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A Humanitarian Emergency: War, Genocide, and Displacement

Recently the media have focused on the threat of insurgents in failed states with weapons of mass destruction to the rich of the United States, Canada, and Europe. Scholars predict an inevitable clash between the West and Islam. Amid these perils to the West, we should not forget that war, state violence, and rebel resistance threaten the livelihoods and voices of millions of poor in Africa and Asia. About 20 per cent of Africans live in countries seriously disrupted by war or state violence. The cost of conflict includes refugee flows, increased military spending, damage to transport and communication, reduction in trade and investment, and diversion of resources from development. The World Bank (2000a, pp. 57–9) estimates that a civil war in an African country lowers GDP per capita by 2.2 percentage points annually. Scholars must focus on reducing this danger to the survival income and human rights of the world’s poorest.

Economic stagnation, political decay, and deadly political violence interact in several ways: economic and political factors contribute to war, while war has an adverse effect on economic growth and political development. This book analyses how economic decline, income inequality, a weakening state, pervasive rent seeking by ruling élites, an extensive threat to survival income, and competition for control of mineral exports contribute to humanitarian emergencies. These emergencies comprise a human-made crisis in which large numbers of people die and suffer from war, state violence, and refugee displacement, and are usually accompanied by widespread disease and hunger (Väyrynen 2000a). During the twentieth century, some 170 million people were killed by the state (democides) (Rummel 1994), compared to about 30 million people in armed conflict. Rummel lists the Soviet Union, Communist China, Nazi Germany, and 15 other instances in the twentieth century in which
governments intentionally killed at least one million people. As will be pointed out in Chapter 2, only a small proportion of these hundreds of millions of deaths from humanitarian emergencies are from insurgent action or fighting between belligerents.

A substantial literature views ethnic groups as products of ‘primordial sentiments’, based on ‘permanent and separate histories, separate social institutions, customs and practices, and separate leaders’, in which politics is practised almost exclusively along ethnic lines (Rabushka and Shepsle 1972). World Bank researchers find that a major factor contributing to war is ethnic and linguistic fractionalization. However, we find that ethnic identity is created and reconstituted in struggles to share benefits from economic growth and self-government. Frequently ethnic antagonism emerges during conflict rather than being the cause of conflict.

1.1 Objectives of the study

The study has three major objectives. First, we examine factors associated with humanitarian emergencies, the types of relationships, and the mechanisms of interaction between the variables. What are the sources of humanitarian emergencies? Auvinen and Nafziger (1999) showed that stagnation and decline in real (inflation-adjusted) GDP, slow growth in average food production, high income inequality, a high ratio of military expenditure to national income, and a tradition of violent conflict are sources of emergencies. Also inflation and low levels of International Monetary Fund (IMF) funding are associated with emergencies, although causality may run from emergencies to high inflation and low Fund assistance, rather than, or as well as, the other way round (ibid.).

However, the focus of this book is much less on econometrics than on a discussion of how factors embedded in the political economy of developing countries contribute to humanitarian emergencies. ‘Political economy’ includes not only economic analysis but also an examination of the interests of political leaders and policymakers who make economic decisions and members of the population who are affected by these decisions. This politico-economic analysis, based on a research project begun in 1996 by the UN University/World Institute for Development Economics Research (WIDER), Helsinki, and Queen Elizabeth House, Oxford (QEH), generalizes on the case studies of 17 war-affected less-developed countries (LDCs), and explains the reasons for econometric findings from annual data from 124 LDCs from 1980 to 1995 (Auvinen and Nafziger 1999). The case studies include Nigeria.