

UNDERSTANDING ARMED GROUPS AND THE APPLICABLE LAW

Photo Gallery

This selection of photos aims to illustrate the activities and characteristics of armed groups across different historical and geographical contexts. It was compiled by the Review with the support of the ICRC Library and Archives services.

ARMED GROUPS: NOT A NEW PHENOMENON

American Civil War, 1861–1865. Soldier giving a wounded man a drink

States' histories are often marked by violent rebellion. The American Civil War is considered one of the most violent times in US history, with estimated losses of more than 600,000 men. The war saw the eleven 'Confederate' (Southern states) militarily opposed to the twenty-five states supporting the federal government, in an attempt to secede. It was also during this war that Francis Lieber produced the 'Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field', best known as the Lieber Code, and one of the first codifications of the customary law of war.



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Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939. Near San Sebastian. Loyalist militiamen in the field at an advanced post

The Spanish Civil War, which lasted from 1936 to 1939, saw armed groups fighting on both sides, with the support of foreign states. It ended with the rebel Nationalists overthrowing the Republican Government.



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COMPOSITION AND ORGANIZATION OF ARMED GROUPS

Colombia. Mountains in the Valle del Cauca region, between Santander de Quilichao and Popayan, 2010. The daily life of a FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia) combatant

Just like men and boys, women and girls also join armed groups and often take part in the fighting. Their experiences, as well as their potential role for promoting compliance with international humanitarian law, are subject to contemporary research and analysis. The Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del



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Pueblo (FARC-EP), is one of the biggest and most well-known armed groups currently operating in Colombia. The non-international armed conflict between FARC and the government armed forces is one of the longest-running in modern history, and continues to take a heavy toll on the country's civilian population.

Sri Lanka. Jaffna, 1994. Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam female combatants

Armed groups can be very well structured and organized. The conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan government forces took place between 1983 and 2009, when the government of Sri Lanka declared victory over the LTTE. The high level of organization of the LTTE has been acknowledged, with the group operating both military and political wings, holding control over territory throughout the armed conflict, instituting courts and passing local legislation, disposing of great weapon capacity (including ships and aircraft), and organizing regular training for its recruits, many of whom were women.



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FALSE APPEARANCES

Liberia. Monrovia, 2003. Government soldiers manning a checkpoint outside the town

One often associates the image of government armed forces with uniforms, tight organization, and training. Armed groups, in contrast, are commonly perceived as disorganized bandits. Yet states also commit violations of international humanitarian law, and sometimes also employ militias. The case of the conflict in Liberia demonstrates that



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appearances may be misleading. The civil war in Liberia was a complex, multi-actor, two-stage war (1989–1996 and 1999–2003) that claimed the lives of more than 200,000 people and displaced a million more into refugee camps in neighbouring countries. In the second stage of the war, the Liberians United for

Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) opposed the government of Charles Taylor. Throughout the conflict, President Taylor mobilized a number of Liberian militia groups, such as the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), and provided significant support to the armed opposition group Revolutionary United Front (RUF) inside Sierra Leone.

TRADITIONAL WARRIORS

Côte d'Ivoire. Bouake, 2003. Young members of a special unit of the MPCJ (Le Mouvement patriotique de Côte d'Ivoire) rebel movement called 'Warriors of the Light' during training

Armed groups often draw their support from local constituencies. For instance, traditional warriors' and hunters' groups have commonly been involved in fighting in West Africa and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The MPCJ unit shown in this photo is composed of about 1,000 young soldiers, most of them Dozos, traditional hunters from the north of the country believed to possess magical powers.



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TRAINING

Somalia. Hilwaye, 2006. Somalia Islamic Court combatant training camp

Armed groups also undergo military training. Just as in any military unit, commanders try to enforce discipline among their troops. The conflict in Somalia, which began in 1991 and is still ongoing, has passed through several stages of intensity and duration, and various levels of external involvement. In its current stage, the conflict involves a multitude of actors, including Islamist insurgents, clan-based armed groups, criminal gangs, the Somali military, and a number of external actors. In this fragmented environment, the training of different armed groups often takes a rudimentary form. Even in such conditions, training of members of armed groups can and should include knowledge of international humanitarian law.



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ABILITY TO DETAIN

Sudan. Southern Sudan, 1998. A rebel guards captured Sudanese soldiers

In non-international armed conflict, captured fighters do not benefit from a 'prisoner of war' status. Domestic law also does not grant armed groups the right to detain. In practice, however, detention by armed groups does take place. The photo shows a Southern Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) soldier standing next to captured Sudan government



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soldiers shortly before their release in Jigomoni, southern Sudan. Before the creation of the new state of South Sudan, the SPLA was an armed group with significant

capability and training, which – like many other armed groups – captured and detained government soldiers.

ARMED GROUPS' FUNDING STRATEGY

Afghanistan. Kabul, 2007. Afghan Interior Ministry officials and police watch a pile of seized drugs burning on the outskirts of Kabul

Armed groups have various methods of funding their enterprise, including revenue from exploitation of natural resources, drug trade, and hostage-taking. Afghanistan is known for its rich poppy harvest, which accounts for the majority of the world's opium production and provides financing to numerous armed actors. Understanding an armed group's funding strategy is key to successful engagement.



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CHILD SOLDIERS

Lebanon. Beirut, 1976. Young armed militiamen

Armed groups are often responsible for the recruitment of child soldiers. Although child recruitment tends to be associated with conflicts in Africa, this phenomenon also takes place in other parts of the world. Ongoing fighting and insecurity make children vulnerable to repeated recruitment. The civil war in Lebanon (1975–1991) was a devastating multi-layered conflict with significant external involvement, notably from Israel and Syria. The war involved several armed groups representing Lebanon's political and religious denominations.



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Fifteen years of conflict caused massive loss of human life and property, triggered multiple waves of displacement, and left a once-prosperous economy in shambles.

LIGHT WEAPONS

Sierra Leone. Giema, Kailahun district, 1996. Young combatants of the Revolutionary United Front

Light automatic weapons are the most common weapons in use among armed groups. For the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), one of the most infamous of the West African militias, the emblematic weapon was the machete. The RUF is known for the atrocities committed during the armed conflict in Sierra



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Leone between 1991 and 2002, including hacking off the hands and arms of thousands of Sierra Leoneans, and the recruitment of child soldiers. The financing strategy of this armed group was largely based on the diamond trade.

TREATY LAW OF NON-INTERNATIONAL ARMED CONFLICTS

Switzerland. Geneva, 10 June 1977. Signature of the Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949

The twentieth century witnessed significant developments in the legal protection of victims of non-international armed conflicts. One landmark was the adoption in 1977 of Additional Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions. It still remains the case that treaty law of non-international armed



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conflict is much less elaborate than the law of international armed conflicts.

HUMANITARIAN CONSEQUENCES: LIBYA 2011

Libya. Misrata, 2011. Combatants move in on buildings

The conflict between the National Transition Council of Libya (NTC) and the Libyan armed forces (and forces loyal to Colonel Gaddafi) began in February 2011. This conflict saw the involvement of a multitude of armed actors, including mercenaries, paramilitaries, and state armed forces (under the aegis of NATO). The anti-Gaddafi protest movement following the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt quickly transformed into an organized entity capable of planning and co-ordinating attacks, having an identifiable structure, and controlling certain parts of the territory. The NTC is also the most recent example of an armed group having adopted and publicized its own code of conduct.



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V-P-LYE-00161 © ICRC/André Lüthi

Libya. Misrata, 2011. Tripoli Street after heavy fighting has taken place

Destruction of property and infrastructure is a common humanitarian consequence of armed conflict. The recent conflict in Libya demonstrates the extent to which destruction of property impacts on livelihoods and post-conflict recovery.



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Chad. Faya-Largeau, 2011. Chadian nationals fleeing Libya arrive by truck

As the Libyan example shows, the displacement of populations as the result of ongoing fighting is a grave humanitarian consequence of armed conflict. Often the urgency of the moment causes people to leave with few or no supplies. Relocation can prove perilous and families can be dispersed. The return can be delayed because of damage to property and infrastructure, or lack of finances.



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