

In Warfare, Civilians Are Still the Target

By Henry Butterfield Ryan

WASHINGTON — This month has brought the 50th anniversary of the Geneva conventions, a laudable effort to civilize warfare. The aims include protecting civilians from conflicts that often rage around them. Undeniably, however, the conventions are honored mostly in the breach.

As long as human beings solve problems with warfare, they will surely target civilians deliberately — at least, they always have.

In ancient warfare, cities were commonly put under siege and given the option to submit to the attacker's terms, however harsh they may have been. The alternative, if the city was conquered, was to be obliterated by murder and slavery.

For centuries armies have tried to destroy the enemy's civilian morale, as NATO has just done in Serbia, hoping that the population will apply pressure on its own authorities to abandon the war. The British, for example, burned towns all along the Atlantic coast during the American revolutionary war to discourage the colonists' rebellion.

In addition, occupying armies for ages have lived off civilian food supplies. In the American Civil War, each side thought that this policy would not only fill its supply wagons but also destroy the other side's will to fight.

Civilians always pay a ghastly price if guerrillas harass an occupying army. The Germans in World War II executed 10 or more civilians for every German soldier killed, at times destroying entire villages.

But reprisals are common fare in war. The Union general Phil Sheridan destroyed farms and villages throughout the Shenandoah Valley in the 1860s. A century later in Vietnam, both sides took violent revenge on civilians they thought opposed them.

Then terror took to the skies. In World War I, German zeppelins became the principal airborne enemies of civilians, causing some dam-

age, a small number of deaths and a great deal of fear as they bombed British cities.

The airplane soon became the arch villain, raising civilian destruction to levels undreamed of before its existence.

In the decades between the first and second world wars, great advances in aircraft design enabled planes to carry much heavier loads. By the late 1930s, as heavy bombers entered air forces, they touched off a military debate in Western capitals of enormous consequence for the future of mankind.

Bombers, said most American strategists, should be used to destroy military targets — bridges, rail yards, convoys and war factories, for example, but never civilian populations, at least not deliberately.

Nonsense, said others, including the British airman Arthur (Bomber) Harris, who became chief of the Royal Air Force's Bomber Command. The airplane, they said, was uniquely adapted to destroy enemy morale. Everyone understood that this meant bombing cities and killing civilians, whatever euphemisms were used.

Still, the Americans resisted. It was just too "unchivalrous," to quote Colin Powell from a later war. Furthermore, they said that airplanes could be better used to destroy military targets.

But once they found themselves with vast air fleets in England in World War II standing idle because Northern Europe's cloudy skies hid their targets day after day, they relented. Soon American air crews, like the Germans and the British, set out to bomb urban areas, which they could hit from high altitudes, even through clouds, by dumping out masses of bombs — area bombing, they called it.

Later, the Allies developed firebombing, causing infernos in cities like Hamburg, Dresden and Tokyo. Meanwhile, the Germans, unable to send bombers over British cities any longer, mainly because they lacked fuel,



launched the infamous V-1 and V-2 guided missiles to fall anywhere in London.

Finally, atomic bombs obliterated two Japanese cities in 1945. No one pretended that the bombs were aimed at military targets.

Later, in the 1960s, B-52s would pound North Vietnamese populations. Finally, in 1999, NATO would bomb the infrastructure that supported civilian life in Belgrade.

And what of the Geneva conventions? Clearly they have a very poor record.

If the long history of warfare demonstrates anything, it is that as long as governments solve problems by arms, they will find it irresistible to target civilians, especially in a political environment that encourages armed intervention

while abhorring casualties among the attacking forces.

That combination gives added emphasis to aerial warfare, often high-altitude bombing, which means killing civilians, either directly or by destroying their communities' infrastructures and letting disease do the job. The latter happened in Baghdad during the Gulf War and would soon have happened in Belgrade. Either way, civilians are the target.

The writer, a retired U.S. Foreign Service officer, is an associate of Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of Diplomacy and a life member of Clare Hall, Cambridge. He contributed this comment to the International Herald Tribune.