

# The debate about the human and economic cost of war

In any war there are direct and indirect victims. In countries that end up being invaded, ordinary civilians can be as much at risk as the military, maybe even more so as they do not have the equipment or skills to fight back effectively. The cost of war must be measured in terms of:

- **Death and destruction** – The number of people killed and injured, the destruction of towns, villages and countryside and the number of people whose lives have been shattered all need to be taken into account. War can leave a country totally devastated.
- **Displaced people** – War forces thousands of people to leave their homes and often their countries as well. This turns them into refugees, people without a home. This is a lasting effect of war.
- **Economic cost** – War destroys homes, crops, power supplies, industry, schools and hospitals. All of these vital services have to be replaced once the war is over. This uses up vast amounts of money and resources that poor countries cannot afford.
- **The environment** – The weapons used in war can lead to the pollution of air, water and soil. This is particularly so when chemical, biological or nuclear weapons are employed. Sometimes there is the deliberate destruction of a natural resource, such as the burning of oil wells. This can have a disastrous effect on the environment.
- **Psychological effects** – War can scar the people involved in many ways. Soldiers who have witnessed terrible atrocities (or committed them) may suffer trauma as a result. Civilians whose daily lives have been shattered can suffer in a similar way.
- **Tourism** – War can have a huge economic impact on some countries when tourism is affected. Egypt and many Middle Eastern countries are no longer popular tourist destinations due to war and conflict.

## What is the role of the United Nations?

The United Nations was set up in 1945 after World War Two. It currently consists of 193 member states, including the UK. It was designed to stop wars between countries and provide a meeting place where countries could discuss their problems and hopefully come to an agreement.

The aim is to reduce the chance of wars happening and to help resolve issues before a declaration of war is felt necessary.

# The victims of war

The main casualties of war include:

- servicemen and women who lose their lives or are injured
- civilians who lose their lives or are injured
- civilians who have their families, homes and way of life damaged or destroyed
- a country's infrastructure, eg roads and bridges which are destroyed
- refugees who have to flee their country of birth to find safety



Estimated number of military and civilian fatalities in major UK conflicts since World War Two

CAIN WEB SERVICE; MOD; CNN, ALL RETRIEVED 2013

## **Refugees**

A refugee is a person who is forced to flee from his or her country because of intolerable living conditions. These are often the result of persecution, war or other violence. Some are forced to flee with no warning and many have experienced significant trauma, perhaps witnessing the death of family members or the destruction of their home. Refugees are protected by international humanitarian law when they are in a state involved in an armed conflict. They must not be returned to situations where their life and freedom are at risk.

## **Child soldiers**

International law prohibits young people under the age of 18 taking part in armed conflict, and the use of children under the age of 15 is considered a war crime. However, throughout the world tens of thousands of children – some as young as 9 or 10 years old – are given weapons and forced to fight for government armed forces or paramilitaries. The United Nations defines child soldiers as 'children associated with armed forces and groups', or 'CAAFAG' for short. Not all children have armed roles in these groups, so referring to them as 'child soldiers' isn't always accurate as they may be used in any capacity - including as spies, messengers, porters, servants or for sexual purposes.

## **Innocent civilians**

During the past 60 years the main victims of war have been civilians. Civilians are often caught in the crossfire or killed in bombings simply by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. With infrastructure destroyed, many people die through illness due to lack of clean water or food. Others become traumatised because of the atrocities they have witnessed and may suffer from long term mental illness. Civilians are protected during armed conflict by international humanitarian law. They should be shielded from all forms of violence and degrading treatment, including murder and torture.