India Armed Violence Assessment

A shift in priorities. A new level of debate.

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India, with 1.21 billion people according to the 2011 census, has one-sixth of the world's population. While the country is on its way to being the world's most populous country by 2030, it is far from the world's most violent. Even so, the costs of violence are considerable: approximately 33,000 to 38,000 Indians die violently each year, nearly five per cent of all violent deaths worldwide. While crime appears to be declining in India, there remain very real problems with political, caste, and religious violence; with crimes against women; as well as with terrorism and insurgency.

In India, military threats to the state dominate official and popular perceptions of violence. Highly visible events—such as the Mumbai terrorist attacks of November 2008, and the spread of Maoist insurgency—have concentrated national security priorities on containing terrorism and insurgency. Yet these threats cause no more than 5 to 10 per cent of all violent deaths in the country. In 2009, the most recent year for which reliable data is available, there were 32,369 homicide victims compared to 2,231 deaths linked to terrorism and insurgency in India.

India is significantly influenced by problems spilling over from neighboring countries, including terrorism, separatism, and illicit arms trafficking. Many of India's neighbors are either plagued with armed conflicts—such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Myanmar—or emerging from long periods of conflict, such as Sri Lanka. Yet despite these challenges, regional efforts to prevent and reduce armed violence have been marginal. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has been slow to sign up to the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, a global platform to promote measurable improvements in security: of the eight SAARC countries, just three—Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Nepal—have signed the Declaration.

Other factors shaping armed violence can be traced to domestic challenges, including gender-based aggression, organized crime and drug trafficking, political intimidation, caste violence, communal tensions, regional separatist movements, and a home-grown Maoist rebellion. These are not insignificant challenges: the Maoist insurgency has spread to one-third of the country. Meanwhile, some of the most extreme violence in India is concentrated in particular cities—including the national capital of New Delhi.

In 2010, the Small Arms Survey launched the **India Armed Violence Assessment (IAVA)** to develop a comprehensive evidence base on the contours of violence and fatalities in the country. It intends to initiate a dialogue that widens the understanding of armed violence, to bring together leading experts and social science research communities to review the many causes and consequences of insecurity, and to build networks of policy-makers and practitioners to thicken the evidence base. The project leaves no doubt that India has the capacity to reduce armed violence, and can expand its vision to encompass the full dimensions of human security and development.

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