16 Conclusions – the future

The 1990s have witnessed a steady growth of violence whether in the form of civil wars, ethnic cleansing, border wars, religious fanaticism and related terrorism or in connection with highly organized international crime such as the drugs business. There is little evidence that such violence will abate and much to suggest that it will become worse and, if anything, more widespread in the early years of the twenty-first century. If, indeed, this turns out to be the case the market for mercenary interventions and the demands for military security services will increase commensurately. At the same time the prospects for ordered interventions by the United Nations or other organizations backed by the major powers seem at the very least problematic; there will, of course, be interventions but their effectiveness will be determined according to the extent of the big power interests involved in any particular conflict. Many conflicts are likely to be of marginal importance as far as the major powers and UN policy-makers are concerned; as in the case of Sierra Leone and the restoration to power of President Kabbah in 1998 Britain was sufficiently involved to encourage intervention by ECOMOG and Sandline though it was clearly unwilling to go further. Such interventions by proxy may well become the norm in the future and if this proves to be the case there will be a sharp increase in the numbers of military advisory security firms with little attempt to curtail their activities beyond what are likely to be the increasingly frustrated efforts of the United Nations.

One aspect of mercenary activity which has long been taken for granted consists of the private security provided for the protection of the rich or well-to-do in most of the world’s big cities. The word ghetto formerly referred to districts set aside for Jewish communities; today the term is often used more broadly to denote the poor quarters of inner cities, the crumbling ‘no hope’ areas passed over by prosperity which has moved elsewhere. In fact, there are now two kinds of ghetto in the world’s big cities: the inner city ghettos of the poor and the suburban ghettos of the rich who live in fear of robbery or other violence behind high walls and electrified fences and employ private guards or security firms to protect them.

Johannesburg has earned an unenviable reputation for violence. At one end of the scale is the black-on-black violence to be found in the huge African town of Soweto which was long regarded by the
apartheid regime as a ghetto that could be cut off and controlled by the police and military or the growing number of ‘informal settlements’ as they are now called – the former squatter camps. At the other end of the violence scale are the northern suburbs of Johannesburg where the rich or well-to-do whites live. Anyone who takes the trouble to walk down one of the quiet residential streets of these suburbs will be hard put to spot a single residence behind its high walls and strong gates that does not have a sign on the outside warning of 24 hour patrols, or not to set off the deep baying of large dogs simply by passing. Signs bearing the names of the appropriate security companies show a dog’s head (of the Rottweiler kind) or depict a hand holding a gun. Anyone who breaks in – and many do – cannot claim not to have been warned. One of South Africa’s largest and fastest growing ‘armed response’ security companies, Paramed, is ready through every twenty-four hours to respond to someone pressing the panic button and scarcely a home in the sprawling northern suburbs of Johannesburg does not have some kind of ‘Immediate Armed Response’ warning. Johannesburg, indeed, most obviously displays the huge gap that exists in the new two-ghetto cities of our violent age and a flood of new security companies have sprung up in the 1990s. According to one account:

Protecting the well-being of South Africa’s haves – who remain overwhelmingly white – from the newly enfranchised but still economically deprived black population, swelled by returning former guerrillas with no job skills save their ability to use a gun, has become a 130bn rand (£13.5bn) business.¹

Johannesburg may appear to be an extreme case and certainly it has a unique history of violence with its roots in the apartheid years of racial segregation as well as the huge and obvious disparity in wealth between haves (who still largely equate with the white population) and have-nots who are mainly blacks yet the problems of Johannesburg described above can be found repeated in most major cities in the Third World and, increasingly, in cities of the North: security services for the rich in North America have been big business for years. Firms such as Britain’s Securicor which is responsible for the safe transport of money, for example between banks, or provides bodyguards and property guards for the rich and well to-do may not qualify as mercenaries yet the line that can be drawn between their activities and those of a firm such as Executive Outcomes, which among other tasks, provides guards for mines, is not an easy one to draw. We live in an increasingly security