



## Warlords, famine and food aid: Who fights, who starves?☆



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### ABSTRACT

We examine the effects of famine relief efforts (food aid) in regions undergoing civil war. In our model, warlords seize a fraction of all aid. They hire their troops within a population with varied productivities or skills. We determine the equilibrium distribution of labor in this environment and study how the existence and allocation strategies of a benevolent food aid agency affect this equilibrium. Our model allows us to predict who will be recruited, who will receive aid, and who will die of famine in every circumstance.

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### 1. Introduction

War and famine are probably the two greatest calamities that can befall a nation. Often they occur simultaneously, since war may cause famine, and vice versa. Humanitarian aid agencies have become accustomed to operate in areas which are or have recently been theaters of war.

But in parallel to this, warlords have gotten used to the presence of aid agencies in the areas they control or seek to control. In times of famine, aid from abroad is a large fraction of a country's total income, and as such forms an important part of a warlord's economic environment.

Our aim in this paper is to consider how famine and famine relief can affect the way in which warlords make decisions. Our analysis encompasses situations of warfare, as well as standoffs, in which armies are raised but remain poised against each other without bloodshed. We have in mind intrastate (i.e. civil) rather than interstate conflict, although the assumption is not essential to the analysis.

The arrival of food aid into a region tends to benefit more than just the hungry. Aid agencies hire local personnel, buy local goods, pay bribes, make deals, and are robbed. Much of this appropriation is organized by or trickles up to a regional potentate or warlord. Regions may already be at war with one another, but the onset of famine brings a new dimension of conflict: regions compete for food aid. And the best way to attract food aid is to have hungry people. Therefore we would expect warlords to manipulate the food needs of the population within their control in an effort to enrich themselves or finance their operations — essentially, to use hunger as a weapon.

This paper presents a formal, game-theoretic model which illustrates how warlords may include the availability of food aid in their strategic decision-making. We take as our starting point a country divided into two regions, each controlled by a warlord. Individuals within a region have different civilian productivities, or at any rate different access to food. Many do not have enough to survive on their own. Warlords are engaged in appropriative conflict with each other: each warlord hires soldiers in order to fight over a prize. Soldiers earn enough not to starve. As warlords are the only employers in a region, their hiring practices largely

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determine who in the region will need food aid, and how much each person will need. In our model they take this fully into consideration when recruiting. As a result, they may not hire those in greatest need of employment.

This view of things seems to tally with observations which people in the field have made over the years. Cuny<sup>1</sup> and Hill (1999) say, “Combatants always receive priority for food – those with guns rarely starve. (...) People who produce food are the ones most likely to starve.” Weiss and Collins (2000) summarize the links between aid, aid agencies, and warlords as follows:

Combatants steal or extort relief assets (...) In addition to humanitarian goods, combatants may receive cash for providing protection to relief workers or relief warehouses and for allowing access to certain roads, airfields, or ports. Combatants may also intentionally create noncombatant displacement and acute impoverishment in order to lure relief agencies and their assets to a conflict environment, as was the case with Liberian warlords. Relief agencies have often implicitly or explicitly cut deals and accepted that a portion of their relief assets will be diverted to combatants – a kind of “tax” or “cost of doing business” in war zones. (pp. 133–134).

In Africa, the power structure seems to change constantly. More and more governments lose their hold on their countries, which break up unofficially into smaller territories ruled by ambitious potentates. One journalist (Polgreen, 2006) speaks of

(...) the drawn-out ending of one era – the slow demise of nationalist Big Man politics – and the beginning of another, in which warlords presiding over small, nonideological insurgencies played havoc across much of the region, enriching themselves and laying waste to their homelands.

Our model attempts to combine all these elements, and to predict their logical outcomes. We will see that the abundance or scarcity of available aid is a major determinant of recruitment patterns.

### 1.1. Related literature

Who takes part in conflict? Who fights? These are questions that have been asked by researchers in many fields. The literature can be divided into two broad categories according to the way it approaches these questions. First, an important literature tries to establish the circumstances that favor an individual's participation in conflict. We should of course distinguish voluntary participation from conscription, although we would argue that conscription is easier to sustain if it somehow meets the will of conscripts. When participation is voluntary, many motivations have been proposed. From frustration, economic, ethnic or other, to ideology (which, by most definitions, has a component of reality denial), the literature has covered a large spectrum of possible circumstances (see, e.g. Horowitz, 1985; Muller and Seligson, 1987). As Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) demonstrate, no single one, however, can speak for all conflicts.

While this literature tends to focus on the motivations for conflict, another views the cause of conflict in opportunities (Goodwin and Skocpol, 1989; Lohmann, 1994; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004; Fearon and Laitin, 2003). In this equally important literature, little place is left for spontaneous outbursts of violence or ideologically driven actions. Here, individuals act rationally. They ponder their choices. Even though ideology can be rationalized (see, e.g. Bénabou, 2008), conflict is analyzed through the lenses of researchers in this strand of thought as the collective result of individually rational agents comparing all opportunities.

In the latter approach, a series of theoretical articles have established substantial ground. Herschel Grossman (1991), for example, views insurrections as a business like any other. In his models, armies and militias are made up of individuals allocating economic time to soldiering. When choosing whether to take part in a fight, these individuals weigh the pros and cons of their enrollment, and in particular, they understand the opportunity cost of their action. In such a theory of conflict, ideologies play little role. Soldiers are pure mercenaries. In Azam (2006), participants internalize the cost the conflict might have on them if they do not participate: the opportunity cost of not participating includes possible victimization of civilians by warlords. The latter anticipate this and make sure the cost is credible, by encouraging looting and violence against civilians, including their own. In Gates (2002), recruits enter a self-enforcing contract with the landlord or the rebel leader. Their relationship is one of a principal and multiple agents and everyone's action is individually rational. Gates (2002) brings interesting light to the sustainability of militia groups. Recently, Esteban and Ray (2008) propose a theory of ethnic conflicts in which individuals participate because they benefit from the fight.

Lavie and Muller (2011) reconcile both approaches and explicitly model the interplay between ideological considerations and opportunistic behavior: this manifests itself in the self-selection of individuals into combatants and non-combatants.

Another important question is why wars would erupt in the first place, in other words why warlords would choose conflict over settlement. Garfinkel and Skaperdas (2007) provide an excellent review of this literature. Conflict can be rationalized by information asymmetries: it may serve as a way for one party to (costly) signal its strength or equivalently to force another to reveal private information and prevent its bluff (Brito and Intriligator, 1985). Wars can also arise in the absence of informational problems. In spite of their cost, they can be worthwhile today if they provide one party with a permanent advantage over another (Garfinkel and Skaperdas, 2000) or because one party may prefer fighting for a pie that cannot be divided or for the lack of commitment possibilities in settlements (Fearon, 1995; Powell, 2006). Territories are often considered as indivisible in bargaining, although the indivisibility may be endogenous (Goddard, 2006).

<sup>1</sup> Frederick C. Cuny was a civil engineer and disaster relief specialist. He did field work in such places as Nigeria, Sudan, Somalia and Sri Lanka, while they were undergoing civil conflict. He disappeared in Chechnya in 1995.

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