

## Chapter XV

### ARMED CONFLICT

1. Post-cold war hopes of a world without wars, where conflicts between and within nations are peacefully resolved through negotiations, have not been fully realized. Recent data on armed conflicts indicate that during the period 1989-1997, there were 103 such conflicts in 69 locations around the world, 33 of which were active in 1997.<sup>1</sup> Over the decade, roughly one third of all United Nations Member States were directly involved in at least one armed conflict. The number of conflicts increased after the end of the cold war, peaking in 1992. Most were contained by the end of 1997. There were 27 conflicts in 1998 and 36 in 1999.

2. During the decade 1989-1997, there was only one major armed conflict between States. This pronounced change in pattern – to intra-state conflict – suggests a new phase in world security, in which many States are finding it difficult to provide peaceful and effective solutions when faced with intricate and intractable conflicts within their borders.

#### The nature of armed conflicts

3. Armed conflicts within States are political conflicts involving citizens fighting for internal change. Some are secessionist movements, generally spearheaded by a group of people, more often than not a minority within a community, who take up arms to fight for the establishment of either an autonomous entity within an existing state or an entirely new and independent state of their own. Such struggles have taken place recently in Asia and Europe. Such conflicts have been relatively uncommon in Africa, although issues related to ethnic identity are an important factor in African politics. However, Eritrea declared independence from Ethiopia and several military actions on a large scale followed. In Europe, between 1991 and 1992 Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina seceded from Yugoslavia after short or prolonged war, while the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia did so peacefully. Barring these and East Timor, the break-up of States as a result of secessionist movements has been rare.

4. A second and larger category of armed conflicts within States often involves a group of people who are armed and ready to fight for the goal of seizing governmental power. Sometimes conflicts are matters of

organized crime as opposed to politics. Money is the motivator for these groups. Unlike members of secessionist movements, such groups are generally prepared to continue to live in the same territory with other groups, regardless of the outcome of the conflict.<sup>2</sup>

5. Most armed conflicts are fought not only by regular armies but also by militias and armed civilians with little discipline and with ill-defined chains of command. Such clashes are in fact often guerilla wars without clear front lines. Another important feature in such conflicts is usually the collapse of the institutions of the state, especially the police and judiciary, with resulting paralysis of governance, a breakdown of law and order, and general banditry and chaos. In some cases, not only are the functions of government suspended but its assets are destroyed or looted and experienced officials are killed or flee the country.

6. Fighting in most conflicts is usually intermittent, with a wide range in intensity. It usually occurs not on well-defined battlefields but in and around communities, and is often characterized by personalized acts of violence, such as atrocities committed by former neighbours and, in extreme cases, genocide. In some cases, the fighting spills over to neighbouring countries used by one of the parties in the conflict as supply routes or hideouts for combatants.

7. Home-grown weapons, such as machetes and spears, maim many in armed conflicts, but imported machine-guns, grenades, mortars and armoured vehicles kill many more. The weapons are acquired by warring parties, either through hard currency purchases or through what is known as “parallel financing”, which involves the sale or barter of goods, such as diamonds, oil, timber and coffee. There is usually some level of external involvement, whether in the form of arms supply to the warring factions, provision of military advisers or direct combat support for a particular side, as was noted earlier in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia and Sierra Leone.<sup>3</sup>

8. Brief ceasefires characterize most armed conflicts. Armed conflicts may end in many ways, including through peace agreements entered into by the warring parties to explicitly regulate or resolve contentious issues. They may also end through outright victory, where one party has been defeated and/or eliminated by the other. For some experts, conflicts may also be considered to have ended in situations in which even though there has been no formal

ceasefire fighting has been dormant for two years.

9. A feature of twentieth century armed conflicts is that civilians have in many instances become the main combatants, as well as the primary victims. While it is not possible to estimate civilian casualties in war with precision, authorities agree that the trend is upward. According to *World Military and Social Expenditures 1996*, civilians represented about 50 per cent of war-related deaths in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> In the 1960s civilians accounted for 63 per cent of recorded war deaths, in the 1980s 74 per cent, and in the 1990s the figure appears to have risen further.<sup>5</sup> The massive killings of civilian populations are due, in large part, to the fact that present-day wars are fought largely within and not between countries. Villages and streets have become battlefields. Traditional sanctuaries, such as hospitals and churches, have become targets. Armed conflicts today destroy crops, places of worship and schools. Nothing is spared. In addition, more and more civilians are involved in combat because of the easy availability of small arms and light weapons, which are also inexpensive, reliable and simple to operate.<sup>6</sup> Since the end of the cold war, arms manufacturers have been aggressively promoting sales to developing countries to compensate for the fall in arms purchases by most industrialized countries.

10. Particularly disturbing is the increasing use of young children as soldiers. The Swedish Save the Children Fund reported that one quarter of a million children, some as young as seven, were used as soldiers in 33 armed conflicts in 1995 and 1996 alone.<sup>7</sup> They worked as cooks, porters and messengers or participated in active combat as executioners, assassins, spies and informers. Regardless of what these child soldiers are assigned to do, they work in close proximity to combat.

11. Historically, children participated in wars as drummer boys, foot soldiers or ship's boys, but not all of them fought or risk their lives. The alarming trend today is that children are widely used as soldiers during prolonged periods of civil war. As of 1995, conflicts have dragged on in Angola for 30 years, in Afghanistan for 17 years, in Sri Lanka for 11 years and in Somalia for seven years. Moreover, children are no longer recruited as a last resort when adult fighters run short – they are sometimes recruited first.

12. There are several reasons why children are recruited as soldiers. They are more docile, complain less and are easily moulded into ruthless fighters. They can easily carry and use lightweight but high-powered weapons. A boy as young as 10 years can strip and reassemble rifles with minimal training. It is also believed that most young soldiers are less afraid of dying than are older combatants. They are often fearless because of being drugged. In addition, children are a greater proportion of

the population than are adults in these countries. In much of Africa, for example, half of the population is under 18 years old.

13. Many child soldiers have been deliberately recruited, others abducted and some coerced into fighting to protect their families. Boys as young as six have been picked from schools and indoctrinated into “small boys” units. Boys have been kidnapped from poor districts of cities or from schools to replenish military forces. To lure children to fight, they are given amulets or the use of “magic” charms, and brainwashed into believing that they are fearless warriors and protected from harm. In other cases, poor parents have offered their children to serve in wars as a means of family survival. Invariably, recruited child soldiers come from impoverished and marginalized backgrounds.

14. The brutal indoctrination of child soldiers leaves them with emotional and psychological scars. Children were made to witness massacres and commit atrocities. In Cambodia, Mozambique and the Sudan, child soldiers were “socialized” into violence by subjecting them to periods of terror and physical abuse. In Sierra Leone, abducted children were forced to witness or take part in the torture and execution of their own relatives. This made them outcasts in their villages and forced them to cling to rebel groups. Another effective tactic used by rebels to spread terror is the execution of the village chief by the youngest boy.

### **The causes of armed conflicts**

15. Many complex factors lead to armed conflicts within States. Some conditions that increase the probability of war include the inability of Governments to provide basic good governance and protection for their own populations.<sup>8</sup> In many instances, weak Governments have little capacity to stop the eruption and spread of violence that better organized and more legitimate Governments could have prevented or contained. Armed conflicts can also be seen as the struggle for power by a section of the elite that has been excluded from the exercise of power in authoritarian systems of one-party rule.

16. Countries afflicted by war typically also suffer sharp inequalities among social groups. It is this, rather than poverty, that seems to be a critical factor, although poor countries have been far more likely to be involved in armed conflicts than rich ones. Whether based on ethnicity, religion, national identity or economic class, inequality tends to be reflected in unequal access to political power that too often forecloses paths to peaceful change. Economic decline and mismanagement are also associated with violent conflicts, not least because the politics of a shrinking economy are inherently prone to conflicts as

compared to those of economic growth. In some instances, the impact of radical market-oriented economic reforms and structural adjustment imposed without compensating social policies has been seen to undermine political stability.

17. Ethnic and religious animosities, mass violations of human and minority rights, and ethnic cleansing resulting from extreme forms of nationalism propagated by hate media are factors that exacerbate conflict. The relative ease with which arms are trafficked all over the world, particularly in countries and regions afflicted by civil wars, is also a contributory factor. Although not in itself a cause of conflicts, the wide availability of such weapons tends to fuel them, undermine peace agreements in situations where combatants have not been completely disarmed, intensify violence and crime in society, and impede economic and social development (see chap. XVIII). It is estimated that some 500 million light weapons are in circulation in the world. At least seven million small arms are in West Africa, where they have killed more than two million people since 1990, more than 70 per cent of them women and children<sup>9</sup>. Induced, mass movements of populations have also contributed to the spread of conflicts, as in Central and West Africa.

18. In some countries in the sub-Saharan region, struggles for control over key natural resources, such as diamonds and gold, coupled with wider political ambitions, have increased the level of intensity of armed conflicts. For example, in Angola, where the rebel movement UNITA controls a substantial part of the diamond production, estimated revenue of \$3.7 billion from the sale of diamonds between 1992 and 1998 allowed UNITA to maintain its armed forces.<sup>10</sup> The Angolan Government, for its part, is financing the war mainly with revenue from oil concessions granted to foreign multinational companies. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a number of complex factors, including the desire to get a share of the country's rich potential wealth in minerals, especially diamonds and gold, have drawn six States in the region into a battle either for or against the Government. In Sierra Leone, control of the diamond mines by RUF has been a source of power and wealth for the rebel movement. Rebels, according to reports, purchased arms through the sale of diamonds and paid in diamonds Liberian soldiers who fought alongside their counterparts in the RUF/Armed Forces Revolutionary Council.<sup>11</sup>

### **The impact of armed conflict on society**

19. Present-day internal wars typically take a heavier toll on civilians than inter-State wars, and because combatants increasingly have made targeting civilians a strategic objective.<sup>12</sup> This disregard for humanitarian norms and for the Geneva Conventions on the rules of war also

extends to treatment of humanitarian workers, who are denied access to victims in conflict zones or are themselves attacked.

20. Societies ravaged by armed conflicts have paid a massive toll in loss of human life and economic, political and social disintegration. More than four million people are estimated to have been killed in violent conflicts since the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>13</sup>

21. Women and children, in particular, suffer unspeakable atrocities in armed conflicts. In the past decade, according to one estimate, up to two million of those killed in armed conflicts were children.<sup>14</sup> Three times as many have been seriously injured or permanently disabled, many of them maimed by landmines, and millions were psychologically scarred by violence. Countless others have been forced to witness or even to take part in horrifying acts of violence. The widespread insecurity and trauma due to the atrocities and suffering of the civilian population is another terrible legacy of these conflicts. Conflicts create extensive emotional and psychosocial stress associated with attack, loss of loved ones, separation from parents and destruction of home and community. Many children develop problems, such as flashbacks, nightmares, social isolation, heightened aggression, depression and diminished future orientation. These problems of mental health and psychosocial functioning persist long after the fighting has ceased and make it difficult for children, who may comprise half the population, to benefit fully from education or to participate in post-conflict reconstruction. The psychosocial impact of war is often an aspect poorly addressed by Governments, as are the root causes of conflicts, such as exclusion and polarization of groups, in their efforts to rebuild society and prevent a relapse of violence.<sup>15</sup>

22. Sexual violence is another ruthless weapon of war. Warring parties resort to rape and sexual slavery of women to humiliate, intimidate and terrorize one another, as, in the recent conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Rwanda (see chap. XVII). Rape has been a weapon of ethnic cleansing aimed to humiliate and ostracize women and young girls for bearing the "enemy's" child and to eventually destroy communities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina many women were forced to give birth to babies conceived during rape. Other women were forced to have abortions. There were also cases of sexual violence against men.

23. Millions of children suffer from starvation and disease as a result of war. The high incidence of malnutrition, disease and deaths among young children is attributed to war tactics of disrupting the production and distribution of food supplies. Children are also tortured and raped to extract information about peers or parents, to punish parents or simply for entertainment. Girls are

sometimes obliged to trade sexual favors for food, shelter or physical protection for themselves or their children, causing intense psychological trauma.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the incidence of HIV/AIDS has increased.

24. Wars have separated millions of children from their families. In 1994, the war in Rwanda left 100,000 children without families. In 1995, 20 per cent of children in Angola were separated from families and relatives, according to a UNICEF study. In Cambodia, a country where half the population is under 15 years old, the war deprived children of adult caregivers. As a result, problems of delinquency, child prostitution, drug abuse and other crimes are rampant (see Chap. XVII). Displaced children are also most likely to be abused, raped, tortured, exploited and drafted as child soldiers.

25. The creation of conflict-free zones has proved effective in some cases in protecting children from harm and providing some essential services. So have periodic ceasefires agreed to by Governments and rebels to allow health workers to immunize children against common diseases, such as polio, measles, diphtheria and tetanus, and to deliver medical services and supplies. Such practices have been used in El Salvador, Uganda, Lebanon, Afghanistan and the Sudan. In Eritrea, alternative sites for schools destroyed by war include caves, camouflaged huts or under trees. In Sierra Leone, mothers and adolescents were trained to teach. Sri Lanka used public media to reach out-of-school children and other sectors of the community. Vocational training that leads to employment has in some cases eased the reintegration of former child soldiers into the community.

26. For displaced children, UNICEF and UNHCR have initiated programmes to trace and reunify unaccompanied children with their families. In Ethiopia, Sudanese refugee camps have created villages where three to five children are housed in a hut supervised by a caregiver from their own country.

27. Landmines in many war-torn countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Mozambique and Angola, have claimed about one million people. According to one report, about 120 million landmines are buried in 71 countries and two to five million landmines are planted each year.<sup>17</sup> Some countries, such as Afghanistan, Angola, and Cambodia, have approximately 10 million landmines each. Landmines can have profound medical, environmental and economic consequences. Anti-personnel mines, which come in different shapes and sizes, are especially dangerous for children, who are unable to read warning signals and mistake them for toys. Their small bodies make children more likely to die from landmine injuries (see Chap. XVII). Aside from residents of the affected countries, health-care workers and staff of non-governmental organizations who

assist emergency-affected, displaced and refugee populations in regional conflicts have suffered landmine-related injuries. Long after conflicts are settled, scattered landmines continue to injure people and disrupt food production in agricultural lands and the flow of goods and people.

28. In addition to exacting a heavy human toll, landmines in some countries, such as Angola and Cambodia, have rendered vast areas of arable land uncultivable. Safe drinking water is at a premium in areas with large numbers of landmines, increasing the risk of waterborne diseases and malnutrition. An exodus from heavily mined rural areas can lead to overcrowding in urban areas, increasing risks of transmission of infectious diseases. Landmine victims are a serious financial burden on Governments. The cost of treating a landmine survivor can be in the range of \$3,000 to \$5,000, while clearing a mine can cost \$300 to \$1,000. Most poor countries contaminated by landmines cannot cover the costs of victim rehabilitation and mine clearance. The economy also suffers from the loss of productivity of mine victims.

29. Refugees and internally displaced persons are the symptoms of wars, communal violence motivated by ethnic or religious hatred, persecution and intolerance. At the start of the 1990s, the decline in intensity of several long-standing armed conflicts bred optimism about a fall in the number of refugees and internally displaced persons around the world. In fact, the grim reality is that at the end of the 1990s their number was about 50 million, of whom 30 million were internally displaced persons. The number of refugees increased from 17 million in 1991 to 27 million in 1995 and then declined to 22.25 million in 1999.<sup>18</sup> Countries affected by armed conflicts or internal strife generally have large numbers of refugees and displaced persons, although such factors as natural disasters and widespread human rights violations have also contributed to the number of displaced persons.

30. Refugees may be cared for by a recognized international agency (such as UNHCR). But no international organization has a parallel authority to intervene on behalf of the uprooted who did not cross a border, although very often internally displaced persons have been forced to abandon their homes for precisely the same reasons as refugees. The situation of internally displaced persons varies from one country to another and is influenced by many social, economic and political factors.

31. UNHCR has noted that dealing with the internally displaced is often more arduous than with refugees who cross borders.<sup>19</sup> The difficulty of gaining access to large numbers of people in insecure and isolated areas is compounded by the complexity of assisting civilians in their own countries, where their own state authorities or rebel forces in control are frequently the cause of their

predicament. Hundreds of thousands of people at risk in war areas, such as southern Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Angola and Sierra Leone, a majority of them internally displaced, cannot be reached by humanitarian agencies. Where such access is possible, it is often under very dangerous conditions. In Burundi, for example, in the last quarter of 1999 alone, 30,000 new refugees fled to the United Republic of Tanzania. The total number of Burundian refugees in that country is now about 300,000.<sup>20</sup> The number of internally displaced people has also increased. There are an estimated 300,000 people in "regroupment" sites, virtually people who are internally displaced by a government policy. Access by humanitarian agencies to these people has been difficult since, among other problems, the Government has provided no clear guarantees for the security of humanitarian staff in these sites.

32. Internal displacement poses a threat to political and economic stability at the national and international levels. The communities left behind and the towns and villages in which the displaced find refuge are often ravaged. In many situations of armed conflict, the violence generated in one country often spreads through entire regions, forcing neighbouring States to bear the brunt of massive refugee flows. Even countries that are continents away may have to contend with waves of desperate refugees.

33. United Nations humanitarian and development agencies have come to recognize the internally displaced as a distinct category of persons requiring attention. Since 1992, a representative of the Secretary-General has been monitoring the global situation of displaced persons. In 1994 the Office of the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator was formally designated as a reference point for requests for assistance and protection of internally displaced people. In his 1997 reform programme, the Secretary-General reaffirmed the responsibility of the Office for ensuring continued assistance to displaced people.<sup>21</sup> There seems to be a growing recognition of the need for a comprehensive approach to the situation of refugees and internally displaced persons, given the sharp increase in the numbers of the latter and the problems they have in common with refugees.

34. Ultimately, a solution to the problems of refugees and displaced persons depends on an end to wars that force people to flee their homes. The international community has sought to prevent, contain and resolve conflicts through a variety of initiatives, including improved early warning systems to help identify and remove the sources of conflicts.

35. National and international efforts are beginning to incorporate measures to address the needs of child victims and combatants. Increasingly in peace negotiations,

recognition and aid are tied to preconditions that children not be used as soldiers. Sri Lanka and the Sudan, for example, have agreed to such arrangements. Demobilizing child soldiers and facilitating their reintegration into society through welfare programmes, counseling and adoption are seen as new priorities in peace-building. The task of rehabilitating children victims and soldiers is daunting. Malnourished, uneducated, without skills and psychologically scarred, children in armed conflict need urgent attention if they are to become participants in peace. Attaining and maintaining future peace in these war-torn countries will depend on these children, who know of no way of life except war. Protecting the human rights of children is increasingly viewed as a priority in peace negotiations.

36. For lasting solutions to armed conflicts, respect for human rights is imperative, with a special sensitivity to the human rights of ethnic, religious, racial and linguistic minorities. Equally, good governance and the strengthening of civil societies are essential for addressing the deepest causes of conflict: historic antagonism, economic despair, social injustice and political oppression. The international community is moving also to more effectively assist countries that have experienced violent conflicts and are now grappling with the enormous task of rebuilding their shattered societies.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Armed conflicts are defined as political conflicts where the use of armed force by two parties of which at least one is the Government of a State results in at least 25 battle-related deaths. A 'major armed conflict' is a war between states and a current political conflict within a State in which armed fighting or clashes between Government forces and its opponents result in at least 1,000 deaths in the course of the conflict. See Wallensteen, Peter, and Margareta Sollenberg, *Armed Conflict and Regional Conflict Complexes, 1989-97*, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 35, no. 5, 1998, pp.621-634; The Conflict Data Project, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University; <http://www.pcr.uu.se/data.htm>; and preliminary data for 1999 provided by the Conflict Data Project, Uppsala University.

<sup>2</sup> R. Williams Ayers, *A World Flying Apart? Violent Nationalist Conflict and the end of the Cold War*, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 37, no. 1, 2000, pp.105-117; see also *Armed Conflict Report 1993, 1995 and 1998*, Project Ploughshares, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Waterloo, Ontario (Canada).

<sup>3</sup> *Armed Conflict Report 1993, 1994, 1995 and 1998*, Project Ploughshares, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Waterloo, Ontario (Canada).

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Leger Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures, 1996*, pp.18-19, World Priorities, Washington D.C., 1996.

<sup>5</sup> United Nation Security Council, Report of the Secretary-General to

the Security Council on the protection of civilians in armed conflict, Doc. S/2002/33/para.3.

<sup>6</sup> Armed Conflict Report 1998, Project Ploughshares, Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, Waterloo, Canada

<sup>7</sup> United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General's Expert appointed to study the impact of armed conflict on children: The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children (A/51/306 and Add.1).

<sup>8</sup> United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization, Supplement No.1 (A/54/1). Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization, A/52/871-S/1998/318; see also Adam Daniel Rotfeld, Rethinking the Contemporary Security System, SIPRI Yearbook 1999: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security; Jeffrey R. Seal, Ours is the Way of God; Religion, Identity and Intergroup Conflict, *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol.36, no.5, 1999, pp.553-569.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Integrated Regional Information Network, Workshop on Small Arms Trafficking in Africa, 9 August 1999.

<sup>10</sup> Global Witness, A Rough Trade: The Role of Companies and Governments in the Angolan Conflict; <http://www.oneworld.org/globalwitness/reports/Angola/role.html>

<sup>11</sup> Margareta Sollenberg et.al., see 2 above. See also Insights: Partnership Africa Canada, <http://www.sierra-leone/heartmatter.html>

<http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/programs/internat/ierh/pub/1997/mmwr/landmine.htm>

<sup>18</sup> UNHCR, Refugees and Others of Concern to UNHCR, 1999 Statistical Overview. See also UNHCR By Numbers, <http://www.unhcr.ch/un&ref/numbers/table1.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Briefing by Mrs. Sadako Ogata, then United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to the Security Council of the United Nations on the Situation of Refugees in Africa, New York, 13 January 2000. <http://www.unhcr.ch/refworld/unhcr/hcspeech/000113.htm>

<sup>20</sup> Briefing by Mrs. Sadako Ogata, then United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to the Security Council of the United Nations on the Situation of Refugees in Africa, New York, 13 January 2000; see also Roberta Cohen and Francis M. Den, Exodus within borders: The uprooted who never left home, *Foreign Affairs*, New York, July/August 1998; David A. Corn, Exodus within borders: An introduction to the crisis of internal displacement, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C.

<sup>21</sup> Renewing the United Nations: A Programme For Reform, Report of the Secretary-General (A/51/950), p. 60.

<sup>12</sup> United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on the Work of the Organization, Supplement No.1 (A/54/1).

<sup>13</sup> Preventing Deadly Conflict, Final Report, Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict, New York, December 1997, p.11; Christer Ahlstrom, Casualties of Conflict, Uppsala, Department of Peace and Conflict Research, 1991, pp. 8, 19; United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Report 1997, New York, Oxford University Press, 1997, p.65.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations, Impact of Armed Conflict on Children: Report of Graça Machel, Expert of the Secretary-General of the United Nations (Selected Highlights) New York, 1996, p.7 (DPI/1834-96-22765-October 1996-5M).

<sup>15</sup> Michael G. Wessells, Children, Armed Conflict and Peace, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol.35,no.5, 1998, pp.635-646.

<sup>16</sup> UNICEF, Report on the State of the World's Children, 1996.

<sup>17</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Environmental Health;