

Number of conflicts in the world no longer declining

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The trend toward fewer conflicts reported by peace researchers since the early 1990s now seems to have been broken. This is shown in the latest annual report “States in Armed Conflict,” from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program at the Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research. The findings worry the researchers. The Middle East is the region where peace initiatives are most conspicuous in their absence.

Since the most conflict-ridden years in the early 1990s, a continuous decline was registered up to 2002. Since that time the number has held steady at around 30 active armed conflicts per year. This is probably also the case for 2007.

“This is of course a cause of concern. Today’s ongoing conflicts are extremely protracted,” comment researchers Professor Peter Walensteen and Lotta Harbom. “This indicates that the successful negotiation efforts of the 1990s are no longer being carried out with the same force or effectiveness.”

Today’s conflicts appear to be intractable and drawn-out, and the researchers believe that the 1990s peace strategies need to be improved in order to achieve results. At the same time, there are encouraging trends. Conflicts between different groups and peoples, with no involvement of the state, are decreasing in the number of both conflicts and fatalities.

“This type of conflict often arises in the wake of civil war, but they seem to be easier to bring to an end,” says Joakim Kreutz at the Uppsala Conflict Data Program.

One event that received a great deal of attention during 2007 was the violence perpetrated against demonstrating monks in Burma, but this type of violence against civilians is becoming less common. Even though there still are armed attacks on civilians in many countries, there is a great difference compared with the situation in the 1990s, when the genocide in Rwanda, for example, claimed hundreds of thousands of victims.

There are also points of light when it comes to conventional conflicts. Peace negotiations are underway in a number of conflicts, and they are also leading to peace treaties. The agreements in Nepal (from 2006) and Aceh in Indonesia (from 2005) are now being implemented with some degree of determination. Also, peace-making measures in a number of West African countries, like Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Ivory Coast, continue to be fruitful.

The Middle East is the region in which peace initiatives are most clearly conspicuous in their absence. The central importance of the region for the world’s oil supply and for world religions makes this serious. The conference in Annapolis in late November 2007 was the first attempt since 2001 to bring the parties together. They even found it difficult to agree on the declaration that started the negotiations, notes Peter Wallensteen.

“This is a worrisome sign. At the same time, we have to welcome all attempts to bring peace to this area. It has been more than 60 years since the UN General Assembly adopted a plan for Palestine. It must be adapted to today’s reality and implemented.”

During the year other regional conflict complexes have emerged and worsened. The crisis in the Sudanese region Darfur is now spreading to the surrounding countries, such as Chad and the Central African Republic.

“These developments have prompted neighboring countries to take certain peace initiatives,” states Lotta Harbom. “The international mediators in the Darfur conflict, including Jan Eliasson, who is also a visiting professor at Uppsala University, are working to arrange negotiations among the parties. But thus far they have had no success.”

The situation in Africa’s Horn continues to be troublesome. The region’s own conflict dynamics have come to be more and more intertwined with the US-headed war on terror. This has led to new conflict issues being added to the unresolved disputes between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Somalia has once again become a seat of conflict.

The conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have created more uncertainty for the neighboring states. Turkey, Iran, and Syria have shown their extreme displeasure with the activities of the Turkish-Kurdish guerilla PKK from their base in the Kurdish provinces of Iraq. Turkey’s attack in early December was predictable. The Taliban’s increased military activity in Afghanistan and Al-Qaida’s operations have influenced developments in Pakistan. This can affect the stability and chances for democracy in this nuclear-weapons state and have a negative impact on the otherwise promising drop in violence in Kashmir.

Source: Uppsala University

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