

Root causes of conflicts in Africa

Africa has undergone significant changes ever since decolonisation in the early 1960s. A new process of change started with the end of the Cold War, and a 'wave of democratisation' in the early 1990s did in fact produce some success stories, but it also left in place some dictatorial regimes. Periods of change have also been periods of turmoil and violent conflict. To quote UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan:

Since 1970, more than 30 wars have been fought in Africa, the vast majority of them intrastate in origin. In 1996 alone, 14 of the 53 countries of Africa were afflicted by armed conflicts, accounting for more than half of all war-related deaths worldwide and resulting in more than 8 million refugees, returnees and displaced persons. The consequences of those conflicts have seriously undermined Africa's efforts to ensure long-term stability, prosperity and peace for its peoples.²

Compared with this gloomy picture of Africa in the mid-1990s, the early years of the new millennium are somewhat more positive. There are fewer major armed conflicts around the world now than in the late 1990s (21 in 2002 – the lowest figure since 1998), but Africa (along with Asia) still leads on that front.³ Despite the end of the war in Angola, and progress in the peace talks in Sudan and in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), many parts of Africa, stretching from Sierra Leone and Liberia to Sudan and Somalia, are still affected by violent conflicts. Even in those cases where war has come to an

end or peace seems close at hand, the long-lasting human, social and economic effects of armed conflicts are likely to be a major challenge to durable peace and development in the countries and regions concerned. At the beginning of 2003, there were 4.6 million people in Africa of concern to the UNHCR. The vast majority were refugees (almost 3.4 million), in addition to many IDP (more than 700,000), returned refugees, asylum seekers and stateless people. Six African countries (Angola, Burundi, Sudan, Somalia, DRC and Eritrea) were in the 'top 10' countries of origin of major refugee population in 2002, the vast majority of them seeking refuge in neighbouring African countries.⁴

Colonialism has often been blamed for Africa's conflicts. The colonial heritage does provide a partial explanation to some of the root causes of recent conflicts in Africa, but that is not the only explanation for the recent history of African countries. The imposition of boundaries that did not correspond to indigenous social and ethnic dynamics certainly did not help to create a sense of national unity upon which the political leadership could rely. Furthermore, the inherited economic infrastructure only perpetuated the dependency of former colonies, as it did not meet their needs as new, independent states. Nor had the indigenous populations acquired the necessary skills that would have best prepared them for statehood. Centralisation, and in many cases authoritarianism, were the political responses adopted by many post-colonial regimes. The nature and perception of political power in some African

² Secretary General Report to the UN Security Council (UNSC) on *The causes of conflict and the promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa*, April 1998.

³ SIPRI, *SIPRI Yearbook 2003*, ch. 2; <http://www.sipri.se/pubs/yb03/ch02.html>.

⁴ UNHCR, *Refugees by Number 2003 Edition*, 1 September 2003; <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texts/vtx/home?page=search>.

states was in itself a source of conflict: the 'winner takes all' logic of power did not favour political pluralism, power sharing or smooth transitions of power. The multi-ethnic fabric of populations within most African states has often led to a politicisation of ethnicity – the 1994 genocide in Rwanda being one of its most extreme examples.

During the Cold War, the two 'blocs' supported and legitimated authoritarian, oppressive and corrupt regimes in search of allegiances in Africa. Their influence in the region has often created, fuelled and perpetuated conflicts (namely by providing governments with financial and military support) when that served their interests; but that influence also helped to contain some conflicts. After the end of the Cold War, there was a general decrease of economic and political support and interest in the region on the part of the superpowers and Western countries, including towards their former colonies. The legitimacy of many African regimes started to be questioned more openly; internal opposition became more vocal and more openly declared. The state itself was in crisis: the lack of accountability and transparency of most African regimes, increasing corruption, mismanagement, imposed centralisation and inefficient bureaucracies, failed economic choices and the inability to respond to the most basic needs of their populations were visible almost everywhere. In many cases, the state was increasingly noted for its absence, as social responsibilities were taken up by non-state actors supported by international donors, non-governmental organisations and UN agencies.

However, the impact of the new internal and international environment had different consequences in different African countries and regions. In some cases, longstanding conflicts were finally brought to an end and the parties agreed to a peaceful transition into democracy.

Some southern African countries (e.g. Namibia, Mozambique, South Africa) provide good examples of this, and although not every country in the subregion could be said to have made substantial progress towards peace and stability or increasing pluralism, the general picture was nevertheless more positive than in the previous decades. Other parts of Africa sank into growing domestic unrest and violence, which ultimately led to brutal intrastate conflicts.

Apart from the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, all major conflicts in Africa during the last decade have been intrastate conflicts. Yet they have proven to be a major problem for their region, and in some cases they have also fuelled conflicts in neighbouring countries. The proliferation of armed groups and militias (sometimes used by external political forces to wage proxy wars in neighbouring countries, but not always fully controlled by them), and the inability of state authorities (where the state has not collapsed or disintegrated) to control their movements or confine them to national borders, the proliferation of small arms, and the growing influx of refugees, have contributed to further destabilise the region and pose a major challenge to the ability of states to govern. Economic decline and growing poverty in Africa, the struggle among communities for access to land, water or control over oil and rich mineral resources have also been at the origin of, or have partially contributed to, some internal and interstate conflicts.

Despite this gloomy general backdrop, recent evolution on the political front in sub-Saharan Africa does show some positive signs and certainly a greater willingness of Africans to deal with some of their major problems and conflicts in the region. Hopefully, the international community will follow and provide the necessary support. But the challenge is huge and the risks of falling back are still high.