This year is the 20th anniversary of the release of the 1994 United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Human Development Report, which defined the concept of human security and brought it to international attention. It is thus timely to ask: where is human security today? The following is the third part of a series exploring new and complex issues which have gone beyond the seven original components of human security.

Protection of Civilians (POC): A Human Security Perspective

By Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies
S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS)
Singapore

Armed conflicts always have disproportionate consequences on civilian populations. Civilians accounted for 74 per cent of the fatalities in Israel’s bombing of Gaza in the summer of 2014. The high civilian casualties in armed conflicts highlight the persistent need for POC. In addition, threats to civilians also emerge from political instability, communal violence, massive human rights violations and natural disasters. The clashes between Muslims and Buddhists in Myanmar since 2012 have caused hundreds of deaths and displaced thousands of people. Hence, POC needs broader settings rather than armed conflicts only.

Progress and challenge

While the national government concerned should assume the primary responsibility to safeguard the security and basic rights of its people, international assistance is also crucial. The UN has developed extensive practices to improve the implementation of POC, including the biannual Security Council debate, regular thematic and country-specific reports by the Secretary-General, an informal expert group on POC and inclusion of POC into peacekeeping operations (PKOs). Other equally important agencies for POC include international organisations like the International Committee of the Red Cross, regional organisations and arrangements and NGOs.

However, civilians, particularly vulnerable groups, are still subject to abuse. Sexual violence in conflict and recruitment of child soldiers has been a grave concern. Humanitarian personnel and even peacekeepers have also become the target of violence. According to a report by The Guardian in 2014, 155 humanitarian workers were killed and 171 seriously wounded in 2013, the highest number in history. 44 UN peacekeepers in Golan Heights were held hostage by Syrian rebels in August 2014.

Despite the international commitment, POC efforts still face many difficulties, such as lack of equipment and personnel for PKOs and denial of access for humanitarian workers to people in need. Many UN peace operations face the problem of personnel not being deployed in its full strength on time. The under-staffed operations are often overwhelmed by the precarious situation. Lack of access is a major challenge in international efforts to help civilians in desperate situations as in Syria and South Sudan now.
POC and Human Security: A Holistic Approach

POC shares the ethos of human security that values people’s security and well-being. It relates to human security through its three components – personal security, political security and community security which focuses on people’s physical security, political rights and collective identity respectively. The realisation of these three securities is crucial to POC.

POC efforts should be inclusive and comprehensive, providing not only protection per se but also solutions to deep-rooted problems that create conflicts and social tensions. Protection mechanisms should integrate external assistance with local experience to improve effectiveness. Structural measures such as security sector reform and the rule of law are essential to prevent future abuse and atrocities. Poverty eradication, economic development, social justice and national reconciliation are key for realising both POC and the afore-mentioned three components of human security.

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