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Violent Conflict in Town and Country

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Introduction

The past half century has seen a proliferation of violent conflicts, especially in the developing world. Violence has become less analytically tractable using the distinction between "war" and "petty violence." On the one hand, wars have devolved from discrete, time-bounded crises of the Westphalian era, into a plethora of widespread, protracted, and low-intensity intrastate and regional conflicts, in which the usual notions of "crisis" and "peace" are often intermeshed. Moreover, accelerated growth among "late-developing countries" and global climate change will increasingly squeeze the values of natural resources between rising demand and falling supply, accelerating this trend. On the other hand, urban "petty violence" has grown into a monster, eroding the capacity and legitimacy of states, building transnational networks, and inflicting very war-like casualties on society.

For conflict economists, there is a deeply intertwined relationship between production and predation: two poles of human endeavor that jointly inform the prospect for development and conflict[1]. Humans choose to invest in creating value or in stealing it from someone else. Economic growth and conflict are thus often perceived by the mainstream of economics to exhibit a parallel diametric relationship – growth is achieved when people invest in production, conflict when they invest in appropriation.

Yet it is essential to make a distinction between "conflict" and "violence." If conflict is defined broadly as competition over scarce resources – political, social, or environmental – it may no longer be the diametric opposite of development, but rather its byproduct. What is essential may not be the "elimination" of conflict, but rather how it is managed and structured to produce equitable socioeconomic outcomes and eschew the flaring of violence. This management takes place through formal and informal economic institutions, which persist (or arise) in, adapt to, and allow individuals to cope with conflict.

The process of institutional adaptation to violent conflict is enormously important for the developing world: first because it may secure the livelihoods of those caught up in hostilities, and second because such coping strategies will in turn shape the conflict itself – affecting the potential for future development and conflict relapse.

These adaptive processes occur within the spatial contexts of built and natural environments – city and countryside. This photo essay attempts to capture a few critical implications of civil war and widespread violence for (and coping strategies in) (1) the urban environment as a locus of competing bids for spatial domination, (2) trade networks linking urban and rural areas during war, (3) rapidly-formed human settlements of displaced persons, and (4) post-conflict infrastructure and livelihoods.

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[1] See, e.g., Caruso, R., "Butter, Guns and Ice-Cream: Policy Implications of Economic Theories of Conflict", *MIT International Review*, 17 Feb 2009.

1. Urban Violence

PLATE 1
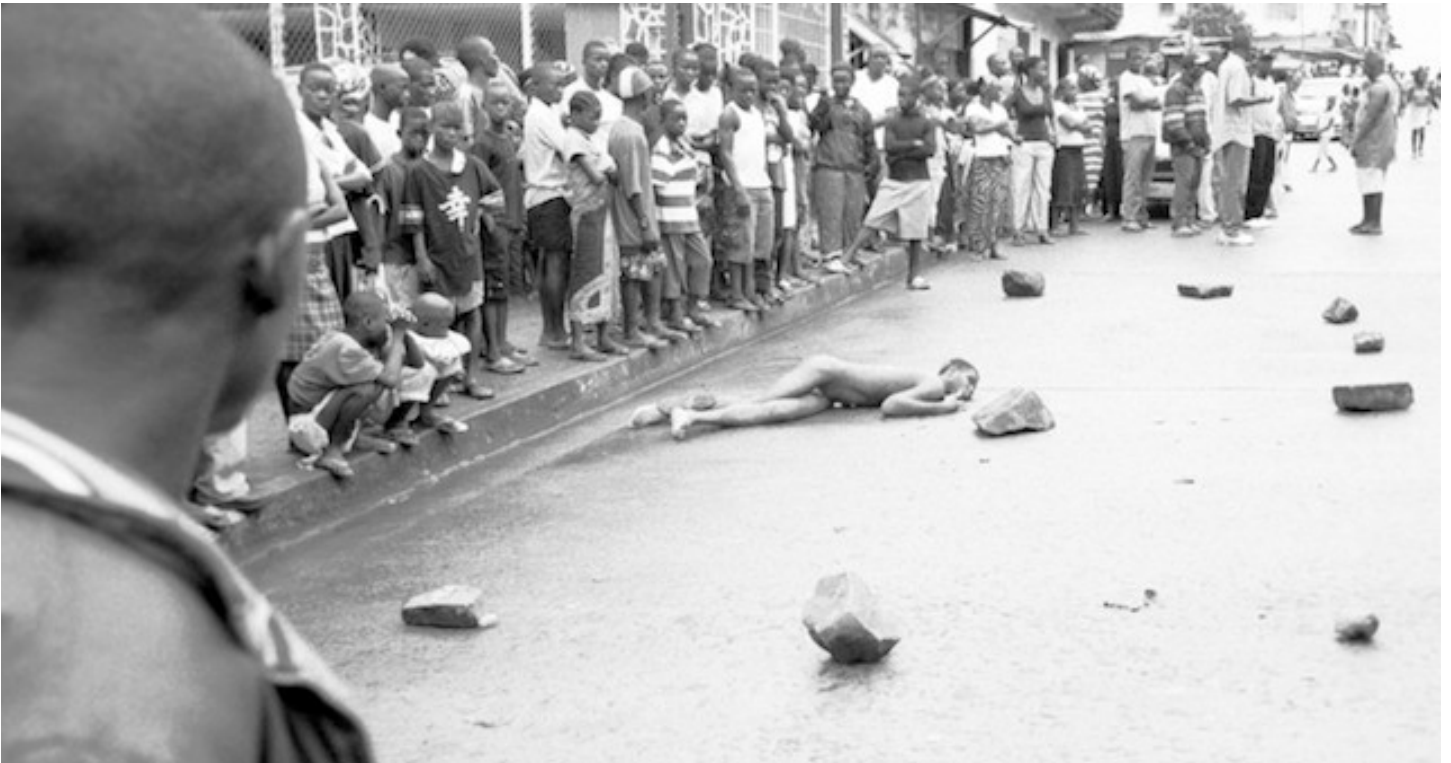
Conflict and post-conflict cities often suffer from weak formal legal institutions and widespread poverty, giving vigilianteism a large role to play in defending property rights.

Here (PLATE 1), a would-be robber lies dead in a Monrovia street—possibly the victim of a communal defense force of market vendors.

PLATE 2

Violent conflicts entangle cities in webs of contention, as cities are seats of political authority; key nodes in the sub-regional, national, and international flows of money needed to sustain fragile states and their organized opposition; and cosmopolitan locales for resolving differences. Inter-group disparities are often accentuated in the close proximity of urban environments, making cities especially prone to flare-ups of street violence, riots, looting, and urban warfare. The physical control of capital cities may especially be viewed as a metaphor for national hegemony.

Left (PLATE 2), a Tanzanian government soldier peers around a corner before firing a teargas grenade into a riot in Zanzibar.

PLATE 3

Burning tires fill the streets of a Zanzibar in tumult with thick black smoke, shielding rioters from the police and blocking intersections (PLATE 3).

As long as there have been large cities, barricades have been employed to prevent central authority from penetrating to the neighborhood level. The most famous example of such tactics comes from the French riots of the 18th and 19th centuries, which prompted the complete reconfiguration of Paris by Napoléon III and Baron Haussmann to bring the Cartesian order of a rational state to warrens of alleys swarming with rebellious citizens.

2. Rural-Urban Linkages

PLATE 4

In the absence of electricity, city dwellers often rely upon massive amounts of charcoal for cooking.

A correspondingly robust trade in carbonized forest timber has sprung up in eastern Congo, where trains of women and boys haul the fuel to transportation hubs for conveyance to urban centers such as Goma (PLATE 4).

PLATE 5

Control over the rural-urban and urban-urban trade routes during conflict is crucial for rebels to gain supplies and put pressure on government strongholds.

In Eastern Congo, the young soldiers of rebel General Nkunda (recently captured by Rwandan military) sit idly on patrol in a roadside shack, sometimes stopping traders to "control" their merchandise or demand bribes (PLATE 5).

PLATE 6

In the face of rampant predation of finished goods by soldiers and civilians alike, distribution channels splinter into reticulated networks of trade "capillaries." Businesses in civil war outsource risk, contracting out those supply chain components which are most liable to predation, require knowledge of the local social geography, and do not demand a highly skilled workforce. The prototypical examples are distribution and sourcing operations in rural areas.

In Eastern Congo, amid widespread sporadic warfare, this trader distributes crates of nail polish on foot. Despite (or perhaps because of) the fighting, Goma boasts a lively night club scene (PLATE 6).

PLATE 7
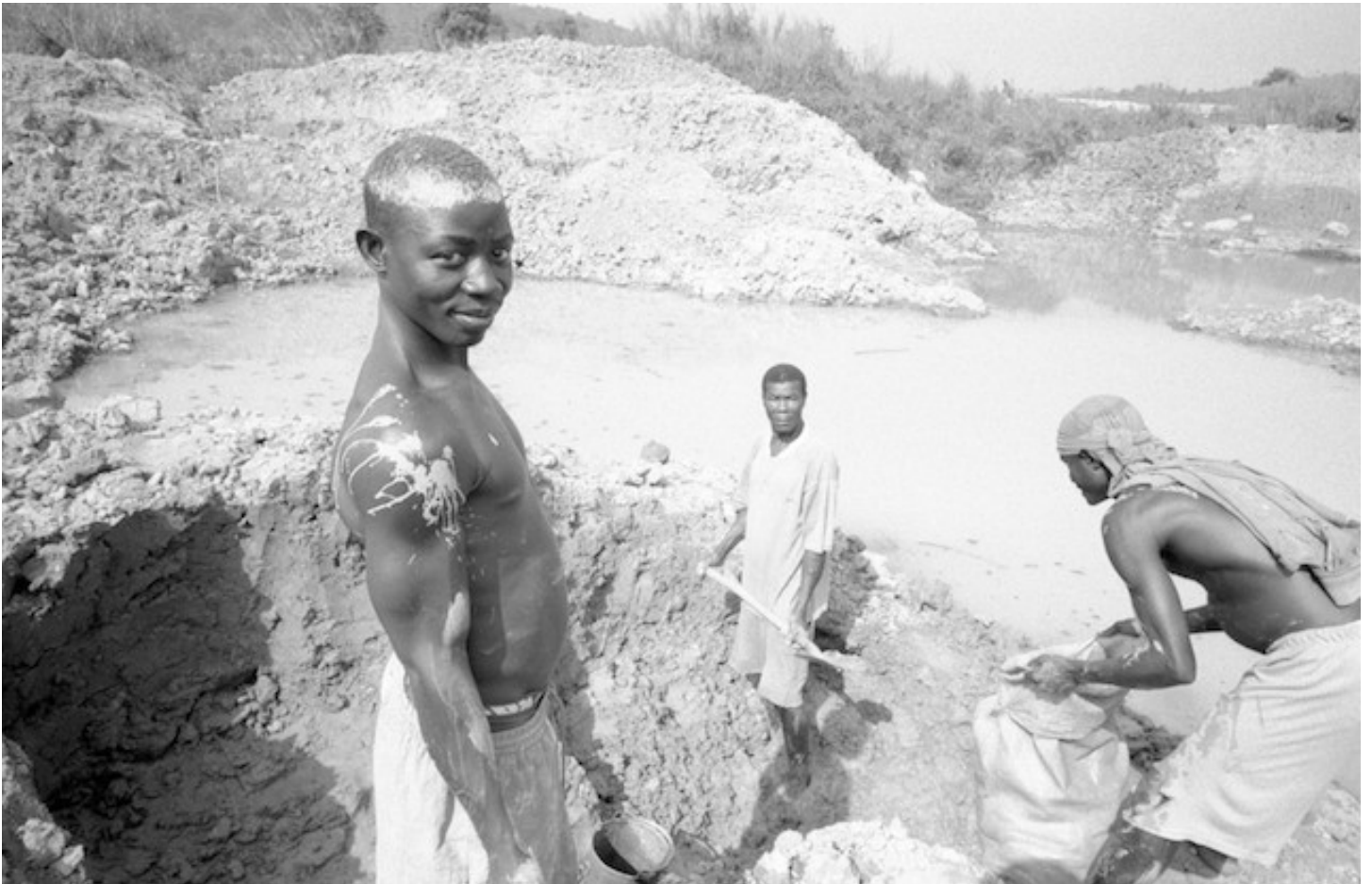
Dispersed natural resources that require little collective effort for extraction can fuel ongoing conflicts by giving rebel and government leaders easy access to goods with high value on the international market. Military commanders from the Revolutionary United Front and government militias famously commandeered alluvial diamonds fields in Sierra Leone, trading the stones for small arms.

Above (PLATE 7), small-scale diamond miners in a post-conflict Kono District, Sierra Leone, continue to dig for their quarry in an open diamond pit from the war years.

3. International Aid Cities

PLATE 8

Refugee camps like this one in Eastern Congo (PLATE 8) may hold tens of thousands of people. Displacement is a traumatic experience in many senses: families are torn apart, livlihoods are destroyed, accumulated assets are abandoned in the flight, and the incidence of disease skyrockets.

PLATE 9

Food aid can be a double-edged sword: beneficially, it saves lives and may help to develop domestic markets for agricultural products. Harmfully, however, it may undercut local prices for those same products, or wean local consumers off of domestically-farmed goods. Women often bear a disproportionate burden for providing for displaced families, as their husbands are more likely to have been conscripted into militaries and militias, or have been targeted by them.

Three women above (PLATE 9) carry a large bag of rice in a displacement camp in eastern Congo.

4. Post-Conflict Cities

PLATE 10

From December 1989, when a former government official-turned-rebel named Charles Taylor crossed the Ivorian border at the head of an army, until October 2003, when the United Nations established its Mission in Liberia, Liberia was engulfed in a complex series of conflicts collectively termed the Liberian Civil War—the result, *inter alia*, of misrule, misguided economic policies, political and socioeconomic marginalization of various ethnic groups, discrepancies in development levels between urban and rural areas, the fuel of illicit trades in diamonds and timber, and conflict-induced human and monetary capital flight. The war was characterized by a string of competing factions battling from rural bases to lay siege repeatedly to the capital, Monrovia. Urban infrastructure, including electricy, water and santiation grids, present prime targets for rebel armies wishing to destroy confidence in government's ability to provide public goods to its citizens. Monrovia still lacks piped water five years after the end of hostilities in 2003.

Here (PLATE 10), a boy runs to collect fresh water during the rains of summer.

PLATE 11

Civil war leaves a lasting scar on a country. The psychological trauma and
years of lost education among the war's children travel with that
demographic as it ages long into the post-conflict period.

Above (PLATE 11), a 12-year old girl not attending school takes a break
from selling wares in the shade of a shelled building in post-conflict
Monrovia, Liberia. Monrovia is situated on a penninsula whose neck,
pictured above, was heavily fought over during the 1990s.

PLATE 12

A woman stands under open sky in the remains of her former home in Koidu, Sierra Leone (PLATE 12). The majority of homes in this town were similarly razed during that country's 11-year conflict.

PLATE 13

The conflict trap is ostensibly an endogenous cycle, implying two dynamics: not only is poverty associated with the incidence of violent conflict, but the reverse is also true. The recent occurrence of a civil war raises the risk of a country descending into widespread violence within a decade from just 9% to 40%. The conflict trap can produce a layered social trauma across multiple generations.

Here (PLATE 13), a man sits in what used to be his home in northern Sri Lanka. A civil war has intermittently ravaged the northern and eastern portions of the country since 1983, as the the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have waged a secessionist struggle against the Sinhalese-dominated government. As of this writing, Sri Lankan militoary forces had captured large swathes of former rebel-held territory and claimed to be close to defeating the rebels.