

Digging for Trouble

VIOLENCE AND FRONTIER URBANIZATION

This chapter focuses on violence related to one specific form of urbanization prevalent in the global South—*frontier urbanization*—here defined as the rapid growth of previously marginalized, underdeveloped regions and hinterlands into urban areas that service resource extraction, particularly of oil, gas, and minerals. Little is known about the spatial and institutional dynamics and competing interests among the extractive industries, state and non-state security providers, and populations in such settings. Is there a link between frontier urbanization and specific types of violence? What are the security effects when the extractive boom recedes?

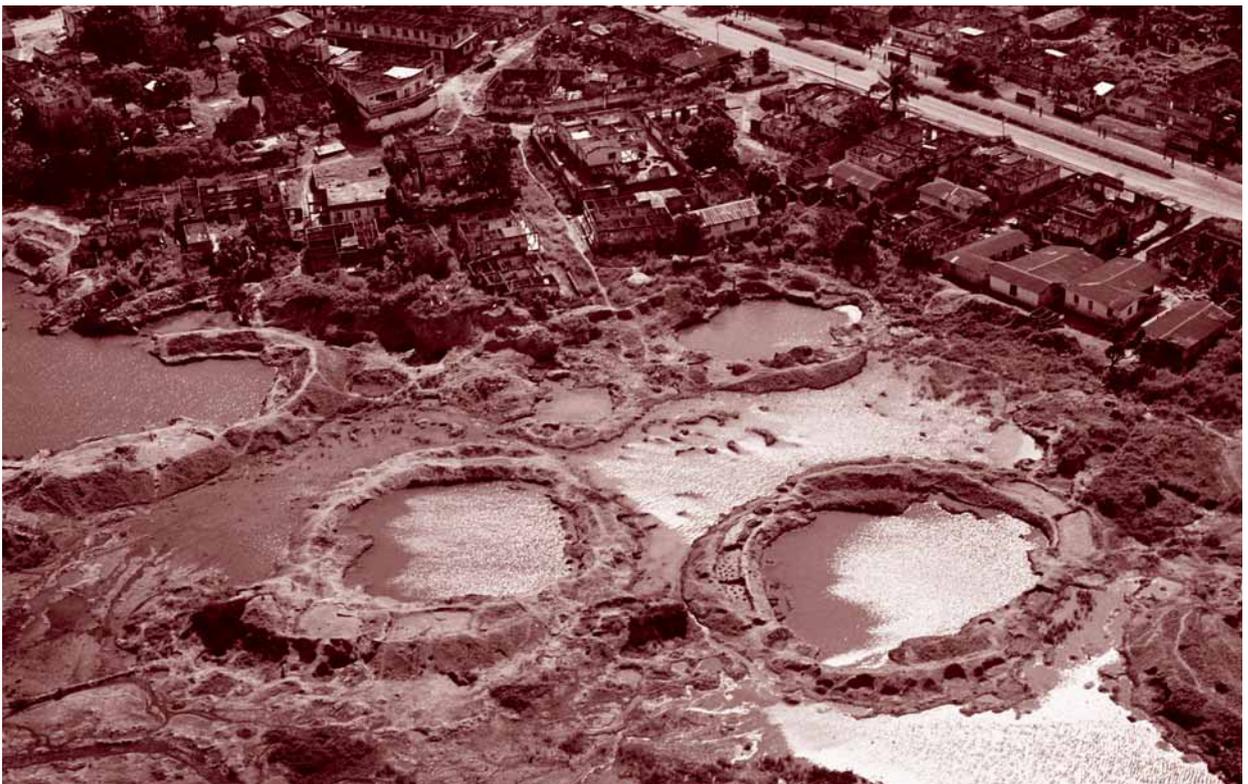
'Frontier urbanization' captures the volatility of urban growth and decline in areas affected by extraction activities.

The main findings of this chapter are as follows:

- The extraction of oil, gas, and strategic or precious minerals is typically accompanied by significant urbanization of the adjoining area, with often-dramatic socio-economic repercussions.
- The effort to control and secure resources that are being extracted can attract a variety of armed actors, including security forces and predatory groups, not only to the mining sites themselves, but also to the rapidly expanding urban service areas.
- The sudden urbanization around extraction sites is rarely accompanied by sufficient public service provision, including security. As a result, these services are increasingly outsourced to non-state providers, such as private security companies or protection squads.

Frontier urbanization can lead to conflict over the control of the land and its extractable resources; insecurity and social unrest related to precarious socio-economic and environmental conditions; and tensions, sometimes expressed violently, around post-extraction decline or state-led urban clean-up and rejuvenation plans. While the intersection of extractive industries and frontier urbanization is associated with various types of violence, key information, including rates of violence and small arms proliferation, remains elusive.

Following a brief introduction that conceptualizes frontier urbanization and identifies what is known about the links between urbanization and extraction-related armed violence, the main part of this chapter is divided into three sections that describe interrelated sources of violence and insecurity in such areas.



An aerial view of the abandoned diamond mines of Koidu, Sierra Leone, in 2001. Rebel forces later took control of the minefields and surrounding areas.
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The first discusses armed actors' protective and predatory responses to resource extraction. In the face of relatively high global prices for oil, gas, and minerals, the extraction of these resources is potentially lucrative for the business sector, the state, party-political elites seeking to finance their campaigns, and armed actors ranging from rebels to organized criminal groups. The practicalities of extracting, transporting, and selling what comes out of the earth depends to a large extent on the nature of the raw materials themselves, and the type of machinery and equipment required to extract and transport them. Security concerns, however, appear to be a fundamental aspect of all extraction endeavours—fuelled by protective measures on the one hand, and the resort to violent, predatory behaviour on the other.

The second section highlights the political, societal, and ecological challenges posed by unserved and impoverished (and often informal) urban areas that can arise in response to extraction activities. State institutions, particularly at the local level, sometimes lack either the capacity or the political will to react to the rapid growth of mining boom towns. As a result, these towns are among the poorest urban areas on earth, featuring high unemployment, a lack of social fabric, and dire living conditions because of air, water, and soil pollution. This section also touches on urban protest and social unrest in the face of perceived injustice and environmental damage related to resource extraction. Protests tend to revolve around working conditions, disputes over the land and its resources with property owners or indigenous groups, and environmental issues related to pollution and the destruction of natural habitat.

The third section discusses the extent to which frontier areas can cope with demise and decline. In light of significant labour mobility, extractive towns in the global South may experience the mass exodus of residents once the mining boom is over. Even so, some urban areas servicing extractive activities are too large to ever become true ghost towns. In such cities, state authorities tend to apply long-term approaches to persistent, informal, 'ungovernable' neighbourhoods. Their methods are at times violent and violence-inducing.

The chapter's conclusion reflects on the scenarios presented and offers possible directions for further research. Among the challenges to moving from a case study approach to a more comprehensive analysis is the lack of key data points, such as rates of violence and small arms proliferation in urbanized frontiers compared to other urbanized areas. Research on the different facets of frontier urbanization and security provision across actors and communities is needed to better understand violence trends. Only then can promising policies and legal frameworks be developed to mitigate violence and improve security. ■