# THE PREVENTION OF INSTITUTIONALIZED INTERGROUP VIOLENCE

*Morton Winston*

## The Postmodern Predicament

A wit once defined "irony" as buying a suit with two pairs of pants and then burning a hole in the coat. This nicely captures the sense of pride punctuated by tragedy that characterizes our postmodern mood as the twentieth century slouches towards it conclusion.

The irony of the historical experience of the twentieth century arises from the recognition that the long string of successes in many fields of science and technology that have occurred in this century have taken place alongside an equally long string of human rights violations, mass killings, wars, and genocides. If we measure human progress solely in terms of scientific and technological discovery and innovation, it has been a fabulously progressive century indeed. But if we measure human progress in terms of increased social and economic justice and greater security from war and other forms of social violence, then any objective appraisal of our century must conclude that we have failed tragically to solve the problem of man's inhumanity to man.[1]

I want to focus my remarks on the phenomenon of institutionalized intergroup violence (IIV) and to discuss how an approach to this problem through the framework of health and human rights can point the way towards more effective responses to this source of human suffering in the twenty-first century.[2] My proposal is essentially that we ought to view outbreaks of IIV as an epidemiologist would view outbreaks of disease—as threats to public health. Furthermore,

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we ought to be responding to these outbreaks not just in order to monitor and document the occurrence of the various kinds of human rights violations which are associated with IIV, but rather, in order to address the task of preventing such outbreaks from occurring in the first place.

By "we" I mean members of the transnational human rights movement. The human rights movement is a particular "community of belief" within global civil society. The human rights community should not be confused with national governments, which may from time to time use the rhetoric of human rights, or with intergovernmental organizations such as the United Nations (UN), which contain bodies that are ostensibly devoted to the protection of human rights.[3]

Until quite recently, the basic approach of both intergovernmental and nongovernmental human rights institutions to continuing patterns of human rights violations has been reactive. To use a medical analogy, those of us in the human rights community act for the most part like doctors in the emergency room, waiting for the next victims to be wheeled in and then doing the best we can to prevent these patients from dying. Effective crisis response to human rights emergencies, while certainly an essential part of human rights work, is now seen within many quarters of the human rights movement as "too little" and "too late." There are many people, and I include myself among them, who have come to the conclusion that we need to find ways to be more proactive, we need to find ways to intervene early to prevent intergroup tensions from erupting into civil wars, mass killings, and genocides such as we have seen in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda.

To shift back to my own original metaphor, I want to suggest that in the past 20 years or so scientific research has provided us with significant insights into the causes and etiology of IIV, enough to enable several scholars to develop promising "early warning" models capable of identifying probable or impending outbreaks of IIV. We also have at least a few early intervention techniques that can be employed to forestall, derail, or disrupt the social and political processes that typically lead to massive human rights violations. These insights into causes and techniques of intervention are like

the two pairs of pants. What is lacking at this point in human history is the political will necessary to use this knowledge in the appropriate ways to actually prevent potential human rights and humanitarian disasters. We will surely, in my view, witness more and more deadly IIV in the twenty-first century unless we figure out how to repair this gaping hole in the coat.

## Early Warnings of Ethnopolitical Conflicts and Humanitarian Crises

A workable early warning system must consist of several distinct but interacting elements: (1) a reliable method of objectively and empirically assessing the underlying risk of intercommunal conflict, state repression, genocide/politicide and related human rights abuses, (2) a reliable method of deciding when a particular situation that has been deemed "at risk" and that has been placed on a "watch list" is in imminent danger of escalating into a human rights emergency, (3) a method of publicizing and communicating credible warnings of such emerging crises to the relevant international actors, e.g. the United Nations, regional intergovernmental organizations, major nation-states, human rights and humanitarian nongovernmental organizations, and others, (4) a set of appropriate intervention strategies that can be employed in various stages of different situations by the relevant international actors to prevent the further escalation of conflict, protect innocent bystanders, forestall state-sponsored and other violence, and so prevent serious human rights violations that might otherwise occur, and (5) a set of stable procedures for invoking these strategies in a timely and effective manner by the international community working in concert on the basis of an equitable system for sharing the risks and costs of intervention.

Empirically validated warning models of ethnopolitical conflict have recently been developed.[4] Ted Gurr provides a sophisticated and empirically grounded analysis of factors that dispose communal groups to rebel and states to violently repress such rebellions. He has applied his analysis to 22 of the largest Asian countries, yielding a "watch list" of countries that are at various risk levels for serious intercommunal conflicts.[5]

Gurr defines communal groups as "psychological communities whose core members share a distinctive and enduring collective identity based upon some combination of cultural traits, language, religious beliefs, ways of life, place of residence, and collective experiences, past or present, that set them apart from others with whom they interact." For the purposes of his analysis, Gurr concentrates on communal groups that are disadvantaged and politically active and, using the criteria he has developed for this, identifies 55 "politically salient communal groups." The goal of his analysis is to assess the likelihood that "these politically salient communal groups will become involved in intensified conflict in the near future, say between 1995 and the year 2000." Two further criteria, group incentives and capacities for conflict, are then employed to determine how likely it is that a politically salient communal group will rebel. Group incentives to rebellion involve factors such as a history of collective action and the existence of collective grievance, e.g. discrimination or cultural and/or political restrictions. Finally, capacity for sustained political action involves group cohesion, organization, and mobilization, as measured by the existence of militant and illegal movements or parties acting in the group's name.

The risk of rebellion is then calculated and compared to the risk that the state against which they rebel will respond to such rebellions with violent repression or accommodation, or a combination of these responses. The potential for severe repression or coercive state action against rebellious minorities is analyzed according to three factors: autocracy/democracy, habitual practice, and threat to state security, including "support given to ethnopolitical groups by kindred groups in adjacent states." In addition, prosperity and economic stagnation or decline are factored into the analysis on the assumption that in societies experiencing economic growth, elites are more likely to employ accommodation than repression as a strategy for dealing with communal discontent.

The resulting model yields an empirically based derivation of politically salient communal groups with high, medium, and low risks of rebellion which can then be combined with a risk assessment of state coercion being used against these rebellious groups. As might have been predicted intu-

itively, risks of repression are highest within authoritarian states such as China, Indonesia, and Myanmar, which have significant ethnic minorities and track records of gross human rights violations. India, a democratic state, but one with a history of human rights violations related to intercommunal conflicts, also scores high in this model. Gurr claims only that his model identifies Asian conflicts that "are most in need of in-depth assessment, monitoring, and policy advocacy." But without adding additional factors such as preconditions and accelerators, it cannot be used to predict emerging crises. Nevertheless, this analysis can be used to produce a watch list of countries that are at risk. It is particularly illuminating for those situations that are relatively less known and followed; the model indicates a moderate to high likelihood that a simmering low-intensity conflict could escalate into a deeper crisis, such as those involving the Uighurs in China, the Hmong in Laos, and the Montagnards in Vietnam.

Barbara Harff's work is designed to move the analysis from the base-line risk assessment or detection of preconditions of possible ethnopolitical conflict to actual prediction of genocide/politicides in contemporary history.[6] Her analysis provides a sequential, real-time model which uses international and internal background conditions, intervening conditions, accelerators, and "triggers" to derive predictions of genocide/politicide. Harff has identified and operationalized a category of events she calls accelerators, which are "essentially feedback events that rapidly increase the level or significance of the general conditions." These include new discriminatory or restrictive policies, increases in external support for a targeted group, threats of external involvement which are not backed by action, and increases in the aggressive posturing of the targeted group. She stresses that intercommunal conflicts do not develop in isolation within the boundaries of particular nation-states, but are affected by, and in turn affect, the international political system as a whole, and in particular, by the ways that agents outside of the country respond (or fail to respond) to the developing situation and to similar situations in other countries.

Working on the principle that early intervention is most effective, Gurr's work could provide a basis for deploying human rights monitors, conflict mediation teams, and diplo-

matic initiatives designed to prevent low-intensity conflicts from worsening. Further, Harff's work suggests that once tensions begin to rise, it is important that the international community take concerted and sustained action. Teams of peacekeepers should be sent in before the outbreak of armed conflicts rather than afterwards, when the parties to the conflict are exhausted and tired of killing each other. Arms shipments to areas of potential conflict should be interdicted. Diplomatic and political pressures should be brought to bear on the adversaries in order to get them to negotiate their differences. Worsening instances of IIV, such as massacres must not be ignored. The perpetrators of such atrocities must be captured, tried, and punished just as though they were criminals, which, in fact, they are. At the same time, resources must be provided for victimized groups to receive necessary medical, psychological, and other support. Techniques of nonviolent resistance should be taught and encouraged as substitutes for retaliatory force.

We know what conditions lead to IIV, and what needs to be done to prevent it. The real problem is that the international system does not provide any real incentives for nation-states or international institutions to act in appropriate ways.

## Mobilizing Political Will
In the contemporary context, the human rights community often finds itself in the position of Cassandra, who was cursed by the gods with the power to see the future but whose warnings were not believed. The stories of Bosnia and Rwanda are tragedies in precisely this sense. The assembly of nations watched these events unfold and did little or nothing to stop them. The argument that everyone was "blind-sided" by these conflicts was simply not true. In fact, the signs of impeding IIV were evident to those who had the knowledge to interpret them; the warnings were issued, but they were not heard.[7]

If early warning models are to be transformed into practical systems for preventing human rights and humanitarian crises, we need to pay more attention to the deficiencies of the current United Nations. The UN system is inherently flawed, because its structure involves a fundamental contra-

diction between sovereign states, each of which conducts its foreign policy using its own national interest as the determining factor in decision making, i.e. realpolitik or group egoism, and an international legal order that does not adequately specify who is responsible for enforcing universal human rights and humanitarian norms. In such a system, the universal human rights and humanitarian norms end up as merely "paper laws" because the member states of the UN are disinclined to enforce these norms in cases when their national self-interests are not also served.

This dilemma is an example of the game-theoretical phenomenon which has been called a "tragedy of the commons."[8] In situations where a collective or common good is utilized by independent actors who calculate only their own self-interest, the commons are exploited to individuals' advantage, ultimately destroying the commons to the detriment of all parties. In the present case, the UN peacekeeping system and the canon of human rights and humanitarian law are "commons" that are gradually reduced to a cynical joke due to the ineffectual responses by the member states in the face of widespread noncompliance with internationally agreed-upon norms. Member states are unwilling to place their own resources at great risk to protect defenseless and vulnerable civilians in other nations when there is no obvious national interest served by doing so. As a result, the international community responds fitfully and unpredictably to human rights and humanitarian crises, thereby undermining the credibility of the entire UN system for the protection of peace and human rights.

Today, the problem is not one of philosophical justification—no one seriously believes that wars of aggression, genocides, or torture are ethical and should be allowed to take place with impunity. Rather the problem is one of moral motivation: the disposition of global society to enforce already accepted ethical and legal norms. This need for better enforcement mechanisms is behind the demand by the human rights community that the tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda succeed, and that they lead directly to the creation of an international criminal court. It is also behind the various proposals that have been developed for a

standing UN interventionary force, and it is behind the movement to strengthen the UN, rather than "reforming" it by defunding it.

But, these ideas emanating from the human rights community have received scant notice in the popular media. Unless it is possible to mobilize large constituencies in the more democratic of the world's nations, none of this noble humanitarian agenda is going to get very far. Such groups would lobby their own governments in favor of UN reform, early warning and intervention and crisis intervention, even if risky, in human rights and humanitarian catastrophes. But the contemporary human rights movement, so far, has been unable to penetrate the mass media and mobilize this kind of popular support.

I concur with Stanley Cohen's analysis and critique of failures of the contemporary human rights movement.[9] We are not being smart enough about getting our messages out in powerful, emotional, and motivating ways. There is a wide disparity between what is known and reported and the ways this information is disseminated to the wider audiences. Human rights organizations tend still to rely on scholarly print media, rather than pictures and video to convey our messages to the public.[10] Moreover there is a disconnect between what is known and how it is acted on by governments and intergovernmental institutions. In addition, human rights nongovernmental organizations do not much like to cooperate with one another, fearing competition over funding, media access, and reputation. We tend to get more and more specialized and so lose sight of the big picture. We have not found a way to attract a mass following in the developing world. Even in developed countries such as Japan, where there is not a strong culture of volunteerism and philanthropy, the impact of the human rights movement on domestic affairs and international politics is minimal at best.

The fundamental issue concerns the morality of the bystander. In most cases, most of us are neither victims nor perpetrators of institutionalized intergroup violence; we occupy the role of bystanders. We do not perceive ourselves to be likely victims of major forms of IIV at any time in the foreseeable future. Thus, even though some of us may intellectually appreciate the ethical duty to aid and rescue suffer-

ing strangers, we—and here I am speaking generally about the one billion or so of us who are generally well fed, well clothed, well housed, and well educated—are sitting behind a "veil of indifference" which prevents us from acting to create international institutions that will enforce already accepted international standards.

People are weakly disposed to participate in public institutions that are perceived as a benefit only to others. In order to secure the requisite political motivation for change within democratic societies, the majority must be convinced that there is at least a reasonable assurance of a "double benefit," that is, that in addition to benefiting others, support for a policy or institution will also benefit oneself or one's significant others. If the only benefits go to people who are outside one's own identity group, and these beneficiaries are perceived as unable to reciprocate the favor, the prospects of mass support for these institutions are slim. This is true when the individual is asked to make personal sacrifices, either of wealth or power, to support the policy or institution in question. People are, however, likely to accept the existence of private institutions that provide various forms of assistance to the victims of IIV, such as human rights, relief, medical, and humanitarian nongovernmental organizations. So the work of these organizations, if unified into a coherent program and reaching out to a mass constituency, could provide a functional early warning system that would be able to motivate and help ensure international action.

This leads me to conclude that the best hope for humankind in the coming century lies within global civil society—in the development of a cosmopolitan class who, through vision and collective leadership, can bring about within their own nations the reforms that will create a new international order. If this is at all a realistic possibility, then it may be through meetings such as this one that we find the way forward.

**Notes**
**1.** In fact, this failure coupled with the increased destructive power in weapons technology has led to ever wider, more total, more destructive, and more deadly intergroup conflicts which have threatened the survival

of entire nations and even threaten, if our nuclear arsenals are ever un-leashed, the survival of humankind.

**2.** The term "institutionalized intergroup violence" (IIV) designates for-mally organized systems of political oppression in which persons are sub-jected to systematic and pervasive violence and threats of violence or-chestrated by the state or quasi-state political organizations on the basis of their group identities. Examples of this general phenomenon include: ethnonationalist civil wars, mass killings, politicides and genocides, sys-tems of adverse discrimination such as apartheid, and policies which in-stitutionalize patterns of intergroup domination and immiseration. Eth-nic violence occurs in every human society that I know of; however, it does not always become systematic, organized, or institutionalized. The term "ethnopolitical violence" is also used to designate the phenomenon Specific recent cases of IIV are those between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims (or cosmopolitan secularists) in the former Yugoslavia, the fratricidal civil wars and genocide in Rwanda and Burundi, the war in Chechnya, and smoldering intergroup conflicts between Israelis and Palestinians, Hin-dus and Muslims in India, Han Chinese and Tibetans, Latinos and indig-enous peoples in the Americas, and many other specific cases.

**3.** The system of human rights laws and institutions that have been de-veloped since the end of World War II, including the human rights appara-tus of the United Nations and its accompanying canon of international human rights and humanitarian law, is a creature of the human rights movement, rather than the other way around. The canon of human rights law is a kind of ethico-legal paradigm, whose central purpose is to catego-rize and proscribe the major forms of IIV. This normative approach has sought to prevent institutional intergroup violence and related forms of oppression by creating and installing a system of legal norms that pro-hibit IIV's recognized major forms in particular, genocide, slavery, tor-ture, and racial discrimination, the particular forms of IIV around which, to use Michael Waltzer's term, there is a "thick" moral consensus. The belief was, and is, that if legal norms of this kind were promulgated and universally enforced, they would effectively prevent the most egregious forms of IIV from recurring in human history.

**4.** T. R. Gurr and B. Harff (eds.), Early Warning of Communal Conflicts and Humanitarian Crises. Special issue of *The Journal of Ethno-Develop-ment* 4 (2) (1994) (proceedings of a workshop held at the Center for Inter-national Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland, College Park, MD, November 5-6, 1993); T. R. Gurr and B. Harff, *Early Warning of Communal Conflicts and Genocide: Linking Empirical Re-search to International Responses* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 1996); T. R. Gurr, "Early Warning Systems," in: K. M. Cahill (ed.), *Preventative Diplomacy: The Therapeutics of Mediation* (New York: Ba-sic Books, 1996). The case of the former Yugoslavia was not so clear to observers before the outbreak of war, although the warning signs are abun-dantly clear in hindsight. In particular, Article 19 in: *Forging War: The Media in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina* (London: Lancaster House, 33 Islington High St., London 9LH United Kingdom, May 1994), documents how nationalist radio and television stations in Serbia and Croatia spewed propaganda that sowed the seeds of ethnic hatred through

lies and distortions in the years 1989-1991 before the outbreak of overt hostilities in the former Yugoslavia.

**5.** See T.R. Gurr, "Assessing Risks of Ethnopolitical Conflict and State Repression: An Empirical Study of Minorities at Risk in Asia." Paper presented at the First Biannual Meeting of the Association of Genocide Scholars at the College of William and Mary, Williamsberg, VA, June 14–16, 1995.

**6.** See for instance, B. Harff, "A Theoretical Model of Genocides and Politicides" in: T.R. Gurr and B. Harff (eds.), Early Warning of Communal Conflicts and Humanitarian Crises. Special issue of *Journal of Ethno-Political Development* 4 (1) (July 1994):25-30.

**7.** Ethnic I.D. cards identifying individuals as Hutu or Tutsi had been issued years before by the Belgians. In 1993 some 50,000 people were killed in Burundi and no one did anything about it. This encouraged the extremists in the Rwandan government to think that they could get away with genocide. Human Rights Watch published a report which detailed massacres carried out by the government of President Habyarimana of Rwanda against the Tutsi minority 13 months before the outbreak of the genocide. In August 1993 a radio station, RTLM, owned by a relative of government officials, began to broadcast clear incitements to hatred against Tutsi and also Hutus who were willing to tolerate Tutsis and live with them. The militias began organizing and sent groups of 300 recruits to military camps where they were trained to kill. Guns were bought and brought into the country. People knew about these things. The Papal Nuncio was informed, the United Nations was informed, and everyone in the diplomatic community knew. H. Fein, "An Interview with Alison L. Des Forges: Genocide in Rwanda was Foreseen and Could Have Been Deterred," in: H. Fein (ed.), *The Prevention of Genocide: Rwanda and Yugoslavia Reconsidered*, Institute for the Study of Genocide, The John Jay College of Criminal Justice (New York: City University of New York, 1994).

**8.** G. Hardin, "The Tragedy of the Commons," *Science* 162 (December 1968):1243-48.

**9.** S. Cohen, *Denial and Acknowledgment: The Impact of Information about Human Rights Violations* (Jerusalem: Center for Human Rights, Hebrew University, 1995).

**10.** A case in point is Amnesty International, "Rwanda and Burundi: A Call for Action by the International Community," AI Index AFR 02/24/95 (September 1995), which warned that in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda the conflict was spreading back again to Burundi, but which went largely unnoticed in the media and in the corridors of power in Washington. AI's most recent report on the region, "Rwanda: An Alarming Resurgence of Killings" (AFR 47/13/96), is meeting a similar fate.

## Suggested Readings

T.R. Gurr and B. Harff, *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1994).

A. Pasic and T.G. Weiss, "Yugoslavia's Wars and the Humanitarian Impulse," with commentaries by A.S. Natsios, M. Winston, A. Destexhe, and D.R. Mapel, *Ethics and International Affairs* 11 (April 1997):105-150.

T. Cushman and S.G. Mestrovic (eds.), *This Time We Knew: Western Responses to Genocide in Bosnia* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

C.A. Crocker and F.O. Hampton (eds.), *Managing Global Chaos: Sources of and Responses to International Conflict* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996).

M.S. Lund, *Preventing Violent Conflicts: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996).