



**Beyond a 'rational violence' framework:  
Psychological causes of civil war violence**

*Based on Working Paper no.14: David Keen, "Since I am a dog, beware my fangs": Beyond a 'rational violence' framework in the Sierra Leonean war.' This is intended to provide a summary of the principal findings, and an indication of the implications these may have for debates over policy.*

In his paper, David Keen goes beyond the confines of a 'rational violence' framework and proposes a model that helps to explain the occurrence of widespread violence against civilians during a civil war. In assessing violence induced by military soldiers and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels in Sierra Leone, Keen's three-stage model suggests that violence may be a product of human emotions, such as shame, anger and fear. The emotions and views of combatants need to be taken seriously if abuses are to be minimised.

- **Restore respect to soldiers.**

Government soldiers' abuse of civilians in Sierra Leone was encouraged by their poor conditions. Improving these conditions can reduce abuses.

- **Pay attention to the psychological functions of violence**

We need to look at aspects of violence that do not fall readily within a framework where war appears to be a 'rational system'. Psychological functions of violence need to be considered along with economic and political functions. Violence can offer an immediate sensation of power and a reversal of perceived injustice.

In Sierra Leone, violence was often used to reverse relations of humiliation prevailing in peacetime. Extreme violence in Sierra Leone has sometimes been related to the presence of political beliefs or idealism, albeit in poorly articulated and often highly perverted forms.

- **A three stage model to help explain the occurrence of widespread violence against civilians**

In the *first stage*, elements of military factions turn away from their ideals (effecting political change, protecting civilians from rebels and so on) and engage in self-centred violence at the expense of civilians. This first stage is linked with the mutation of war from a contest to a 'system'. Reasons for the shift towards attacks on civilians include poor or non-existent salaries/payments, the existence of readily exploitable resources, the weakness of ideological or military training, and a desire to avoid dying at the hands of the enemy.

In the *second stage*, civilians condemn or turn away from armed factions. The factions' pursuit of economic agendas and physical abuse against civilians attracts significant criticism and condemnation.

In the *third stage*, the military factions turn with renewed intensity on the civilians, accusing them of being disloyal, ungrateful and a threat to the fighters' own security. During this later stage 'anger and fear - and not just the "rational" pursuit of wealth and safety - feed more and more into the escalating abuse of civilians.' There may be anger at civilians for turning away from them, and fear of civilian's betrayal and recrimination; there may also be intense feelings of shame and humiliation.

- **Three psychological dynamics may be at work when shame feeds into extreme violence**  
First, there may be an impulse to eradicate a person arousing a sense of shame. Second, there may be an impulse for the perpetrators of violence to conform to the insulting descriptions leveled at them (as expressed by Shakespeare's Shylock in the Merchant of Venice "Thou call'dst me dog before thou hadst a cause; But, since I am a dog, beware my fangs"). Third, there may be an attempt to use violence in order to insist that one is not negligible, but a human being who must be respected, even if this 'respect' is compelled through violence.

- **Violence can be seen as a means of compelling respect**  
Fighters may try to use violence to draw attention to their existence and their feeling of being betrayed either by civilians or by higher officials. They find self-worth and a feeling of empowerment 'by bullying and harming those under them'. However, the irony lies in the fact that their desire for recognition only provokes further rejection and condemnation, deepening their sense of alienation.

- **Providing respect must be part of the solution**  
In understanding violence as an attempt to command respect and recognition, 'it follows that providing respect has to be part of the solution'. This crucial point has important policy implications:

*First*, soldiers should be given respectable salaries, adequate living conditions and food allowances.

*Second*, high quality and non-abusive military training and ideological education should be provided. This could include inculcating a sense of pride in their nation's history and emphasizing their duties in defending civilians.

*Third*, there is a need for measures to address young people's perception that they are inadequately listened to, respected, or provided for. Improved employment and education are fundamental here, as well as reform of the chieftaincy system in the case of Sierra Leone.

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