

# Unarmed Civilian Protection: An Introduction



## What is UCP?

**Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) is a methodology and set of practices for the direct physical protection of civilians by trained, unarmed civilians before, during, and after violent conflict.** Through direct protection, UCP supports local civilians as they work to protect themselves and their communities and transform violent conflict.

UCP protects civilians from violence through use of a range of methods, including protective accompaniment and protective presence, community-led safety and security initiatives such as early-warning early-response mechanisms, civilians protecting one another through Women and Youth Protection Teams, conflict de-escalation techniques, civilian ceasefire and peace agreement monitoring, the establishment of weapons-free zones – and much more.

In the longer term, UCP uses civilian-led protection strategies to support and strengthen local peace infrastructures. UCP is a protection practice led by civilians, for civilians that prioritizes leadership and decision-making by communities themselves. It is practiced by communities, NGOs, and other civil society organisations.

UCP cannot be practiced by entities directly associated with, or accompanied by, military personnel (including armed peacekeepers), police, or other armed actors. The practice is grounded in international legal commitments to civilian immunity in war and protections afforded by international conventions.

Key partners around the world, including the [United Nations](#) and the [United States Congress](#), are recognizing the importance of UCP as a response to violent conflict. Since 2007, 27 UN and UN-related policies, recommendations, and resolutions have recognized unarmed approaches for the protection of civilians. Since 2019, the US Congress has urged consideration of UCP through reports accompanying the annual Appropriations bills.

### Core Principles of UCP

- Nonviolence
- Non-partisanship
- Primacy of local actors
- Civilian-to-civilian action

### NP Current Programs

Iraq, Myanmar, South Sudan, Sudan, Thailand, Ukraine, the Philippines, United States

### NP Past Programs

Standing Rock (US), South Caucasus, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Guatemala

## Where is UCP practiced?

**UCP is practiced in a range of diverse contexts around the world, both through locally-led civilian initiatives, and through formally constituted UCP organisations such as Nonviolent Peaceforce.** [One study by Selkirk College](#) estimates that over 60 formally constituted UCP organisations are currently active around the world. However, this does not account for the vast range of community-level UCP initiatives, of which there are countless examples. For example, in South Sudan alone, there were 67 Women's Protection Teams (WPTs) active in 2021, with over 2500 women and girls have been trained in the practice in UCP over the last decade.

Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) currently has a UCP presence in Iraq, Myanmar, the Philippines (Mindanao), South Sudan, Sudan, Thailand, Ukraine, and the United States. In addition, NP has developed an intensive, multi-month virtual UCP course to reach areas of need that do not have

program sites nearby. Since 2020, over 200 people have been trained in UCP in Burkina Faso, Burundi, Kenya, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan.

UCP can and is used to respond to a range of different forms of violence. From the civil war in South Sudan to gun violence and racist harassment in the United States to the low-intensity conflict in Southern Thailand, UCP has a crucial role to play in responding to violent conflict.

## How does UCP work?

‘But how do you protect people without the use of force?’ is a common question raised about UCP. Different organisations and communities emphasise different strategies, but [a growing body of academic research](#) and program evaluations has found that at its core, UCP is about **creating and leveraging relationships** with a range of parties to a conflict in order to protect people and reduce violence. The below case studies give some insight into how UCP works to protect civilians in practice.

### \* [Case Study 1](#)

In Mindanao, Philippines, a local UCP team stationed in North Cotabato, received information about a rising armed tension in a nearby village. Elaysa Latiban, a local and NP’s field team leader, jumped into action with her team to conduct a security assessment of the area. Elaysa recalled, “Upon reaching the border, we heard the sporadic firing of guns and were surprised to see approximately 30 vehicles with civilians on board, including child passengers, caught in the middle of the road and unable to pass through.” Well-known in the area and aware of the dynamics at play, NP accompanied the parade of vehicles and motor riders to safety. No more gunfire was heard during the trip back to safety. Since NP had established relationships with key actors on the ground before the conflict, the team was able to talk to all sides and significantly influence conflict



resolution. Not only did NP protect civilians from the crossfire, but the team continued to work after the fight to support by providing protective presence in the negotiations following the firefight. NP joined the ceasefire committee to ensure there is no further retaliation between the parties.

### \* [Case Study 2](#)

UCP teams – both from Nonviolent Peaceforce, and those led by local communities – in South Sudan regularly conduct protective accompaniments and patrols in areas where the risk of violence is high, including for the accompaniment of women and girls at particular risk of Sexual and Gender Based Violence. In one example, the town of Bentiu in Unity State, the local UCP team noted that the risk of violence spiked at night, with women reporting facing assault, harassment and robbery on their way to and from the market after dark. In response, the team decided to start foot patrols at night. The goal was to prevent violence from occurring and to provide an immediate response to violent incidents when they did happen. They also made themselves available in case anyone needed accompaniment to or from the market. The team has responded to a range of violent incidents in the course of these patrols, which they are able to conduct safely because of the relationships and recognition they have within the local community. Said one local youth on observing the patrol, “That’s Nonviolent. They move around at night to protect us.” Female merchants have also confirmed that the security situation has improved thanks to the unarmed patrols’ presence.

