high mark. The trick is to show off what you know, keep focused on the specific points at hand, and demonstrate that you can think independently and critically.

Remember, it is important to check the VLE for:

- up-to-date information on examination and assessment arrangements for this course
- where available, past examination papers and Examiners’ commentaries for the course which give advice on how each question might best be answered.

We give you further advice on approaching your examination for this course at the end of the subject guide in Appendix 2.

We hope that you enjoy studying this course and wish you good luck for your examinations!

About us

Tim Allen is a professor at the Development Studies Institute of The London School of Economics and Political Science. He has worked on issues to do with war, refugees, health, violence and development, mostly in Africa, since the 1980s. He has carried out long-term field research in Uganda and Sudan, and has also worked in several other countries, including Ghana and Zimbabwe. His books include Trial Justice: The Lord’s Resistance Army and the International Criminal Court (Zed Books, 2006) and Poverty and Development into the 21st Century (edited with Alan Thomas, Oxford University Press, 2000). In addition, he has worked as a consultant for numerous international organisations, and has made radio programmes for the BBC and the Open University on issues related to international development.

Mareike Schomerus has worked for many years for German television. She is also an independent film maker. Her most recent documentary was My Own Master (2007), which deals with contemporary slavery in Sudan. She has been a consultant for Conciliation Resources, Human Rights Watch, and the Small Arms Survey, and (with Tim Allen) for UNICEF and USAID on a major study of child abduction in northern Uganda. She is currently completing a research project on the Ugandan peace negotiations.

List of abbreviations

- Central Intelligence Agency: CIA
- Coalition Provisional Authority: CPA
- Comprehensive Peace Agreement: CPA
- Disarmament, demobilisation and rehabilitation: DDR
- Economic and Social Council: ECOSOC
- Economic Community of West African States: ECOWAS
- Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group: Ecomog
- European Commission: EC
- European Union: EU
- Global humanitarian assistance: GHA
- Inter-Agency Standing Committee: IASC
Internally displaced people     IDP
International Committee of the Red Cross     ICRC
International Court of Justice     ICJ
International Criminal Court     ICC
International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda     ICTR
International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia     ICTY
International Law Commission     ILC
International Peace Research Institute, Oslo     PRIO
Joint Policy of Operations     JPO
Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy     LURD
Lord’s Resistance Army     LRA
Médicins Sans Frontières     MSF
Movement for Democracy in Liberia     MODEL
National Patriotic Front of Liberia     NPFL
National Resistance Army     NRA
Non-governmental organisation     NGO
Official Development Assistance     ODA
Operation Lifeline Sudan     OLS
Organisation of African Unity     OAU
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development     OECD
Post-conflict peace-building     PCPB
Principles and Protocols of Humanitarian Operations     PPHO
Return, resettlement and reconciliation     RRR
Revolutionary United Front     RUF
Rwanda Patriotic Front     RPF
Security sector reform     SSR
Stockholm International Peace Research Institute     SIPRI
Sudan People’s Liberation Army     SPLA
Uganda National Liberation Army     UNLA
United Liberation Movement     ULIMO
United Nations Children’s Fund     UNICEF
United Nations Development Fund for Women     UNIFEM
United Nations Development Programme     UNDP
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees     UNHCR
United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs     OCHA
United Nations Special Court for Sierra Leone     SCSL
United States Agency for International Development     USAID
West Nile Bank Front     WBNF
World Food Programme     WFP
Chapter 1: What are complex emergencies?

Aims of the chapter

In this chapter we introduce the term ‘complex emergency’ and how it came about. We also look at how it was incorporated into international policies. In addition, we introduce the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and raise various problems associated with OCHA’s definition of complex emergencies and the humanitarian activities it coordinates.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter, and having completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

- define the term ‘complex emergency’ and recognise its contradictions and ambiguities
- research information on complex emergencies as presented by ReliefWeb and OCHA

Women receiving food aid in Eastern Equatoria, southern Sudan.
Photo by: © Mareike Schomerus, 2006
• describe and contextualise the approaches of David Rieff and David Keen, the authors of the two textbooks.

**Essential reading**


**Further reading**


**Supplementary reading**


**Activity 1.1: Definitions**

Before you start reading, write down what you think a ‘complex emergency’ and a ‘humanitarian response’ are. Do not use the words ‘complex’, ‘emergency’ or ‘humanitarian’. Keep your notes. We will revisit them later.

**Now read**

To start you off, read the Introduction and the first chapter ‘The humanitarian paradox’ in David Rieff’s *A Bed for the Night*. It will introduce you to a lot of the concepts that we will deal with in this course.

**What is an emergency?**

The title of this course is made up of ‘loaded’ and highly problematic terms. On the one hand, the expression ‘humanitarian responses’ suggests a range of good intentions, but motivations may not be as altruistic as they seem, especially when military force is involved. As we shall see, referring to ‘humanitarian responses’ can be a gloss for something else, such as the national interests of powerful states. Even when it is not, the recipients on the ground are unlikely to share all the values and goals of those who are trying to help them. That is one reason why so many unarmed humanitarian workers have been killed in recent years.
On the other hand, the meaning of the term 'complex emergency' is also full of ambiguity, and its use may similarly hide a great deal. It refers to certain sorts of social and political upheavals causing widespread suffering, but how and why it is employed is by no means straightforward. There are several ideas that are often used interchangeably when describing complex emergencies and the responses to them. Let's look at these in detail.

First of all, the term 'emergency' can be rather misleading. An emergency is defined as either 'an unforeseen combination of circumstances or the resulting state that calls for immediate action' or 'an urgent need for assistance or relief'. However, the reality of what we call 'complex emergencies' today is quite different. More often than not, these emergencies are not unforeseen, but have been either politically created or, in fact, have been in an emergency-like state for a rather long time. Aid agencies today deal with cases where an emergency was declared years ago and yet the 'immediate action' either took a long time to be realised or the emergency situation has changed so little that the state of emergency has become a permanent one.

It is one of the characteristics of the term 'complex emergency' that more often than not, it can denote a situation that is much less fleeting than its description as an 'emergency' implies. It is therefore important to understand that what may be described in the media or by policy makers as an 'unforeseen combination of circumstances' is in fact an accumulation of several factors and triggers that have been building up for a long time. Similarly you will find that 'immediate action' is a term that can be stretched indefinitely: often responding to an emergency, even one that has been a long time coming, takes years.

In addition, the combination of the words itself seems odd. What would an uncomplicated emergency look like? What is gained by using the adjective 'complex'? Like the word 'humanitarian', it is, in practice, impossible to separate the expression 'complex emergencies' from the history of how it has been applied. This chapter comments on the emergence of the term and on various ways of assessing the problems it highlights.

'Complex emergency' is a much more recently introduced concept than 'humanitarianism'. It first began to be used towards the end of the 1980s, initially in relation to upheavals in Africa, and was adopted by various United Nations agencies and by several influential analysts in the early 1990s. One of the analysts taking up the term was the academic Mark Duffield. Drawing from his experience as Oxfam's Country Representative in Sudan in the early 1980s, he wrote an influential article called 'Complex Emergencies and the Crises of Developmentalism' in which he observed that:

Following the end of the Cold War, political tensions have decreased in East Asia and Latin America. In contrast, they have tended to concentrate and scale new heights in parts of Africa, the Middle East, East Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia…In 1993, for example, there were 26 UN-designated 'complex emergencies' affecting 59 million people. Apart from Haiti, it is significant that all were in the Africa-Eurasia zone…For the UN, a complex emergency is a major humanitarian crisis of a multi-causal nature that requires a system-wide response. Commonly, a long-term combination of political, conflict and peacekeeping factors is also involved.

(Duffield, 1994, pp.3–4)
Now read

Mark Duffield 'Complex Emergencies and the Crises of Developmentalism'. We recommend that you read the whole article, which can be accessed at: www.genderandpeacekeeping.com/resources/4_complex_emergencies.pdf

One thing you will notice is that Duffield is not opposed to the use of the term 'internal war', and is not altogether clear if this refers to something distinct from a complex emergency. However, this does not really affect his argument. He refrains from using the terms as tight analytical categories, but finds them to be helpful ways of indicating situations in general terms. It is probably a wise strategy, because, as we shall see, both are inherently problematic, and become more so if they are used in a narrowly defined way. We will return to Duffield's concepts about war in Chapter 3.

It is also worth reading David Keen's introduction to his book to get an idea of his perspective. He has a very different, but complementary, take on the topic of war, one that is imbued by his analysis of complex emergencies and the functions of violence. You will read his analysis of war later on, but right now, his introduction will give you a good overview of what else to expect.

Now read

David Keen Complex Emergencies, 'Introduction'.

In 1994, the same year that Duffield's paper was published, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) agreed a formal definition of complex emergency. The IASC is a mechanism set up in 1992 for inter-agency coordination of humanitarian assistance. It involves both the key UN and non-UN humanitarian partners, and its definition of complex emergency is generally accepted to have official status, although not everyone is prepared to accept it at face value. The IASC definition is repeated in the Orientation Handbook on Complex Emergencies, published by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) in 1999. We will look at this in more detail later.

A brief history of OCHA

OCHA is the UN agency that is supposed to facilitate the work of operational agencies delivering humanitarian assistance to populations and communities in need. As we will see, there are various problems associated with having one coordinating UN agency. There is competition between various UN agencies and there are a host of other agencies that are not part of the UN system, some of which have their own 'rules of engagement'. In the case of the Red Cross, the organisation even has its own legal mandate. The Red Cross has been particularly important in the development of what is now understood as 'humanitarianism'. We will look at the Red Cross in the box below (Box 1.1) and we will return to it when we discuss humanitarianism in Chapter 3.

The following section discusses the role of OCHA and the part of the OCHA Handbook that explains the meaning of the term 'complex emergency'. But first here is a brief history taken from the organisation's website:

In December 1991, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted Resolution 46/182, designed to strengthen the United Nation's response to both complex emergencies and natural disasters. In addition it aimed at improving the overall effectiveness of the UN's humanitarian operations in the field.
The resolution also created the high level position of Emergency Relief Coordinator (ERC). This new function would combine into a single UN focal point the functions carried out by representatives of the Secretary-General for major and complex emergencies, as well as the UN’s natural disaster functions carried out by the UN Disaster Relief Coordinator, UNDRO.

Soon after, the Secretary-General established the Department of Humanitarian Affairs (DHA) and assigned the ERC the status of Under-Secretary-General (USG) for Humanitarian Affairs with offices in New York and Geneva to provide institutional support.

Resolution 46/182 also created the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), the Consolidated Appeals Process (CAP) and the Central Emergency Revolving Fund (CERF) as key coordination mechanisms and tools of the ERC.

As part of the Secretary-General’s programme of reform in 1998, DHA was reorganised into the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, OCHA. Its mandate was expanded to include the coordination of humanitarian response, policy development and humanitarian advocacy.

OCHA carries out its coordination function primarily through the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, which is chaired by the ERC. Participants include all humanitarian partners, from UN agencies, funds and programmes to the Red Cross Movement and NGOs. The IASC ensures inter-agency decision-making in response to complex emergencies. These responses include needs assessments, consolidated appeals, field coordination arrangements and the development of humanitarian policies.

(Source: http://ochaonline.un.org/AboutOCHA/tabid/1076/Default.aspx)

Activity 1.2: Setting up an international body


Why do you think it was necessary to set up a UN body to coordinate humanitarian affairs? Make a list of reasons and keep it. You will need it later in the course.

Not surprisingly, an aspect of OCHA’s history that is muted in the version quoted from the organisation’s own website is the controversy around its creation. Other agencies were not particularly enthusiastic about being coordinated, and were often reluctant to cooperate fully. This problem has been exacerbated by the fact that OCHA does not run its own programmes, and this has made it seem like an ‘armchair expert’ by agencies engaged on the ground. A reason why the Department of Humanitarian Affairs was reorganised into OCHA was that it had not managed to perform its role effectively. OCHA has perhaps been a bit more successful – partly because it has become established as a good source of information and because Jan Egeland, a former head of OCHA, assumed quite a high profile role in a number of complex emergencies. Nevertheless, problems of coordination remain, and the new arrangements for re-organising the UN system – linked to so called ‘cluster’ arrangements – may end up effectively sidelining OCHA. This is an issue that we will return to later.
The current head of OCHA is the former British diplomat, John Holmes. His official title is UN Under Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator. So far he has assumed a less high-profile approach than his Norwegian predecessor, Egeland, who has recently published a book about his work in OCHA: *A Billion Lives: An Eyewitness Report from the Frontlines of Humanity*.

**Activity 1.3: Humanitarianism through Jan Egeland’s eyes**

Have a look online at this short extract from Jan Egeland’s book for a very personal view on working as a humanitarian. The extract can be found at:

www.simonsays.com/content/book.cfm?tab=1&pid=616663&agid=2

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**Box 1.1: The Red Cross movement**

The Red Cross is the best known of all humanitarian agencies. Its creation was linked to the experiences of a Swiss citizen, Jean Henri Dunant, who witnessed the horrors of warfare in Italy, and particularly at the battle of Solferino in 1859. His book, *Un Souvenir de Solférino*, published in 1862, reached a wide audience. He argued that societies needed to be formed to assist those suffering the consequences of war, and also that services provided to wounded soldiers should be provided on a neutral basis. The Société genovoise d’Utilité publique, a Swiss welfare agency, actively seconded Dunant’s suggestion, the result being the formation, in 1863, of the organisation that became known as the Red Cross.

The next year, delegates from 16 nations met in Switzerland, and the Geneva Convention of 1864 for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick of Armies in the Field was adopted and signed by 12 of the nations represented. It provided for the neutrality of the medical personnel of armed forces, the humane treatment of the wounded, the neutrality of civilians who voluntarily assisted them, and the use of an international emblem to mark medical personnel and supplies. The original Geneva Convention, its subsequent revisions, and allied treaties such as the Hague Convention for naval forces and the Prisoner of War Convention have been signed (although not always ratified) by almost all countries and their dependencies.

What is nowadays called the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is made up of over 180 national societies and two international groups with headquarters in Geneva: the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. The existence of the two international groups is the result of a split in the Red Cross movement after the First World War. The ICRC traces its origins back to the founding of the movement in 1863, and it is still a predominantly Swiss organisation. The Federation was formerly called the League of Red Cross Societies and originated in 1919, largely as a consequence of pressure from the American Red Cross. Partly based on the assumption that the end of the First World War would mark the end of war as a serious problem, the League expanded Red Cross activities to provide relief in other kinds of emergency situations. Although there has been a considerable degree of overlap, and tension, between the ICRC and the League/Federation over the years, essentially the former’s role is to operate in war zones under the terms of the Geneva Conventions, while the latter takes the lead in circumstances of natural disaster. In 1965, seven basic principles were adopted, which should apply to all parts of the Red Cross movement. They were eventually given official status in 1986. They are: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.

Henri Dunant was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1901, and since then the Red Cross has been awarded the prize three times (in 1917, 1944 and 1963). However, there have been very controversial moments in the movement’s history, most notably in Nazi Germany, both before and during the Second World War. The German Red Cross became involved in serious violations of the Geneva statutes, but was not
expelled from the movement. Later, the ICRC failed to expose the full details of what was happening in the death camps, in order to continue being able to work with Allied prisoners of war.

There is a great deal of material available on the ICRC and the Red Cross movement on a variety of websites. Some of the information above is adapted from the entry on the Red Cross in the Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia (www.infoplease.com/ce6/history/A0841326.html). Other useful sites include the websites of the American Red Cross (www.redcross.org/index.html), the British Red Cross (www.redcross.org.uk/index.asp?id=39992), the ICRC (www.icrc.org/) and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (www.redcross.int). There is, in addition, a good ‘Wikipedia’ essay on the Red Cross (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Cross#History). Note that care has to be taken with ‘Wikipedia’ sources, because they are not necessarily authoritative and can include errors – so it is important to check the sources cited in the entries, and it is normally better to use those.

**OCHA Handbook definition of a complex emergency**

The official definition of a complex emergency is ‘a humanitarian crisis in a country, region or society where there is total or considerable breakdown of authority resulting from internal or external conflict and which requires an international response that goes beyond the mandate or capacity of any single agency and/or the ongoing United Nations country program’ (IASC, December 1994).

Such ‘complex emergencies’ are typically characterised by:

- extensive violence and loss of life; massive displacements of people; widespread damage to societies and economies
- the need for large-scale, multi-faceted humanitarian assistance
- the hindrance or prevention of humanitarian assistance by political and military constraints
- significant security risks for humanitarian relief workers in some areas.

After presenting this definition, the *OCHA Handbook* highlights reasons why there is a need to treat complex emergencies as a special category. Essentially this is claimed to be connected with the changing nature of armed conflict. It is argued that, in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, the number of armed conflicts around the world increased, particularly those within state borders, and the associated violence has been directed towards civilians, causing terrible suffering among non-combatants and massive population displacement. The *Handbook* provides this explanation by Sergio Vieira de Mello, who was then UN Under Secretary General and Emergency Relief Coordinator (i.e. the head of OCHA). He made the observations in a briefing to the UN Security Council in 1999:

> Contemporary armed conflict is seldom conducted on a clearly defined battlefield, by conventional armies confronting each other. Today’s warfare often takes place in cities and villages, with civilians as the preferred targets, the propagation of terror as the premeditated tactic, and the physical elimination or mass displacement of certain categories of populations as the overarching strategy. The acts of warring parties in recent conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, Sierra Leone and Afghanistan bear testimony to this. Breaches of human rights and humanitarian law, including mutilation, rape, forced displacement, denial of the right to food and medicines, diversion of aid, and attacks on medical personnel and hospitals are no longer inevitable by-products of war. They
have become the means to achieve a strategic goal. As a result
even low intensity conflicts generate enormous human suffering.
Humanitarian needs are disproportionate to the scale of military
conflict. Meeting these needs has become more difficult, as the
dividing line between soldiers and civilians has grown blurred.

The OCHA Handbook uses the term ‘complex emergency’, which is
distinctly different from the IASC’s definition of a ‘major emergency’. The
IASC uses the term ‘major emergency’ to refer to ‘a situation threatening
the lives and wellbeing of a large number of people or a very large
percentage of a population and often requiring substantial multi-sectoral
assistance’ which, in contrast with a ‘complex emergency’, normally has
the following features:

- It is not politically motivated, and there are no political or conflict-
related impediments to humanitarian access: governments try to
respond and facilitate delivery of aid.
- Local and national capacities are inadequate to meet relief needs.
- International or cross-border operations are not affected by political
differences.
- The situation requires measures beyond the capacity of any single
agency.

Activity 1.4: OCHA Handbook

You can find the entire OCHA Handbook online. Have a look at:
www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/ocha_orientation_handbook_on.htm

Just browse a bit. A lot of the terms should by now be familiar.

Now read

Since you will be reading David Rieff’s A Bed for the Night as your textbook, we want
to give you another perspective on the text. Andras Vailin wrote a review of it for the
International Committee of the Red Cross: ‘Reflections on Humanitarianism: David Rieff’s
www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/htmlall/5SSEAR/$File/irrc_851_Vailin.pdf

Activity 1.5: Revisiting definitions

Go back to your notes on how you defined ‘complex emergencies’ and ‘humanitarian
interventions’ at the start of this chapter. Revisit what you wrote. What has changed in
how you would define the two terms? Rewrite your definitions and keep them.

Ongoing complex emergencies

One of OCHA’s activities is to administer ReliefWeb, an online gateway
to information (documents and maps) on humanitarian emergencies
and disasters. It has a map showing ongoing emergencies, divided into
complex emergencies and natural disasters. It is not exactly an official
listing, but is as close to such a thing as there is.

According to this source, the following are some of the world’s complex
emergencies in 2008: Central African Republic, Chad, Congo, East Africa
Drought, Eritrea-Ethiopia, Great Lakes, Kenya, Sahel Humanitarian Crisis,
Somalia, Southern Africa Humanitarian Crisis, Sudan, Uganda, West
Africa, Zimbabwe; Afghanistan, Caucasus (Armenia; Azerbaijan; Georgia),
DPR Korea, East Timor, Indonesia, Iraq, Lebanon, Nepal, Occupied
Palestinian Territory, Russian Fed. – Chechnya, Sri Lanka, Indonesia,
Balkans, Colombia, and Haiti.
Activity 1.6: ReliefWeb

It is interesting to note that not all those listed are separate states. Also the reference to drought and the mention of places such as Occupied Palestine and DPR Korea alongside Iraq and Sudan indicates that the term complex emergency is not used very precisely or even consistently. It would be a good idea to look at the site at this point and explore some of the linked commentaries and articles. It can be accessed at:

www.reliefweb.int/rw/dbc.nsf/doc103?OpenForm

There are several important points to observe about OCHA’s use of the term complex emergencies. First, the distinction between a ‘complex’ and a ‘major’ emergency can be hard to maintain. There are cases where an apparently natural disaster exacerbates tensions and leads to politically motivated impediments to humanitarian access. There are others, too, in which famine assistance is co-opted to fund wars and support political oppression. This seems to be implied by the inclusion of ‘East African Drought’ and ‘Southern Africa Humanitarian Crisis’ in the ReliefWeb list.

Second, in referring to a ‘total or considerable breakdown of authority’ there is the suggestion that complex emergencies are an aspect of state breakdown. In practice, this often seems to mean that the term is applied to acute social upheavals in locations where a government is so weak that it cannot do anything to resist its application, or when a government actively seeks support from international agencies to manage parts of its country. In general, the term is avoided in discussions of armed conflicts in Palestine, Nepal, Kashmir, Chechnya and Colombia. In this respect it is striking that all these places are actually mentioned in the ReliefWeb list, recognising that they have more similarities with circumstances occurring in Africa than is often supposed. It is, in addition, crucial to recognise that what may be diplomatically described as ‘state breakdown’ may in reality mean state oppression. The governments of many states experiencing complex emergencies may actually be effective and brutal perpetrators of violence.

Third, the definition of ‘complex emergency’ in the OCHA Handbook can be criticised for conflating a way of describing a situation with a preferred policy for dealing with it. Explicit reference is made to ‘humanitarian crisis’ and the requirement for ‘an international response’. In other words, for OCHA, complex emergencies, by definition, are situations involving international humanitarian agencies. OCHA itself is, of course, one such agency. So calling a crisis a complex emergency is a way of asserting its own role. One implication is that other agencies, especially those with an orientation towards longer-term development assistance, may resist the designation, because its use suggests that their activities are inappropriate. Use of the term has therefore become an aspect of inter-agency competition for funding. That competition goes back to precedents set at the end of the 1960s in the Biafra War in the Nigerian Civil War. You will read more about it in Box 1.2 below.

These difficulties with the official use of the term complex emergencies have prompted some analysts to set aside the concept, dismissing it as an unnecessary and euphemistic neologism. They prefer to refer to civil or internal wars, and to treat the issue of humanitarian responses as a separate issue. To an extent, that is what we do here, discussing the evolution of humanitarianism since the nineteenth century in the next chapter. However, we retain the term complex emergency, in spite of its limitations, using it in a loosely defined way to describe places where war and violent upheaval, associated with states in crisis, coincide with humanitarian responses. We do this partly because it is evident that there have been dramatic transformations in humanitarian action during
situations of ongoing war since the end of the 1980s. It is sensible to use the established term to refer to situations where such developments have occurred. In addition, there are equally serious limitations in the terms ‘civil’ or ‘internal’ war, a point we turn to in Chapter 2.

Box 1.2: The Nigerian Civil War: A defining moment

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has long worked in conflict zones. It works with the permission of internationally recognised governments and, even when serious abuses of human rights have been witnessed, usually maintains strict confidentiality. This approach is both its great strength and its weakness. The ICRC has been able to operate in places not accessible by other organisations, but its capacity to affect change is limited. Moreover, in situations of internal war, it has even less room to manoeuvre, because its activities depend largely upon the willingness of warring parties to abide by the terms of the Geneva Conventions, with their implicit assumption that wars are fought between the armies of internationally recognised governments. Secessionist movements and guerrilla groups may not recognise Red Cross neutrality, and governments may take the view that monitoring police activity and anti-insurgency operations is not part of the Red Cross mandate. Partly as a consequence, from the late 1960s onwards a more interventionist kind of NGO has emerged. In retrospect, the turning point was the summer of 1968.

The civil war in Nigeria had broken out just over a year before. Government forces had met with unexpectedly stiff resistance, and the southern state of Biafra was in a state of siege. Food supply was increasingly disrupted, and there were concerns about starvation. UNICEF and the ICRC responded with an impartial operation, which involved an arrangement with the Nigerian government to provide equal amounts of food and drugs to both sides of the conflict. However, in an effort to force Biafra to abandon its claims for sovereignty, in the spring of 1968 the Nigerian government withdrew permission for the ICRC-coordinated airlift. The situation rapidly deteriorated, and in June 1968 European newspapers and television news carried harrowing stories. Three thousand children were reported to be dying every day, but relief supplies could not be transported.

In fact, a limited amount of relief supplies did reach Biafra during this period, because various Catholic organisations had made an agreement with Biafra’s arms suppliers to carry ‘mercy cargoes’. In May 1968, the British-based NGO Oxfam made a £10,000 grant towards goods on this officially illegal route. Up until this point, Oxfam, like other international NGOs had operated only under ICRC auspices; however, there was growing frustration within the NGO sector over the ICRC’s lack of action. Once the Biafra story was taken up in the media, these frustrations resulted in a new kind of unilateral approach, partly based on the gun-runners’ mercy flights. Oxfam was one of the agencies taking a lead in this development, as Maggie Black explains in her official history of the organisation.

In mid-June, when the popular press set up its clamour about starving Biafra, Oxfam threw its agreed policy line, its understandings with other agencies, and its caution to the winds. With the pressure of ‘3,000 dying daily’, carefully worded statements of neutrality seemed to many Oxfam crusaders like so much foot-dragging. There was a humanitarian tiger to ride and, since its partners in the business of compassion were holding back, Oxfam would ride it alone. On 13 June, it announced that 1,000 tons of milk was being purchased for immediate shipment to Biafra, and launched an appeal for £100,000 to cover the costs.

(Black, 1992, p.122)

Oxfam’s assumption of the ‘Saviour of Biafra’ role breached previous understandings, but by early August had forced ICRC into re-starting its airlift without Nigerian government permission. Meanwhile, the alternative airlift started by Catholic groups received support from several other church-based organisations, and in October
Chapter 1: What are complex emergencies?

1968 became regularised as Jointchurchaid (JCA) with Scandinavian funding. By the end of the war, the two airlifts had flown 7,800 relief flights into Biafra. It was an extraordinary, heroic achievement. However, it has become widely recognised that it was also ‘an act of unfortunate and profound folly’ (Smillie, 1995, pp.101–106). There is little doubt that it prolonged the war for 18 months and reportedly contributed towards the deaths of some 180,000 people – although admittedly numbers like this cannot ever be considered as entirely reliable. The Biafran government had shrewdly manipulated international opinion through media coverage, and had convinced the aid agencies that a Nigerian victory would result in an appalling genocide, in spite of the fact that there had been no massacres in neighbouring areas liberated by Nigerian forces in the early stages of the war. Even more important to Biafra than the food and drugs that were flown in was the hard currency provided by the relief operations. Millions of US dollars were exchanged into the worthless Biafran currency, or paid to the Biafran government in the form of landing fees and other taxes. Much of the money was used to purchase weapons. It has been estimated that the whole relief effort cost $250 million. How much of this money was actually secured by the Biafran state is not known, but it was surely more than the $40 million, which the Nigerian government is reported to have spent on arms throughout the war.

Subsequently, Oxfam and other aid agencies tried to avoid what they came to regard as a mistake. However, the fact that relatively small NGOs had briefly become so influential at the height of the airlift, by setting aside issues of sovereignty and using the media to appeal directly to populations in Western countries, was not lost on people who felt that the international community had a duty to intervene in such situations. One such individual was Bernard Kouchner, a young French doctor, who had worked as an ICRC volunteer in Nigeria and had been shocked by the organisation’s response to the situation. In his view, ‘By keeping silent, we doctors were accomplices in the systematic massacre of a population.’ He and a group of colleagues decided to break with the ICRC policy on confidentiality, and to talk to journalists about what they had seen. Later he claimed, ‘We were using the media before it became fashionable…We refused to allow sick people and doctors to be massacred in silence and submission’ (Benthall, 1995, p.126). Returning to France in 1969, Kouchner started an International Committee against Genocide in Biafra, and he and his friends organised three independent missions to Biafra. Following the Nigerian government’s victory, members of the groups went onto work among victims of the 1970 Peruvian earthquake and with Palestinians after the massacres by the Jordanian army. Then, in 1971, they became formally constituted under Kouchner’s leadership as a new kind of NGO, calling themselves Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

The choice of the name MSF itself indicated an intention to set aside conventional notions of national sovereignty and, from its inception, the organisation was almost exclusively concerned with the quick deployment of emergency relief to populations judged to be in dire need, irrespective of official dictates and controls. Instead of always working through formal channels, it relied heavily on the international media to publicise its activities, both to secure funding, and to provide a degree of immunity from the lobbying of hostile governments and other political interest groups. Its success in mobilising French public opinion prompted the founding of similar NGOs in France and in other rich countries. In 1981 Kouchner himself founded one of these agencies, Médecins du Monde, ostensibly because he felt that even MSF was not committed enough to ignoring national borders and exposing abuses of human rights.

Activity 1.7: Characterising an emergency

Now take your own revised definition of a complex emergency that you wrote in the previous learning exercise. Go to the ReliefWeb list of ongoing emergencies and pick one. Why did ReliefWeb classify it as an ongoing emergency? Does your definition fit this case? Why, or why not? Write a list of your characteristics and see if you can find them in the emergency situation you chose.

Conclusion

Complex emergencies is a term linked to the ending of the Cold War and the opening up of possibilities of a more vigorous approach to humanitarian action by the United Nations system and other influential players in the international system. It is also a term full of ambiguity, tautology and contradiction, but it has become established as a way of referring to war-affected locations to which there is an international humanitarian response.

The term complex emergencies is closely connected with the experiments with humanitarianism since the early 1990s. These have been very critically analysed, for example by the authors of the two textbooks for this course, David Rieff and David Keen. Both of these authors argue that the responses to complex emergencies have been a key aspect of the emergencies themselves.

Reminder of learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter, and having completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

- define the term ‘complex emergency’ and recognise its contradictions and ambiguities
- research information on complex emergencies as presented by ReliefWeb and OCHA
- describe and contextualise the approaches of David Rieff and David Keen, the authors of the two textbooks.

Sample examination questions

1. Why does the United Nation’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) use the term ‘complex emergencies’?

2. Is the term complex emergency just a way of turning war into an aid problem?

3. Why are some war-affected states described as complex emergencies while others are not?
Aims of the chapter

In this chapter we will continue to look at definitions and how naming something actually influences the way we react to it. We will look at how the term ‘war’ has been defined and re-defined and how its use influences responses. We will also introduce you to the work of research institutions that attempt to develop indicators to ease definitions. Furthermore, we will learn how labels are used to justify responses and what some of the recent consequences of labelling are.

Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter, and having completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

- explain why the ways in which war is perceived affects how seriously warfare is taken as a global problem
- discuss how perceptions of war shape what kinds of responses are considered appropriate to alleviate the suffering of afflicted populations
- discuss some of the current data on war and attempts to make ‘objective’ indicators of the numbers and severity of wars
- discuss how the term ‘war’ is used to allocate status to violence and how this directly affects the way ‘enemies’ are defined.

Essential reading


Further reading


Supplementary reading


Activity 2.1: Defining war

Before you start reading, write down your own definition of what war is without using the word ‘war’. Keep your notes. We will revisit them later.

Naming wars

In the last chapter, we saw how the notion of complex emergencies is closely connected with concerns about armed conflicts and, in particular, organised armed conflicts that occur within states rather than between them. These conflicts are usually referred to as ‘civil’ or ‘internal’ wars. These two terms are used interchangeably, and basically mean the same thing, although it is quickly apparent that both are far from ideal. The first suggests conflicts within states for political power at the centre – but by no means all contemporary armed conflicts are like that. The latter refers to armed conflicts within states in a more general way, and that is a reason why some analysts prefer it. But a problem with the term internal war is the implication that causes of the violence and influences upon it are contained within the state concerned. There is a danger of underestimating external factors. Wars that may sometimes appear to be internal prove to be closely connected with regional and international developments. They may be waged across borders, may involve the armed forces of foreign states and
may be closely linked to global trade networks. A further difficulty with both terms relates to the word war itself. There is a suggestion, primarily based on historical experiences in Europe, that warfare follows a certain pattern: wars are fought between armies, are normally linked to the control of territory and are supposed to adhere to certain agreed rules. But many contemporary organised armed conflicts are not like that at all. Those occurring in situations of complex emergencies may involve few battles between combatants and may have characteristics that are very different to conventional ideas about fighting between clearly defined parties.

Noting this, one much cited analyst, Mary Kaldor, has argued that the end of the Cold War was connected with the emergence of ‘new wars’, as distinct from ‘old wars’. She suggests that they have completely different characteristics. Whereas what she calls ‘old wars’ were regulated and linked to the formation and maintenance of states, new wars are unregulated and are fought to gain control of power and resources wherever they might be. The state becomes one of several resources to exploit. Kaldor's ideas about new wars coincide in many respects with Duffield’s concept of complex emergencies, although he would probably not agree with all of her arguments. Her starting point is the wars that played such a major role in the formation of modern Europe. In contrast, his starting point is wars in Africa. For Duffield, most of the characteristics that Kaldor highlights seem to have been common for some time. For him, it is more the international connections that are most new. Indeed, from an African perspective, we might argue that actually what Kaldor describes as ‘old wars’, with rules of engagement and professional armies have historically been rather geographically contained and an unusual phenomena.

However, to be fair, Kaldor gives almost as much weight to international connections in her analysis as Duffield, and their approaches have moved closer over the years. This is indicated by the title of the book Mark Duffield published in 2001, which was called *Global Governance and the New Wars*. Also a key point underlying the arguments of both of them is that whereas the wars fought between countries in Europe helped establish modern states, that option is usually closed in most places referred to as complex emergencies. The United Nations system, the mechanisms of dispute resolution between its members and various other international institutions set up after the Second World War has militated against wars between states. There are exceptions, such as the war between Iran and Iraq or between Ethiopia and Eritrea. But in general the possibility of making the population of an internationally recognised state into an imagined community by promoting the idea of an external enemy (usually living in a neighbouring state) has been set aside as an option.

In Africa, the African Union (formerly the Organisation for African Unity) to which almost all African states belong, explicitly opposes actions which threaten the national boundaries inherited at independence from European colonial rule. Secession too is generally discouraged. One consequence is that putative nation states, which emerged as a legacy of colonialism, have been preserved by international decree. Collective identity is nevertheless often promoted by encouraging notions of enemies, but the violence associated with this strategy tends to be concentrated within formal national boundaries. It is partly for this reason that ‘ethnic’ conflict seems so prevalent.

Interestingly, this has been less the case in the former Yugoslavia. Here identity politics was very aggressively linked to territory, new states emerged and national integration was promoted by performing dreadful acts against those deemed to be foreigners (we will take a closer look at what identity
politics mean in Chapter 5). In this respect it is curious that Mary Kaldor’s concept of new wars was derived from research in that region. Events in former Yugoslavia had characteristics that were in several ways closer to those of previous European wars than most of those being waged in Africa. It is perhaps for that reason that what happened was so challenging for the ‘international community’. It certainly helps explain why, after so many atrocities had been perpetrated elsewhere, it was their re-occurrence in Europe that led to the re-invigoration of ideas about international criminal justice and the need to punish those who are responsible for the worst of crimes (an issue we return to in Chapter 7).

Now read
Mary’s Kaldor ‘Cosmopolitanism and Organized Violence’. This short paper gives a good overview of her ideas:


Activity 2.2: Defining new wars

While reading Mary Kaldor, make a list of what defines – in her view – a new war.

There is an additional important aspect of the new wars thesis that needs to be highlighted. In choosing to use the term, Duffield and Kaldor are taking advantage of a very important characteristic of the word war itself: it allocates status to violence. They both recognise that organised violence occurs on a large scale in parts of the world, but that it falls outside of the conventional models of international relations and military strategy related to established nation states. It also falls outside most of the provisions established to ameliorate the effects of armed conflict on civilians and to assist wounded or captured soldiers. It does not follow the rules, and could perhaps be called banditry, tribal raiding, criminal activity, human rights violations, low-intensity conflict, insecurity or oppression. Another option might be to just refer to complex emergencies, as OCHA tends to do. Duffield and Kaldor don’t necessarily reject these terms, and Duffield in particular has been willing to use the term complex emergency. Nevertheless they chose to use the term war as well. They recognise that that term too has its limitations, but its use emphasises that what is happening in various parts of the world should be taken very seriously.

The status attached to the term ‘war’ is of course why terrorist groups are keen to use it to describe their activities. It is also a reason why the British government resisted the term during the years of IRA bombings. The British government took the view that it would lend the IRA a kind of credibility, and preferred to call IRA activists ‘criminals’. In contrast, President Bush chose to talk about ‘the war on terror’. The phrase lends US activities in Iraq and Afghanistan an aura of credibility and importance. Also he was able to emphasise his own position as commander of the US armed forces, thereby enhancing his political position at home, and contributing to his winning of a second term in office. However, it might be argued that, in the long run, it was a strategic mistake in that it implies that those seeking to harm the USA are waging war themselves. Also in waging a war on something so vague as terror, it is hard to see how this war will ever end, at least if that requires there to be a military victory.

These different ways in which the word war has been used help to explain the contradictions in assertions made by analysts about the scale of war as a global problem. Kaldor, Duffield and many other commentators have suggested that the curse of war was terrible during the 1990s, and in many
regions became worse than before. The OCHA Handbook highlights this, and in the mid 1990s, at the time the UN was celebrating its fiftieth anniversary, there was much emphasis on the prevalence of war by international aid agencies.

However, other analysts, such as John Keegan, suggested that this was a misconception, and that ‘the worst of war is behind us’ (Keegan, 1998). These divergent perceptions are partly a consequence of how analysts use the war label. Keegan essentially means large scale, organised armed conflict between states. So his wars are actually not the same kind of thing as most of those studied by Kaldor or Duffield. In the next sub-section we explore these differing perceptions, and ask if there is a way of assessing the scale or significance of war in the contemporary world.

Now read

David Keen, Complex Emergencies, Chapter ‘Defining the Enemy’. In this reading, Keen gives deeper thought to what definitions do and how they influence the emergence and development of a conflict. This is a central theme when looking at complex emergencies and one we will return to in Chapters 4 and 5.

Activity 2.3: Comparing ideas

You will find that the first part of Keen’s chapter elaborates the points made above about forging communal values by allocating the status of enemy to outsiders, and the later part of it develops the argument with respect to the global war on terror. He approaches the issues in a different way to Mary Kaldor but, as you are reading it, think of ways in which his conclusions coincide with hers. To what extent are their approaches complementary? An issue to focus on is the degree to which their use of particular concepts and examples leads them to weigh evidence and make points in different ways. Do you think this matters – if so, why? We don’t ask you to do this as a kind of test. The point is to encourage you to read critically. Both Kador’s paper and Keen’s chapter engage with themes that concern all of us, and about which we all need to have well-founded and well-formulated points of view. As an extra bonus, thinking about this now will come in handy during the exam!

The scale of contemporary war

In The Oxfam Poverty Report of 1995, it is pointed out that the UN system was essentially a product of the blood-letting which had made the first half of the century so violent. The founders of the UN saw conflict prevention as the ultimate criterion against which the post-Second World War order would be judged. Thus, the first Article of the UN Charter committed governments to:

- maintain international peace and security, and to that end to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace, and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace.

However, according to the Oxfam report,

- Fifty years after the Charter was adopted, the world’s citizens are in greater need of a collective security system than ever. Throughout the world, the level of human rights violations resulting from current conflicts and rising violence is unprecedented. The costs are to be measured in deaths, broken lives, the destruction of livelihoods, loss of homes and increased vulnerability. Yet as the human suffering mounts, the international community’s response to conflict appears ever more inadequate.

(Watkins, 1995, p.42)
Similar sentiments could be found in the UNHCR’s *State of the World’s Refugees* reports. At the beginning of 1995, the total number of official refugees and ‘other persons of concern’ to UNHCR was more than 27 million. One staff member quoted: ‘We are living a scenario…that not even the most pessimistic among us could have predicted’ (UNHCR, 1995, p.97). Meanwhile, the UNDP’s *Human Development Report* of the previous year claimed that there were 52 major conflicts in 42 countries and another 37 countries affected by political violence. Of these 79 countries, 65 were in the developing world. It also noted that about half of the world’s states had recently experienced ‘interethnic strife’. A new approach was called for in international affairs, one premised on a ‘profound transition – from nuclear security to human security’ (UNDP, 1994, pp.22, 32 and 47). The term ‘human security’ it should be mentioned, has been seized upon by many analysts, not least Mary Kaldor. We will look in more detail at the term and its implications in Chapter 8.

Towards the end of the 1990s, Oxfam’s then Emergencies Director claimed that the highest crude mortality rates ever recorded by his organisation were found in the war zone of central Africa in 1997, and UNHCR officials privately admit that they have ‘lost’ more people who were formally under their protection between 1994 and 1998 than the cumulative ‘loss’ for all preceding years (Stockton, 1998). This latter point was confirmed to one of the authors of this subject guide (Tim Allen) in an interview with the UN High Commissioner herself in 1999. She talked of her disappointment at the lack of ‘humanitarian compassion’ in rich countries, particularly for events outside of Europe, and of her ‘despairing feeling’ when the rebellion in Zaire expanded in 1996 and her organisation ‘lost track of a million people’ (Sadako Ogata, interviewed in Geneva, February 1999).

Yet, in stark contrast to all these statements, other commentators writing towards the end of the 1990s, suggest that things are actually improving. Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg of the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University have argued that there is a ‘clear pattern of a global reduction in armed conflict’, which ‘does not correspond to the common understanding of the world as becoming more insecure after the end of the Cold War’ (Wallensteen and Sollenberg, 1998, p.623). Similar views have been expressed in many more recent publications, several of which are summarised in the article by Charles Hanley of The Associated Press news agency, issued in August 2004.

Now read


As Hanley himself notes, these arguments continue to be contradicted by newspaper headlines and politicians’ speeches. A very different view is expressed, for example in the extracts taken from a briefing issued by The Coalition Information Centers on ‘The global war on terrorism’ (see Box 2.1). Meanwhile a host of development agencies and human rights groups continue to emphasise the overwhelming costs of contemporary war, both in terms of squandered resources and the suffering of affected populations. A glance at the section dealing with war and displacement on the website of the ICRC certainly does not give the impression that wars are declining in numbers or intensity. On the contrary, it provides numerous accounts of how armed conflict results in large-scale flight of civilians, both within the frontiers of a country and, as refugees, across international borders (www.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteeng0.nsf/Content/...
refugees_displaced_persons?OpenDocument). Similarly, an article in the Guardian newspaper in October 2007 cited an Oxfam report, which claims that conflicts in Africa since the end of the Cold War have cost the continent £150bn, equivalent to all the foreign aid it has received over the same period, and that almost half of the countries on the continent have been involved in some form of conflict since 1990 (www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/oct/11/congo.international).

**Box 2.1: The global war on terrorism**


‘The attack took place on American soil, but it was an attack on the heart and soul of the civilised world. And the world has come together to fight a new and different war, the first, and we hope the only one, of the 21st century. A war against all those who seek to export terror, and a war against those governments that support or shelter them.’

*President George W. Bush, 10/11/01*

On September 11, terrorists attacked freedom.

The world has responded with an unprecedented coalition against international terrorism. In the first 100 days of the war, President George W. Bush increased America’s homeland security and built a worldwide coalition that:

- Began to destroy al-Qaeda’s grip on Afghanistan by driving the Taliban from power.
- Disrupted al-Qaeda’s global operations and terrorist financing networks.
- Destroyed al-Qaeda terrorist training camps.
- Helped the innocent people of Afghanistan recover from the Taliban’s reign of terror.
- Helped Afghans put aside long-standing differences to form a new interim government that represents all Afghans – including women.
- President Bush is implementing a comprehensive and visionary foreign policy against international terrorism. The President’s policy puts the world on notice that any nation that harbours or supports terrorism will be regarded as a hostile regime…

President Bush has built a worldwide coalition against terrorism. More than 80 countries suffered losses on September 11; 136 countries have offered a diverse range of military assistance; 46 multilateral organisations have declared their support; and with US leadership and international support, Afghans are putting aside long-standing ethnic and political differences to form a new and representative government…

‘The message to every country is, there will be a campaign against terrorist activity, a worldwide campaign. And there is an outpouring of support for such a campaign. Freedom-loving people understand that terrorism knows no borders, that terrorists will strike in order to bring fear, to try to change the behavior of countries that love liberty. And we will not let them do that.’

*President George W. Bush, 19/09/01*

- Since September 11, President Bush and Secretary of State Colin Powell have built a worldwide coalition for the war against terrorism. The coalition is stronger than ever and continues to grow.
Since September 11, President Bush has met with leaders from at least 51 different countries to help build support for the war against terrorism.

136 countries have offered a range of military assistance.

The US has received 46 multilateral declarations of support from organisations.

The UN General Assembly and Security Council condemned the attacks on September 12.

NATO, OAS and ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand and the US) quickly invoked their treaty obligations to support the United States. Our NATO allies are assisting directly in the defense of American territory.

142 countries have issued orders freezing the assets of suspected terrorists and organisations.

89 countries have granted over-flight authority for US military aircraft.

76 countries have granted landing rights for US military aircraft.

23 countries have agreed to host US forces involved in offensive operations.

Through intelligence cooperation with many nations, we are acquiring evidence against those responsible for the attacks of September 11 and we are better able to prevent future attacks.

With US leadership and with international support, Afghans have put aside long-standing ethnic and political differences to form a new interim government, naming a president and 29 ministers with portfolio. The new government will also include women, who have been oppressed by the Taliban regime.

On December 11, more than 120 nations around the world answered President Bush’s call to reject terrorism and commemorate the victims of the September 11 attacks by holding remembrance ceremonies…

So how do we make head or tail of all this? A basic problem with trying to make an assessment of the scale of contemporary war is that it is not clear what it is that we are discussing. A standard dictionary definition of war is: ‘strife, usually between nations, conducted by force, involving open hostility and suspension of ordinary international law’ (The Concise Oxford Dictionary). But if this is what war is, then most of the recent events that are commonly described as wars are exceptions, in that they are not fought between recognised nation states, and their connection with ‘ordinary international law’ is tenuous.

In practice, it seems that ‘war’ is used in various ways as a means of indicating the occurrence of a kind of violence in which collective public killing can be expected to occur. As has been indicated above, it is often a means of conferring status on a conflict, suggesting that a particular situation should be taken seriously and not just treated as criminal activity or dismissed as petty squabbling. The conferring of such status can be a point of controversy, especially in situations occurring within a state, and use of the label sometimes reveals as much about the user as it does about those who are fighting. It may be a way of highlighting the scale of killing in a particular place by an affected group (e.g. in northern Uganda) or it may be used to suggest that killing can be partly or even entirely condoned (e.g. by the USA and its allies during the 1991 war with Iraq).

More broadly, there seems to have been an increasing acceptance of the term war at international fora and in the international media for localised conflicts which formerly would have been ignored. In other words, there has been a shift in usage of the term. This raises the question: is the violence that is commonly called war really becoming more serious or is it just that some commentators (such as Mary Kaldor or Mark Duffield) and
some institutions (such as aid agencies and news media organisations) are allocating the status of war to conflicts more readily? The obvious response is to try to avoid the ambiguities of the term by deciding upon a specific set of measurable indicators.

The SIPRI indicators

The most well-established war indicators are those of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI). Although SIPRI actually avoids the term war itself in its annual Yearbook, preferring to use the less overtly problematic expression 'major armed conflicts', the SIPRI data is commonly used as a source for assessing the scale of the global war problem. Sometimes this is done explicitly (e.g. Thomas, 1994; Carnegie Commission, 1997) and sometimes indirectly (e.g. The World Bank, Breaking the Conflict Trap, 2003, p.94, http://indh.pnud.org.co/files/rec/Conflictrap.pdf).

During the 1990s, SIPRI defined major armed conflicts as:

prolonged combat between the military forces of two or more governments, or of one government and at least one organised armed group, involving the use of weapons and incurring the battle-related deaths of at least 1,000 people during the entire conflict and in which the incompatibility concerns government and/or territory.

Using this definition, according to SIPRI there were 36 such conflicts in 1986 (the first year that this indicator was used in the Yearbook), 37 in 1990, 31 in 1994 and 25 in 1997. However, SIPRI subsequently revised its definition to include only those conflicts resulting in at least 1,000 battle-related deaths in any single calendar year. As a consequence the numbers of major armed conflicts in the SIPRI list declined. The new definition was also used to revise previous estimates, so that the number of major armed conflicts in 1990 dropped to 32, in 1994 to 29 and in 1997 to 19. The number then rose dramatically in 1998 to 27, and has now declined to 16.

One obvious point to make is that such assessments exclude many situations sometimes described as war in newspaper articles, aid agencies (reports) or by researchers working among small population groups – such as anthropologists. SIPRI's aim is only to indicate the prevalence of larger scale conflicts. Recognising this, the 2007 Yearbook notes that:

Data on the many forms of collective violence, not just that involving states, would help show whether the recent downward trend indicated in the armed conflict data reflects a genuine decline in collective violence worldwide.

(SIPRI Yearbook Chapter Summaries, 2007, p.4)

Another issue with this kind of indicator is that the benchmark used to define the category being assessed has an arbitrary element. This is illustrated by SIPRI's own changed weighting of its key indicator: battle-related deaths (which incidentally would affect the data presented in the World Bank's Breaking the Conflict Trap report cited above). In addition, the question needs to be asked: what exactly is a combat-related fatality, and is it a good indicator of an armed conflict's intensity?

It is usually impossible to know if combat-related casualty rates are accurate. They are often no more than a guess, and they are commonly linked to a political agenda. Estimates of those who have died in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1992–95 vary from 400,000 in one UN source, to the most
commonly quoted figure of 200,000 (which seems to have been originated with the Bosnian Information Ministry in June 1993), to as little as 20,000 in *The World Disasters Report*, published by ICRC (the International Committee of the Red Cross). Obviously even the low figure for casualties is enough for Bosnia-Herzegovina to appear in both the SIPRI and Wallensteen and Sollenberg surveys. But the variation in assessments is striking, and is equally apparent in smaller-scale conflicts, many of which should also perhaps have been included.

In parts of the world there is organised armed combat that frequently results in the deaths of many more people than in the past. An increasing ease of access to sophisticated light weapons (such as automatic assault rifles) means that fighting which in the past would lead only to a few casualties, now can escalate very quickly (an issue which will be explored in Chapter 6). Anthropologist David Turton has described one such incident which occurred in Omo Valley of southwest Ethiopia on 21 February 1987, when a Nyangatom war party crossed the Omo and attacked a group of Mursi – mostly women and children (Turton, 1994). The Nyangatom had obtained Kalashnikov rifles in return for cattle from warring factions in Sudan. Several hundred Mursi were killed, perhaps as much as a third of the whole Mursi population. Subsequently, there

**Figures 1 and 2: Regional distribution and number of major armed conflicts 1997–2006**

have been further attacks, and the Mursi have also managed to obtain Kalashnikovs with which to launch a counter-offensive. No one really knows how many have been killed in the area, but there is no doubt that more than a thousand casualties have occurred. Possibly there have been more than a thousand in a single year if all the groups in the Omo Valley region are included, so a case could be made for the area to be listed as a war zone by Wallensteen and Sollenberg. Arguably it is reasonable to exclude it from the SIPRI survey, because government forces have not been directly involved, but elsewhere in Ethiopia, and in other countries, this is not the case.

Moreover, even if it was possible to use data on combat-related deaths with confidence, it may be a misleading indicator. It is a matter of opinion, for example, how many of those who died in Bosnia were casualties of this kind. Many seem to have been unarmed people who were rounded up and murdered. In many modern wars, being a combatant can be relatively safe. According to some sources, at the beginning of the twentieth century, 90 per cent of all war casualties were military, whereas today about 90 per cent are civilian (UNDP, 1994, p.47). This too can be no more than a good guess, and it also begs the question what a civilian is in contemporary civil wars – given, for example, that there may be no formalised recruiting mechanisms for soldiers, women and children may be directly involved in supporting certain factions, and whole populations may be involved in violent acts. Nevertheless, it is the case that many insurgents and government forces seem to spend most of their time avoiding each other. The immediate military objective of warring factions may not be to defeat the other side in combat, but to extort a livelihood from or traumatise a population as a whole.

**The Hamburg Study Group data**

One response to the difficulties of using casualty rates is that adopted by the Study Group on the Causes of War at Hamburg University. This group sets them aside as a defining characteristic. Their key indicator is that regular armed forces of a government must be engaged at least on one side. This is perhaps an even more narrow way of categorising war, but it is much easier to verify and it can be easily used to give a longer term perspective. Figure 3 shows the annual frequency of wars, defined in this way, between 1945 and 2000. It divides the wars into wars between officially recognised states (international wars), wars that are internal to states (internal wars) and wars that are waged across borders or which are internal, but involve armed forces from other states (mixed wars).

According to this source, there have been around 200 wars since 1945. The annual frequency of outbreak oscillates in an irregular way, which does not differ from earlier periods. However, since the end of the 1950s, the number of wars ongoing from year to year has increased. This means that more wars have begun than have ended, and that new wars last longer. From five wars in 1945, the trend resulted in a peak of 51 ongoing wars at the end of 1992. In the mid 1990s the number declined to around 40, but this still indicates that nearly a quarter of all wars which had broken out since the end of the Second World War were being waged at that time. Also the number rose again towards the end of the decade. This is a very different, and more worrying, interpretation to that suggested in the surveys linked to battle-related deaths.

Whatever the limitations of the way that the Hamburg study classifies war, it does demonstrate something very significant: that the military
forces of more and more states have become involved in serious armed conflicts within the territories that they are supposed to govern. Many of the affected states are former colonies that became independent in the two decades after the Second World War. It seems that their political integrity and legitimacy has increasingly been challenged. The data also suggest that the challenge has been growing in significance fairly consistently since the late 1950s. In other words, the end of the Cold War is not in itself an adequate explanation, but may be seen as part of a longer term process, whereby artificially formed and fragile states increasingly face violent dissent from within.

It is also important to note that both the SIPRI and Hamburg approaches are in agreement on three things.

First, most wars are not being openly fought between states (according to the Hamburg study, since 1945 less than 25 per cent of wars have been of this kind). Second, no wars are waged directly by rich states against each other (which is the reason why John Keegan talks about the worst of war being behind us). Third, the majority of wars now take place in Africa and Asia. Relatively few wars are indicated in eastern Asia or South America. As Mark Duffield observes in the quote above, during previous decades these regions were severely affected, largely due to the effects of Cold War politics. Now there is a shift in the concentration of wars towards some of the word’s most impoverished places – places that are now often referred to as being in a state of ‘complex emergency’.

Other indicators of the scale of contemporary war

The usual location of contemporary large-scale warfare helps explain why those most vociferous in asserting the seriousness of the situation tend to be individuals and organisations representing the interests of people from developing countries. Often they will present their own statistics from their own estimates of the number of wars (like the 53 wars mentioned in the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report that introduced the notion of ‘human security’) – a concept we will explore further in Chapter 8. In addition, they commonly refer to other kinds of indicators, focusing more on the social effects of the fighting.

They might, for example, refer to the crude mortality rate (CMR): the numbers of deaths per 10,000 persons per day. Under ‘normal’
circumstances, the CMR is less than 0.5, and a rate of two or three suggests a very extreme situation. In parts of central Africa during 1994 and again in 1997 staggering CMRs were recorded of around 60 (Stockton, 1998, pp.352–53). These data highlight that something dreadful must have been occurring in the places in which they were collected. However, this sort of information cannot be readily used for comparative purposes. CMRs based on local level surveys are usually hard to come by, and where they are available it is often not clear what sampling methods have been used. In practice it is virtually impossible to gather this kind of data unless a population is relatively static (i.e. not actually in the process of fleeing) and the security situation is such that researchers are not going to be killed.

Another approach is to assess levels of forced displacement. It can be argued that this is a relatively good indicator of the intensity of social upheaval, and longitudinal data is readily available on refugees in annual surveys. The first chapter of a 1997 MSF Report, entitled World in Crisis, begins with the observation that:

Civilians have always been under threat in war. But the methods of modern warfare seem sometimes to threaten more of them more of the time. In recent years wars have seemed characterised by endless streams of wretched refugees, fleeing violence or mayhem or starvation.

(Van Mierop, 1997, p.1)

A later chapter refers to ‘a world in a state of upheaval’, and notes that the ‘multiplication of conflicts and violent situations has swollen the ranks of refugees and displaced populations to over 50 million people’ (Jean, 1997, p.42). A similar figure is given in the 1996 edition of The Blue Helmets, the United Nations’ official report on peace-keeping (UN, 1996, p.4). The Oxfam Poverty Report suggested in 1995 that, unless something was done, there might be 100 million refugees by the year 2000 (Watkins, 1995, p.43).

But once again, we need to be cautious about such estimates. There are four main reasons why refugee figures may be inaccurate:

1. The numbers may have been exaggerated in order to secure international aid.
2. It can be impossible to register refugees accurately when they are dispersed in a host population.
3. It may not be known when refugees have returned to their place of origin.
4. If refugees do not return to their country of origin but are absorbed into a host population, it may be unclear when they should stop being included in refugees statistics.

In addition, it needs to be remembered that official data on refugee flows have not always been collated on the same basis, and some very large displaced groups have never been formally registered as being refugees. For example, perhaps two million Vietnamese were displaced between North and South Vietnam in 1954, and an estimated 10 million people crossed into India during the Bangladesh war of independence in 1971. Such groups have been largely overlooked and, as a consequence, graphs indicating rising refugee numbers over time may seriously underestimate the scale of the problem in the past.

Moreover, in civil wars, most of those who flee the fighting may not actually cross an international border. This may be because the border is too far away or too dangerous to reach, or because a neighbouring country offers
no advantages in terms of security, or because a border has been closed. Internally displaced people are not technically refugees, and there is no established system for effectively categorising, surveying or protecting them (although various ad hoc measures have been introduced to extend UNHCR's mandate in specific cases). It is therefore hardly surprising that figures quoted sometimes vary widely. The World Refugee Survey, for example, claims that in 1996 there were 1,000,000 internally displaced people in Liberia alone – more than three times the corresponding UNHCR figure.

Since 1998, an attempt has been made to collate the best available information on refugees and internally displaced people (IDP) by the Norwegian Refugee Council (Norwegian Refugee Council, 1998). Drawing on conservative estimates from UNHCR and the US Committee for Refugees, this survey suggests that official refugee numbers rose from under three million in the early 1970s to over 10 million in the early 1980s to around 17 million in the early 1990s. They subsequently declined to around 12 million in the mid-1990s, rising to around 15 million in 2000, and then declining again to around 10 million in 2006. However, the decline in refugee numbers has to be assessed against the numbers of IDPs. Particularly because from the mid-1990s, UNHCR became responsible for so-called 'safe havens' – areas within war-torn countries in which people were supposedly protected, and from which they were effectively prevented from fleeing across international borders and thereby becoming refugees. Figures for internally displaced people from the mid 1990s include around 10 million people in these safe havens (classified as 'other persons of concern' to UNHCR) in *The State of the World’s Refugees* (UNHCR, 2006). UNHCR data on 'populations of concern' to the agency are presented in Figure 4. Norwegian Refugee Council assessments of the overall number of IDPs (i.e. including those not designated as 'persons of concern' to UNHCR) suggest a rapid rise from the early 1980s, from under 10 million to around 27 million in 1995, then a decline to about 15 million in 1997 followed by another rise to around 24 million in 2001. The latest figure is 24.5 million (www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CFA06/).
Activity 2.4: Categorising conflict

Go to the SIPRI website and find the latest yearbook at:

Look at the introduction and overview of armed conflicts. How do they differ from the information in this chapter? To what extent is SIPRI’s interpretation of the global problem of war a product of the way that they categorise conflict?

In each yearbook there are a series of essays on aspects of war. Make a list of reasons for the choice of topics in the current yearbook. To what extent is the choice of topics related to possible ways of alleviating the suffering of war? How is the focus of the current SIPRI yearbook connected with what you have learned about current complex emergencies by looking at the list of current emergencies on ReliefWeb? How do the lists of SIPRI and ReliefWeb compare? Note down discrepancies if you find any.

Now read

David Keen, Complex Emergencies, Chapter ‘War’. When reading this chapter, think about what you have just learned about the numbers of conflicts. How does it fit in with what he is writing?

Activity 2.5: Redefining war

Take out the definition of war you wrote in the beginning of the chapter. How would you rewrite it now, having read this chapter?

Conclusion

So what conclusions can we derive from the foregoing discussion? To begin with, it is clear that war is partly in the eye of the beholder. When President George W. Bush talks about the ‘war on terror’ he is using war to explain and, to some extent, justify the use of violence for strategic purposes. But he is not using ‘war’ to refer to organised armed conflict in battles between soldiers. His notion of war does not accord with the categorisations of war in most reports on the scale of the global problem. Efforts to make an ‘objective’ assessment of the global problem also vary.

However, certain things can be said with a degree of confidence, not least that there has not been a massive increase in global warfare since 1990. Rather the prevalence of wars involving formal armed forces continued to rise in the early 1990s at about the same rate as previously, and may have declined slightly since the middle of the decade. It is also apparent that most of these wars are not being fought between states, and that they mostly occur in parts of the world that are relatively poor and are least equipped to recover quickly.

Finally, there is evidence that, in some regions the adverse social effects of wars may have become more extreme, including very high CMRs and a rise in the number of forcibly displaced people. International concerns about these afflicted populations have been fuelled by a variety of factors, including new media technologies, the proximity of social upheaval to Western Europe and, in recent years, by concerns about the spread of global terrorist networks. The combination of these concerns in the post Cold War era has led to some remarkable efforts aimed, at least ostensibly, at containing, preventing or ameliorating suffering. It is this combination of humanitarianism and war that is the focus of the next chapter.
Reminder of learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter, and having completed the Essential reading and activities, you should be able to:

• explain why the ways in which war is perceived affects how seriously warfare is taken as a global problem
• discuss how perceptions of war shape what kinds of responses are considered appropriate to alleviate the suffering of afflicted populations
• discuss some of the current data on war and attempts to make ‘objective’ indicators of the numbers and severity of wars
• discuss how the term ‘war’ is used to allocate status to violence and how this directly affects the way ‘enemies’ are defined.

Sample examination questions

1. Why is it so difficult to measure and assess the global problem of war?
2. To what extent is David Keen’s analysis of war contradicted by the apparent decline in numbers of conflict?
3. Is there anything that is really ‘new’ about contemporary wars?