Angola
J.B. Russell / Panos Pictures

The death toll from armed conflict has been declining since the late 1960s. The best available figures under-count the real totals, but no one knows by how much.

3
Counting the Dead

The decline in battle-deaths has been even more remarkable than the fall in the number of armed conflicts. In wars involving a state, for every 30 people killed in 1950, only one was killed in 2005. But how accurate are the death-toll statistics?

While the number of wars, conflicts, genocides and other slaughters of civilians is relatively well-documented, the deaths that result from them are difficult to count. On the world's battlegrounds and killing fields, there is little accurate book-keeping.

Some bodies are never found. The commander of an organized army knows how many of his own soldiers remain after a battle, but he cannot be sure if those missing have been killed or have deserted; leaders of hastily recruited militias and fast-moving guerrilla bands are even less certain. Military units rarely count enemy or civilian dead. And massacres of civilians are not usually documented, with many victims deliberately made to "disappear."

In all three forms of organized political violence – state-based, non-state and one-sided – the perpetrators and others often lie. One group may exaggerate deaths on its own side to demonstrate the enemy's brutality. Another may understate its casualties to appear stronger than it really is. But for policymakers, absolute numbers are not essential. What matters is that death counts can be compared – year by year, conflict by conflict, country by country. Without such evidence, there is no objective way of evaluating long-term policies or one-off interventions, or of establishing whether economic sanctions, ceasefires or peacekeeping missions are effective.

Until recently, no such comprehensive numbers existed for non-state conflict and one-sided violence. But the University of Uppsala recently completed a new set of global figures for the *Human Security Report* which counts "reported deaths" from all three main forms of organized violence. This dataset does not provide a true measure of total deaths. Rather, it is a careful count of only those fatalities that satisfy a series of strict, consistent and published criteria. In essence, these are minimum figures. Uppsala follows three basic rules in counting deaths. First, a death must be documented by a reasonably

reliable source. Second, there must be enough evidence to attribute a death to a specific conflict, or to a specific campaign of political killing. Third, the conflict or campaign must have caused at least 25 deaths in a calendar year.

These stringent criteria mean that Uppsala's annual counts of "reported deaths" are almost invariably lower – sometimes far lower – than the real death tolls, especially for one-sided violence. But year by year and conflict by conflict, data are now being collected using the same standard criteria – data that can be used with confidence to explore three key issues: the year-on-year trends, the relative deadliness of the three main forms of organized political violence, and the geographical spread.

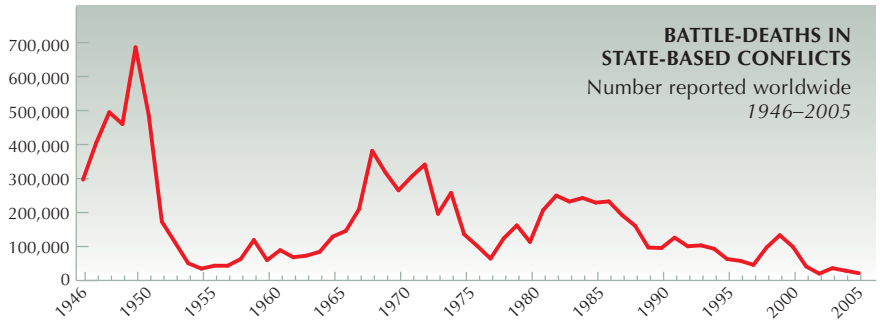
Battle-deaths in state-based armed conflicts have been on a downward trend since the late 1960s. Deaths from non-state conflicts dropped by more than two-thirds from 2002 to 2005, although four years is much too short a time to draw firm conclusions about trends.

Between 1989 and 2005, the only years for which we have figures, there is no clear trend in deaths from one-sided violence. Fatalities from this form of organized political violence are especially difficult to record accurately, as has been evident recently in Darfur (Sudan) and Iraq.

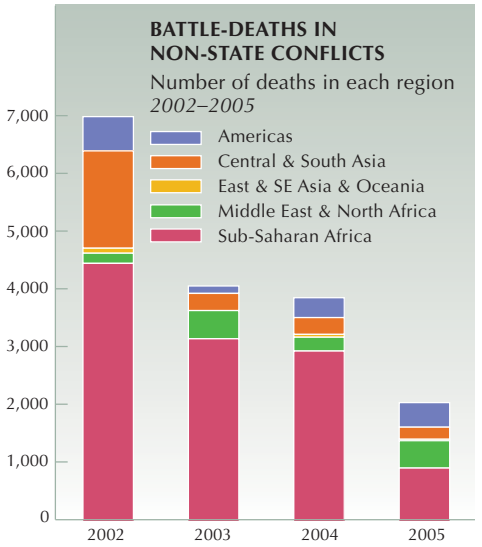
Most deaths from organized political violence are in armed conflicts involving states – 69 percent in 2005. Three regions – Central & South Asia, the Middle East & North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa – accounted for nearly 80 percent of battle-deaths in state-based conflicts in 2005. For non-state conflicts, the pattern was different, with more than 40 percent of battle-deaths occurring in Sub-Saharan Africa. And for one-sided violence, almost half of all deaths were in the Middle East & North Africa, where attacks in Iraq and Darfur (Sudan) drove up the death tolls.

One widely publicized form of violence against civilians – terrorism – is not separately identified in these statistics. This is because there is no widespread agreement on what distinguishes it from other forms of organized violence. "Terrorism" is often used to describe acts of insurgency. And many consider acts of government-instigated one-sided mass violence to be "state terrorism." Most deaths from "terrorism" are, however, included in one of the three main types of organized violence in the Uppsala totals.

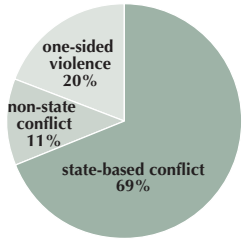
With data now being collected on death tolls from non-state conflicts and one-sided violence, our understanding of the true human costs of war has greatly improved. Although such death tolls generally represent minimum totals, they enable comparisons between regions and over time. But, as the next section of this atlas shows, there is far less information on other human rights abuses.



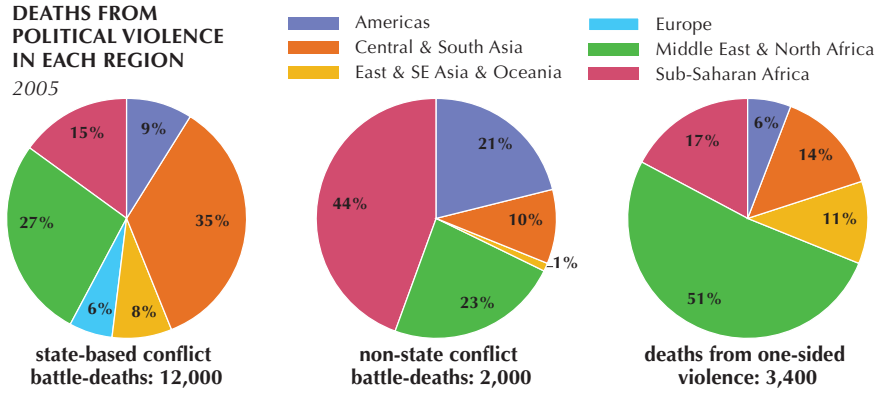
The peak in 1950 was caused by the Korean War, and the peak in 1968 is associated with the Vietnam War. Overall there has been a dramatic decrease in battle-deaths since World War II.



There has been a remarkable four-year decline, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa and Central & South Asia.



DEATHS FROM POLITICAL VIOLENCE
Reported in 2005
Total deaths: 17,400



state-based conflict battle-deaths: 12,000

non-state conflict battle-deaths: 2,000

deaths from one-sided violence: 3,400

While useful for tracking trends, these figures underestimate the real death tolls. This is particularly true in the case of Iraq, where fatality estimates are wildly divergent and intensely controversial.

Battle-Deaths in State-Based Conflicts

HUMAN COSTS OF WAR

Number of reported battle-deaths in state-based conflicts on home soil
1946–2005

- 100,000 or more
- 10,000 – 99,000
- 1,000 – 9,999
- 25 – 999
- fewer than 25
- no data

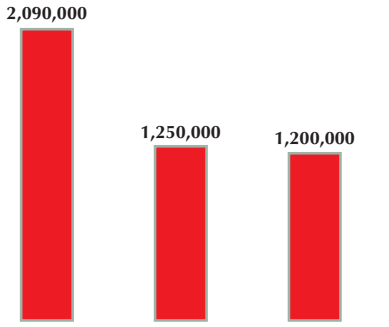
Over the past 60 years, only 16 countries have experienced state-based conflicts that killed 100,000 or more people on their home soil.

The total for the United States includes the deaths from the September 11 attack on the Pentagon.

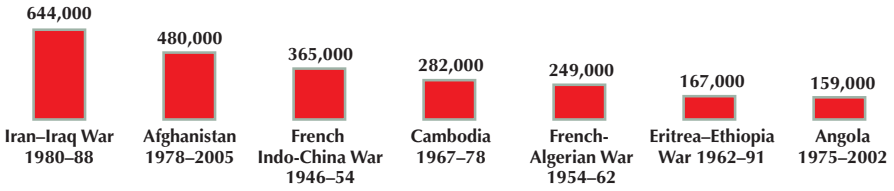
From 1946 until 1975, the wars in Indo-China killed more than 2 million people.

The 1980–88 Iran–Iraq war was by far the bloodiest since Vietnam, with 644,000 reported battle-deaths.

These totals only include those killed on the soil or in the waters of the country experiencing a state-based conflict. Reported battle-deaths are deaths of combatants, and civilians caught in the crossfire, recorded by a reliable source, and linked to a specific conflict with 25 or more battle-deaths a year. The real death-tolls are almost always higher, and will never be known. There are no global figures for those who die from war-induced disease or malnutrition.



THE MOST DEADLY CONFLICTS
1946–2005



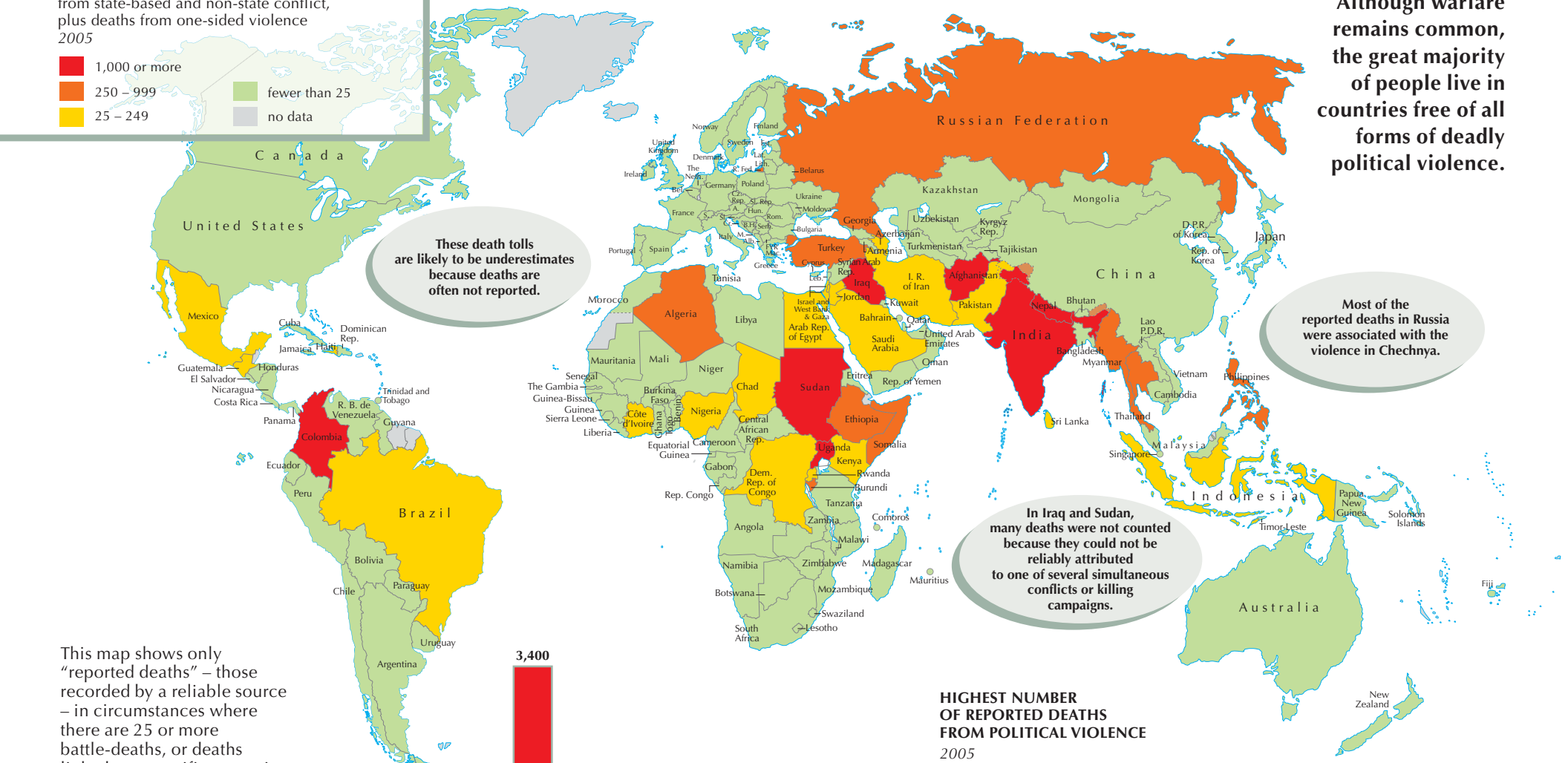
Deaths from Political Violence

Although warfare remains common, the great majority of people live in countries free of all forms of deadly political violence.

DEATHS FROM POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Number of reported battle-deaths from state-based and non-state conflict, plus deaths from one-sided violence
2005

- 1,000 or more
- 250 – 999
- 25 – 249
- fewer than 25
- no data



These death tolls are likely to be underestimates because deaths are often not reported.

Most of the reported deaths in Russia were associated with the violence in Chechnya.

In Iraq and Sudan, many deaths were not counted because they could not be reliably attributed to one of several simultaneous conflicts or killing campaigns.

This map shows only "reported deaths" – those recorded by a reliable source – in circumstances where there are 25 or more battle-deaths, or deaths linked to a specific campaign of one-sided violence, in a year. Real death-tolls are almost always higher than reported death totals, sometimes substantially so. But, on balance, these trends are grounds for cautious optimism.

HIGHEST NUMBER OF REPORTED DEATHS FROM POLITICAL VIOLENCE
2005