Ethnic, religious and racial violence: the policy planning and response issues for governments and their law enforcement agencies*

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Introduction

This overview of the issues is in the nature of a checklist for policy planners and those charged with policy implementation. It also seeks to identify, immediately, the fact that even decision-makers, who see themselves as totally well-meaning, can be part of the problem. As the English essayist, Charles Lamb (1779–1834) said we are all

... in plainer words a bundle of prejudices made up of likings and dislikings

Moreover, in some conflicts the problem that no 'party' has a monopoly of 'right' needs to be fully recognised. The critic Thomas Foster (1989) wrote of the contemporary Irish poet, Seamus Heaney's attempts to grapple with the extreme consequences of the Irish question that

... the net result of the poet's recognition of the various elements is the characteristic paralysis; the ability to grasp simultaneously both poles of a diametric opposition translates into an inability to act, either to throw the stones or to stop those who do.

These words could also be applied to the EU and the UN in Bosnia.

The forms of violence varies greatly '... from symbolic posturing to formal mobilisation of armies ... ', (Coakley 1992: 344), that is from 'skin-head'


In this contribution the term 'law enforcement agencies' is used to refer to both police and military forces deployed, domestically, for either normal police work or as military aid to the civil powers and, externally, under the UN or regional organisation mandate in various forms of peacekeeping and humanitarian aid duties.
abusive behaviour to the Bosnian crisis. Consequently the response must be related to the dimensions of the problem. The responses need to be well thought out and will require a wide range of skills and resources. It is also necessary to recognise that there are no simple answers to many of these problems.

Ethnic, religious and racial violence are all very emotive issues. They attract national and international media attention. Western democratic states regard such violence as a sign of immature societies. Yet the current range of incidents are actually spread across the spectrum of state types and political systems. Moreover ‘majorities’ often find the problems or aspirations of ‘minorities’ to be somewhat incomprehensible. Do we understand the Salman Rushdie affair? Why are gypsies treated with widespread hostility? Did we even know of the existence of some of the minority groups in the former USSR? Coakley (1992: 334) comments that ‘The concern of social scientists to understand and explain the nature of ethnic conflict with a view to devising strategies for its resolution is thus reinforced by the need of policy makers to reduce or eliminate ethnic conflict or at least to devise a mode of government that minimises the effects of its continued existence’.

It is also necessary for the ‘average and moderate’ person, politician and official to face up to the fact of human cruelty in these types of conflicts. As Beaumont (1990: 57) comments, ‘...what is so close at hand and pervasive in human affairs at lower levels of intensity is unnerving when it blares forth in extreme and unfamiliar forms’. Here the problem, for governments and law enforcement agencies is to avoid ‘knee-jerk’ reactions to what has been called the CNN (Cable Network News) factor.

This paper seeks to perform two specific functions, in relation to policy planning and implementation, firstly, to identify key elements for planning and implementation. It is suggested that there are four such elements:

- the location of the problem
- the scope of the problem
- the degree of governmental legitimacy
- the resources for response