

Introduction

In January 2008, it became known that 5.4 million people had died because of conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the vast majority from preventable disease and starvation (IRC 2008). Not only is it by far the deadliest conflict in the world today, it is the deadliest of the past half-century. It began in August 1998, in the form of a Rwandan-led invasion (joined by Uganda, and, to a lesser extent, Burundi), ostensibly in support of a number of local rebellions. It was a lightning strike consisting of an eastern front beginning from the areas bordering the invading states, and a western front that commenced with the hijacking of civilian planes in the east, which were used to ferry hundreds of soldiers to a military base west of Kinshasa, who then joined with disgruntled forces there to occupy the Inga Dam and move on the capital. Five African countries came to the aid of the DRC government, and a combination of Angolan, Zimbabwean and DRC troops were able to stop the advance on the capital and shut down the western front. The eastern advance was eventually halted as well, resulting in a stalemate that left the country (the size of Western Europe) effectively cut in half. Although foreign troops had withdrawn by 2003, and the conflict has largely subsided, violence has continued from overlapping local and national conflicts (that accompanied the international conflict), insecurity and human rights abuse are rife in parts of the country, and the abysmal humanitarian conditions resulting from the conflict continue to cause levels of death and suffering unparalleled anywhere else in the world.

The announcement of such a high death toll should not have come as a surprise. It was already known in May 2000 that the conflict in the DRC was the deadliest in the world when the International Rescue Committee (IRC) announced the results of its first mortality survey in that country, revealing a death toll of 1.7 million people. And the same organization continued to provide updates on the growing death toll through its surveys: 2.5 million in 2001, 3.3 million in 2003, and 3.8 million in 2004. It was also known that, even as the fighting died down, the failure to address the needs of the displaced and otherwise affected, and the damage to life-sustaining social structures and services, meant that the death toll would continue to rise: far beyond the toll caused by the bullets and bombs.

What should have come as a surprise was the resounding silence with which the revelations of the conflict's unparalleled scale were met: from policymakers, the media, the public and academia alike. It seemed that no matter how large it was, or how high the death toll became, the conflict simply could not elicit a serious response from the world outside the region. Policy interest has been scant, and media corporations appear to have cast a virtual news blackout over the region. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have not flocked to the region en masse, and there have been no major star-studded civil society movements to 'save' the DRC.

In fact, in most of the world outside the region, one could even be forgiven for not knowing that such a conflict ever existed.

And the DRC is hardly alone in this regard. Twelve of the world's fifteen deadliest conflicts, and almost 90 percent of the world's conflict-related deaths since the end of the Cold War, have occurred in Africa. But the allocation of attentional and material resources in response to most of these conflicts by a wide variety of actors in a position to respond has been minimal: certainly not remotely commensurate with the needs in most cases. It seems that international consciousness, recognition, outrage, and action coming from outside the continent rarely extend far beyond the Suez Canal. Far from dominating individual and institutional consciousness, from the perspective of policy, media, public and academic agendas outside the continent, Africa seems hardly to exist.

How is it possible that in this day and age, a conflict of the magnitude of that in the DRC (or of the magnitude of Angola, or Burundi, for that matter) can simply be 'missed'? And this considered, how can one explain the overwhelming, emotive and almost exclusive response by policymakers, the media, the public and academia alike, to conflict resulting in the deaths of roughly 2,000 people in Kosovo in 1998–99, from the perspectives of 'moral imperative' and 'humanitarianism' (see Associated Press 1999a; and *Independent* 1998)? This was happening at a time when not only was the massive nine-nation conflict in full swing in the DRC, but also when rebels in Sierra Leone were succeeding in a brutal campaign to take the capital, Freetown, arbitrarily killing and mutilating their victims; when rebels in Angola were launching another brutal campaign that included the downing of civilian aircraft; and when Ethiopia and Eritrea were squaring off in devastating nation-on-nation conflict over a border dispute, among other conflicts. In 1999, Kosovo received more attention and aid money than all of Africa's humanitarian emergencies combined. And how can one explain the fact that post-election violence in East Timor (with a death toll of roughly 1,000) sparked as much as ten times more aid than did the DRC in 1999?

How is it that newspaper articles, academic papers and foreign policy statements on the Israel-Palestine conflict (roughly 5,000 deaths) are consistently (almost obsessively) churned out throughout the world on a daily basis, full of lengthy details and insights on the complex political intricacies of the situation, when infinitely larger conflicts in Africa, on the rare occasion that they are discussed at all, are framed only in overly simplistic humanitarian formats, and are treated as having little or no political value? Some major Western news corporations have devoted 50 times more coverage to Israel-Palestine than they have to the DRC. It is not at all rare for major Western academic journals that examine international security issues to publish more articles focusing on Israel-Palestine in recent years than they have on all of Africa's conflicts combined. And how is it that there is so much attention to and discussion of terrorist attacks on trains in Spain, and buses in the UK, but a terrorist attack by rebels on a train in Angola in 2001, resulting in more than 300 deaths, barely rates a mention? Why does there appear to be almost an obsession with global terrorism (most notably in the West), but virtually no awareness of global warlordism? Levels of attention and response to conflict in the world seem to defy any semblance of proportionality.

Evidence points to the marginalization of most of the world's deadliest conflicts, particularly those in Africa. It is almost as if the actors in a position to respond have by and large tacitly agreed on some form of global-level triage: they have somehow all arrived at the fatalistic and highly simplistic conclusion that Africa's problems are too massive and intractable for the continent as a whole to be 'saved', and that attention and energies are therefore best devoted elsewhere. It would be easy to jump to the conclusion that Africa's conflicts are ignored because the continent does not have a great deal of national interest value for the West: perhaps primarily because it is not as oil-soaked as the Middle East, and because the conflicts predominantly affect poor black people in a rich and white-dominated world. While there is certainly a great deal of truth in these generalizations, they are somewhat simplistic and fail to properly explain the response of the outside world to conflict in Africa. The continent is in fact a veritable storehouse of minerals and other natural resources, including large quantities of oil, upon which the outside world is increasingly coming to rely. Furthermore, Africa's conflicts are not completely ignored across the board. There are large discrepancies in the levels of outside attention allocated to the various African conflicts, and again, scale and severity do not appear to be major indicators of the response. So to simply leave explanation at this point leaves too many questions unanswered.

Why, for example, was the humanitarian tragedy caused by conflict and famine in Somalia chosen for intervention in the early 1990s when a similar situation in southern Sudan was not? Why did large-scale massacres in Rwanda attract some measure of (albeit belated) outside attention, indignation and a great deal of guilt in 1994 and beyond, whereas similar massacres in neighbouring Burundi in 1993, leaving more than 200,000 dead, had failed to attract any outside attention or residual guilt? Why, after eight years of relative silence on the problems of violence in Africa, did the outside world suddenly begin to collectively suffer the pangs of moral outrage over the conflict in Darfur, at a time when death toll estimates from conflict in the DRC were almost 80 times greater? And why have so many in the West apparently been so incensed with the repression and political instability in Zimbabwe? At roughly the same time as government reaction to opposition activity in Zimbabwe in March 2007 left one dead and a number of opposition leaders beaten and arrested, similar government reaction to opposition activity in Guinea left 130 people dead (as security forces opened fire indiscriminately on protestors) and civil society leaders imprisoned (see Amnesty International 2007); and clashes between government troops and forces loyal to the opposition leader in the DRC left at least 400, possibly 600 people dead. And yet it is Zimbabwe alone that has been the target of outrage and indignation in the outside world. The situation in Guinea is, to all intents and purposes, as good as unknown. Why is it that names like Mugabe, and places like Darfur, are so commonly known in the West, when names like Conté and Kabila, and places like Kivu and Ituri are not?

Our collective perception of the state of conflict in the world can perhaps be likened to a reflection in a distorted mirror that makes certain parts of its subjects appear much larger than they actually are, and others much smaller. That is, while certain (often relatively minor) conflicts are disproportionately prominent in the sphere of individual and institutional consciousness around the world, the vast

majority of others (including the most major conflicts) are given disproportionately low levels of attention. Far from being a major determinant of attention, the absolute scale of conflict can rarely be seen as playing any significant role at all in determining the levels of response of any of the actors in question. The responses by these various actors also appear to be highly assimilated, reflecting very similar concerns and priorities. While there may be a host of varying viewpoints and opinions from different actors on what a particular conflict is about and what should be done in response to it, the object of the attention of all the actors is generally the same: they are responding to one and the same conflict and are barely responding to any of the others.

The failure to take conflict scale into account, combined with the assimilation of agendas, in many cases reaches the point where the resulting focus of these actors brings into question their adherence to their own professed objectives, interests and concerns, as well as their roles in society. Interestingly, words and actions (and calls to action) in response to conflicts are so frequently couched in humanitarian terms by a wide variety of actors, all emphasizing the need to save human lives and prevent human suffering. But such 'humanitarian' principles ring quite hollow when one considers how highly selectively and disproportionately they are applied. It is understandable, and largely unavoidable, that, if left to their own devices, national governments will respond to conflict in accordance with narrowly defined political and national interests (humanitarian rhetoric notwithstanding), largely ignoring the world's deadliest conflicts if they do not particularly affect these interests, or if it suits their interests to do so. It is less understandable that the media, the general public, NGOs and academia end up with similar agendas and priorities, particularly when many of these actors see their roles in society as watchdogs of (or counterbalances to) policymakers, as independent agents of humanitarianism, or as the keepers of objective reality.

Such assimilation also seems odd in the context of vibrantly diverse 'free' democracies in which virtually unlimited amounts of information flow unhindered throughout all levels of society. Media corporations, the public, and academia in developed countries are independent entities which essentially have the freedom and the power to discuss, investigate, research, announce and print virtually anything about anything. The media is free to (and frequently does) question, disagree with, and criticize the government. Furthermore, advances in communication technology have provided us with the unprecedented ability to gather, process and disseminate news on events from any part of the globe to any other part of the globe.

The members of the public at large are exposed to what both the government and the media have to say, and, thanks to the Internet, are now able to independently access a seemingly infinite amount of information from and about any part of the world from the comfort of their homes. This can increasingly be done even without using the formal mass media corporations as intermediaries. The more active members of the public are able to investigate, speak out about, fundraise for, and even become directly involved in, alleviating human suffering resulting from conflict in foreign countries, through forming or joining aid, advocacy, or other NGOs. Researchers and academics generally have the freedom to choose their research topics and focus (in terms of geographical region), and have access to funding for conducting research,

both at their universities or think tanks, and in the field. As with the media and the general public, the ability of academics and researchers to examine and analyze distant conflict has also been greatly enhanced by advances in communication technology (most notably the Internet).

But 'freedom' is an all-too-convenient term that is usually used to describe the absence of intimidation and legal constraints that prevent speech, observation, research, movement and association. Governmental censorship, arrest, and intimidation are by no means the only barriers to the freedom to discuss, research, publish, and take action on matters of foreign affairs. Numerous other (often invisible) barriers prevent, inhibit and discourage attention from being given to certain conflicts, while many external influences encourage attention to be given to other conflicts. The large number of foreign conflicts makes the setting of priorities for attention, at both an individual and institutional level, an inevitable process of selection and elimination.

In this process of determining responses to foreign conflict, internal interests, priorities and dynamics are certainly major considerations, but actors are also susceptible to external influences. This susceptibility is typically inversely proportional to the power those same actors wield, although the level of importance that an actor attaches to a particular conflict also affects the level of influence and susceptibility to influence. Once an issue appears to be important for one powerful actor, it often becomes important for some or all of the others, and its perceived importance snowballs. Such a bandwagon effect plays a major role in bringing the agendas of diverse actors together. Within national boundaries, so too does the socially constructed and highly pervasive ideology of nationalism, in which individuals and institutions are raised and constantly reminded to see foreign events in terms of how they affect their own nation. Finally, the increasing globalization of power and information through influential governments, media corporations and other actors means that the projection of influence is all the more powerful, such that what is seen as being important to a country, institution or individual becomes (as if by default) important for other countries, institutions or individuals on the other side of the globe.

Hence, the priorities on the agendas of the various actors seem to merge, and consciousness appears to be increasingly assimilated and unified in terms of the conflicts that are selected for consideration as being important, even though the individual perspectives and opinions regarding those particular conflicts may be highly divergent. Understanding the process by which conflicts are 'chosen' for highly concentrated levels of attention is useful not simply for the sake of understanding these conflicts and how we respond to them, but perhaps more importantly because it helps us understand how and why the vast majority of other conflicts are not given the attention they deserve – to the point that, in many cases, most major conflicts are almost entirely hidden from view. Consciousness of and attention to conflicts ranges from obsessive to virtually nonexistent, with a yawning gap between the two. And while some conflicts may occasionally find themselves to be the temporary object of focus (flash-in-the-pan style), and others may be focused on more consistently, the majority (including the largest and deadliest) belong to the 'virtually nonexistent'

category of attention levels. These are ‘stealth conflicts’: those that remain ‘off the radar’ of the collective consciousness of those actors in a position to respond.

That certain actors focus disproportionately on certain conflicts is not necessarily a major problem: selectivity in responding to conflict is inevitable, as is prioritization based on the interests of each actor. But when all of the actors (including those that are supposedly charged with the task of checking and balancing other actors) develop and follow similar priorities in their selection of which conflicts are to be considered important, not only does a major problem arise, but, because there is almost no one left to point it out, the problem itself goes largely unnoticed. The higher the collective level of importance attached to a particular conflict, the greater the frenzy of attention and the degree to which it is accentuated by the bandwagon effect. The more disproportionate this becomes (in relation to other conflicts), the more the opportunities for attention to other conflicts are eliminated. Deprived of vital attention, these ‘other’ conflicts (regardless of their scale) carry on, often largely unchecked, and ironically, it is because they are unchecked that the death tolls of such conflicts continue to rise, usually far exceeding those of conflicts that do manage to attract attention. Not only are they absent from the collective international consciousness of today, they will also be absent from the history books of tomorrow. Such is the plight of stealth conflicts.

The purpose of this book is to reveal how skewed and assimilated is the collective response to foreign conflict by major actors in the world (a situation that results in many of the world’s deadliest conflicts being largely ignored) and to analyze why this is so. The book is divided into seven main chapters. The first begins by putting into perspective the state of conflict in the world. Focusing primarily on the death toll as the most representative indicator of scale, it looks at the relative scale of conflicts as they have occurred throughout the world since the end of the Cold War, and examines some trends in conflict throughout the world. The second chapter attempts to provide an overview of the mechanics of individual and institutional consciousness among those in a position to respond to foreign conflicts, presenting a simple agenda-setting model of how these actors interact in determining their response (or lack thereof). This leads to the explanation and development of the concept of stealth conflicts.

The following four chapters each deal with one of the actors in this agenda-setting process: policymakers, the media, the public (including NGOs, interest groups and corporations) and academia. Each quantitatively and qualitatively examines the responses of these actors to foreign conflicts, and the mechanics of their agenda-setting process in this regard, including their internal dynamics and how they are influenced by the other actors. The final chapter brings these arguments together. All conflicts, together with the factors that lead external actors to make choices in how they respond to them, are complex and unique. As such, fixed formulas designed to predict which conflicts will be chosen for attention, and which will not, are unlikely to be universally viable. Even so, it is possible to narrow down many of the key factors that determine the level of attention a conflict receives from external actors, and to gain an overview of how these factors come together in making such determinations, thereby somehow systematizing the concept of stealth conflicts. This is the purpose of the final chapter of the book.