

At War's End: Armed Violence in Nepal

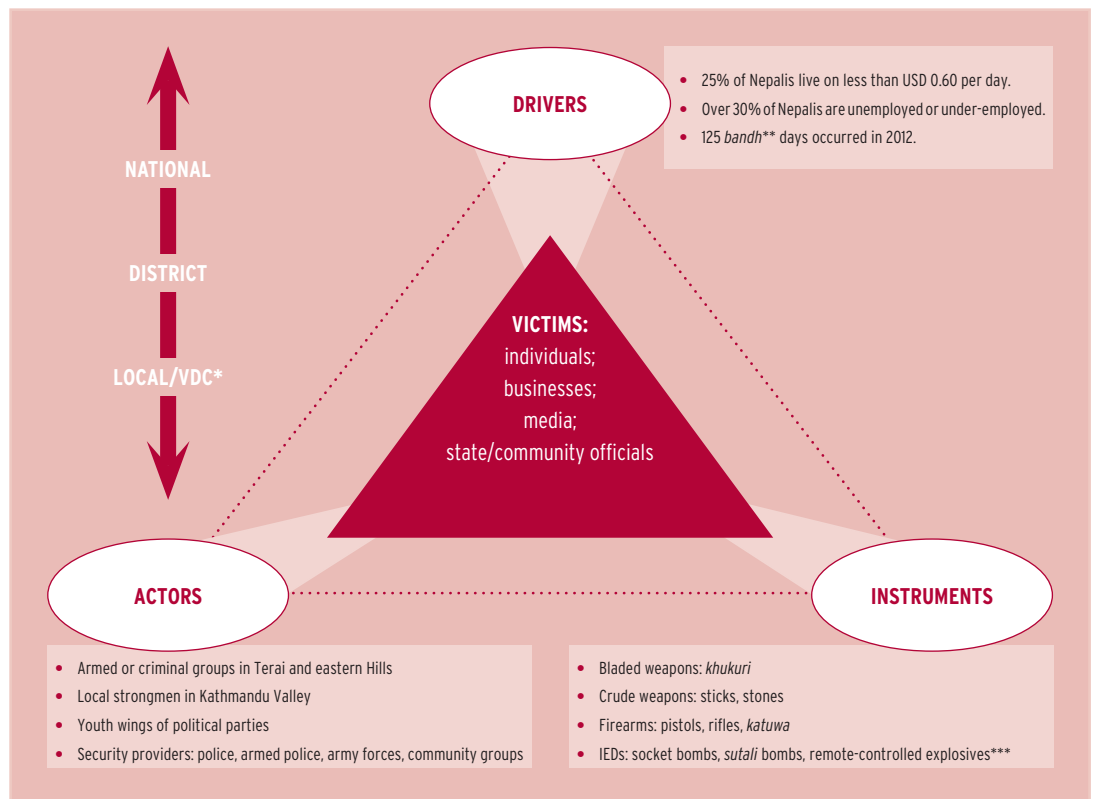
More than six years after the end of a civil conflict that claimed over 13,000 lives¹ and displaced over 52,000 people (UNCTN, 2011, p. 84), Nepal's uneasy peace is still plagued by uncertainties linked to the volatile political situation, gridlocks over the drafting of the constitution, the precarious economic situation, and sporadic criminal and armed group activities. The country has also witnessed significant security improvements in this period that have left civilians feeling increasingly safe and prompted changes in patterns of violence. This *Research Note* provides an overview of the scale and evolving nature of insecurity in Nepal, its geographical distribution, and security responses. It draws on a comprehensive violence assessment involving extensive primary data collected between late 2011 and 2012,² including the results of a national household survey, interviews with community members and security officials,

focus group discussions, a media review,³ and a survey of 160 Nepali businesses.⁴ The overall assessment is completed by two in-depth studies, on armed groups (Bogati, Carapic, and Muggah, 2013) and firearm ownership in Nepal (Karp, 2013).

The complexities, scale, and manifestations of armed violence

As in many post-conflict settings, armed violence in Nepal (see Figure 1) involves a range of actors (such as armed groups, youth wings of political parties, criminal groups, and security providers), various targets (such as individuals, businesses, media, and state/community officials), and a wide array of instruments (including bladed and traditional weapons, firearms, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs)). The boundaries between the various

Figure 1. Overview of armed violence in Nepal



* Village development committee.

** See note 7 for an explanation of *bandh* days.

*** *Khukuri* are traditional curved knives; *katuwa* are home-made guns; *sutali* bombs are bombs made out of cloth or string.

Source: OECD (2009, p. 50); Racovita, Murray, and Sharma (2013, pp. 28-29, 54, 56); Bogati, Carapic, and Muggah (2013); CBS (2011a, p. 18; 2011b, Vol. 2, p. 55); RCHCO (2012)

categories of violence are blurred and the dynamics are evolving at the local, district, and national levels.

Crime and violence are fuelled by persistent poverty, economic inequalities, and political instability. With Nepal remaining on the UN list of least-developed countries, almost one in four Nepalis lives below the poverty line⁵ and over 40 per cent of all income still goes to the wealthiest 20 per cent of the population.⁶ Political instability is connected to the failure and ultimate dissolution of the Constituent Assembly charged with producing a new constitution, and frequent *bandhs*.⁷

While incidents of armed violence figured prominently in media headlines over the past six years (Racovita and Kafle, forthcoming), the assessment found that only a small proportion of respondents admitted to having been physically attacked or threatened between 2007 and 2011. Only around 4 per cent of the sample of households interviewed reported having experienced threats, intimidation, thefts, or robbery (Racovita, Murray, and Sharma, 2013, p. 35). However, these findings vary among groups or societal sectors. For instance, over 50 per

cent of the businesses surveyed in 2012 reported having been victims of at least one crime or violent incident in the period 2007–12 (Racovita et al., forthcoming). The police and the media also frequently report episodes of property crime (the theft of cattle, money, or valuable goods and vehicles, most commonly bicycles and motorcycles) and various forms of threat (Racovita, Murray, and Sharma, 2013, pp. 40–41; Racovita and Kafle, forthcoming).

The majority of household survey respondents reported feeling safe during their day-to-day activities such as going to the market or working around the home, and contended that the security situation had improved from 2010 to 2011. Insecurity is concentrated around political campaigns and *bandhs* (see Table 1), which involve crowds and can lead to quarrels or disputes between participants and bystanders.

Focus group participants in Dhanusa, Dankutha, and Banke attributed this higher sense of security to increased police patrols and greater social cohesion (Racovita, Murray, and Sharma, 2013, p. 26).

Conversely, over a quarter of businesses claimed the risk of them experiencing crime increased between 2011 and 2012 (Racovita et al., forthcoming).

Geographical distribution of violence and insecurity

Notorious for being home to a number of remnant insurgent factions with various political or criminal agendas, the Terai has long been singled out as a hotbed for crime and armed violence (UN Nepal Information Platform, 2012; IDA et al., 2011; IDA and Saferworld, 2009). Indeed, some Terai districts, such as Banke, Kailali, Dhanusa, Sunsari, and Morang, displayed higher levels of victimization than Hill districts, with 7–16 per cent of these districts' populations affected by crime or violence (see Map 1).

The security situation in the Terai has improved recently. A majority of respondents in the districts of Dang and Parsa declared that security had improved since 2010 (Racovita, Murray, and Sharma, 2013, p. 36). One explanation is the decrease in the overall number of armed groups, which can be credited to increased police activity, but also to separate peace negotiations with the government (Bogati, Carapic, and Muggah, 2013).

However, the security situation in urban areas remained unstable in 2011. Kathmandu Valley (including Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur), the largest urban agglomeration in the country, stands out as the most unstable area, with 59 per cent of respondents declaring that the security situation had remained the same or grown worse from 2010 to 2011, as opposed to less than 30 per cent in other urban and rural areas (Racovita, Murray, and Sharma, 2013, pp. 47, 49). This is due to the flourishing of organized-crime activities such as human and red sandalwood trafficking (Saferworld, 2012) and small arms smuggling into Kathmandu (Racovita, Murray, and Sharma, 2013). The presence of local '*goondas*' (strongmen or thugs) involved in extortion, trafficking, or contract killings also contributes to higher insecurity in the Kathmandu Valley and other urban hubs within their

Table 1. Perceived safety levels, 2011

| Context/time of day or night | Proportion of respondents | |
|--|---------------------------|------|
| | Unsafe | Safe |
| Walking around outside the home during the day | 16% | 84% |
| Walking around outside the home during the night | 36% | 64% |
| Being inside the home during the day | 9% | 91% |
| Being inside the home during the night | 13% | 87% |
| Walking alone from the home to the market during the day | 17% | 83% |
| Walking around the marketplace during the day | 13% | 87% |
| Collecting fodder/grass for animals on the land/in the jungle during the day | 24% | 28%* |
| Sending children to travel to and from school** | 25% | 69% |
| Walking around outside the home during religious festivities | 24% | 75% |
| Walking around outside the home during national holidays | 10% | 78% |
| Walking around outside the home during political campaigns | 55% | 38% |
| Walking around outside the home during <i>bandhs</i> | 56% | 37% |

Notes:

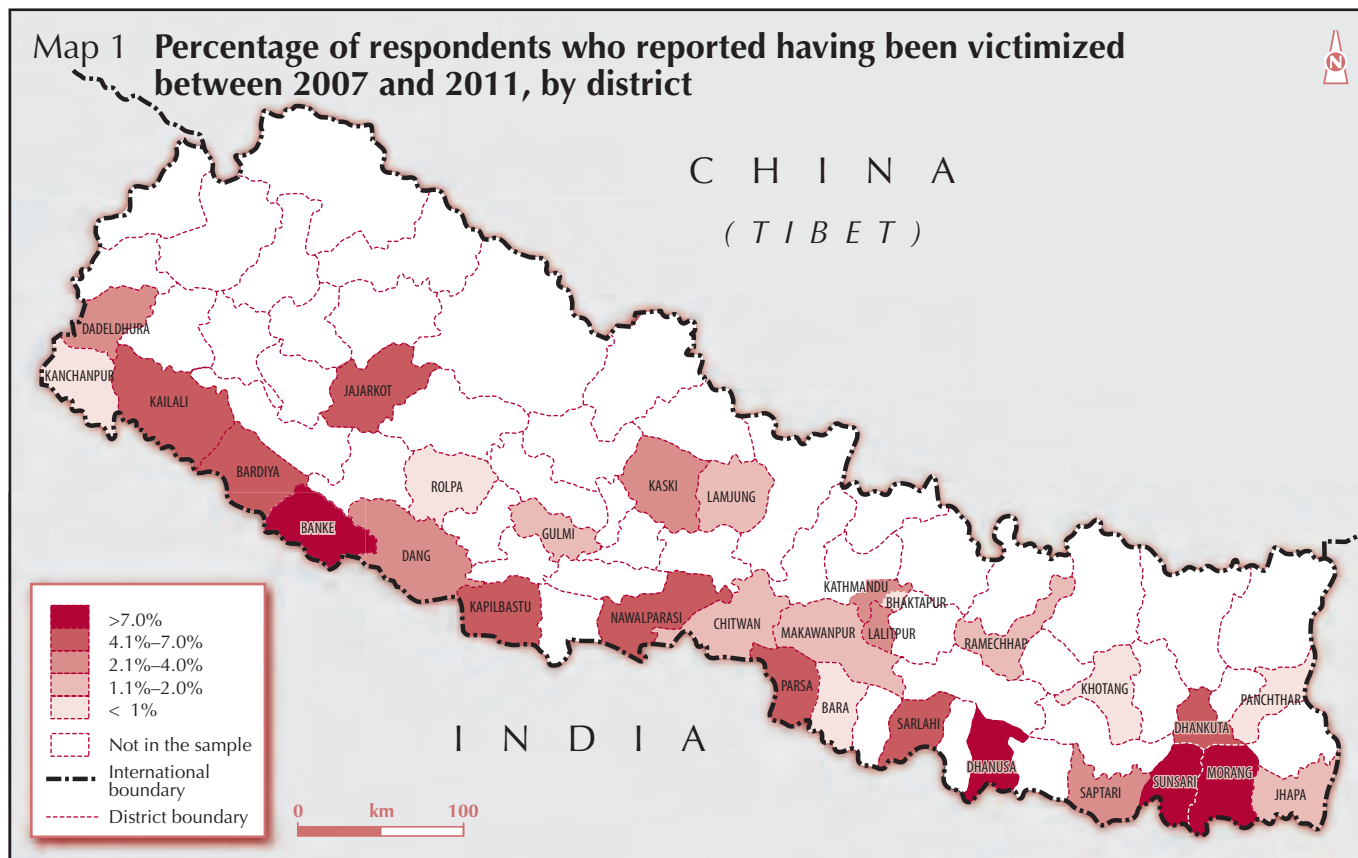
n = 3,048. Respondents were asked the question, 'How safe do you feel in these contexts?' This table does not show 'Don't know' responses.

* In response to this question, 44 per cent of respondents chose 'not applicable'.

** This question refers to how safe the parent felt his/her children were when travelling to and from school.

Source: Racovita, Murray, and Sharma (2013, p. 32)

Map 1 Percentage of respondents who reported having been victimized between 2007 and 2011, by district



Source: Racovita, Murray, and Sharma (2013, p. 36)

networks (Bogati, Carapic, and Muggah, 2013). Also, close to half of the respondents in the valley declared that, in response to insecurity, ‘quite a few’ or ‘a majority’ of households own firearms—more than any other district in the country (Racovita, Murray, and Sharma, 2013, p. 64). Firearms are not uncommon in Nepal, with an estimated civilian firearm ownership of 440,000 small arms, the majority of which are unregistered craft weapons (Karp, 2013, p. 2).

Responses to insecurity: supply and performance

In response to local security issues, Nepali authorities have mobilized over 60,000 police officers (Nepal Police, 2011), and around 40,000 paramilitaries from the Armed Police Forces (Shresta, 2011). Additionally, the private sector relies on private security guards, as confirmed by a quarter of businesses surveyed (Racovita et al., forthcoming).

Community leaders and the police were ranked as the most accessible, trustworthy, and responsive institu-

tions, while political leaders trailed behind with scores ranging between ‘poor’ and ‘fairly poor’. These negative perceptions are fuelled by persistent political instability, coupled with what many respondents described as the widespread interference by politicians in police work and judicial proceedings (e.g. in the form of pressure to release imprisoned cadres). Perceptions of police performance were generally positive, with close to half of respondents stating that performance had improved from 2010 to 2011. Some suggested, however, that more could be done and proposed prioritizing police training over personnel increases and standardizing services, so that the quality of responses is no longer linked to individual police chiefs.⁸

Conclusions

With a recent history of political instability and economic fragility, the assessment of violence in Nepal found reasons for optimism about the security situation, but also some causes for concern. Data shows a relatively small scale of experienced

violence and high levels of confidence in personal safety during day-to-day activities, which may be attributed to increased police activity and an overall decrease in the number of armed groups. At the same time urban areas that have been signalled as emerging hotbeds for criminal activities will also require more targeted security approaches. The findings suggest many areas for improvement, such as tackling political interference in police work and judicial proceedings, and providing more training for police officers. ■

Notes

- 1 The precise number of victims of the Nepalese conflict is still disputed, with figures ranging from 13,236 deaths (OHCHR, 2012, p. 14) to 16,009 (UNCTN, 2011, p. 84).
- 2 The nationwide household survey conducted in September 2011 covered 30 districts located in Hill and Terai, from which 3,048 respondents over 15 years of age were selected. To supplement this information, eight key informant interviews with police, political party representatives, and local researchers were conducted, as well as six focus group discussions with community members

and civil society in Banke, Dhankuta, and Dhanusa. For more information on collection tools, see Racovita, Murray, and Sharma (2013, p. 13).

- 3 The media review featured data on armed violence reporting from four Nepali daily papers over the period 2005–12 (Racovita and Kafle, forthcoming).
- 4 Extensive analysis of each data set can be found in Racovita, Murray, and Sharma (2013); Racovita and Kafle (forthcoming); and Racovita et al. (forthcoming).
- 5 Over the last ten years the poverty rate has continued to decline, although the situation remains problematic. In 1995–96 more than 40 per cent of Nepalis were estimated to be living in poverty, a number that decreased to around 31 per cent in 2003–04 and reached 25 per cent in 2010–11 (CBS, 2011a, p. 23).
- 6 According to World Bank data, the 2010 Gini index was 32.8, while the top 20 per cent of the population earned 41.5 per cent of national income in 2010 (World Bank, 2012).
- 7 *Bandh* is a form of political or social protest (similar to a strike) that entails the stopping of all activity in public spaces and street circulation. In 2012 alone Nepal witnessed 125 unique *bandh* days, compared to 88 unique *bandh* days in 2011 (RCHCO, 2011; 2012).
- 8 This section draws on Racovita, Murray, and Sharma (2013, pp. 75–77).

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For more information on the Nepal Armed Violence Assessment project, please visit <http://www.nepal-ava.org/>.

About the Small Arms Survey

The Small Arms Survey serves as the principal international source of public information on all aspects of small arms and armed violence, and as a resource centre for governments, policy-makers, researchers, and activists.

The Small Arms Survey, a project of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies, Geneva, hosts the Geneva Declaration Secretariat.

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About the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development

This *Research Note* was published in support of the Geneva Declaration on Armed Violence and Development, a high-level diplomatic initiative signed by more than 100 states, designed to support states and civil society to achieve measurable reductions in the global burden of armed violence by 2015 and beyond.

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