EDITORIAL

The age of unconventional conflict?

An overriding theme in this issue of *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* is that of 'unconventional conflict', and the impacts of these conflicts on the lives of those affected. The pieces presented here cover a range of subjects from opening dialogues with terrorists, proclaiming declarations, questioning military medical ethics, through to the environmental impacts of contemporary warfare. Taken together, these pieces raise questions about the ethics and morality of contemporary war and conflict. But just how unconventional is conflict today?

Typically, we understand conventional conflicts as somehow more legitimate, equal and proportionate. But history has shown us that this is not always the case, as the contributors to the final issue of last year (30.4), on the history of WW1, also demonstrated.

Currently, armed non-state actors are playing key roles in the conflicts in Ukraine, Syria and Nigeria. Some are allegedly funded, backed and legitimised by states and, in some cases, fight in tandem with state militaries. By treating these conflicts as unconventional, are we in fact missing an opportunity to attempt to build a just and sustainable peace?

Alex Poteliakhoff, for example, in his piece 'The case for a public forum within the United Nations to listen to those who use armed violence to address their grievances', continues his plea to "…explore the legitimate grievances of 'terrorists'" (p.no). Poteliakhoff does not ignore the challenges such an approach would face, but argues that the benefits may outweigh the ever-increasing risks of not engaging with them.

John Loretz (Program Director of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War), gives us a summary of the 21st IPPNW Congress in Kazakhstan and presents the Astana Declaration. The Declaration notes that:

> Ukraine made a historic decision in the 1990s—along with Kazakhstan and Belarus—to return the nuclear weapons based on its territory to Russia, following the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of the Cold War. The wisdom of that decision is evident today, given the catastrophe that could ensue from the introduction of nuclear weapons into the current conflict. Nevertheless, with Russia and the US holding most of the 17,000 nuclear weapons in the world, thousands of which are on alert and ready to be launched on short notice, the possibility of their use, should events in Ukraine take a desperate turn, cannot be ruled out. The only way to avoid a relapse into the dangerous major-power antagonism the world was hoping had been left behind, is to make a good faith effort to find diplomatic solutions that respect the need for peace and security of all people in the region.

This statement reminds us that, in so many ways, this balance of power means that we are – and have been – in an age of unconventional conflict for a very long time.

But this also means there is a desperate need to rethink our interventions – including military ones. In their commentary piece 'Military Medical Ethics: a call to regulatory and educational arms', Carwyn Hooper and colleagues point out that many of the rules of engagement – including International Humanitarian Law and the Geneva Conventions – came about when conflicts and warfare were (perhaps) more conventional and symmetrical. This leads them to question how modern military medics need to prepare for – and navigate – the inevitable dilemmas and challenges that emerge as a result of unconventional and asymmetrical warfare. They make two calls – one for improved regulation and guidance; and the other for better preparation for medics, including by universities and medical schools.

These pieces are all trying to prevent death and destruction or alleviate pain and suffering in the immediate aftermath of conflict. The Toxic Remnants of War Project argues for a much broader and longer-term perspective, and draws attention to the extent to which states do or do not 'clean up' after conflict. Given the mounting evidence around the "environmental bootprint of the preparation for war" (p.no), and the longer term environmental and health effects of military activities around the world, Doug Weir notes that:

> Improved recognition of the short and long-term health and environmental impact of toxic remnants of war could contribute to a more coherent understanding of the costs, implications and acceptability of particular military practices. It could help reinforce the need for environmental mainstreaming in post-conflict response and ultimately in constraining the behaviour of belligerents. Above all it would help identify and assist those affected and increase accountability for harm. (p.no).

The role of the health sector in post-conflict recovery has been a topic on which MCS has had a long-standing engagement, and in this issue Cathryn Christensen and Anbrasi Edward report the findings of their study into the ways in which health provision mitigates tensions and promotes social cohesion in post-conflict Burundi. The conflict in Burundi can be characterised as unconventional in many ways – though it is perhaps very conventional in its effects on community cohesion and reconciliation. Through a fascinating series of interviews and focus group discussions, the authors find evidence that the community-based health provision of Village Health Works does indeed seem to be playing a positive role in strengthening the social fabric of the community.

War can certainly be very bad for the environment and for health, but as Frank Boulton in his article 'Blood Transfusion and the World Wars' points out, it has also been a stimulus to develop treatments and improve interventions, including blood transfusions:

> There is no doubt that both wars stimulated the science and practice of blood transfusion – from donor selection to more refined testing and blood fractionation, and the optimum indications for blood use.

But we need to be mindful of how to harness these benefits, as well as understand how the circumstances that caused the need for them arose in the first place to ensure that they do not continue to arise.

All the pieces in this issue highlight the need to rethink how we engage with all parties to the conflicts – however unconventional. We also need to rethink the expected outcomes of such engagement. The risks of not doing so are great.

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