

# FACTSheet

## How Demographic Transition Reduces Countries' Vulnerability to Civil Conflict

During the last three decades of the 20th century, demographic transition — a population's shift from high to low rates of birth and death — was associated with continuous declines in the vulnerability of countries to civil conflicts (ethnic wars, anti-government insurgencies and terrorism resulting in multiple deaths). This relationship suggests that a range of policies and programs that promote demographic transition by encouraging small, healthy and better educated families and longer lives will improve the prospects for political stability in developing countries and enhance global security in the future.

### What is demographic transition?

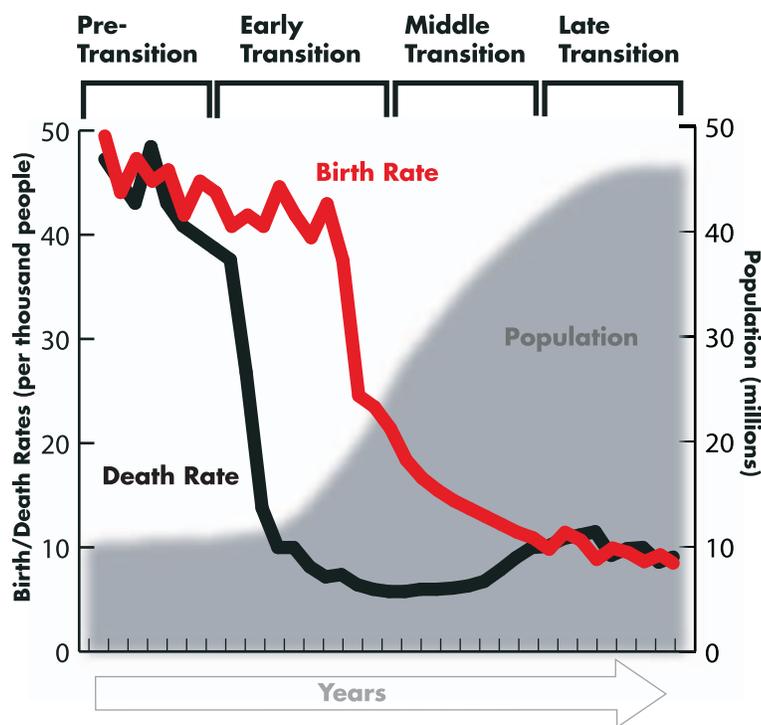
- **Demographic transition is the change that countries go through when they progress from a population with short lives and large families to one in which people tend to live longer lives and raise small families.** About one-third of the world's countries have completed this transition. However, about another third of all countries, plus the northern states of India — in total, about 1.5 billion people — remain in the transition's early or middle phases. Most are in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East. Others are scattered across southern Asia and Latin America.
- **Countries in the early and middle phases of demographic transition, as a group, have been more significantly vulnerable than late-transition countries to civil conflict.** During the 1970s, '80s and '90s, countries in the late phases of demographic transition were less likely to experience new outbreaks of civil conflicts than those still in the tran-



sition's early or middle phases. And, crucially, the likelihood of civil conflict steadily decreased for high-risk countries as they experienced overall declines in birth and death rates.

- **From the 1970s through the 1990s, a decline in a country's annual birth rate of 10 births per thousand people corresponded to a decrease of about 10 percent in the likelihood of an outbreak of civil conflict.** Each decade, countries in the earliest phase of demographic transition (with birth rates above 45 per thousand) had more than a 40 percent probability of experiencing a new outbreak of civil conflict. This vulnerability descended until the latest phase of transition, in which countries had less than a 5 percent probability of an outbreak of civil conflict. While this association does not demonstrate direct causation, the relationships found here are striking and consistent.

## The Demographic Transition



The graph portrays idealized paths of the demographic transition's two component transitions — birth-rate and death-rate transitions — and shows the population growth that results from the gap between these two rates. Because death rates typically decrease before birth rates begin to decline, population tends to grow rapidly during the transition. Individually, birth-rate and death-rate transitions have taken from 50 to 150 years to complete. Some developing countries are passing through these transitions very rapidly, much faster than European populations did in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

- **The demographic factors most closely associated with the likelihood of a new outbreak of civil conflict** during the 1990s were a high proportion of young adults (aged 15 to 29 years) — a phenomenon referred to as a youth bulge — and a rapid rate of urban population growth.
- **When coupled with a large youth bulge**, countries with a very low availability of cropland and/or renewable fresh water (measured on a per capita basis) plus a rapid rate of urban population growth had a roughly 40-percent probability of experiencing an outbreak of civil conflict during the 1990s.
- **Currently available data cannot verify that a high death rate among working-age adults, a characteristic of populations with high HIV prevalence, contributes to a state's vulnerability to civil conflict.** Nonetheless, the arguments

for the connection — citing the loss of key professionals, the weakening of military units, and unprecedented numbers of orphans — are strong, and the projected demographic impact of HIV/AIDS is likely to exceed by far that of the 1980s and 1990s.

- **Migration and differential rates of population growth among ethnic groups competing for political and economic power have also played important roles in politically destabilizing countries.** Tensions between ethnic groups can arise when changes in ethnic or religious composition (the proportions of such groups in the population) are perceived as threats to the political character, traditions or cultural practices of one group or another. Refugee movements and other cross-border migrations regularly evoke fears and anti-immigrant tensions in host countries. However, accurate data on ethnic composition and migration are lacking for most countries. Trends and policies that influence migration, ethnic relations, separatism and assimilation warrant close study and the collection of more accurate data.

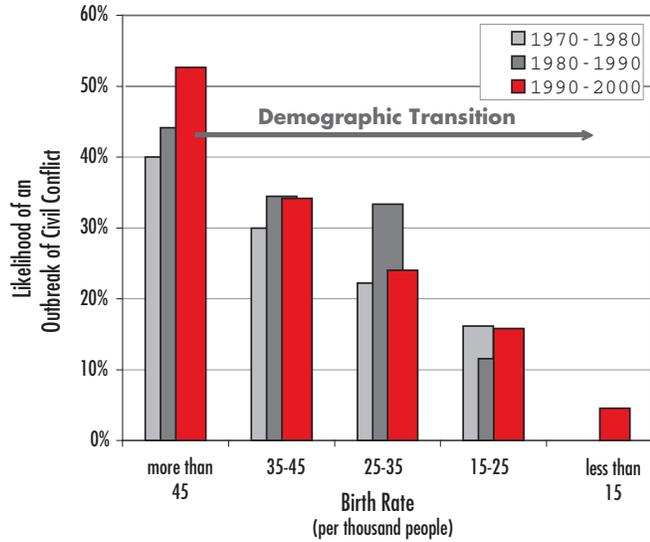
### What can be done to speed completion of the demographic transition?

- **Greater political commitment and more funding are needed** to expand foreign assistance programs that enable women and couples to choose for themselves the timing and frequency of childbirth, that promote maternal and infant survival, and that protect reproductive-age adults from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. And there is an increasing need for programs that educate young men, military and civilian, about the risks and responsibilities of their sexual activity.
- **Governments should work with international organizations to improve girls' access to schooling and women's access to income-generating opportunities.** Improving women's status can influence social environments, help change cultural norms, and ultimately speed demographic transition. Increasing women's participation in government, in

general, and in post-conflict negotiations, specifically, could ultimately lead to shifts in priorities favoring human development over continued strife. It also could strengthen needed efforts to prevent and discourage violence against women, whether in refugee camps, combat and post-conflict environments, or during peacetime. The presence of high numbers of qualified women in important and visible diplomatic and military roles at home and abroad also contributes to changes in attitudes about women's roles.

■ **By articulating for policymakers the relationships between population dynamics and armed conflict, those working in the national security community can help secure funding** for programs in family planning, girls' education, maternal and child health and HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. Collectively, these encourage lower birth and death rates in countries still advancing through the demographic transition.

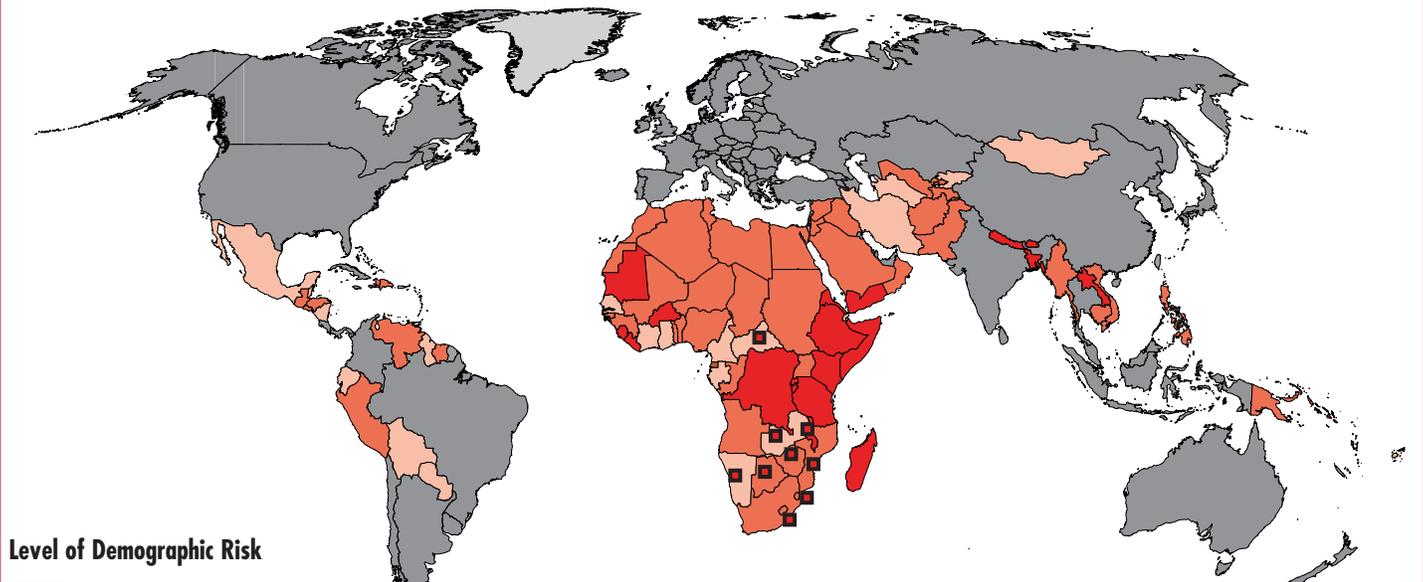
### Demographic Transition and the Likelihood of Civil Conflict, 1970s, '80s and '90s



Decline in the likelihood of a new outbreak of civil conflict mirrored progress along the demographic transition in each of these three decades. Persistent and recurrent conflicts were omitted from the analysis.

Data source: Gleditsch et al. 2002; United Nations Population Division, 2003

### A Decade of Risk, 2000 - 2010: A Global Assessment of the Demographic Risk of Civil Conflict



#### Level of Demographic Risk

- Very high risk
- High risk
- Elevated risk
- Other countries
- No data
- Extremely high rate of death among working-age adults

About half of the world's countries exhibit demographic characteristics that add to their risk of a civil conflict during the present decade. This assessment of demographic risk, from 2000 to 2010, is based on the intensity of three stress factors: the proportion of those aged 15 to 29 in the adult population, the rate of urban population growth, and the per capita availability of cropland and freshwater. Countries with an extremely high rate of working-age adult death (losing 10 percent or more in the 15-to-64-year-old population in five years), largely reflecting the influence of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, are also indicated.

Data source: Cincotta, Engelman & Anastasion, 2003. *The Security Demographic*. Population Action International.

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## A Security Demographic

■ Most of the world's countries are moving toward what could be called a security demographic, a distinctive range of population structures and dynamics that make civil conflict less likely. Progress through the demographic transition gives countries a more mature and less volatile age structure, slower workforce growth and a more slowly growing school-age population. It reduces urban growth, and gives countries additional time to expand infrastructure, meet the demand for services and conserve dwindling natural resources.

■ Over the past 40 years, the demographic transition has been moving forward impressively in nearly all of the world's regions. Human population worldwide is growing at nearly half the pace of 35 years ago, and infant mortality and family size are roughly half of what they were at that time. This progress, however, is uneven and in peril. Continuing declines in birth rates and increases in life expectancy in the poorest and worst-governed countries will require much more international collaboration and funding than are evident today.

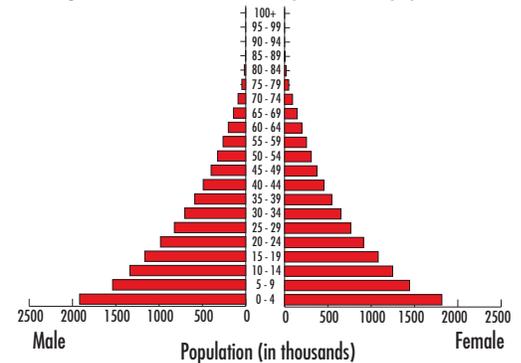
■ Completing the demographic transition worldwide will take an international effort to boost significantly assistance for policies and programs that improve access to modern contraception and other reproductive health services, expand educational opportunities for girls, and increase women's participation in government and throughout society. A major benefit of success in these endeavors will be a more secure world.

### Source:

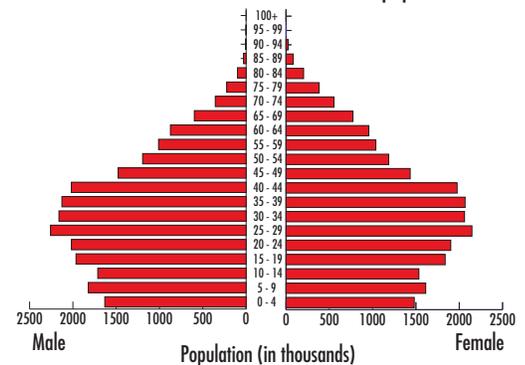
■ Material in this factsheet is based on the PAI publication, *The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict After the Cold War*.

## Population Age Structures at Progressive Stages of Demographic Transition

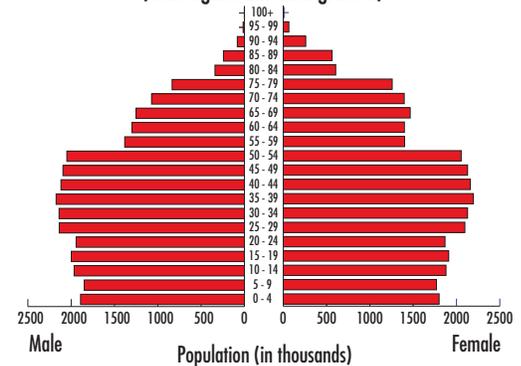
Afghanistan in 2000: an early-transition population



South Korea in 2000: a late-transition population



France, 2000: a post-transition population (with significant immigration)



Populations in the early phase of the demographic transition, like Afghanistan, typically exhibit age structures predominated by young adults and children. As countries advance toward the late phase of transition — shown by South Korea — this youth bulge persists for around two decades, moving “upward” into older age classes. France has a mature age structure, typical of populations that have passed through the transition.

Data source: United Nations Population Division, 2003

