

Understanding Causes:

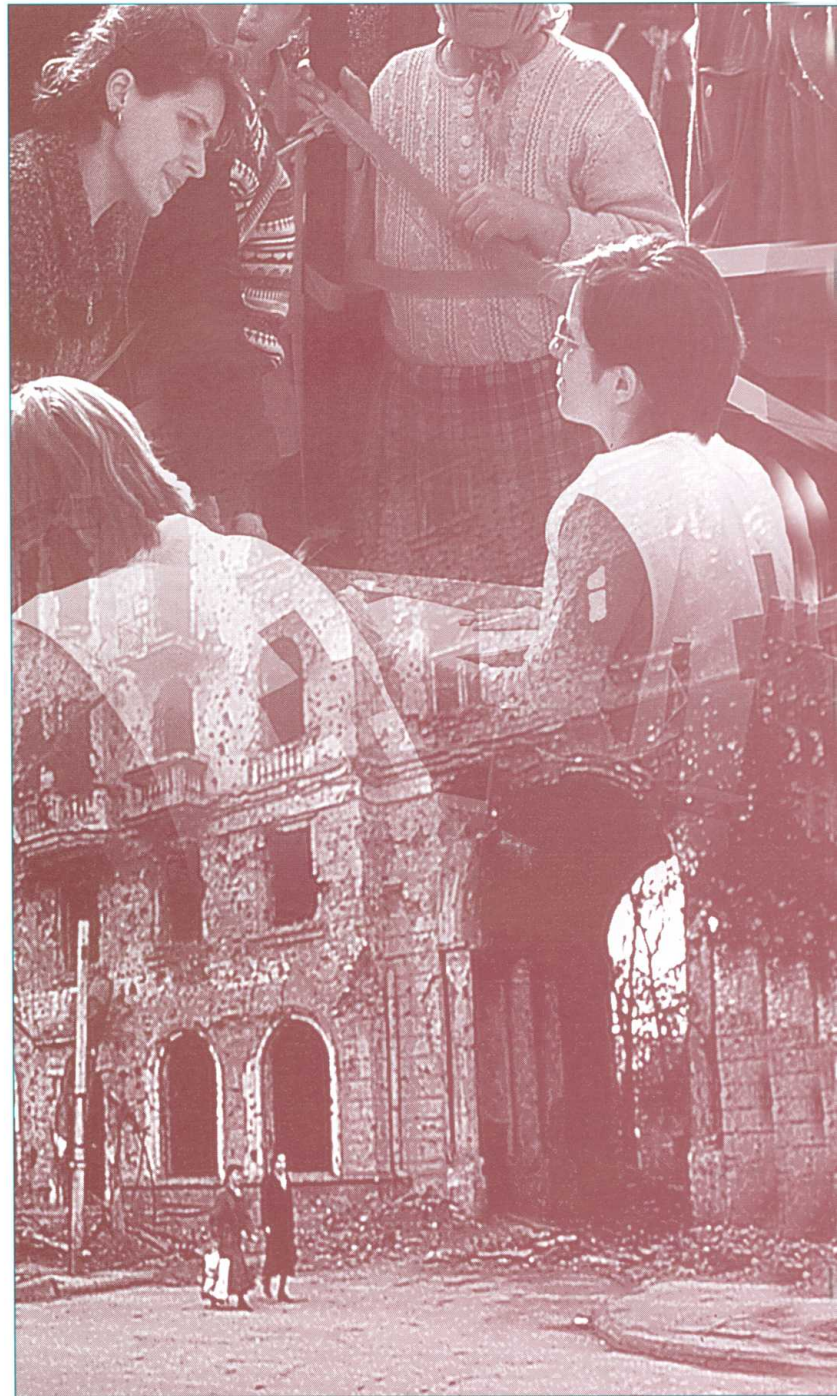
the First Step to Successful Prevention

The causes of war are inherently more difficult to explain than those of natural events. Social behaviour is not subject to physical laws in the same way as cyclones or earthquakes; people make their own history, often violently and sometimes inexplicably. Thus, causality is complex and multidimensional, and it differs, often fundamentally, from war to war.

We can, however, identify some conditions that increase the probability of war. In recent years poor countries have been far more likely to be embroiled in armed conflicts than rich ones. But poverty per se appears not to be the decisive factor; most poor countries live in peace most of the time.

A study recently completed by the United Nations University shows that countries that are afflicted by war typically also suffer from inequality among domestic social groups. And it is this, rather than poverty, that seems to be the critical factor. The inequality may be based on ethnicity, religion, national identity or economic class, but it tends to be reflected in unequal access to political power that too often forecloses paths to peaceful change.

Economic decline is also strongly associated with violent conflict, not least because the politics of a shrinking economy are inherently more conflictual than those of economic growth. In some instances, the impact of radical economic reforms and structural adjustment programmes imposed without compensating social policies can undermine political stability. More



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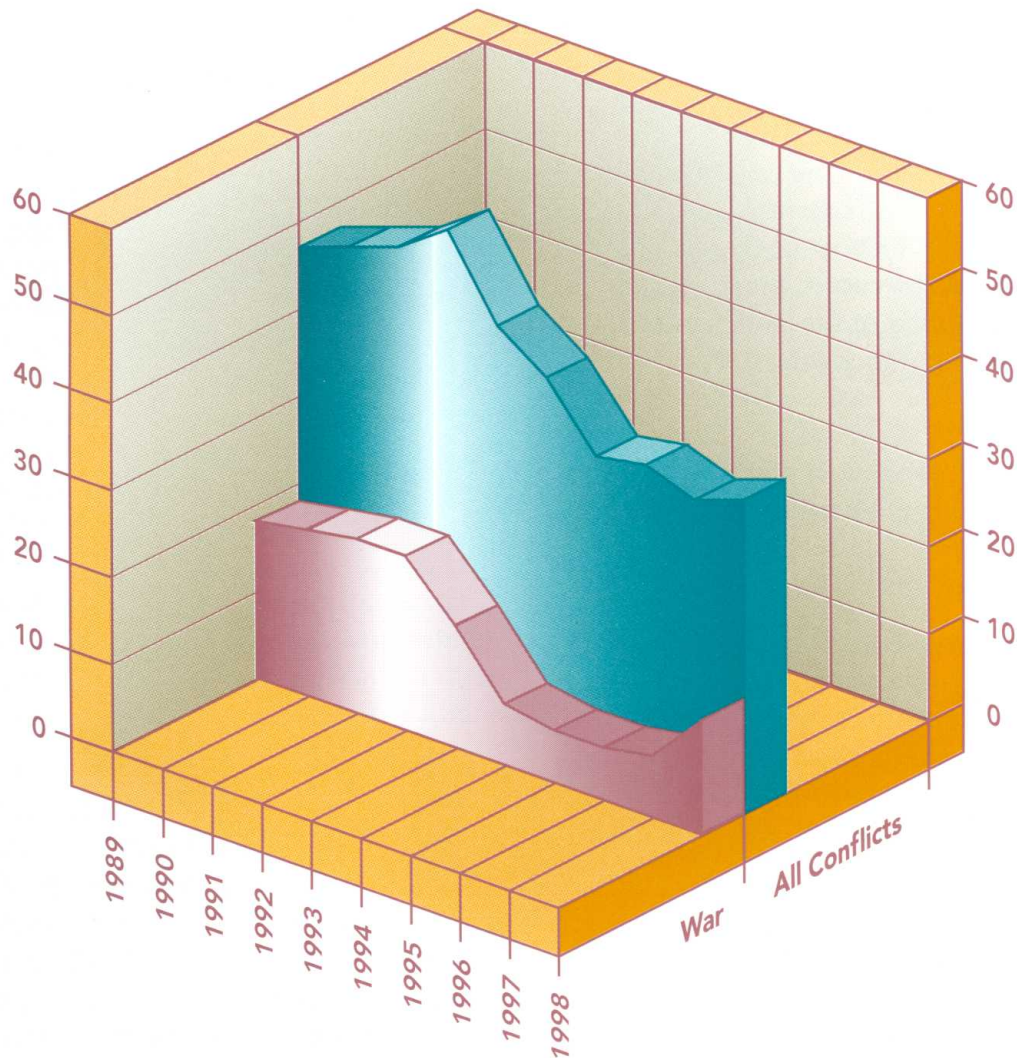


generally, weak governments—and, of course, so-called failed States—often simply lack the capacity to stop the eruption and spread of violence.

The shift from “war-proneness” to war itself can be triggered by the deliberate mobilization of grievances, and by ethnic, religious or nationalist myth mongering and the promotion of dehumanizing ideologies, all of them too often propagated by hate media. The widespread rise of what is sometimes called identity politics, coupled with the fact that fewer than 20 per cent of all States are ethnically homogeneous, means that political demagogues have little difficulty finding targets of opportunity and mobilizing support for chauvinist causes. The upsurge of “ethnic cleansing” in the 1990s provides stark evidence of the appalling human costs that this vicious exploitation of identity politics can generate.

But in other cases armed conflict has less to do with ethnic, national or other enmities than the struggle to control economic resources. The pursuit of diamonds, drugs, timber concessions and other valuable commodities drives a number of today’s internal wars. In some countries the capacity of the State to extract resources from society and to allocate patronage to cronies or political allies is *the* prize to be fought over. In others, it is rebel groups and their backers who command most of the resources—and the patronage that goes with them.

Global **Armed Conflict**, 1989-1998



Source:
Wallensteen and Sollenberg,
University of Uppsala,
Sweden (1999).

Note:
"War" is defined as an armed conflict
in which there are 1,000 or more
battle-related deaths in a year.
The category "all conflicts" refers to
all armed conflicts with 25 or more
battle-related deaths in a year,
including wars.