



## Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

### Background on Conflict and Catholic Peacebuilding February 2019

*Today in many places we hear a call for greater security. But until exclusion and inequality in society and between peoples are reversed, it will be impossible to eliminate violence. ... When a society – whether local, national or global – is willing to leave a part of itself on the fringes, no political programs or resources spent on law enforcement or surveillance systems can indefinitely guarantee tranquility.*

--Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 2013, no. 59

#### **THE NATURE AND LEVEL OF CONFLICT IN TODAY'S WORLD:**

Our senses are bombarded daily with horrific images, analysis and politicians' fearmongering of armed conflict in Syria and Iraq; images of refugees in Turkey, Bangladesh, and Texas; civil war in the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo; and economic collapse in failing states like Venezuela, Honduras or Nicaragua. In addition, international relations experts write scholarly works regarding the breakdown of world order, [A World in Disarray](#), Richard Haas, [How Everything Became War and the Military Became Everything](#), Rosa Brooks, and [World Order](#), Henry Kissinger among others.

The conflicts, crises and the misery they cause are real; the Church deplores them and has fought hard to address them. Yet the images and stories mask a much bigger story of success and accomplishment in reducing the number, the severity and the lethality of conflict in our current world. To capture this picture, we must concentrate on the trend lines, not the headlines and look at what the facts and data show. The end of the Cold War led to a world where democracy, respect for human rights and the free flow of goods, services and ideas are the norms even if they are not respected everywhere. Where these norms are violated, in many places the world has stood up to oppose (but necessarily resolve) the violations. The Center for Systemic Peace reports that the number of mass killings has dropped from 350 people per 100,000 to 10 during the Rwanda genocide to 0.3 per 100,000 in 2013. Since World War II, the percentage of countries where mass killings occurred went from almost 20% to around 5% in 2013. The number of wars and armed conflicts have dropped significantly since the end of the Cold War and the rate of death in armed conflict is the lowest in history. Even more encouraging, since the Cold War is that the prevalence and quality of democracy in the world has increased while the prevalence of autocracy has fallen by roughly the same amount (Polity IV Project, Center for Systemic Peace).

#### **THE CHURCH IN TODAY'S WORLD**

At the end of the Cold War, the West and the Soviet Bloc ended their support to civil wars and conflict in many smaller countries. Western countries also conditioned or cut future economic support based on the institution of democracy and human rights. This change in approach created some tragic consequences. The genocide in Rwanda and conflict in Somalia, Darfur and the former Yugoslavia shocked the world. The United States realized that it could not turn a blind eye to mass killings, starvation and misery. Less outside interference in conflict countries and the rise of democracy opened the political space to in-country civil society and faith-based organizations combating corruption, human rights abuses and working to stop conflict, promote reconciliation and defend the common good.

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In many countries of the world, particularly in Africa and South America, the biggest and best equipped civil society actor is the Catholic Church. The Church is often the biggest institution, second only to the national government. The dioceses and parishes and the cohesion of the faithful and the training of its leaders mean that the Church can reach to the far corners of the country with coherent programs. Add on the schools, the health centers, hospitals, universities and the diocesan development and peace and justice organizations, the Church is the biggest and broadest institution in civil society. In addition, unlike many other organizations, the Church has a vertical reach that can affect positive change from the farthest village and inner-city neighborhood up to the President of the republic. That ability, when cultivated, can be essential to resolving conflict that often plays out in the provinces, in the cities, and the upper echelons of government and other national structures.

The Church has a well-developed and coherent body of social teachings that many other faith communities consult to form the basis for their work. A growing number of Catholic universities in the world have developed peace institutes and departments and majors in peacebuilding studies and an increasing body of research in Catholic peacebuilding. Since the late 1990s, Catholic Relief Services has built and implemented a broad array of peacebuilding programs. In fragile and failing states, often the Church stands as the only, or most trusted and legitimate institution. That trust is strongest when it is based on the Church's support to the poor, its nonpartisan, and non-political interventions in society, and on its willingness to take risks to defend the common good. People in the villages and the streets look up to the Church to defend their rights and interests. Other civil society actors, religious and secular, want to partner or align themselves with the Church.

## **PEACEBUILDING IN ACTION**

The Church in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is one of the stellar examples of a committed, engaged and effective actor in the support of democracy, good governance and peace. The Catholic Church has worked to promote the common good since before independence in 1960. The Church played a major role in trying to help the country transition to democracy in the early 1990s. When Laurent Kabila came into power through a coup in 1997 the Church continued to promote the institution of a liberal democracy. When his son, Joseph Kabila, came into power in 2001 the Church intensified its efforts leading to successful elections in 2006. During those elections and the subsequent elections in 2011 the Church conducted nationwide civic and electoral education programs to train an informed populace to participate in their first ever elections. The Church also fielded 30,000 electoral monitors to ensure that the elections were conducted freely and fairly.

In 2016 through the first couple months of 2019, the Church entered the political realm as an actor to ensure that elections took place and to guarantee that they respected the will of the people. In late 2016 the Church negotiated a settlement between all the political parties to restart preparations for elections that had missed the original deadline. In 2018 the Church doubled their education program and fielded nearly 40,000 electoral monitors. The data they collected along with data leaked from the official electoral commission helped prove that the government's declared winner did not win a plurality of votes. Even though the Africa Union took the decision to address the crisis its plans were halted when key Africa country leaders decided to support the government's decision.

The USCCB and CRS work with the Church in fragile states like the DRC to end and/or prevent conflict and build healthy societies that can live in peace and prosperity. We are working with Congress on the following legislation to increase and improve the U.S. efforts to prevent and resolve conflict.

1. **ACTION REQUESTED:** Urge Congress to reintroduce and pass the **Global Fragility and Violence Reduction Act** (As Passed Last Year HR 5273) to increase and improve the United States' ability to deploy diplomatic and good governance resources to prevent the outbreak of violent conflict and avoid the need for military force.

**RESOURCES:** Visit: [www.usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/](http://www.usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/) or [www.usccb.org/globalpoverty/](http://www.usccb.org/globalpoverty/)  
Contact: *Steve Hilbert*, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, [shilbert@usccb.org](mailto:shilbert@usccb.org), 202-541-3149

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