

# The applicability of International Humanitarian Law to Situations of Urban Violence

Carlos Iván Fuentes\*

## Abstract

Cities have always experienced a degree of violence that radically differs from that of rural areas. While cities become more populated and social problems become more complex, the population faces increasing levels of violence. For example, in the last five years, there were over 20,000 gang-related murders in Guatemala. In Brazil alone, more than 100 people are killed by guns every day. This paper examines the legal regimes that regulate these new urban realities. It argues that international humanitarian law might not be the appropriate regime to provide protection as it tends to legitimize violence.

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\* Licentiate in Law & Political Sciences *summa cum laude* (USMA-Panama), LL.M. (McGill), Doctoral Candidate and O'Brien Fellow at the Centre for Human Rights and Legal Pluralism, McGill University; Publications Officer of the Centre for International Sustainable Development Law. The author wishes to thank Ms. Michelle Hassen from the Canadian Red Cross for her comments and edits to the final version of this paper. He also wishes to thank Ms. Arezou Farivar Mohseni for her comments to the draft version of this paper. However, any mistake is the author's only. Finally, the author wishes to thank the support of the Liu Institute for Global Issues, the Canadian Red Cross and the Department of Foreign Affairs Canada, which funded the research that led to this paper under the project 'On the Edges of Conflict'.

## 1. Introduction

According to UN-HABITAT, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo, Mexico City, Lima and Caracas share a particular characteristic: the number of homicides in these cities is the highest in their respective countries.<sup>1</sup> In the last five years, there were over 20,000 gang-related murders in Guatemala.<sup>2</sup> In Brazil alone more than 100 people are killed by guns every day, more than half of that corresponds exclusively to Rio de Janeiro.<sup>3</sup> Under these circumstances, it is not surprising to hear that cities are going through internal urban wars.

Cities have always experienced a degree of violence that radically differs from that of rural areas. This phenomenon is usually rationalized by the higher concentration of people in a relatively limited space.

While cities become larger and the social problems become more complex, the population faces levels of violence beyond what might be considered tolerable in times of peace (if violence is ever tolerable). These urban realities are regulated by applicable laws. However, regular law enforcement and human rights have failed to stop the sufferings of innocent victims, the recruitment of children into gangs, and the rising death tolls. Can international law help regulate these situations?

The question addressed herein is if, and to what extent, it is desirable to apply the standards of international humanitarian law to address urban violence.

This paper will argue that international humanitarian law (IHL) has too many shortcomings to properly address the complex situations existing in cities. Although some particular issues can be regulated similarly to how IHL regulates armed conflict, the logic of this body of law does not permit an analogous application of its general standards and principles in cases of urban violence. Furthermore, the general lack of compliance and enforcement mechanism in IHL would ultimately deliver a useless framework. On the other hand, relying on regional human rights systems to address situations of urban violence (either enforcing IHL or promoting its own standards) would only be efficient in promoting compliance on the side of the State, while leaving the source of the problem largely untouched.

As big as this problem might be, this paper determine that the regulation of how to conduct urban violence would certainly be counterproductive. Applying the legal framework of IHL to situations of urban violence would mean that society has passively accepted the insolvability of this issue. This is similar to the passivity of the international community in developing *jus ad bellum* and criminalizing international aggression. States and the international community must address urban violence. But instead of trying to regulate the way in which urban violence is conducted, they should try to look for complex policy solutions that address the systemic problems that propitiate this violence, such as poverty, lack of opportunities, violent social models, etc.

## 2. Situating Urban Violence

‘Urban violence’ is a rather broad term that encapsulates many different types of violent behavior. An essential feature of it is that it occurs within urban centers, most notably in the

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Human Settlements Programme, *Global Report on Human Settlements 2007: Enhancing Urban Safety and Security* (London: Earthscan, 2007) at 55.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* at 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* at 13.

so called slums or poverty belts that surround many cities. Its occurrence is particularly rampant in cities that are experiencing rapid growth.

Each city experiences violence in a different way. The intention here is not to generalize the situation to the point that the phenomenon seems homogeneous throughout Latin America, nor is it to present a self-created narrative of the problem. However, I do need to make identify the common denominator of this violence in order to address it properly, and base our analysis on diverse economic, demographic and sociological studies of the subject.<sup>4</sup>

The kind of violence that is witnessed in urban areas can generally be classified in four distinct but interrelated types: institutional forms of violence (when the perpetrator is the State or vigilante groups), violence of an economical nature (broadly economically motivated crimes performed by individuals or organized criminal groups), social violence (domestic or sexual violence, and occasional quarrels) and economic/social forms of violence (gangs, street children, ethnic violence).<sup>5</sup> It is manifested through a different set of criminal activities, which include murder, physical and psychological abuse, intimidation, armed robbery, petty theft, kidnapping, drug trafficking, etc.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.1. Scope of the study

Some initial analysis necessary to properly frame the situation in the legal framework of international humanitarian law.

IHL is a rather broad field of law. The presence and nature of armed conflict determine which laws – if any – apply. Conflicts can be of an international nature or of a non-international nature. The former refers to conflicts between States and under particular circumstances conflicts between States and certain non-state actors.<sup>7</sup> Non-international conflicts are those between a State and a non-state actor which is seeking to overthrow a government that does not have a colonial connotation or does not impose a racist regime.

Before proceeding, we must first define the nature and sources of the law that will be applied to this study. Since urban violence occurs within a city, and never between State-like entities, it will be necessary to focus on the branch of law that actually includes the possibility of non-state actors, that is, the law of non-international armed conflicts. Accordingly, we will mainly apply Common Article 3 (CA3) of the 1949 Geneva Conventions and the Additional Protocol II (AP II) to the aforementioned conventions, while also looking at the customary international humanitarian law (CIHL, or simply Customary IHL) that is applicable to non-international armed conflicts. Evidently, I kindly ask the reader to ignore, for the purposes of the this study, the mandate of AP II regarding its inapplicability to “situations of internal

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<sup>4</sup> Including: *Global Report on Human Settlements 2007*, *supra* note 1; DFAIT, *Freedom from fear in urban spaces*, online: humansecurity-cities.org <<http://www.humansecurity-cities.org/page153.htm>>; *Human Security for an Urban Century*, online humansecurity-cities.org <[http://humansecurity-cities.org/sites/hscities/files/Human\\_Security\\_for\\_an\\_Urban\\_Century.pdf](http://humansecurity-cities.org/sites/hscities/files/Human_Security_for_an_Urban_Century.pdf)>; etc.

<sup>5</sup> Caroline O.N. Moser & Cathy McIlwaine. *Encounters with violence in Latin America: Urban Poor Perceptions from Colombia and Guatemala* (New York: Routledge, 2004) at 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions establishes that conflicts where one of the parties is peoples “fighting against colonial domination and alien occupation and against racist regimes in the exercise of their right of self-determination”, are considered International Armed Conflicts. *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)*, 8 June 1977, 1125 U.N.T.S. 3 at art. 1.4 [*Additional Protocol I*].

disturbances and tensions, such as riots, isolated and sporadic acts of violence and other acts of a similar nature, as not being armed conflicts”.<sup>8</sup>

As stated before, urban violence comprises a fairly large spectrum of types of violence, which also have varied and particular manifestations. Some types of violence, such as domestic abuse, simply cannot be covered by IHL because of the particular relations between the people involved. In the same sense, IHL deals with particular relations that generally resemble some types of urban violence but not others. In other words, this branch of law tries to regulate the actions of individuals, and relates to the exercise of military and humanitarian activities during a conflict between two or more armed groups. The broadness of the definition of “parties to the conflict” in CA3 will help accommodate many actors in urban violence and develop the objectives of this study. However, AP II is more restrictive in what constitutes an “organized armed groups”, establishing that they must act “under responsible command, [and] exercise such control over a part of its territory as to enable them to carry out sustained and concerted military operations.”<sup>9</sup> Evidently, this high threshold of application can hardly be met in situations of urban violence (some might say that even in certain internal armed conflicts<sup>10</sup>), but AP II will be used as a guide to distinguish groups that can meet this definition and be regulated by the laws of non-international armed conflicts.

In situations of urban violence it is possible to identify three types of groups that, to a certain extent, resemble the minimum requirements established in AP II for its application:

(1) State security services: Such as the police or other special government-based security agencies. Since they are governmental institutions, security services operate under responsible command and exercise the jurisdiction of the State. As the government officials in charge of maintaining the security in the country, they are authorized to carry weapons.

(2) Private security services and vigilante groups: The levels of violence in certain cities have propitiated the creation of private security contractors, who do have a command and do try to protect certain areas of private property through the use of weapons. The situation of vigilante groups is less clear, because they often react to particular threats and do not seek to seize territorial control.

(3) Criminal organizations and gangs: Broadly defined as any type of joint criminal enterprise with some level of permanence, they execute violence as a means to secure their illegal activities, which include drug trafficking, human trafficking, prostitution networks, etc. In addition to the economic component, gangs also have social cohesion and some kind of identity feature (often ethnic) that triggers a search for territorial control.

These three types of groups will form the base of the analysis in the following section. The selected IHL norms will be applied to theoretical interactions that could occur between the aforementioned groups.

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<sup>8</sup> *Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II)*, 8 June 1977, 1125 U.N.T.S. 610 at art. 1.2 [Additional Protocol II]

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* at art. 1.1.

<sup>10</sup> Laura Perna, *The Formation of the Treaty Law of Non-International Armed Conflicts* (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2006) at 103-105.

Just as international humanitarian law is not dependent on the right to wage war,<sup>11</sup> the scope of this study must ignore the diversity of reasons that gives rise to urban violence, and focus on the phenomenon itself.

## 2.2. Legal framework

Before entering in the discussion of how IHL would regulate interactions in situations of urban violence, it is necessary to outline the legal framework that generally cover situations of urban violence, and the role of humanitarian actors in this framework.

The type of violence that occurs within cities is usually addressed through national criminal law. Damages to life and goods are treated initially from a criminal perspective. This includes the substantive laws establishing that both the modalities of violence and certain activities related to the violence are crimes, and the procedural laws used to prosecute those crimes. Many countries also criminalize the formation of a joint criminal enterprise or a gang, independently of the crimes they commit. It must be noted that thanks to the action of the international community, most countries have adopted special systems of juvenile justice which work under different procedural rules and often impose lower sentences than regular criminal courts. The legal response from this body of law occurs *post facto*, and works on a long-term concept of prevention.

When the violence is performed by State agents such as the police, these actions enter first in the realm of administrative and disciplinary jurisdictions. It has more to do with the measurement of the consequences versus the objective, taking into account the circumstances in which the violent act occurred. Theoretically, if the violent actions go beyond the necessary response, the individual criminal responsibility of the actor can be compromised under the same premises of normal citizens. Nevertheless, the level of impunity in these situations is extremely high.

In some cases human rights might become the legal framework of application either as national constitutional guarantees or as appeals to international courts and bodies of human rights. While the national approach depends on the existence of a proper constitutional system, the international approach remains limited to cases where the violent actions were performed directly by State agents or by private individuals under the support, encouragement or authorization of the State.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has had a long tradition of promoting the principles of humanity in situations of urban violence that do not amount to a non-international armed conflict.<sup>12</sup> This comes from its mandate to “take any humanitarian initiative which comes within its role as a specifically neutral and independent institution and intermediary.”<sup>13</sup> The last International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent focused on “four great challenges facing the world today which affect the individual and

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<sup>11</sup> With the exception of the qualification of whether an internal armed conflict can be considered as an international one according to API. *Additional Protocol I*, *supra* note 7 at art. 1.4.

<sup>12</sup> Marion Harroff-Tavel, “Action taken by the International Committee of the Red Cross in situations of internal violence” (1993) 294 *Int'l Rev. Red Cross* 195; Jean-Philippe Lavoyer, “Refugees and internally displaced persons: International humanitarian law and the role of the ICRC” (1995) 305 *Int'l Rev. Red Cross* 162.

<sup>13</sup> Statutes of the International Committee of the Red Cross, at art 4.2 online: ICRC <<http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/icrc-statutes-080503>>.

specifically the most vulnerable”,<sup>14</sup> among them “violence, in particular in urban settings”.<sup>15</sup> The declaration ‘together for humanity’ adopted by the Conference recognized the magnitude of the problem and stated:

Violence in urban areas poses a particular challenge, where problems are often aggravated by rapidly growing populations, poverty and economic inequalities, unemployment, social exclusion and marginalization, insufficient public security and services, and the easy availability of drugs and weapons.

We acknowledge that States are responsible for providing safety and ensuring adequate care and support for the victims of violence, to the extent feasible, and for the creation of policies and legal frameworks which aim at prevention and mitigation of violence. Such policies and frameworks may also need to address cases of urban armed violence between organized groups.<sup>16</sup>

While reinforcing ICRC’s commitment to work together with States in the prevention and reduction of urban violence, the declaration puts the responsibility of creation of a proper legal framework in the hands of States.

### **3. Is international humanitarian law the solution?**

Having established the focus of this paper, I will now move to develop the main premise: is it possible to apply international humanitarian law to situations of urban violence? In my view, the question can be approached from two perspectives. First, can the existing rules of IHL, particularly the laws addressing internal armed conflicts, be applied to urban violence. Second, is there room to create within the general framework of IHL a body of law covering internal violence. This approach will be strictly theoretical and will look at the bases of the system to see if such a creation is feasible.

#### **3.1. Possible subjects of interest in the law of internal armed conflicts**

The law of non-international armed conflicts is considerably smaller than the body of law dedicated to international wars. This is mostly due to the fact that States have less motivation to regulate the sort of conflict that might affect their own integrity. Nevertheless, it would not be practical to contrast and compare every single article of AP II with the violent experiences lived in urban settings.

Instead I will focus on four particular subjects which *prima facie* seem to bring interesting ideas to the regulation of urban violence. In each subject, I will briefly revise the applicable law of internal armed conflict and will try to apply its logic to situations of urban violence. The goal of this subsection is to analyze whether the rules of IHL applicable to non-international armed conflicts can be used analogously in cases of urban violence.

##### **3.1.1. Protection of civilians**

In any conflict, the situation of civilians is one of the principal concerns of humanitarian actors. International humanitarian law provides a vast amount of rules concerning the

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<sup>14</sup> Together for humanity, 30th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent, 26-30 November 2007, Doc. 30IC/07/R1/Declaration, at p. 1 online: ICRC <<http://www.icrc.org/Web/eng/siteeng0.nsf/html/30-international-conference-resolutions-061207>>.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* at p. 3.

protection of those “[p]ersons taking no active part in the hostilities.”<sup>17</sup> The general rules regarding the protection of civilians in internal armed conflicts establish that civilians cannot be the object of an attack either directly against them<sup>18</sup> or of an indiscriminate nature,<sup>19</sup> and that civilians should be affected as little as possible by the attack of a legitimate military objective.<sup>20</sup> When thinking about situations of urban violence, it seems logical and desirable to afford a high level of protection to those individuals that are not participating in inter-group violence, and to protect regular individuals from the institutional violence of the State or vigilante groups.

However, the application of the law of non-international armed conflicts presents an inherent shortcoming: how is a civilian identified. Customary international humanitarian law applicable to non-international conflicts establish that “[c]ivilians are persons who are not members of the armed forces”,<sup>21</sup> however it is acknowledged that there is no clear State practice on the qualification of members of the armed opposition groups as either civilians or combatants.<sup>22</sup> The ambiguity of customary law and the total silence of AP II on the issue renders the protection of civilians in such conflicts quite complicated. It has been argued that the whole principle of distinction is totally unsuited for internal armed conflicts and needs to be re-conceptualized for it to be operative.<sup>23</sup>

While the protection of persons not taking a direct part in situations of urban violence is desirable, the issue of identification gets in the way. That is, it would be quite easy to identify the police forces operating in a given city. Meanwhile persons participating in criminal groups are by definition unidentifiable, since wearing uniforms and carrying visible weapons are not compatible with their interest in pursuing criminal activities. The ICRC has acknowledged that in non-international armed conflicts, the obligation of State forces to wear identifiable uniforms can give a considerable advantage to the armed opposition groups.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, affording a different threshold of protection to police forces and the general non-uniformed population would not produce a significant change to the current situation, as police forces are under the human rights obligation not to violate the rights to life and personal integrity of the population.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field*, Geneva, 12 August 1949, 75 U.N.T.S. 31 at art. 3 (Evidently, the reader can look for the same content in any of the other three Geneva Conventions of 1949) [*Common Article 3*].

<sup>18</sup> *Additional Protocol II*, *supra* note 8 at art. 4.1. Jean-Marie Henckaerts & Louise Doswald-Beck, *Customary International Humanitarian Law, Volume I: Rules* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) at rule 1, p. 3 [*Customary IHL*].

<sup>19</sup> *Customary IHL*, *supra* note 18 at rule 11 to 13, p. 37-45.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* at rule 14 & 15, p. 46-55.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* at rule 5, p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* at p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> See Jann K. Kleffner, “From ‘Belligerents’ to ‘Fighters’ and Civilians Directly Participating in Hostilities – on the Principle of Distinction in Non-International Armed Conflicts One Hundred Years after the Second Hague Peace Conference” (2007) *LIV Nethl. Int’l L. Rev* 315; see also Stefan Oeter, “Comment: Is the Principle of Distinction Outdated?” in Wolf Heintschel von Heinegg & Volker Epping, eds., *International Humanitarian Law Facing New Challenges: Symposium in Honor of Knut Ipsen* (Berlin: Springer, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> *Customary IHL*, *supra* note 18 at 21.

<sup>25</sup> OAS, *American Convention on Human Rights*, O.A.S. Treaty Series No. 36, 1144 U.N.T.S. 123 at arts. 4, 5 & 7.

As a general rule of IHL, a civilian loses his or her protection “for such time as they take a direct part in hostilities”,<sup>26</sup> but this does not take into account how to identify those persons that are engaging in direct violence and those who are acting in self-defense.

Paragraph 1 of CA3 and articles 4.2 and 6.2 of the AP II establish the minimum protection accorded to those individuals that do not take part in combat (civilians) or that have ceased (wounded, sick and captured). This includes a general prohibition of: performing acts of violence to the life, health and physical integrity of a person; outrages upon personal dignity; pillaging; taking hostages; and penal prosecutions without procedural guarantees. When transposing this protection to the situations of urban violence, all of the above acts are generally prohibited by national criminal systems (when committed by particulars) and human rights law (when committed by the State or its agents). In this sense, the protection of civilians can hardly be addressed as an absence-of-law. The only difference that the application of IHL would make, is that vigilante groups, criminal groups and gangs could ‘legally’ (or ‘non-illegally’) perform acts of violence on each other and on police forces. This ultimately will transform the de-facto battle grounds in city in de-jure wars.

### **3.1.2. Emergency medical services and humanitarian action**

Fast and reliable emergency medical services are a necessity in any city. However, slums commonly have territorial disputes or other situations that endanger access to medical care. This is very similar to what occurs in times of war. Humanitarian action is always dangerous and limited by the accessibility of the battle zone.

International humanitarian law has responded to this challenge by establishing legal obligations for belligerents to provide medical care without discrimination,<sup>27</sup> and to allow humanitarian actors access in the field.<sup>28</sup> In the case of non-international armed conflicts AP II established that all wounded and sick “shall be treated humanely and shall receive to the fullest extent practicable and with the least possible delay, the medical care and attention required by their condition.”<sup>29</sup> Customary IHL also contemplates the obligations to allow and facilitate civilian access to humanitarian relief<sup>30</sup> and to ensure freedom of movements of impartial humanitarian relief personnel.<sup>31</sup>

Through respect and reinforcement of its neutrality, the ICRC has assured its capacity to deliver humanitarian relief to both civilians and combatants in countless conflicts.<sup>32</sup> It has

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<sup>26</sup> *Additional Protocol II*, *supra* note 8 at art. 13.3.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* at art. 9; *Customary IHL*, *supra* note 18 at rules 109-110, p. 396-403.

<sup>28</sup> *Additional Protocol II*, *supra* note 8 at art 18; *Customary IHL*, *supra* note 18 at rules 55-56, p. 193-202.

<sup>29</sup> *Additional Protocol II*, *supra* note 8 at arts. 7 & 7 and 5.1.a.

<sup>30</sup> *Customary IHL*, *supra* note 18 at rule 55, p. 193.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* at rule 56, p. 200.

<sup>32</sup> See Harroff-Tavel, *supra* note 12.

also played a key role in the humanitarian action in situations of urban violence,<sup>33</sup> such as in the current dynamics of Cité-Soleil, Haiti.<sup>34</sup>

However, the IHL approach has limits when confronted with the realities of urban violence. As big as criminal organizations and gangs might be, it would be quite unreasonable to impose an obligation to provide medical care, especially because that would logically require them to have their own medical personnel. Gangs and other criminal groups would not have an incentive to have their own medical staff and first aid equipment unless the medical services of the State are not available to their members. State behavior of this fashion would constitute adverse treatment and discrimination, which is forbidden by both IHL and IHRL.<sup>35</sup>

However, regulating humanitarian actors and their access to the vulnerable is quite different. It is difficult to imagine a situation where urban criminal groups and gangs would block the action of neutral humanitarian aid agencies. More than a legal obligation, it is a dictate of human consciousness that sick and wounded people should be given proper medical care. This might be one of those rare cases when “if it goes without saying, does it always go better when you say it?”<sup>36</sup>

For the purposes of urban violence, the application of IHL rules regarding the prompt medical care for wounded and sick would simply be unrealistic. They require a minimum level of medical aid that cannot be satisfied unless the parties have their own medical staff and supplies. And spelling a duty to allow humanitarian actors in the cities would be redundant, since IHRL already imposes an obligation upon the State to ensure that “primary health care, that is, essential health care [is] made available to all individuals and families in the community”<sup>37</sup>.

### **3.1.3 Respect for children and protection against their recruitment**

One of the most complicated features of urban violence is that most of its actors and victims are minors. The type of violence that urban children suffer, and their level of participation in the violence differs radically from city to city, however the problem mostly turns on social vulnerability and encouragement to perform illegal activities (drug abuse, petty robbery). In countries like El Salvador and Guatemala, children are both perpetrators and victims of the violence due to the increasing phenomena of the *maras* or gangs. Meanwhile, in countries

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<sup>33</sup> “The capacity of the ICRC to implement programmes to prevent violence in mainly urban areas in places like Brazil, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica or Haiti is limited. While by no means indifferent to the humanitarian needs of people affected by this type of violence, the ICRC is aware that the limitations on action in such situations probably require a much more integrated and comprehensive approach than it is able to adopt within the bounds of its mandate”, *American States: protection of persons in situations of internal disturbances and tensions*, address by the ICRC at the special meeting of the Committee on Juridical and Political Affairs of the Organization of American States on current issues in international humanitarian law, Washington, D.C., 2 February 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Didier Revol, “Hoping for change in Haiti’s Cité-Soleil” Red Cross Red Crescent magazine (February 2006) online: Red Cross Red Crescent Movement <[http://www.redcross.int/EN/mag/magazine2006\\_2/10-11.html](http://www.redcross.int/EN/mag/magazine2006_2/10-11.html)>.

<sup>35</sup> *Additional Protocol II*, *supra* note 8 at arts. 2.1; *Customary IHL*, *supra* note 18 at rule 55, p. 193.

<sup>36</sup> R. A. Macdonald, *Lessons of Everyday Law/Le droit du quotidien* (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2002) at 33.

<sup>37</sup> *Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (Protocol of San Salvador)*, 14 November 1988, O.A.S.T.S. No. 69 (1988) at art. 10.2.a, 28 I.L.M. 156 (entered into force 16 November 1999); a similar obligation can be found in the universal system, which is described as creating the “conditions which would assure to all medical service and medical attention in the event of sickness”, *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 16 December 1966, 993 U.N.T.S. 3, art. 12.2.d, 6 I.L.M. 360 (entered into force 3 January 1976).

such as Colombia and Brazil, the problem consists of institutional violence against street children, which might or might not be related to gang activity.

The laws of internal armed conflict have created a small but important set of rules regarding the involvement of children both as combatants and possible victims. AP II establishes that “children who have not attained the age of fifteen years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor be allowed to take part in hostilities.”<sup>38</sup> It also extends certain rights such as access to education and family life,<sup>39</sup> which remain valid even if the child has engaged in combat.<sup>40</sup> Customary IHL also provides protection from sexual violence, and access to food and medical care.<sup>41</sup> Although the minimum age for recruitment and participation in combat remains 15 years,<sup>42</sup> the *opinio juris* and practice of States is evolving towards raising the minimum age to 18. It is particularly important that in the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflicts* States have made the compromise to not compulsorily recruit any person under the age of 18,<sup>43</sup> and in the case that a children joined the army before that age, States have committed to take all necessary measures to keep them away from direct hostilities.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the Protocol establishes a general prohibition for armed non-state groups to recruit persons under the age of 18 years.<sup>45</sup>

Regarding the situation of child civilians caught in an urban center with high levels of violence, the rights accorded by IHL do not substantially differ from those already established in IHRL. The fact that the most comprehensive instrument dealing with human rights to date is the *Convention on the Rights of Child* and that this instrument has almost universal ratification,<sup>46</sup> shows that the problem is not of absence-of-law. Meanwhile the situation of child soldiers reveals a lower threshold of protection in IHL than in IHRL, for children will be considered as soldiers and thus legitimate object of an attack for “such time as they take a direct part in hostilities.”<sup>47</sup>

Probably the issue where IHL can make the best contribution to urban violence is that of child recruitment. The already existent international obligation not to allow minors to participate in combat and the even stricter obligation of not allowing armed opposition groups to enroll persons under the age of 18 in non-international armed conflicts, could establish the base for a general prohibition and criminalization of this practice. However, it must be noted that in international criminal law the “war crime of using, conscripting and enlisting children”<sup>48</sup> uses the 15 years old limit accepted in customary law.<sup>49</sup> The

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<sup>38</sup> *Additional Protocol II*, *supra* note 8 at arts. 3.c.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* at arts. 3.a, 3.b, 3.e.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* at art. 3.d.

<sup>41</sup> *Customary IHL*, *supra* note 18 at rule 135, p. 481.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.* at rule 135, p. 484.

<sup>43</sup> *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflicts*, 25 May 2000, 39 I.L.M. 1285 at art. 2.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* at art. 1.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* at art. 4.

<sup>46</sup> With the known exceptions of the United States and Somalia, and the expectation over Kosovo’s recent declaration of independence.

<sup>47</sup> *Additional Protocol II*, *supra* note 8 at art. 13.3.

<sup>48</sup> *Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court*, 17 July 1998, 2187 U.N.T.S. 90 at arts. 8.2.b.xxvi & 8.2.e.vii (entered into force 1 July 2002).

<sup>49</sup> International Criminal Court, Assembly of State Parties, First session, *Elements of Crimes*, ICC-ASP/1/3, (2002) at art arts. 8.2.b.xxvi & 8.2.e.vii.

successfully prosecuted cases in the Special Court for Sierra Leone<sup>50</sup> and the forthcoming trial of Thomas Lubanga Dyilo in the International Criminal Court<sup>51</sup> are based on this 15 years old standard.

Even if IHL rules for child recruitment were assumed to be applicable to participation in gangs and other criminal organizations, certain aspects of IHL's general framework would make it very difficult to properly adapt them to urban violence. Although the next section will discuss those general incompatibilities, this section will discuss how they relate to the issue of child recruitment. Initially, armed opposition groups experience IHL as a legal restraint, that is, these groups are not conducting themselves illegally so long as they comply with the laws of non-international conflicts and human rights. Imposing a framework in which only children recruitment in gangs and other criminal groups would be illegal, would have to consider that any other type of joint criminal enterprises would not be (as) illegal. In addition, such a framework supposes that there is an interest from gangs and other criminal groups not to include children in their activities. Gangs are in themselves a phenomenon linked to youth and organized crime often relies on children to commit economic and violent crimes.<sup>52</sup> It would be absurd to request these groups to follow legal means, against their own interests, in pursuing an illegal end. Finally, opposition groups often violate the laws of war because of the asymmetry in the conflict. Since the State is bound to comply with IHL, these groups see the violation of international law as a way to compensate the disadvantages in the battle field. In this particular issue, even before the Optional Protocol on Child Recruitment was finalized, agreements with armed opposition groups to stop child recruitment were continuously violated.<sup>53</sup>

### 3.1.4 Protected persons and objects

Besides the generic protection of civilians, the law of internal armed conflicts provide for the protection of particular persons who perform an important humanitarian role in the field. It also provides for the protection of objects and places that are used to perform these functions or which carry a significant value.

In a non-international armed conflict, protected persons include all medical and religious personnel of the armed forces,<sup>54</sup> humanitarian relief personnel,<sup>55</sup> personnel of peacekeeping missions<sup>56</sup> and journalist.<sup>57</sup> The protected objects include medical units and transports;<sup>58</sup> any transport or unit caring the distinctive emblems of the red cross, red crescent, red lion or sun on a white ground<sup>59</sup> or any combinations of symbols featuring the red crystal;<sup>60</sup> places of

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<sup>50</sup> *Prosecutor v. Fofana & Kondewa*, Judgment, Trial Chamber I, 2 August 2007, Case No. SCSL-04-14-T, at para. 182-199; *Prosecutor v. Brima, Kamara & Kanu*, Judgment, Trial Chamber II, 20 June 2007, Case No. SCSL-04-16-T, at paras. 727-728.

<sup>51</sup> For the documents on this case, online: ICC <[http://www.icc-cpi.int/cases/RDC/c0106/c0106\\_doc.html](http://www.icc-cpi.int/cases/RDC/c0106/c0106_doc.html)>.

<sup>52</sup> *Global Report on Human Settlements 2007*, *supra* note 1 at 64.

<sup>53</sup> Stuart Maslen, "The use of children as soldiers: the right to kill and be killed?" (1998) *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 6 Int'l J. Child. Rts. 445 at 449.

<sup>54</sup> *Additional Protocol II*, *supra* note 8 at arts. Art 9; *Customary IHL*, *supra* note 18 at r 25 & 27.

<sup>55</sup> *Customary IHL*, *supra* note 18 at ruleR 31.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* at rule 33.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* at rule 34.

<sup>58</sup> *Additional Protocol II*, *supra* note 8 at art. 11; *Customary IHL*, *supra* note 18 at rule 32.

<sup>59</sup> *Additional Protocol II*, *supra* note 8 at art. 12; *Customary IHL*, *supra* note 18 at rule 30.

<sup>60</sup> *Protocol additional to the Geneva Conventions 12 August 1949, and relating to the Adoption of an Additional Distinctive Emblem (Protocol III)*, 8 December 2005, 45 I.L.M. 558.

worship;<sup>61</sup> and buildings dedicated to religion, art, science, education or charitable purposes and historic monuments.<sup>62</sup>

Unquestionably, the aforementioned persons can be endangered by episodes of violence in an urban area. There have certainly been cases where members of peacekeeping operations have lost their lives due to urban violence. But, as was the case with civilians, to afford them protection also means legitimating violence directed at other targets. In any case, the lives and wellbeing of any person in the city is legally protected by the regular laws of the State. Although it would be desirable to afford some higher level of protection to these people, in an urban setting it simply does not make sense.

The protection of places could be an area of interest for urban violence. Establishing that hospitals, schools and places of worship (to say the least) are outside the realm of violence would probably have a positive impact on the lives of citizens. Worship places are traditionally seen as neutral and off-limit, and there is a general belief that it is forbidden to carry weapons in schools and hospitals. But an analogous application of IHL would imply that violence in other places is not forbidden, thus having counterproductive results.

In short, affording special protection in IHL makes sense because there is some degree of violence that can legally be performed to non-protected people and places. Meanwhile, in urban settings, the fundamental premise is that violence against any person or any place is illegal. The idea of a protected person loses validity if the general premise is that nobody should be killed or wounded, hence it is completely unsuitable for situations of urban violence.

### **3.2. Beyond the law of internal armed conflicts**

The last subsection analyzed four areas of IHL that seem to be analogously applicable to situations of urban violence, but found that none would actually change the situation in general or benefit the victims of this violence.

Analogous application does not exhaust the issue. A point has been made that the law of non-international armed conflicts was indeed an evolution of the law of international conflicts. Now I wish to explore whether it is possible to evolve to a law of internal disturbances within the system of IHL.

As I start to approach the possibility of creating a branch of IHL for internal violence, some general issues related to the structure and conceptualization of this body of law start to reveal certain theoretical incompatibilities. This section will explore the structure of the system in general and how situations of urban violence are so specialized that they would complicate the creation of a regime within IHL to regulate it.

#### **3.2.1. The nature and rationale of IHL**

There can be several idealizations about the origins of purpose of international humanitarian law. However, it would be more accurate to say that the whole body related to the laws of war was born out of the interest of States to prevent the waste of human lives beyond the necessary. Compliance with these rules was sustained out of pure reciprocity. States would only limit their means and methods of warfare as a way to ensure that the other party would

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<sup>61</sup> *Additional Protocol II*, *supra* note 8 at art. 16.

<sup>62</sup> *Customary IHL*, *supra* note 18 at rules 38-40.

respect them too. Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a breach of the laws of war was punished with a similar breach by the other party to the conflict. It must be said that although pillage and destruction of property has always been a feature of war, until recent times civilian population was rarely the object of military attack.

The issue of the rationale becomes absolutely relevant in the discussion of urban violence, because in armed conflict there is usually an interest by both parties that previously established limits to military action be respected during the conflict. Urban violence is in itself a cumulus of illegal activities directed from individuals of a group towards individuals or groups. In order to set limits to illegitimate action between the protagonists of the violence and from them to non-participants, it would be necessary to accept and acknowledge that a certain level and certain methods of violent behavior is accepted.

In this sense, how can the State ban private violence and regulate it at the same time? It is possible to envisage a framework where violent activities would be regarded as less-illegal or even non-illegal if performed between actors of an urban conflict. However, this raises many philosophical issues on State power and the function of the law. If legitimacy is, as Weber affirms, the monopoly of violence, structuring a framework where legal –or at least non-illegal– forms of violence can be performed by entities outside the State would legitimate the authority of actors in a given space.

### **3.2.2. IHL, actors and compliance**

Traditional IHL responded to the realities of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, that is, war between States. Besides the consideration of what is a just or an unjust war, the authority of States to perform war was hardly contested -- it came with the territory. With the explosion of intrastate conflicts, the legal regime usually accorded to international wars was applied to certain types of non-international conflicts. Simultaneously, a particular regime was created for conflicts of a pure non-international nature. The AP II simply adapted the minimum possible norms of international conflicts to conflicts where only one of the parties is formally a State.

In non-international armed conflicts IHL is experienced by armed opposition groups as legal restraints and substantial obligations,<sup>63</sup> meaning that there is a range of prohibitions imposed on them and an obligation to respect humanity in general. There are no rights, but there is recognition of their status and a presumption of non-illegality while complying with the restraints and obligations.

This adaptation has proven highly ineffective as AP II did not envisage mechanisms of enforcement beyond the existing structures in IHL.<sup>64</sup> Reciprocity becomes a one way street. That is, the State is forced to respect the rules due to its international commitments while dissident armed forces commonly break them or recourse to the asymmetry of the conflict to invoke military necessity.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Cfr Lisbeth Zegveld, *Accountability of Armed Opposition Groups in International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)."

<sup>64</sup> Georges Abi-Saab, "Les Protocoles Additionnels, 15 ans après", in Jean-François Flauss, ed, *Les nouvelles frontières du droit international humanitaire* (Brussels: Bruylant, 2003) at 27

<sup>65</sup> René Provost, *International Human Rights and Humanitarian Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 161).

The simple issue of identifying who is a ‘legitimate’ actor in non-international conflicts has revolved around the fact that sometimes the use of uniforms is simply impossible or quite counterproductive.

All of these reveal that the system was created to work between States. The continuous difficulty to promote compliance between non-state actors is indicative of its shortcoming. Applying the principles of this body of law, which lacks efficient enforcement mechanism, to create a regime for organizations that willingly operate outside the law is simply illogical.

#### **4. Conclusion**

After reviewing the particular provisions of the law of non-international armed conflicts, the general principles that establish the bases of IHL, it is my conclusion that the application of international humanitarian law to situations of urban violence is both dangerous and undesirable.

The comparison between the actual provisions of CA3, AP II and relevant parts of Customary IHL has shown that the selected issues are not better regulated by IHL. On the contrary, adopting such a stance will open the door for the acceptance of violent lawful behaviors between criminal groups.

By looking at the principles of IHL in general, it was clear that the creation of a new regime for urban violence under the bases of IHL would be absolutely impractical and even counterproductive. The violence that Latin American cities are witnessing in the last decades should not be addressed as an unsolvable fact, but as a systemic problem. Formally regulating violence legitimizes the violence in itself and the groups that perform it. In this particular case, regulating violence instead of combating it would end up by perpetuating the misery in the slums and promoting the existence of lawless cities.

For all of the above, I have to agree with the report of the Secretary-General of the United Nations regarding the consultation process on ‘Fundamental standards of humanity’:

“[T]here are no evident substantive legal gaps in the protection of individuals in situations of internal violence. There is also broad-based agreement that there is no need for new standards. Nevertheless, situations of internal violence and non-international armed conflicts, including situations where there is a need to ensure accountability of non-State actors, pose particular challenges to securing practical respect for human rights and international humanitarian law.”<sup>66</sup>

Having said that, I believe that international law can play an important role in the promotion of long term solutions. Indeed, cities will benefit from the involvement of the international community on the promotion of social standards, the sustainability of development policies, the struggle against transnational crime, and the implementation of anti-criminal policies. Violence will not be reduced by its regulation.

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<sup>66</sup> *Fundamental standards of humanity, Report of the Secretary-General submitted pursuant to Commission resolution 2000/69, UN ESCOR, 57<sup>th</sup> sess., Annex, Sgenda Itam 17, UN Doc. E/CN.4/2001/91 (2001) at para. 6.*