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CHAPTER 2

Deadly Assaults on Civilians

It is widely believed—in the media, NGOs, governments, and international agencies—that civilians are being targeted, and killed, in ever-greater numbers by the perpetrators of political violence. There is, however, very little hard evidence to support such a claim.

This chapter reviews the latest findings of a dataset commissioned from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) by the Human Security Centre. The data measure the worldwide incidence of organized violence against civilians from 1989 to 2005. The findings of this dataset are then compared with those of two others that also measure—albeit very differently—the global toll of civilians intentionally killed each year in campaigns of political violence.

The Political Instability Task Force’s dataset on genocides and politicides details programs of mass violence directed primarily at civilians from 1956 to 2005.

The dataset compiled by the Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism’s Terrorism Knowledge Base tracks the number of international terrorist incidents from 1968 to the present day, and the fatalities associated with these incidents. It also has data on the number of domestic terrorist incidents and fatalities since 1998.

Each dataset focuses on the intentional killing of civilians—not on cases of “collateral damage,” where noncombatants are caught in the crossfire of military engagements, or become the unintended victims of artillery attacks or aerial bombing.

None of the datasets count deaths from interpersonal violence, nor “indirect deaths” from war-exacerbated disease and malnutrition. In poor-country wars the latter kill far more civilians than do bombs and bullets. The extent and drivers of indirect deaths will be examined in detail in the next *Human Security Report*.

Trends in “One-sided Violence”

UCDP describes intentional attacks against civilians as “one-sided violence”—the term reflecting the fact that the victims cannot fight back.²³

The new UCDP dataset counts civilian deaths in violent campaigns (UCDP uses the term “cases”) perpetrated by either governments or armed non-state groups each year. The latter category includes rebels, militias, warlords, clans, and other organized communal groups. In a few cases violence by organized criminal gangs is included. To count as a case of one-sided violence, at least 25 civilians must be killed in the course of a calendar year by the same government or non-state armed group.

What do the new data tell us? First, that while the number of armed conflicts being waged around the world declined by more than 40% from 1992 to the present, the number of violent campaigns that intentionally target civilians increased by more than half.

Second, that most of these campaigns, and most of the fatalities that result from them, have been concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa.

Third, that organized violence against civilians is strongly associated with armed conflicts. The data show that three quarters of the perpetrators of violent campaigns against civilians were also involved in ongoing state-based

armed conflicts. Civil wars and assaults on civilians are strongly interrelated.²⁴

Fourth, that in most of the period 1989 to 2005—and with the obvious exception of the Rwandan genocide—the number of civilians killed in campaigns of organized violence has been relatively small compared with the total number of people killed in armed combat.

The trend line in Figure 2.1 shows the number of violent campaigns against civilians rising unevenly from 18 to 28 between 1989 and 2005—a 55% overall increase. This finding fits with the widely held belief that civilians have been increasingly targeted by both rebels and governments in the somewhat chaotic post-Cold War years.

It is not clear, however, why there should have been an increase in campaigns of low-level violence against civilians, especially since the armed conflicts with which such campaigns are so often associated have declined in number.

There have been a number of recent attempts to explain why governments and rebels intentionally target civilians.²⁵ But none of these studies has sought to account for the post-Cold War increase in campaigns of organized violence—perhaps because few researchers have realized that such a trend exists.

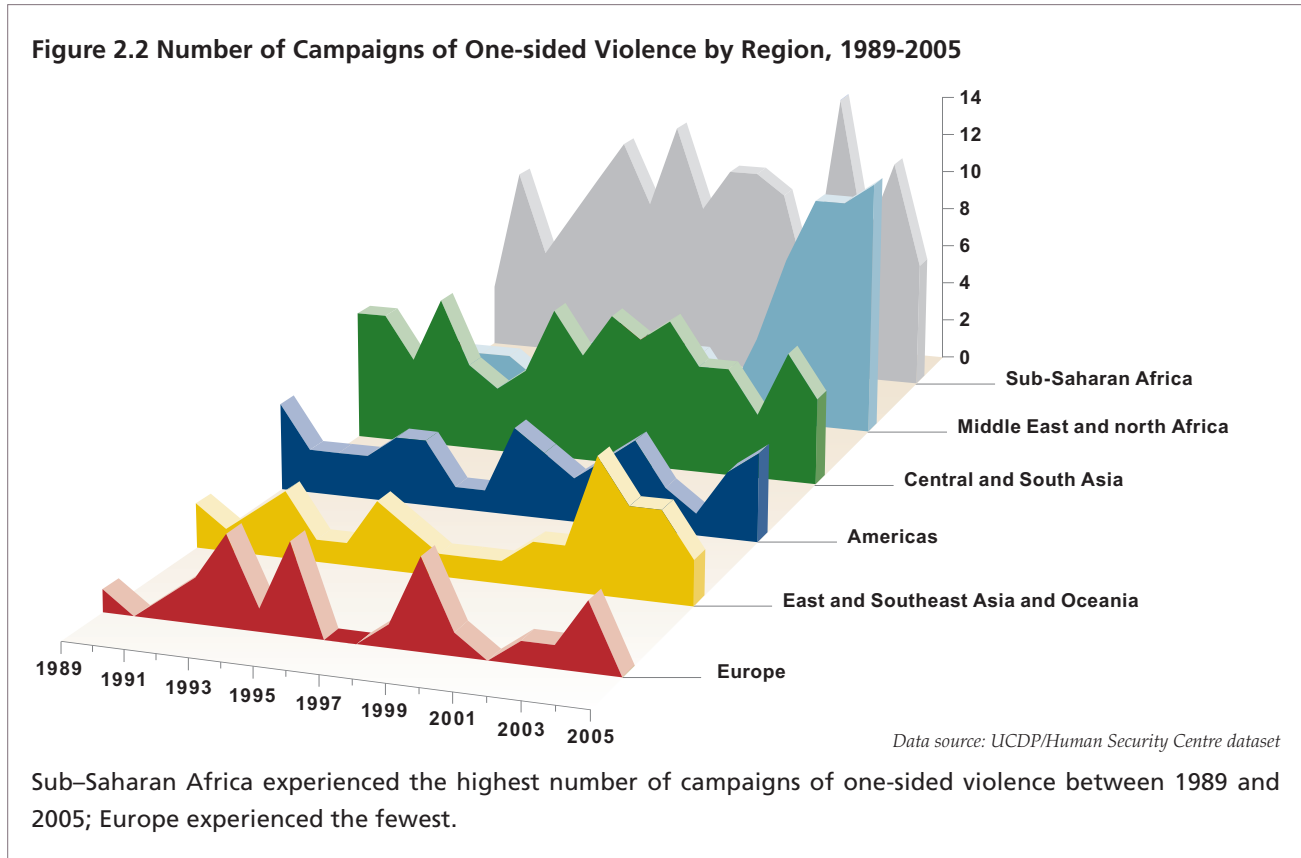
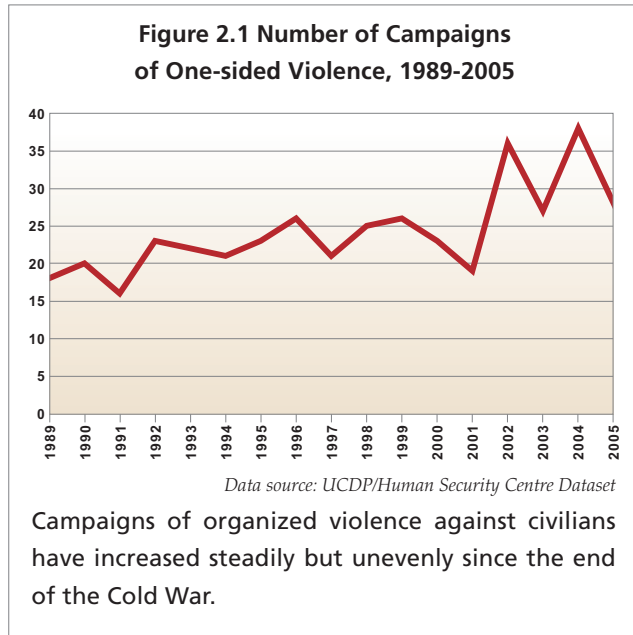


Figure 2.3 Number of Reported, Codable Deaths from One-sided Violence by Region, 1989-2005*

Region	Reported, codable deaths
Africa, sub-Saharan**	535,890
Americas	8,187
Asia, Central and South	13,903
Asia, East and SE and Oceania	3,678
Europe	14,811
Middle East and north Africa	12,920
Total	589,389

Data source: UCDP/Human Security Centre Dataset

Even without the huge death toll from the 1994 genocide in Rwanda (included in the above figure), sub-Saharan Africa has still suffered more deaths from one-sided violence than any other region.

**Fatality figures are "best estimates."*

***Uppsala's "best" estimate for the death toll from the Rwandan genocide is 500,000, considerably lower than the more commonly cited figure of 800,000 which is also Uppsala's "high" estimate.*

Regional Differences

Sub-Saharan Africa endured 143 campaigns of deadly violence against civilians between 1989 and 2005, more than any other region in the world. Fifty-three different actors (governments or non-state armed groups) perpetrated violent campaigns against civilians in 19 different countries.

There were far fewer violent campaigns against civilians in other regions in the period under review. Central and South Asia had 89 campaigns; the Middle East and north Africa 74; the Americas 44; East and Southeast Asia 38; and Europe 24, between 1989 and 2005.

In addition to the high number of campaigns of one-sided violence in sub-Saharan Africa, Figure 2.2 clearly shows the sharp increase in violent campaigns against civilians in the Middle East and north Africa that began in the new millennium. A large part of this increase has been associated with the upsurge of violence against civilians in Iraq and in Darfur.²⁶

In East and Southeast Asia there was a marked increase in campaigns directed against civilians starting in 2001, but there has been no consistent trend in Europe (which includes Russia), nor in the Americas.

The difficulty UCDP researchers confront in establishing reliable estimates of death tolls from one-sided violence is evident in the large variations between their "best" and "high" estimates of death tolls for some countries. In Darfur, for example, where obtaining reliable data is fraught with difficulty, UCDP's high estimate is eight times larger than its low estimate.

So the civilian fatality shown in Figure 2.3 should be regarded with considerable caution—and seen as a very rough guide to differences in the extent of killing between regions rather than a true reflection of different regional civilian death tolls.

Knowing the civilian death tolls from one-sided violence for each region over a 17-year period tells us little about trends within each region. In some cases there are no clear trends, but in sub-Saharan Africa there has been a steep, but very uneven, decline in civilian deaths since the Rwandan genocide in 1994.

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It is hard to overstate just how extreme and unusual an event the Rwandan genocide was. In just a few months more than five times as many civilians were slaughtered in this one country as in all other countries in the world from 1989 to 2005. In fact the estimated death toll was almost as large as the global toll from all state-based conflicts in 1950, the deadliest year for battle deaths in the entire post-World War II era.

In the other regions, Europe had two sharp peaks in civilian death tolls—in the early and mid-1990s, with a much smaller peak in 1999. All were associated with conflicts in the

Balkans. The Americas experienced a relatively stable low level of one-sided deaths until 2001 and the September 11 attack on New York's World Trade Center. Central and South Asia suffered relatively few one-sided deaths, with the exception of a sharp peak in 1998 that was largely associated with the violence in Afghanistan.

The one-sided violence death toll in the Middle East and north Africa was also relatively low and stable until 2001. Between 2001 and 2004 the estimated number of civilians intentionally killed increased twentyfold.

Even if we exclude the slaughter in Rwanda, UCDP's data suggest that there has been a clear, albeit very uneven, global decline in the number of deaths resulting from one-sided violence since 1994. From 1995 to 1999 UCDP recorded a (best estimate) average of 8,000 civilian deaths per year; from 2000 to 2005 the average had dropped to 4,800. But given uncertainties about the death toll in Iraq and given the huge variation between the best and high estimates in Darfur, the data really are not robust enough to make any claims about trends with confidence.

The Worst Perpetrators?

Who perpetrates the most violence against civilians—governments or non-state armed groups? The answer depends on what is being measured.

In the 17 years under review (1989 to 2005), non-state armed groups instigated more violent campaigns against civilians than did governments—and they did so with increasing frequency over the period. Far fewer governments have been

involved in organized violence against civilians than non-state groups, but state-perpetrated violence killed more civilians in four out of the 17 years.

As Figure 2.4 shows, the incidence of campaigns against civilians by non-state armed groups increased over the period, while the incidence of government campaigns changed little.

Far fewer governments have been involved in organized violence against civilians than non-state groups.

The data, however, almost certainly underestimate the responsibility of governments for killing civilians. In some cases—the Janjaweed militias in Darfur are an obvious contemporary example—non-state groups may be little more than government surrogates.

Genocides and Politicides

Barbara Harff of the United States Naval Academy, who compiled the genocide/politicide database used by the Political Instability Task Force (PITF), defines genocides and politicides as campaigns of “political mass murder” that are directed primarily against civilians and are intended to exterminate “in whole or in part” a communal, political, or politicized ethnic group.²⁷ (Politicides are similar to genocides except that their victims are targeted because of their political convictions rather than their ethnicity and religion, as is the case with genocide.)

While both PITF and UCDP's one-sided violence datasets record cases of organized violence against civilians, the PITF dataset is concerned primarily with campaigns of mass violence.

As Figure 2.5, which updates the 1956 to 2001 data presented in the 2005 *Human Security Report*, shows, cases of genocide and politicide declined by 90% between 1989 and 2005. Over the same period UCDP's one-sided violence dataset tracked a 55% increase in campaigns of violence against civilians—from 18 to 28.

Given that both datasets are tracking organized violence against civilians, how can such contradictory trends be explained?

In fact there is no necessary contradiction. Professor Harff's dataset only tracks a relatively small number of campaigns of mass violence against civilians and almost all of these take place in the context of major intrastate armed conflicts. Since

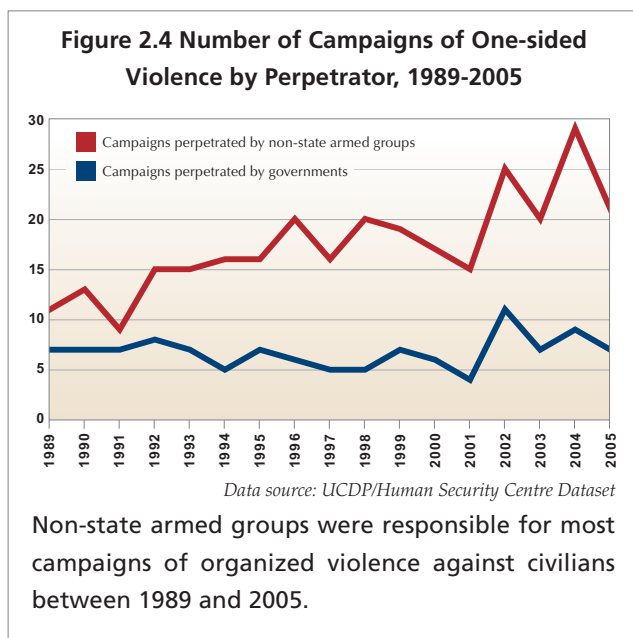
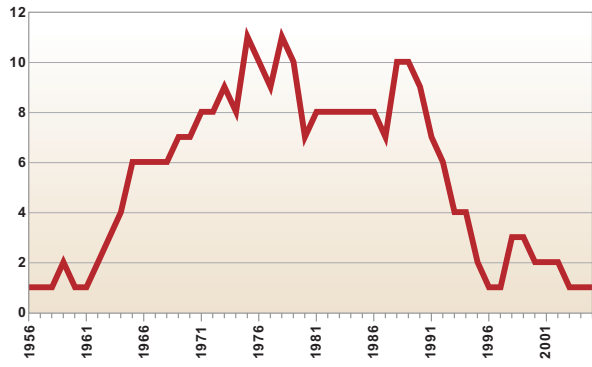


Figure 2.5 Number of Genocides and Politicides, 1956-2005



Data source: Barbara Harff, 2005²⁸

The number of genocides and politicides plummeted following the end of the Cold War—a trend similar to that of high-intensity civil conflicts.

the end of the Cold War the number of major intrastate conflicts has declined by some 80%; with this decline has come a commensurate reduction in genocides/politicides.

UCDP, on the other hand, tracks the far more numerous minor campaigns of violence against civilians, in addition to genocides and politicides with their much higher death counts. The Harff dataset does not include any of the minor campaigns.

Starting in 2001 the downward trend in international terrorism incidents was reversed.

So it is perfectly possible for mass campaigns against civilians to decrease, while low-level campaigns increase. As noted earlier, however, there has as yet been no compelling explanation as to why the number of low-level campaigns should have risen when other forms of political violence were falling.

Terrorism

Terrorism statistics provide a third measure of deadly threats to the innocent, but here too obtaining access to reliable and timely data is challenging.

The Memorial Institute for the Prevention of Terrorism (MIPT), which codes and collates terrorism incident data provided by the RAND Corporation, is now the only institution that publishes updated international terrorism statistics on

a timely annual basis. MIPT has international terrorism data going back to 1968, and domestic terrorism data from 1998.²⁹

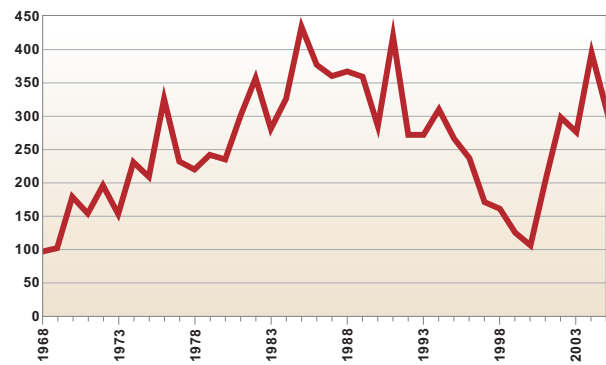
MIPT counts many of the same events as UCDP's one-sided violence dataset and PITF's genocide/politicide dataset. But unlike UCDP and PITF it does not count the killing of civilians by governments.

As Figure 2.6 indicates, MIPT's trend data reveal a four-fold increase in international terrorist incidents from 1968 to 1991, followed by an almost fourfold decline by the end of the 1990s.

Until the beginning of the new millennium, the international terrorism data followed a trend line remarkably similar to those of state-based armed conflicts and genocides/politicides—i.e., a steady increase through the Cold War years followed by a sharp decrease in the 1990s. But over the past five years there has been a dramatic change.

Starting in 2001 the downward trend in international terrorist incidents was reversed, and by 2004 there was almost four times as many incidents as in 2001. The global incidence of domestic terrorism also increased dramatically over the same period. (MIPT only has data on domestic terrorism from 1998.)

Figure 2.6 Number of International Terrorist Incidents, 1968-2005



Data source: MIPT Terrorism Knowledge Base³⁰

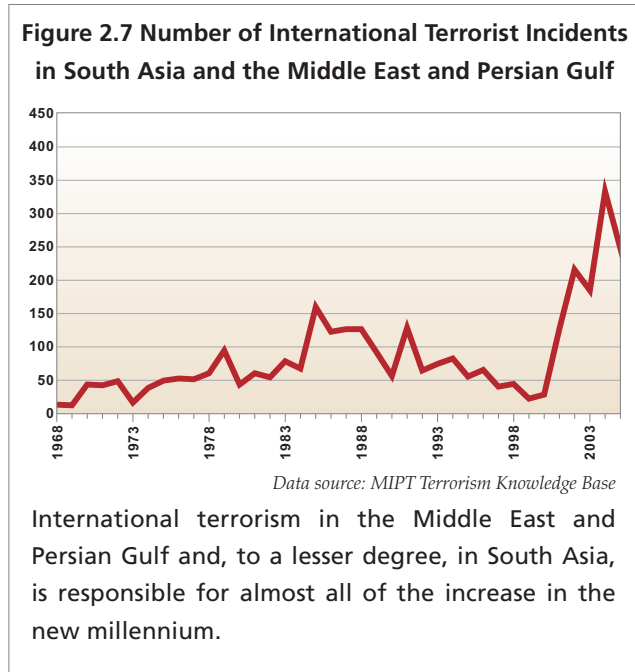
The number of international terrorist attacks rose through the Cold War years, declined steeply in the 1990s, but has risen steeply again in the new millennium.

But when the international terrorist incident data are disaggregated on a regional basis it becomes clear that just two regions are driving almost all of the post-2000 increase.

Figure 2.7 shows the huge reported increase in international terrorism incidents in the Middle East and Persian Gulf and in South Asia. Most of the increased terrorist activity has

taken place in the former region where, since 2003, it has been driven primarily by the violence in Iraq.

When terrorist incidents in the Middle East and Persian Gulf and in South Asia are removed from the global trend data, it becomes apparent that the decline in international terrorist incidents in the rest of the world that started in 1991 has continued to the present day.



This decline—from just under 300 incidents in 1991 to 58 in 2005—has passed almost completely unnoticed by the media and expert community alike.

It is also worth noting that compared with armed conflict, terrorism has, on average, killed relatively few people over the past 40 years.

Terrorism has killed relatively few people on average over the past 40 years.

MIPT's data indicate that the global death toll from international terrorist attacks has averaged just 385 people a year since 1968, while civilian deaths from domestic terrorism have averaged 2,546 a year since 1998. By contrast, the average annual death toll from state-based armed conflict from 1998 to 2005 was almost 60,000 according to the Lacina and Gleditsch dataset.³¹

It is important to note, however, that the ratio of terrorist deaths to battle deaths is changing. Over the past eight years the global death toll from terrorism has been rising, while that of warfare has been falling.

Can We Trust the Data?

Each dataset reviewed in this chapter relies, directly or indirectly, on media and other reports for its estimates of deaths from one-sided violence. But collecting data can be very challenging.

First, in war zones many deaths go unreported or unrecorded, often because reporters are physically denied access to the killing zones, or are intimidated from publishing what they know. Some are even killed. Neither governments nor rebel groups want the fact that they kill civilians given any publicity.

Second, the greater the overall level of violence the less likely individual deaths are to be counted. In Iraq, for example, the level of killing is now so intense that the media tend only to report attacks that cause multiple deaths. Keeping an accurate record of the number of people killed in low-intensity conflicts is far less difficult.

Third, in the many conflicts where insurgents and militia fighters do not wear uniforms, the task of distinguishing civilian from combatant bodies is often impossible. This has been a particularly acute problem in Iraq.

Each dataset also has its own unique sources of potential bias. UCDP's stringent coding rules increase the risk of undercounting because the perpetrators of one-sided violence must be identified before the deaths of their victims can be recorded. In conflicts like that in Iraq, where there are a large number of militias and insurgent groups, few of whom admit responsibility for any attacks, the task of identifying the perpetrators is often impossible.³²

MIPT's dataset, like most other terrorism datasets, does not include civilians deliberately killed by their governments. Its data recording practice also appears to undercount civilian deaths perpetrated by rebel groups in rural insurgencies, which according to its definition should be included. For example, although attacks on civilians perpetrated by the Janjaweed militia in Darfur would appear to fit with MIPT's definition of terrorism, the dataset only records 72 terrorism deaths in all of Sudan from 2002 to the present day.³³ This is despite the fact that the Janjaweed are widely believed to have killed thousands of civilians since the latest fighting began. UCDP records a "best estimate" of 7,173 deaths from one-sided violence in Darfur from the beginning of 2002 to the end of 2005.³⁴

The PITF genocide/politicide dataset differs from both UCDP and MIPT in that it clearly includes some nonviolent civilian deaths from war-exacerbated disease and malnutrition in its genocide death counts.³⁵ For example, the genocide toll in Darfur from 2003 to 2005 is estimated at 250,000. Since no studies have claimed that violent deaths amount to even half that number over the period in question, it must be assumed that a considerable proportion of the estimated 250,000 deaths are from war-exacerbated disease and malnutrition.

So we have three datasets, each of which measures deaths from one-sided violence, but whose estimates for the civilian death toll in Darfur over comparable periods range from 72 to 7,173 to 250,000.

Because each dataset estimates civilian death tolls differently, the absolute number of deaths and trends they describe are also very different. None offers a complete picture, but each provides different insights into one of the most pressing human security problems of our age.

The Need for Better Statistics

This chapter has stressed our concerns about the reliability of data on civilian deaths. This remains a critical issue for all researchers working in this field. It is also a critical issue for policy-makers.

It is both extraordinary and troubling that when the Secretary-General of the United Nations reports to the Security Council on “The Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict,” he has no access to reliable data that can inform the council whether deadly threats to civilians—the central focus of his report—are increasing or decreasing.³⁶

The need for better data collection is obvious. Not one of the three datasets reviewed here can yet provide the sort of answers that the UN needs to determine whether or not its policies for the protection of civilians are having any impact.

There are no simple solutions to many of the data problems discussed in this chapter, but our knowledge could be immeasurably improved by a modest increase in resources to the few institutions that work in this field.