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PROACTIVE PRESENCE: A NON-VIOLENT STRATEGY FOR CIVILIAN PROTECTION DURING ARMED CONFLICT

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*"Civilians are not merely the beneficiaries of international efforts for protection. They are protagonists in their own protection"*¹

Introduction

In today's wars, over 35 million civilians are found to be fleeing the scourges of conflict around the world.² Not only caught in the cross-fire of opposing armies, many civilians in the present-day have become deliberate targets in the increasingly violent and destructive wars of the post-Cold War era. While the line between combatant and non-combatant continues to blur, and entire societies are ruined in the process, there is a greater need now more than ever to formulate effective plans for protecting vulnerable populations from harm, at times of war. Indeed, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon affirms that even where the prevention of armed conflict is not possible, the protection of civilians must remain an "absolute priority".³

Notwithstanding the seriousness of the plight of non-combatants in war, efforts by the international community to provide civilian protection have (thus far) largely failed to produce effective results. Continuing atrocities against innocents in places such as Darfur, Myanmar, Zimbabwe and Tibet support the claim that the global community has remained mostly powerless in the face of human tragedy, and that where it has played a notable role, its actions have been "limited, selective, and subject to utilitarian calculations".⁴ In light of these realities, it would seem necessary for peace workers to start considering different options for protection which are not wholly state-centered or top-down in their approach. One of these strategies, known as "proactive presence" involves the coupling of non-violent, non-state actors with local communities to ensure protection through measures such as monitoring and accompaniment. These tactics, employed by organizations such as Peace Brigades International (PBI), Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP), and Witness for Peace (WFP) have been gravely overlooked, despite signs of success in the field. This paper thus argues that greater attention must be devoted to partnerships with local groups for cooperative protection, and that they must be considered as viable solutions, not only for the protection of civilians, but for the promotion of sustainable resolutions to ongoing conflicts.

This paper will be separated into four parts. The first section will detail the moral and legal evolution of the 'civilian' (or 'non-combatant') concept in the context of war. The second section will show that despite various normative developments in the last century, there are still inherent practical challenges of

¹ Liam Mahony, "Proactive Presence: Field Strategies for Civilian Protection", HD Center for Humanitarian Dialogue (2006), 73. Available at: <http://www.hdcentre.org/files/Proactive%20Presence.pdf>

² United Nations, "Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict", 28 October, 2007. Doc: S/2007/643. Paragraph 3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Claude Bruderlein, "The End of Innocence: Humanitarian Protection in the Twenty-First Century", in *Civilians in War*, ed. Simon Chesterman (Boulder: CO.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 221.

undertaking the responsibility of protection in a top-down manner. Ambiguities, lack of resolve, and a mushrooming of actors (without a clear sense of purpose) make it very difficult to rely solely on organizations like the UN to supply protection on the ground. The third section will introduce the idea of “proactive presence”, and examine the merits of this non-violent protective strategy. Based on the examples studied, it will become clear that this approach represents a qualitative difference from both the goals and underlying ideologies currently employed by global protection policies. Finally, the fourth section will assess the way forward for non-violent means of protection, detailing the points of optimism and areas of concern that will require attention in the future. In sum, this paper seeks to shed light on the gaps in global protection mechanisms, calling for a serious re-assessment and reconsideration of diverse, locally-oriented processes that employ ingenuity to bring about more sustainable forms of protection for civilians at times of war.

Definition of Terms

Before undertaking an assessment of subject matter as broad and far-reaching as ‘civilian protection’, it is important to first clarify what is meant by the main concepts to be discussed within this paper: namely, “protection”, “non-violence” and “non-combatant”.

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the definition of protection encompasses “all activities aimed at ensuring full respect for the rights of the individual in accordance with the letter and the spirit of the relevant bodies of law, i.e. human rights law, international humanitarian law and refugee law”.⁵ While this provides the legal framework for the rights of civilians, there is little consensus on what constitutes best practices for securing protection among disparate groups. Military organizations for example, have very different conceptions of what constitutes protection than humanitarian agencies; UN Security Council mandates to protect those under “imminent threat” are often interpreted differently on the ground. In short, despite a proliferation of agencies assuming responsibilities for protection, the roles and strategies within and between agencies have been remarkably unclear and uncoordinated.

In general however, there are three broad categories of protection that can be identified: *responsive*, *remedial* and *environment-building*.⁶ The first includes activities to prevent abuse resulting from violence, coercion, or forced deprivation; actions are taken to alleviate the immediate effects of these violations. The second form of protection includes the support and assistance of those living with the effects of war, including repatriation, reunification, physical

⁵ Andrew Bonwick, “Who Really Protects Civilians?” *Development in Practice* 16, no. 3 (2006): 271.

⁶ These categories were created by the ICRC in the late 1990s, and are known as the “egg framework”, illustrating the interdependent and complementary nature of different protection interventions. See Sara Pantuliano and Sorchia O’Callaghan, “The ‘Protection Crisis’: A Review of Field-Based Strategies for Humanitarian Protection in Darfur” *Humanitarian Policy Group* (2006): 9. Available at: http://www.odi.org.uk/HPG/papers/discussion_protection.pdf

and psychological care, etc. The third sphere encompasses broader, longer-term goals of fostering an environment conducive to respect for individual human rights and entrenching humanitarian principles. Ideally, protection should encompass all three of these actions, even while in reality, a disproportionate amount of resources are devoted to responsive action, at the expense of the remedial and environment-building facets of protection.

“Non-violence” is another concept that has been widely employed in different contexts, and with varying understandings of the term. Gene Sharp, one of the premier scholars on “non-violent struggles”, identifies 198 different forms of resistance which apply under this rubric.⁷ For the purposes of this paper, specific attention will be given to four methods of non-violent protection employed by groups such as PBI and NP: accompaniment, presence, monitoring and interpositioning. On the part of local communities and organizations, discussion will be centered on one specific protective strategy, referred to by Geraldine McDonald as “peacebuilding from below”.⁸ This refers to local communities that are physically threatened by armed actors,⁹ and who decide to organize and develop collective action strategies to resist the devastating impact of armed conflict (in a non-violent manner). Measures of non-violent resistance can take many forms, from face-to-face confrontations, protests, active assertions of neutrality or zones of peace; all of these tactics entail active measures to establish rules or norms which limit the destructive effects of violent conflict within a specific area or group of people.

Finally, what is a “civilian” or “non-combatant”? As James Johnson notes, modern warfare, with its battlefields increasingly entangled with civilian spaces, has served to blur the lines between combatants and non-combatants.¹⁰ While interesting arguments surrounding the exact definition of civilians in present-day wars can be endlessly debated, it is simply beyond the scope of this paper. At the risk of over-simplification, it will be assumed that a civilian is any person who does not actively participate in fighting, and who does not want to be involved in the dynamics of war.¹¹

The Evolution of Civilian Protection

The rules of engagement delineating the parameters of ‘just wars’ span back to the writings of the philosopher Augustine, who proclaimed: “Be peaceful,

⁷ Gene Sharp. *Waging Nonviolent Struggle: 20th Century Practice and 21st Century Potential*. Boston, MA: Extending Horizon Books, 2005.

⁸ Geraldine McDonald, “Peacebuilding from Below: Alternative Perspectives on Colombia’s Peace Process”, *Catholic Institute for International Relations*, 1997.

⁹ Physical threats by armed groups include: forced recruitment, village raids, rape, harassment, or unsafe practices (ie. laying mines near communities, using villages as shields or as part of the active war-zone, etc.)

¹⁰ James T. Johnson, “Maintaining the protection of non-combatants,” *Journal of Peace Research* 37, no.4 (2000): 423.

¹¹ This definition allows space for those who offer nominal support (eg. food, cover, vocal support) out of fear rather than genuine desire for war.

therefore, in warring, so that you may vanquish those whom you war against, and bring them to the prosperity of peace".¹² Augustine believed that there should be moral limitations placed on the conduct of war so that peace and stability could be established without the total destruction or enmity of society in the process. Early conceptions of 'jus in bello'- or the morals invoked during periods of waging warfare- were first put into official practice during the "Peace of God" movement of 10th century France. In this period, efforts by the Church and state were made to protect those associated with the church (as people of peace) from bullying, thievery, and vandalism at the hands of armed bands.¹³ This was the first formal statement of non-combatant status accorded to civilians, and later was extended beyond the church to the broader population.

The first piece of official legislation concretizing international regulations of war occurred in 1864, after the Swiss businessman Henri Dunant bore witness to the horrific state of wounded soldiers in the Austro-Italian War of 1859.¹⁴ After lobbying his government, the Geneva Convention on Prisoners of War was established that set a universal standard for the treatment of POWs in war. At around the same time, the ICRC was founded as an organization seeking to care for the wounded in war, and this quickly eventually led to the Geneva Conventions of 1899 and 1907, which focused heavily on protections for combatants in war; the subsequent 1949 Geneva Conventions and 1977 Protocols extended these protections to non-combatants and broadened the scope of war to include hostilities between states not considered at war, and intrastate conflict.¹⁵ In sum, this series of legislation effectively entrenched the norms of international humanitarian law (IHL), and the rights of non-combatants on a global scale.

In the last few decades, further developments have taken place with respect to enhancing the legislation for civilian protections. In addition to the ICRC working tirelessly to enforce compliance to IHL, the UN started to increase its own efforts to defend the rights of non-combatants. In the early 1990s, the UN started to send special rapporteurs for human rights on field missions to zones of conflict. These committees are formed to both monitor and pressure states to adhere to the principles of protection. Human rights observers that accompanied the field mission in El Salvador in 1991 for example, proved very effective in getting different parties to respect civilian rights at the time.¹⁶ This development was quickly followed up with the establishment of a permanent Office of the High Commission for Human Rights in 1993- a special branch at the UN that deals exclusively with matters of individual rights and protections.

With dangerous and protracted conflicts that persisted in places like Somalia, Burundi, Sudan, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, and Uganda, the amount of devastation brought

¹² Augustine, cited in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, volumes 1-3 (London: R&T Washbourne, 1912-22).

¹³ Johnson, 2000, 428.

¹⁴ Simon Chesterman, ed. *Civilians in War*. (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 12.

¹⁵ Johnson, 2000, 431.

¹⁶ William G. O'Neill, "Gaining Compliance without Force: Human Rights Field Operations," in *Civilians in War*, ed. Simon Chesterman (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 99.

to civilian life was increasing dramatically in the 1990s. Official statistics started to note how civilians, once only making up 5% of total wartime victims during the First World War, were now accounting for over 90% of the casualty rate.¹⁷ In light of these grim realities, the United Nations took greater measures to address this crisis. Responding with particular concern to the increase of civilians being targeted by armed groups, the Secretary General issued a report in 1999 drawing attention to the urgent need to protect civilians during periods of armed conflict.¹⁸ Since then, Security Council resolutions have incorporated specific measures for civilian protection into its mandates, most notably in Iraq, Somalia and Sudan.¹⁹

Finally, two of the most significant developments in the 21st century have been the establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the UN Resolution 1674, entrenching the norm of the “Responsibility to Protect” (R2P). The former institution signifies an end to the impunity of individuals who perpetrate mass violations against human rights and international humanitarian law; two abuses- rape and the recruitment of children under the age of 15- have been included for the first time as crimes worthy of prosecution. The R2P doctrine similarly implies an end to the impunity of states who fail to assume the responsibilities of protection to its own citizens; in such an event, where grave crimes against humanity are being done, the R2P states that the international community has a moral obligation to intervene to protect civilians.²⁰ This is a huge step away from the Westphalian idea of state sovereignty. Breaking with a norm that has lasted for 360 years, the global acquiescence of the R2P norm suggests that there is a greater awareness of the need to protect civilians in war, and to assume extraordinary measures (when necessary) to fulfill this important goal.

To summarize, there have been great moral and legal advances in the realm of civilian protection in the last century, from the Geneva Conventions, to the entrenchment of human rights monitoring and advocacy, to the prioritization of protection in UN field missions, and finally to the establishment of the ICC and R2P institutions. Commenting on the current status of civilian protection, Ban Ki-Moon asserts that “enshrined in all major moral, religious, and legal codes, and not specific to any particular culture or tradition, the protection of civilians is a human, political and legal imperative that recognizes the inherent dignity and worth of every human being”.²¹

So with all of these advances in the field of protection, why do gross violations against civilians continue unabated in the 21st century? Johnson puts it best when he states that “the increase in the magnitude and deliberateness of harm done to civilians in the present-day is ironic in light of the impressive legal developments that have taken place in international law to protect non-

¹⁷ Chesterman, 2001, 2.

¹⁸ United Nations, “Report of the Secretary-General on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict”, 8 September 1999. Doc: S/1999/957.

¹⁹ Bonwick, 2006, 272.

²⁰ See www.responsibilitytoprotect.org for more information on the main documents and developments.

²¹ United Nations, 2007, paragraph 3.

combatants”.²² Why is effective protection bearing such limited results on the ground? The next section will detail some of the challenges inherent in providing effectual protection based on the approaches of current protection strategies.

The Top-Down Approach to Civilian Protection: Challenges & Pitfalls

There are various challenges pertaining to civilian protection in the present-day, however, this paper will focus solely on three main areas of concern: the problems in defining and coordinating clear protection mandates among (and within) agencies; the inherent weak resolve in implementing international norms and laws; and the responsive-oriented nature of organizations like the UN that focus solely on putting out fires, rather than addressing the underlying causes of violence in armed conflicts.

Victoria Holt and Henry Stimson note that despite civilian protection being consciously written into UN mandates since 1999, there has been an astonishing lack of clear guidelines or expectations of what protection actually entails.²³ Phrases such as “imminent threat”, “within capabilities” and “within areas of responsibility” illustrate the vague and abstract nature of calls for protection. The R2P doctrine, for example, seriously lacks practical guidelines for how protection is to be enforced on the ground. Gareth Evans, one of the founders of R2P himself admits that the norm, which requires an entirely new set of rules of engagement, and therefore training, has thus far been “almost completely neglected by the world’s militaries”.²⁴

In fact, problems in defining the parameters of civilian protection are not only limited to UN agencies and its mandates. As protection is increasingly assumed as a responsibility by relief workers, human rights monitors, global activists, civilian police forces, paramilitaries and various peacekeeping organizations, there are both problems of outlining protection mandates, as well as coordinating among different agencies. Up until now, there has been no clear consensus on either.

One example worth highlighting is the debate within some humanitarian organizations as to what protection encompasses and whether it is even within their mandate to assume such responsibilities. As various organizations have gradually assumed greater tasks in providing protection for local populations, they have often encountered a dilemma between providing protection and being able to effectively deliver humanitarian aid (which is what they are mandated to do). Diane Paul recounts of a family in Kosovo that begged a relief worker to stay

²² Johnson, 2000, 444.

²³ Victoria K. Holt and Henry L. Stimson, “The Military and Civilian Protection: Developing Roles and Capacities”, *Humanitarian Policy Group* (Overseas Development Institute), Research Briefing No.22 (March 2006), 3.

²⁴ Gareth Evans, “From Principle to Practice: Implementing the Responsibility to Protect”, Keynote Address to Egmont (Royal Institute of International Affairs) Conference and Expert Seminar, 26 April 2007.

with them in order to avoid the wrath of encroaching attackers. In this case, what this family required was protection, not a sack of flour or basic provisions; unfortunately, the relief worker could not do both.²⁵

This point raises a further issue which is simply that most organizations do not have the capacity or expertise to offer sufficient protection to populations during times of war. Other than the ICRC and certain agencies such as UNICEF and UNHCR which specialize in specific kinds of protection (ie. prisoners, children and refugees), there are very few organizations that work primarily to safeguard civilians from armed attackers. Darfur for example, has been dubbed as a “protection crisis” on account of the sheer volume of civilian attacks in the region, despite a large number of groups on the ground to provide cover for these populations. Pantuliano and O’Callaghan report that protection agencies in Darfur had such meagre knowledge of the socio-economic dynamics and interrelations between nomadic, transhumant and sedentary groups, that effective protection was severely impeded.²⁶

In sum, as the language of protection and the subsequent mandates become more broadly assumed across different agencies, careful consideration will be required to clarify the roles, purpose and capabilities of undertaking such responsibilities, before effective protection can hope to have any success on the ground.

A second major issue of civilian protection concerns the sizeable gap between standards of protection set at the international level (through IHL and human rights legislation), and its enforcement on the ground. According to Edward Luck, the UN structures and the political culture surrounding this institution is not conducive to providing assertive and effective protection in conflict situations.²⁷ For one, a collective action problem arises when states are meant to volunteer troops and resources for UN missions; when no state is specifically mandated to take the lead on protection measures, more often than not (as we have seen in Rwanda, the DRC, Darfur, etc.) the UN has not been able to react in a timely manner. Second, the existence of the UN Security Council, which bestows veto power to its five permanent members, means that decisions to take action ultimately lie with these powerful states; if it is not in one of these country’s interests to intervene in a warring state’s affairs, it can effectively block any UN action on the ground. Finally, international norms and standards are generally so ambiguously written that one can always question the legitimacy of interventions for protective purposes. Even in a situation as dire as Darfur, where there was incontrovertible evidence of genocide being committed against civilians, action could still be deferred based on the six criteria that must be fulfilled in order to invoke the R2P, including intervention as a “last resort” and

²⁵ Diane Paul, “Protection in Practice: Field-Level Strategies for Protecting Civilians from Deliberate Harm,” Relief and Rehabilitation Network (Overseas Development Institute), 1999, 3. Available at: <http://www.sheltercentre.org/shelterlibrary/items/pdf/Field-LevelStrategiesForProtectingCivilians.pdf>

²⁶ Pantuliano and O’Callaghan, 2006, 15.

²⁷ Edward Luck, “The Enforcement of Humanitarian Norms and the Politics of Ambivalence”, in *Civilians in War*, ed. Simon Chesterman (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 215.

“reasonable prospect” for success; clearly, these conditions are vague enough to argue either for or against intervention in a region such as Darfur.

The structural constraints within the UN system, coupled with a pervasive lack of political will at the global level has led many to sadly conclude that “effective protection strategies can no longer rely solely on the will and capacity of distant and disinterested states to ensure the immediate protection of civilians”.²⁸ Bonwick adds similarly that the UN’s “inability to deliver protection on a consistent and widespread basis means that people caught up in conflict cannot rely on it as a guarantor of their safety”.²⁹

Notwithstanding these cynical conclusions, the UN and various humanitarian organizations have had some success in providing nominal protection to local populations during times of crises. The problem however- as is the case with most UN peacekeeping missions- is that it focuses heavily on putting out the fires of armed conflict, rather than on preventing or rebuilding societies in the aftermath of war. Similarly, with regards to protection issues, agencies predominantly center their efforts on the responsive elements of protection (discussed in the “Definition of Terms” section), with little appreciation for the remedial or environment-building aspects. Several negative by-products occur as a result. One, protection is provided in response to attacks, thus virtually ruling out opportunities for preventive action against villages and communities. Second, protection is sporadic, short-term and unsustainable. In many cases, attacks on civilians are merely relocated to areas where international organizations are not present; with little coordination among local populations (who have the best knowledge of militia patterns, hide-outs, etc.) protection is often randomly organized. A third dilemma is known as the “explosion of substitution”, meaning that a plethora of protection agencies assume the responsibilities for protection that the state should be undertaking itself, therefore acting as a substitute for the state’s duties, and often freeing up resources to continue the military struggle.³⁰ Finally, and most importantly, protective strategies that originate from foreign or international organizations rarely address the underlying causes of violence during periods of conflict. O’Neill notes that the human rights observers in Haiti were limited in their abilities to offer effective protection because all they could really do was monitor and report on violations; there was no enforcement capacity to do anything more, and there was no attempt to redress the source of conflict itself. O’Neill concludes that “the absence of an underlying solution to the conflict limit[ed] the effectiveness of the human rights field operation”.³¹ In other words, without any efforts to enter into dialogue with armed groups and resolve the underlying issues leading to violence, civilians will continue to live in situations of continuing fear and insecurity.

In conclusion, the international community has come a long way in developing moral and legal standards to protect civilians during periods of armed

²⁸ Bruderlein, 2001, 233.

²⁹ Bonwick, 2006, 273.

³⁰ Pantuliano and O’Callaghan, 2006, 15.

³¹ O’Neill, 2001, 107.

conflict. Despite these laudable advances however, reality has shown that these norms have not been effectively translated into practice. Unclear mandates, constraints inherent in the UN system, and reactive, top-down approaches to protection measures are among some of the major impediments to safeguarding the human rights of civilians in war. In light of these various flaws with the international mechanisms for protection, as well as the continuing rise of civilian casualties in war, it is worthwhile to consider different approaches in this field. The remainder of this paper will examine non-violent means of protection as it is practiced by groups such as Peace Brigades International, the Nonviolent Peaceforce and Witness for Peace. By coupling foreign presence with local, grassroots initiatives, this approach represents a significant departure from the top-down processes that have been hitherto employed.

Protection by Presence: A Bottom-Up Approach

It is interesting to note that virtually nowhere in the many reports, resolutions, policies and strategies written by international organizations, is there any mention of the role of local actors in protection efforts. This is particularly surprising, considering that it is really the citizens themselves who end up taking the greatest measures to ensure their own protection at times of crisis. Bonwick affirms that “a rarely spoken truth about protection is that the main players in the protection of civilians in conflict are the civilians themselves” and that more times than not, “when civilians are most in need of protection, the humanitarian agencies are hardly ever present”.³² Indeed, human nature’s ability to survive in the toughest conditions, and devise creative solutions in the name of survival are all too often underestimated in global protection strategies. Communities have been documented to develop early-warning systems for approaching militias; change their movement patterns; enter into agreements to secure protection from warring factions; create their own defence mechanisms, and so on. These strategies are viable because the local people understand the dynamics of the conflict and the motives of the violent perpetrators better than anyone else; they live the realities of war everyday. Therefore, they often have knowledge of who can be trusted, where militias hide out, safe places for avoiding detection, etc. This kind of detailed knowledge and information cannot be quickly or easily gleaned from the outside.

Further to this, local actors are well-suited to lead their own protection efforts because, as we saw earlier, the strategies employed by humanitarian agencies are often unclear, sporadic, short-term (or unsustainable), and reactive in nature. In short, local groups simply cannot rely solely on foreign protection for the duration of a conflict; the initiative must come from within. With local communities leading their own efforts, not only will protection become a sustainable process over time, but the space will exist to focus on remedial and environment-building forms of protection (in addition to purely responsive

³² Bonwick, 2006, 274.

measures) and they will have the chance to look at broader issues of peace-building within communities as well. During the Marcos period in the 1980s for example, many communities in the Philippines pushed for “zones of peace”, or specific areas that local residents declared to be off-limits to armed groups and warfare. Ed Garcia explains that in addition to increasing community security, these zones represented the peoples’ will for peace, and the desire to create a civil, social space to address the symptoms of the conflict through dialogue.³³ These zones created conditions conducive for advancing the peace process, and in the end, the Marcos dictatorship fell peacefully in 1986.

Similarly, many localities in Columbia have mobilized to protest against the devastating impacts of war on their communities. Some villages have refused to allow their residents to join the armed forces, others have set up “peace communities” where internally displaced persons (IDPs) or defectors from the war can find a safe haven. These actions go far beyond simple matters of protection; they are political statements aimed directly at the warring parties. As Garcia-Duran writes, resistance is done through a discourse that “demands the autonomy of the communities from the armed groups and proclaims their neutrality in relation to the conflict; that is to say, they do not want to get involved in the dynamics of war”.³⁴ These are powerful assertions that could not occur without the sustained efforts of local communities.

Even while effective and sustainable protection strategies are likely to start and end at the local level, there is no doubt that outside support can serve to strengthen these initiatives. In many conflict areas, villages are targeted by armed militias so thoroughly and frequently that the means for mobilization have been severely destroyed. In Northern Uganda for instance, the rebel army- the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA)- has conducted such a horrific campaign of pillaging villages and abducting children over the last twenty years that up to 40,000 youngsters were found to be walking into larger cities every night to avoid capture.³⁵ In such dire circumstances, the means of protection are limited. This is where groups such as Peace Brigades International and Nonviolent Peaceforce can play a critical role.

PBI states that its purpose is to help open up political space and provide moral support for local activists to work without fear or repression. The strategy employed by PBI and other organizations of its type is what Liam Mahony calls “proactive presence”. This term, which encompasses physical presence, accompaniment, interpositioning, monitoring, and networking, all typify the work that these organizations undertake.

The main philosophy behind proactive presence is that an outside organization with enough clout and ties to the international community can raise the political cost of armed groups carrying out human rights violations against

³³ Ed Garcia, “Filipino Zones of Peace”, *Peace Review* 9, no.2 (1997): 222.

³⁴ Mauricio Garcia-Duran, “Non-violent Movements for Peace in Columbia and International Solidarity”, *Center for Research and Popular Education*, [year unknown]

³⁵ These kids came to be known as the “night commuters”. See Bruno Stevens, “The ‘Night Commuters’: Uganda’s Forgotten Children of War”, *Human Rights Watch* (June 2005). Available at: <http://www.hrw.org/photos/2005/uganda/>

civilians through their mere witnessing of these acts, and ability to incur negative international reaction. Proactive presence involves three components: deterrence, encouragement and influence.

For the most part, armed groups (whether state or non-state) have at least some degree of interest in maintaining credibility and legitimacy within the global community. Proactive presence therefore acts as a deterrent because those accompanying local residents become the eye of the international community, forcing aggressors to rethink their actions. Mahony writes:

International accompaniment can succeed in deterring attacks because the decision makers behind these attacks seldom want a bad international image. They don't want the world to know about what they are doing. They don't want diplomats making them uncomfortable mentioning human rights problems in their meetings. They don't want to read in the international press that they are being called monsters or criminals. They will avoid all that if they can.³⁶

The deterrent effects of this form of protection have been evidenced in many different cases. For instance, between the years 1994 and 2001, a group of volunteer civilians called the Balkan Peace Team successfully deterred much violence by documenting actions on the ground in villages, refugee camps, courts of law, and areas of tension across Croatia and the former Yugoslavia.³⁷ Likewise, a US organization, Witness for Peace (WFP), sent a delegation of religious activists to interpose themselves between contras and tobacco-growing farmers being regularly attacked during the civil war in Nicaragua. Upon arriving at one village that had previously been under heavy attack, one of the volunteers noticed that a quiet calm had swept over the area. When asked why the shooting had stopped, one villager replied: "they're not shooting because they can see you".³⁸ WFP went on to have many such successes in curbing violence during the war in Nicaragua.

A second important asset that proactive presence offers is encouragement to local civilians, which is no small thing when considered in the context of war, where trauma and fear can have a paralyzing effect on the population. Additionally, where state terror is commonly employed to target innocent civilians as "dissidents", a real sense of isolation can overcome entire communities, lending to feelings of hopelessness and helplessness. The support from groups such as PBI and NP have been vital in demonstrating that these people are not alone, and that others around the world recognize their plight. Magellan Gonsol,

³⁶ Liam Mahony, ed. *Side by Side: Protecting and Encouraging Threatened Activists with Unarmed International Accompaniment* (Minneapolis: Center for Victims of Torture, 2004).

³⁷ People Building Peace II, "An Experiment at Mixing Roles: The Balkan Peace Team in Croatia and Serbia/Kosovo", *European Centre for Conflict Prevention* (July 2005). Available at: <http://www.peoplebuildingpeace.org/thestories/article.php?id=112&typ=theme&pid=26>

³⁸ People Building Peace II, "Human Shields to Limit Violence: Witness for Peace in Nicaragua", *European Centre for Conflict Prevention* (July 2005), 1. Available at: <http://www.peoplebuildingpeace.org/thestories/article.php?id=114&typ=theme&pid=26>

the coordinator for the local community based peace monitoring organization in Mindanao, Philippines expressed his gratitude for the work that NP was doing in his district. Noting that armed clashes between warring factions had caused many villagers to flee on previous occasions, the NP's "continued presence gave us reassurance. They even offered to sleep here with us. The people said after one week they had enough confidence for their own safety and that they would not flee".³⁹ Across the various organizations that practice this form of protection, those who have seen the positive effects have spoken of the courage, moral support, peace of mind and solidarity they have felt, being accompanied (shoulder-to-shoulder in the fight, so to speak) by these international volunteers.⁴⁰

Finally, proactive presence carried out by reputable organizations such as the ones aforementioned can also aid in influencing political processes to ensure long-term protection to citizens by addressing the root-cause injustices being perpetuated in ongoing violence. Christine Schweitzer observes that one of the main objectives for NP programs aside from direct physical protection, is helping local organizations to build networks with national and foreign agencies and authorities.⁴¹ By serving as a liaison between local and international groups, NP and others foster greater awareness of the political causes, which often lend to strengthened protection efforts. Returning to the example of WFP in Nicaragua, the success of the first mission of 30 activists to the village of El Porvenir sprouted into a massive campaign that involved numerous delegations and meetings with the state in Nicaragua (in partnership with local communities), as well as intense lobbying efforts in the US to pressure the Reagan government to curb its support for the contras. By 1984, WFP had worked so extensively to expose the reality of the war in Nicaragua that Reagan was forced to cut off funding for the contras.⁴² Working together with everyday citizens on the ground, these efforts contributed to "cross-border understanding and lasting bonds of solidarity".⁴³ This is but one example of how the simple act of proactive presence can have significant, influential effects. As volunteers work alongside local activists to improve situations of security and justice, they simultaneously act to bridge the gap between the local and global, thus strengthening the universal movement for peace and human rights.⁴⁴

It is clear that the protective strategy of proactive presence has been employed with substantial success in various conflict scenarios, but why is it so important for these organizations to work strictly in a non-violent manner? When

³⁹ Erika Shatz, "Voices from the Field: Magellan Gonso", *Rumors of Peace*, issue 3 (2007), 4. Available at: http://www.nonviolentpeaceforce.org/files/rop/2007_3.pdf

⁴⁰ See personal testimonies from various activists around the world working with PBI at "What They Say", *Peace Brigades International*, 11 April 2008. Available at: <http://www.peacebrigades.org/665.html>

⁴¹ Christine Schweitzer, "Human Security: Providing Protection Without Sticks and Carrots?" Draft for URTF seminar (Unarmed Resistance: The Transnational Factor), July 2006, 7.

⁴² People Building Peace II, "Human Shields", 4-5. Note that the Reagan administration still continued to support the contras privately.

⁴³ Ibid, 7.

⁴⁴ See "Protective Accompaniment" *Peace Brigades International*, 11 April 2008. Available at <http://www.peacebrigades.org/1165.html>

faced with severe hostility and aggression, why do these agencies not respond (like most other groups) in a similar manner? Indeed, all of these groups are very clear in their mandates, stating that enduring peace cannot be attained through the barrel of the gun. Inspired by India's Shanti Sena (peace army) that was founded upon Gandhi's ideas on 'ahimsa' (or non-violence), various organizations seek to apply the philosophies of this great peace-maker to modern-day conflicts. According to Gandhi, violence represented the ultimate negation of humanity;⁴⁵ therefore, in order to achieve peace, parties to a conflict needed to view one another not as enemies, but as dignified human beings.⁴⁶ For Mahatma, violence only breeds greater violence, resentment and bitterness. Non-violence, on the other hand, is the ultimate symbol of respect, dignity, honour, and love. When consistently faced with these pure acts of humanity, even the worse aggressors cannot continue acting with hate and violence indefinitely. Ed Garcia weighs in on this belief system, pondering whether unarmed citizens can effectively engage in dialogue with armed combatants. He notes rightly that even though the logical answer seems to be no, "the deeper logic of political struggles- of which armed struggle is but one form- indicates that if war is fought in their name, then the people- as long as they are organized and mobilized- must one day have their say".⁴⁷ This is the belief that sustains the endless drive, dedication and efforts of workers within PBI, NP, WFP and others each and every day, despite the seemingly insurmountable odds. These volunteers recognize that non-violent strategies offer the best means of appealing to rationality and opening dialogue, and for creating sustainable solutions to conflicts.

In conclusion, civilian protection through strategies of proactive presence addresses many of the problems of international, top-down policies on protection; namely, issues of unreliability, unsustainability, and reactivity. Groups employing these approaches use the knowledge, initiative and experience of civilians themselves to help support their own endeavours at protection and peace, thus lending to a more holistic and sustainable process. Through the simple act of presence on the ground, local populations are afforded the physical safety, moral support and political space to continue struggling for longer-term peace and security.

The Way Forward: Enhancing Proactive Presence as a Tool for Protection

Even while groups like PBI and WFP have been doing effective work for decades, the idea of unarmed civilian peacekeepers is still viewed as an inconceivable and unviable protection strategy within the mainstream discourse.

⁴⁵ Thomas Weber, *Gandhi's Peace Army: The Shanti Sena and Unarmed Peacekeeping* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 54.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 58.

⁴⁷ Garcia, 1997, 222.

This section will detail some of the criticisms and concerns being levelled against groups employing proactive presence as a means of protection on the ground.

Whether general cynicism or a simple dearth of global funds is the culprit, the reality of these aforementioned groups is that they lack serious resources, which invariably affects their ability to function and grow. The work conducted by these institutions involve recruiting substantial volunteers, training, building networks, and establishing long-term commitments of trust and partnership with local communities. All of these efforts require sustained funding over time. Currently, organizations such as NP are only able to send small contingents of peacekeepers to violence-stricken areas like Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Guatemala with the help of mainly private and some institutional donations. This is a concern, because the effectiveness of providing protection through presence depends both on the numbers of volunteers on the ground as well as the credible networks that can be built. To be more specific, in order for armed groups to be deterred from attacking civilians, there must be a visible presence of international volunteers in volatile regions, serving as a constant reminder and witness to any human rights violations. Some critics argue that having a field presence of ten to fifteen people in one pocket of a war-torn country simply acts to defer armed attacks to other villages instead.⁴⁸ This is a legitimate concern that agencies must continually confront in their operations. Clearly, a larger staff would lend to more effective campaigns, however due to limited resources, volunteers must be strategically placed in areas where they will have the greatest impact. Elise Boulding laments that “today’s peace team projects face: inadequate planning, logistical and supply problems, and lack of funds and personnel in relation to the scale of the problems faced”.⁴⁹

Resources are critical not only for the day-to-day support and management of field teams, but also for building international clout and attention to the work being done on the ground. Deterrence is heavily dependent on the belief by armed combatants that any violations of human rights will be documented, and will incur a negative response from the global community.⁵⁰ Without these dense networks to the outside world, the credibility of protection by presence dissipates, and the work being done by volunteers becomes considerably more dangerous and uncertain. As a matter of life and death, it is critical for these groups to carefully weigh the costs and benefits of their programs, which can be a painstaking endeavour with inadequate budgets.

In addition to problems of insufficient resources, a second area of criticism levelled against organizations working with the proactive presence strategies is that they may not be as neutral as they claim to be in their mandates. Are these agencies working as non-partisan protectors, or as partisan fighters for social justice? In any endeavour, complete neutrality is incredibly difficult to sustain, whether as a UN peacekeeper, an international observer, or a civilian accompanier. Whatever the case, this concern must be addressed, because the

⁴⁸ Pantuliano and O’Callaghan, 2006, 17.

⁴⁹ Elise Boulding, “Foreword” in *Gandhi’s Peace Army: The Shanti Sena and Unarmed Peacekeeping*, ed. Thomas Weber (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1996), x.

⁵⁰ Schweitzer, July 2006.

consequences of not establishing clear parameters for protection will invariably diminish the effectiveness of future field missions.⁵¹ (We have already seen the deleterious effects of unclear global policies being applied in places such as Darfur).

A third concern about the protection by presence strategy is that it relies heavily on local civil society to lead the initiatives, when in actuality, these groups may not even exist or may have been forcibly dismantled throughout the course of the war. Mahony writes that “civilian integrity and human rights are most readily respected, protected and fulfilled when people and communities are strong enough to assert and claim their rights”.⁵² This criticism, while valid, does not hold in reality. Even in areas as utterly devastated by civilian attacks as Rwanda, Darfur, and Northern Uganda, there has been evidence of coping mechanisms put in place to secure (local) civilian protection. In Rwanda, some villages initiated neighbourhood watches by creating lookout posts, and warning of danger by banging loudly on jerry cans.⁵³ In Darfur, a region not known for its civil society, many groups were able to negotiate protection with different factions. In Northern Uganda, grassroots organizations such as the Concerned Parents Association mobilized against the recruitment of children in the area, eventually receiving world-wide attention to the group’s cause after intense lobbying efforts. In short, one should never underestimate the abilities of local communities to create their own means of protection at times of crisis. There are always individuals and groups willing to take the first step to oppose violence and oppression; the goal is find these locals, and support them in their work. PBI, WFP and NP have proven through their field missions in the gravest of conflict zones that proactive presence can work.

Finally, there seems to be a general scepticism about the idea of non-violent peace forces working to protect vulnerable populations from armed attacks. Can unarmed citizens really deter violence through their mere presence on the ground? Of course, it is impossible to determine the exact impact that proactive presence has in deterring attacks on civilians, because one can never know what the result would have been without the existence of these various programs on the ground. However, based on the testimonies of those working with such groups and outlined in this paper, there is no doubt that there is more than a reduction in violence on offer; the moral support and encouragement provided to local populations is arguably more valuable than a number count on saved lives. Through these acts of solidarity, individuals often are able to overcome their fears and paralysis of action, restoring a sense of dignity and autonomy to their lives. This process can have a domino-like effect on entire communities once a few people recover this freedom of action.

⁵¹ It should be noted that NP does not claim to be “neutral” in the sense that they clearly privilege the use of non-violent means of resolution. NP does however profess to be impartial in their conduct.

⁵² Mahony, 2006, 24.

⁵³ Paul, 1999, 30.

Conclusion

The beginning of the 21st century has unfortunately seen the upward trend of violence being perpetrated against innocent civilians in wars around the world. As the UN Secretary General observes, “civilians continue to be killed, maimed, raped, displaced and unable to meet their basic needs”.⁵⁴ In such a grave situation, urgent action is needed.

The legal developments to fortify civilian protection in the last century have been impressive testaments to our resolve in tackling this issue, but the gap between norms and practice remains vast. International efforts to protect non-combatants during periods of war have been disappointingly sporadic, uncoordinated and ineffective, leading many to conclude that humanitarian organizations simply cannot be relied upon to do this kind of work.

At the same time, there is an emerging understanding that all aspects of conflict are interrelated, and that one cannot approach protection issues without also looking at the dynamics of war, and the underlying causes of the violence itself. In this regard, local communities are best placed to lead these efforts. **With superior local knowledge, experience and resilience in times of crisis, it is the civilians themselves that possess the greatest capabilities and ingenuity in designing their own protection plans. What is needed is not ill-informed top-down processes, but sound support for bottom-up, grassroots initiatives. As Bonwick rightly asserts, protection must not be “a conversation conducted above the heads of those affected by conflict, but a process to support them in their daily lives”.**⁵⁵

Here, institutions like PBI, NP and WFP offer exceptional means of doing just that: creating protective space for local populations to wage their own non-violent battles for lasting peace and security. Through a strategy of proactive presence, international volunteers deter, encourage and influence peace processes on the ground by acting as the global witnesses to human rights abuses. Faced with the prospect of being denounced by the international community, many armed groups have found it too costly to continue victimizing civilians. In being exposed to a non-violent approach to peace-keeping, perpetrators of violence are forced to recognize that their “enemies” are in fact human beings, desiring to enter into meaningful and rational dialogue to end the suffering of all involved. This provides a unique advantage to the proactive presence ideology, which simply cannot be achieved in the same way through the barrel of a gun.

In sum, protection by presence offers a completely different and compelling approach to the field of civilian protection. There is no doubt that this strategy has its problems, but at a time where civilians continue to suffer disproportionately from the devastating effects of war, and where the international community seems incapable of responding to continuing atrocities,

⁵⁴ United Nations, 2007, paragraph 20.

⁵⁵ Bonwick, 2006, 276.

there is no choice but to start looking elsewhere for answers. Non-violent proactive presence may be the alternative that brings greater and more sustainable peace and security in the future. At the very least, it is worth discovering its true potential.

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