

# **AFRICA: FROM CONFLICT PROMOTION TO CONFLICT OBLIVION**

**Jordi Raich**  
**Humanitarian Consultant and Writer**  
**Associate Fellow of the IECAH<sup>1</sup>**

## **INTRODUCTION**

I have been asked to write about Africa, not a country but 53 of them, about an entire continent. Needless to say, the enterprise seems to me impossible due to limitations of space and the complexity of such a vast territory, far more diverse than Europe. Africa is not a 'case study' but thousands of them. However, I should try my best to present the big picture, partly drawn from the experience of someone like me that, when it comes to Conflict Prevention, is always late. Because, as emergency humanitarian aid worker during the past 18 years, by the time I reach a place is because conflict and violence have already erupted.

In the early 90s, caught in the worldwide wind of the so-called New International Order, many African states opened democratisation and pacification processes that seemed to mark the beginning of a fresh era of multipartidism, rule of law, and the end of a past politically unfree and socially violent. The novel trend was led by a new generation of more pragmatic and 'Westernised' leaders, many of them kids when their countries gained independence. People like Museveni in Uganda, Kagame in Rwanda, Zenawi of Ethiopia and Afewerki of Eritrea. Years gone by, and after the horrors of the Rwandan genocide or the butchery in Liberia, we are coming now to terms with the fact that the hopes raised were a mirage, and some parts of Africa are experiencing a return to the authoritarian and brutal days so characteristic of the post-colonial period.

The *coup d'état* still remains a common way to get hold of power in some African nations like Niger, Nigeria, Burundi or the Congos. Yet, it is true that many other countries, actually the immense majority, prefer to play the internationally more acceptable democratic game and bend its rules until making it barely recognisable. Intimidation, manipulation of census, arrests, blunt killing of political adversaries, elimination of the secret nature of the vote, tampering with the counting, are an integral part of many African elections being Zimbabwe one the latest examples.

The main aim behind these actions is always to give a democratic glaze to a dictator, a successful practice if judged by the fact that the international community contents itself with a narrow and normative conception of democracy when it comes to African states. Only that explains the much praise received by Yoweri Museveni, an exemplary leader according to the White House administration, who claims his 'no-party system' —a new aphorism for the classic old-fashioned 'one-party politics'— is perfectly free. Another example is the 1997 election of warlord Charles Taylor in Liberia through elections termed by international observers as free and transparent, a case of international

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<sup>1</sup> Institute of Studies on Conflicts and Humanitarian Action.

legitimation of a well-known criminal. Many Western governments tend to downplay the democratic failings of their African colleagues as long as their economic policies are favourable to them. The world outlaws the *coups d'état* but can live with false and puppet democracies.

Many political processes are accompanied by, or are the primary cause of armed violence and internal disorder. 'Success stories' are at hand and some nations like Mozambique, Uganda, Namibia and South Africa have abandoned violence during the recent past and initiated a remarkable political transformation with majority-based regimes. But concentrating on a handful of exceptions is misleading. Thus, the 'great' leaders cited before have been or are at war with at least one of the others. A war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, a *coup d'état* followed by a civil war in 'exemplary' Ivory Coast, increasing disorder in Uganda and Zimbabwe remind us how fragile and unstable these processes can be. To the latter, a long list of old and new African conflicts and violent outbreaks has to be added. Since 1970, Africa has had more than 30 wars fought on its territory, most of them of internal nature. Only in 1996, 14 of Africa's 53 countries were afflicted by armed conflicts that were responsible for half of all war victims worldwide and more than 9 million refugees and internally displaced persons. Power centralization, corruption, despotism, systematic persecution of minorities, wealth kidnapped by military, political, religious and tribal groups, lack of representative systems, make people fight for space, access to water, to natural resources, to power. Even genocide becomes a state enterprise in modern Africa, as it did in Germany during WWII. All these conflicts dangerously undermine local governments' chances to provide prosperity, peace and stability to Africans.

In our global real-time world nothing of this occurs out of the blue, without signals and warnings that should ring the alarm bell. But they do not. All these patterns are not causes or problems, rather they are symptoms of a long lasting African illness called internal political decay. Political decomposition that leads, in extreme cases, to the so-called 'failed states' being Somalia the paradigm of it.

## **SOMALIA**

When I first went to Somalia in spring 1992 it was a society already long way down the path of disintegration, quickly plunging into chaos. Everybody was aware of it and the signs were evident all over the country. But I only found 500 Pakistani UN peacekeepers scared to death, confined in their compound because their cars, weapons and radios had been stolen by armed gangs driving the sadly famous 'technicals'. The situation was so dangerous and abnormal that even NGOs, UN agencies and the ICRC hired their own Somali armed guards, their own private soldiers. The international community only reacted when the mass media reported about the suffering of the Somali population. Yet, instead of taking resolute actions to address the root causes of the problem, the United Nations Secretary General fired Mohamed Shanoun, his special envoy and a very much respected interlocutor by all sides, and the United States transformed a deep political crisis into an innocuous and televisual humanitarian show. In December 1992, I myself helped the CNN crew to find a nice rooftop with beach views from where to film the announced American disembark. President George Bush father sent a US military contingent to lead a new UN-sponsored multilateral force, called UNITAF, to ensure the safe delivery of humanitarian aid, something the majority of charities never asked for. More than 35,000 troops were quickly deployed in what

was widely termed as 'armed humanitarianism'. The international forces failure to disarm and destroy the Somali factions' weapons reassured the warlords that American soldiers would soon be out of the country. In October 1993, the whole 'humanitarian' campaign suddenly collapsed when Farah Aidid's forces killed 18 US rangers and wounded around 80 in an urban ambush. Images of a dead American soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu were broadcast around the world, and played an important role in the sudden American withdrawal from Somalia. The United States put the blame on the UN and retired all its forces. In March 1995, the UN also pulled out without any peace settlement in sight. The Somali fiasco became the Somali effect, to be felt for years to come.

## **RWANDA**

Rwanda 1994 awakened the world to the fact that also in Africa widespread violence could be the result of deliberate and careful political planning, and that the media could become a deadly weapon of mass destruction. When I visited Rwanda in 1993 there was unrest and bomb blasts in Kigali, attacks and killings in the countryside, arms were being distributed to the population, and many people were talking about the lists of names and addresses being broadcast by Radio Mille Colines.

Governments and international organizations ignored the clues of a genocide plot, received months before the shot down of the plane that killed the Presidents of Rwanda and Burundi. The 1994 plane crash triggered the start of a genocide strategy that went on during more than four months. The reaction of the United Nations Security Council was to avoid the problem and withdrew 2,000 UNAMIR troops, leaving behind only 250 soldiers to protect a few foreign nationals. Four months later the UN decided to send 5,000 peacekeeping troops to Rwanda, mandated to protect civilians at risk and to provide security for humanitarian assistance. However, member states were not willing to commit soldiers to such a mission 'somewhere in Africa'. Meanwhile, around 800,000 Rwandans were slaughtered. Nothing was done to stop a genocide broadcast live. 'Never again' was said after WWII. 'Never again' was repeated after Rwanda.

Then, an army of Tutsi refugees invaded the country from Uganda, deposed the architects of the genocide and sent two million Hutus fleeing across the borders into neighbouring states. Amongst the wave of refugees were the perpetrators of the genocide, who took control the camps and manipulated the distribution of humanitarian assistance. They transformed the refugee settlements into guerrilla training bases. In 1996, the untenable situation prompted the new government in Rwanda and other nations to send military forces into eastern Zaire, setting off an insurrection that toppled Mobutu Sese Seko. In this new phase, thousands of Hutu refugees were systematically chased and murdered in the forest.

At the end of 1996 I was back in the region, stuck in the Rwandan side of the border with Zaire, in the company of dozens of TV and radio crews from all over the world. After weeks waiting we were allowed into Zaire, but covering the story of such a dispersed refugee population hiding in the tropical jungle was considered too difficult. The public had problems to understand how could genocide perpetrators become victims themselves. One day, it was announced that there would be no international troops coming to deal with the violence spreading through Zaire like a fire bush. Besides, the French transport strike that was paralysing Europe was saturating the

headlines. In a week most reporters left the area. What was to be Africa's First World War, with eight countries interfering, became a non-issue where more than two million have lost their lives since 1998.

## **SIERRA LEONE**

In the 80s a combination of corruption, ambition and negligence by a succession of governments was plunging Sierra Leone into chaos. International organizations, together with African and Western states, preferred to ignore the violent signs pointing to war. In 1991 Sierra Leone's civil war was a fact. In five years more than 50,000 people lost their lives and half of the country's population was displaced. Even then, there was no significant pressure to reverse the fragmentation process and stop the fighting between government forces and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The democratically elected government of 1996 was followed by a *coup* that allied former enemies in a terror campaign of massacres and mutilations. The 1998 civilian government, restored by Nigerian forces, was followed in early 1999 by a wave of murder in Freetown that left 5,000 dead and wounded plus scores of women raped. Yet, the RUF was later welcomed to be part of the government in the Lome Agreement. Lome led to a sort of ceasefire and a some disarming of the RUF, while a British intervention helped to train police and soldiers. Nonetheless, Sierra Leone's experiment is far from the successful intervention some scholars and politicians, especially the British government, pretend it was. Despite the setting up of a Special Tribunal and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission, there has been no real justice process. Many murderers and warlords have been welcomed into the new army, giving the impression that violence has its rewards and no punishment. Not surprisingly, corruption is still widespread in towns and rural areas, where the availability of small arms fuels new militia groups seeking a share of power and interfering in neighbouring Liberia.

## **CONFLICT PREVENTION?**

Could we have prevented all that? That is the million dollars question. Because success in conflict prevention is almost impossible to demonstrate. How can you be sure that the efforts you have done stopped a conflict from erupting? On the other hand, war proves easily that conflict prevention has failed. Yet, it should not be difficult to agree that not enough was done to address the causes of conflict or to guarantee a lasting peace, that many tragedies could and should have been prevented, that in many cases the commitment arrived late and lasted little.

It has long been argued that prevention is better than cure, something people working for medical humanitarian organizations know very well: providing safe drinking water is far cheaper and saves more lives than treating diseases with drugs. Likewise, preventing conflict is more cost-effective than responding to a crisis or a war. Conflict prevention is said to be good for international business and commerce, preserves human life and the organizations involved are relatively cheap to fund when compared to armies' budgets. It is all about preventing the emergence of violence, building peace in fragile post-conflict situations, and creating the necessary conditions for sustainable development in order to avoid future wars.

The root causes of conflict often lie on discrimination, denial of rights, poverty, corruption, proliferation of arms... Fortunately, conflict prevention initiatives also

proliferate. They come from the US, Canada, the EU, the UN, the G8, and Africa itself. Most of these schemes are centred in combating poverty, promoting democracy and human rights, tackling the availability of small arms, establishing early-warning systems, improving the professionalism of local armies, having an impartial and committed media, enhancing the role of civil society and fighting impunity.

Concerning Africa a considerable number of proposals include the idea of Africans being responsible for conflict prevention, management and resolution of crisis in their own continent. Thus, a conflict mechanism with an early-warning system was created at the OAU, presently 'replaced' by the AU. The US, France and the UK proposed several times the creation of an 'African Crisis Reaction Force', a sort of on call army composed of members from various African states, ready to be deployed anywhere whenever the alarming signs of a potential crisis are detected. No doubt, the AU and Africans themselves should assume more responsibility for their own lives and destinies. The bitter experiences of Angola, Liberia, Rwanda, Somalia, Burundi, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo show the low level of interest and commitment that the states that control the UN have regarding Africa's problems. But unless we make the terms of trade more favourable to primary commodities, open up our markets to developing countries, settle the debt problem, re-design bilateral and much corrupted aid to development, and re-examine socially painful adjustment programmes on distressed populations, all our talk about Africans sorting out their problems will be cynical hypocrisy. One wonders why some Western states are ready to support and help financing a standing army for the AU or the ECOWAS but are against doing the same for the UN.

Africanising problems, responsibilities and solutions is a dangerous piece of disengagement distilled in the 'Africa for Africans' rhetoric and the naïve idea that answers for Africa's troubles must come only from Africans themselves. Letting Africans to identify, design and implement solutions is a must, but indigenising problems, pretending the West should stay away because somehow 'it is not our business', and expecting proposals from weak states is preposterous. Recent peacekeeping operations are a good example of this tendency. After the fiascos and killings of foreign troops in Somalia and Rwanda, the UN has more and more trouble in finding developed countries ready to supply soldiers for missions in Africa. About 77% of the current forces deployed in 15 UN operations come from developing countries, being Nigeria and Ghana the main African contributors. Thus, the bulk of peacekeeping is left to soldiers coming from poor nations, most of them belonging to national armies badly equipped, untrained and used to violate human rights in their own countries of origin. Paying Africans to sort out their mess is, at the end of the day, cheaper and less politically risky than doing it directly, but this is not conflict prevention, this is irresponsible dishonesty.

The famous revived economic interest in Africa goes together with a supine lack of political interest badly hidden behind testimonial visits from Western representatives, who keep focussing on 'success stories' such as South Africa, Mauritius, Senegal, Uganda or Botswana. The continent has lost political weight in the eyes of world powers, not only because of the end of the east-west confrontation but also due to the growing geopolitical importance of the EU, the Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe and China. Nowadays the so-called international community is more interested in managing African crisis with donations of beans, rice, maize and high-energy biscuits

than in solving them through prevention, diplomacy, negotiation, and reconciliation. The withdrawal from Somalia, the impassivity and indifference before the atrocities in Rwanda, Liberia and Sudan, the slow response to the floods in Mozambique... When compared to the reaction to the suffering of the Kurds in Iraq, or the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, the difference in the scope and scale of the response is astonishing. Increasingly, developed countries show a spur of concern with Africa's affliction during a given crisis just to retreat soon afterwards. Only worse-case scenarios, only tragedies, are considered. Graça Machel put it more bluntly: "When we are dying in the thousands then they come running, it's always too late".

Some may wonder how do I dare to write for so long without saying a word about how much the world has changed since September 11, 2001. Politics after that fatal date, we are told, demand a new kind of war against global terrorism and swift action to defeat a hidden enemy in a battle with no frontlines. But terrorism, concealed enemies and diffused wars are not new. True enough, some things have changed dramatically. Today, Human Rights and Democracy, the two pillars of Western foreign policy before September 2001, have been replaced by a violent campaign against 'terror' in the name of which everything seems justified. Besides, there is a lot of talk about the way the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon showed how conflict in one part of the world could affect the lives of people on the opposite side of the globe. Likewise, much is being said about the dangers of ignoring the suffering of African nations whose poverty, miseries and frustration, we realize now, could threaten peace and international stability.

Yet, concerning Conflict Prevention little has or will change because of September 11. We only have to follow how the 2001 US-led Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan is evolving. Most parts of the country are more dangerous now than they were under the Taliban regime, and the warlords, whose atrocities justified the very existence of the Taliban, are back in business with Western support and approval. Although there are 5,000 European peacekeeping troops in Kabul, the US rejected plans to deploy them in other parts of the country. They remain in the capital and a few big cities, confined in their secure bases, getting out only for very specific offensive operations and occasional photo-ops. Similarly, the 2003 US military campaign to 'liberate' Iraq has transformed a country at peace into a guerrilla war zone, where no one is secure anymore and political stability looks more remote every day that goes by.

Despite the events of September 11, the United States' reluctant commitment in drought and war-ravaged Afghanistan and decomposed Iraq is alarming. Afghans and Iraqis have plenty of reasons to doubt about the White House promises because Washington already deserted them before. And it is going to abandon Afghanistan and Iraq again once it has accomplished its limited military and economic objectives. This is not new either, it is a pattern repeated throughout the world and a trademark of US interventions' history. Therefore, do not expect much political commitment to Africa beyond bombing Somalia, Sudan or Libya.

Rather than a problem of an unfavourable Western policy towards Africa, it is often a problem of lack of policy at all. Thus, the US keeps bouncing from direct involvement in Somalia, to disengagement in Rwanda; from leave it to Mandela in South Africa, to bombing a drugs factory in Khartoum to combat international terrorism... The only African issues that clearly worry the world beyond the continent are AIDS, emigration

and terrorism. In this regard, journalists, and specially the media companies they work for, have a big responsibility in covering what is going on in Africa in a more consistent, impartial and long-term basis, not only when conflicts and epidemics erupt or when Western leaders tour the region. Likewise, local African media, such as radio stations and newspapers, have a duty to inform in a balanced and unbiased way and to educate the population into the culture of peace, discussion and negotiation, without stirring ethnic and social tensions.

In Africa, during the Cold War, the superpowers instead of Conflict Prevention practiced Conflict Promotion. After the Cold War, Conflict Promotion was replaced by Conflict Oblivion. The events of September 11 have not changed that.

## **CONCLUSION**

Conflict Prevention and resolution in Africa is still in its early stages, and no doubt much work remains to be done. The former OAU interventions in Central and Western Africa showed the limitations of the organization's capabilities. Repeated diplomatic and non-violent attempts to resolve the conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Liberia or Sudan have ended in failure. Furthermore, there seems to be still not sufficient clarity on how to bring together the objective of preventing conflict with other goals such as combating poverty and disease, integrating developing countries into the global economy, and improving African governments' accountability and transparency.

It will be difficult to reconcile theory and practice. On the one hand, it is impossible to maintain a peace that does not exist. Even worse, sometimes imposing peace promotes war by giving factions the opportunity to gain time and reinforce their positions. On the other hand, knowing about potential conflicts in advance is very different from being able to stop them erupting. But deadly violence is not inevitable by definition and the need to prevent it is urgent. An effective policy of conflict prevention and resolution requires a comprehensive and flexible political, social and economic strategy that entails actions and funds. Most often, the problem is not one of lack of resources, knowledge or planning, but of will.

**Jordi Raich**

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