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Conflicts in Africa: Meaning, Causes, Impact and Solution

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Abstract

The continent of Africa has been highly susceptible to intra and inter- state wars and conflicts. This has prompted the insinuation that Africa is the home of wars and instability. Most pathetic about these conflagrations is that they have defied any meaningful solution and their negative impacts have retarded growth and development in Africa while an end to them seems obscure. What then are the causes of these unending wars in Africa? How far have they weakened cohesion, unity and the potential development of the African continent? What can we do to overcome this monster? Answers to these questions form the bone of contention of this paper.

Key words: Conflicts, Wars, Alienation, Poverty, Leadership.

Introduction

The history of Africa as a continent is replete with conflict. (Alabi, 2006:41). One may even assert that the major current that runs through Africa: from North to South, East to West and Central is conflict and wars. Since the 1960's, series of civil wars had taken place in Africa. Examples include: Sudan (1995-1990), Chad (1965-85), Angola since 1974, Liberia (1980-2003), Nigeria (1967-70), Somalia (1999-93) and Burundi, Rwanda and Sierra Leone (1991-2001).

But apart from civil wars, Africa has also witnessed a number of intermittent border and inter- state conflicts notable among which are the following:

- i. Nigeria- Cameroon dispute over Bakassi peninsular since the 1970's;
- ii. Algeria- Morocco conflict over the Atlas Mountains area in October 1963;
- iii. Eritrea- Ethiopian crisis between 1962 and 1979;
- iv. Somalia-Ethiopia` dispute of 1964 to 1978 over the Ugandan desert region;
- v. Chad- Libya crisis of 1980- 1982;
- vi. Kenya- Somalia border war of 1963 -1967 in which Somalia aimed at recovering its lost territories including the Northern frontier district of Kenya.
- vii. Tanzania- Uganda crisis in 1978-79 (Barkindo et al, 1994: 279-321, Cook and Killingray, 1983: 183-84; Europa, 1987: 187).

As Ajayi (2005:143) has rightly observed, “the regularity of conflicts in Africa has become one of the distinct characteristics of the continent ”. However, it is apt to note that Africa has no monopoly of conflict. Other regions of the world are also riddled with considerable violence and social conflagration. For instance, Bosnia, Serbia, Turkey and Northern Ireland are among the trouble parts of Europe. In Asia, one may point to Cambodia, Iraq and Burma among others as conflict ridden. Latin America is also enmeshed in conflicts as evinced by countries like Peru, Guatemala, Mexico and Columbia. (Adedeji 1999:1). Perhaps, this widespread existence of conflicts across the continents of the world has prompted scholars to observe that conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interaction. As such, conflict may be ineradicable for as long as people, nations and groups pursue conflicting interests, there will always be disagreements, disputes and conflict. (Otite, 1999; Deutsch, 1991: 26-28; Zartman 1991: Azar 1990:5).

Meaning and Typology of Conflict

Conflict has been defined variously by scholars. To Holsti (1983:350) conflict is a particular relationship between states or rival factions within a state which implies subjective hostilities or tension manifested in subjective economic or military hostilities. Coser (1998) on his part views conflict as a

struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power and resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are to injure or eliminate their rivals. Conflicts could, however, be violent or uncontrollable, dominant or recessive, resolvable or insolvable. This presupposes that violence is not an inherent aspect of conflict but rather a potential form that conflict may take (Omotosho, 2004:4) But then, unfolding events in world history suggest that most conflicts are violent, inflicting life- long injuries on their victims apart from monumental loss of lives.

Two broad categories of conflicts have been identified. These Internal conflicts (or intra- states conflict) is one in which the governmental authorities of a state are opposed by groups within that state seeking to overthrow those authorities with force of arms (Eminue,2004:15). Internal conflict may also be seen as one in which armed violence occurs primarily within the borders of a single states (David, 1997). International conflict or interstate conflicts on the other hand take place between tow or more nations and involve forces of more than one state (Puchala, 1971:142). It is apt to observe that Africa has experienced both types of conflict over the years. However, Africa has also witnessed a third type of conflict, namely”, internationalized internal armed conflict. Such conflicts, which are essentially civil wars, have varying degrees of external involvement. Examples include the conflicts in the Democratic republic of Congo (DRC), Angola and Sierra Leone.

Causes of Conflicts in Africa

Conflicts in Africa may be said to have been caused by a multiplicity of factors such as: arbitrary borders created by the colonial powers, heterogeneous ethnic composition of African states, inept political leadership, corruption, negative effect of external debt burden and poverty.

(1) Creation of Arbitrary Borders by Colonial Powers:

Alabi (2006:57) and Cammack et al (1988:13) have observed that the colonization of Africa by European powers in the 19th century created political units that divided ethnic groups in some cases and combined rival groups in others. As currently composed, boundaries of most Africa states were arbitrarily drawn without regard to ethnic and cultural affinities. In some cases, European boundaries forced starkly different, rival cultures to cohabit within the confines of a single state. The impacts of these borders were felt to varying degrees from one country to the other throughout Africa.

For instance, the Akan speaking peoples were split between Ghana and cote d' Ivoire; the Ewe ethnic group has also been split between Ghana and Togo while many Yoruba are found in the Benin Republic. It should be noted that since the 1950's when Africa nations started to gain independence, these arbitrary borders have more often than not become source of conflict.

(2) Heterogeneous Ethnic Composition of Africa States and the Resultant Problem of Ethnicity.

Carment (1994:137) and the United Nations (1987) have submitted that of the over 180 states of the world, only a small number are ethnically homogenous. This probably suggests that multi-ethnic states are likely to continue to be a feature of international politics and that ethnic conflict is not only a threat to the African continent but also a menace to the whole international community (Ryan 1990:14; Instituto Del Tercer, 1997:160). However, one cannot deny the fact ethno political conflicts have been on the increase in Africa throughout the 20th century. This is probably not unconnected with the factor of ethnic diversity of most African states and the resultant problem of ethnicity. Eminue (2004:19) and Osaghae (1992: 214) submit that of all the factors, multi- ethnicity is the most frequently associated with conflict. Truly, given the fact that ethnic cleavages are already deep and political discrimination against minority groups is widely practiced in Africa, ethnicity cannot but be a great potential for separatist activities. Ethnicity has bred the feelings of suspicion, hatred and distrust among members of the various ethnic groups in Africa and has no doubt retarded political integration in Africa. It is therefore not surprising to note that at least twice (1967-70 civil war and 1993 -1999 friction) ethnic rivalry has been the major cause of internal conflicts in Nigeria. Similar stories may also be told of Liberia, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Sudan, Congo and a host of other Africa states.

(3) Inept Leadership

Africa has consistently suffered from the problem of inept leadership which has retarded political integration and unity in almost all African states. Given the heterogeneous composition of most African states, perhaps what they needed most are the virtues of administrative tact, political tolerance and social justice. These essential ingredients are to be provided by the continent's leadership. Unfortunately however, the realities on ground in most African nations have revealed that most African leaders are weak,

corrupt and unpatriotic. Apart from retarding national integration and socio-economic developments, the attitudes of these rulers have sparked off widespread bloody violence. Sudanese, Nigerian, Algerian and Liberian civil wars lend credence to the fact that African leaders have failed to forge national unity in their respective countries. Judging from the above observation, one cannot but agree with Adedeji (1999: 11) when he asserts that:

what African countries have lacked during most of their history, as independent states are leaders who are unifiers, chiefs in the true sense, who bind wounds, hold everything and everyone together, mobilize and motivate their people, pursue a policy of inclusion rather than exclusion and are seen by one and all to be of the highest integrity and beyond suspicion.

The point therefore is that African leadership must be acceptable to all sections of the community if the process of integration is not to be halted. Until then, a recurrence of conflicts across Africa may continue to be a common phenomenon.

(4) Corruption

One of the major factors responsible for internal conflicts in Africa is the devastating impact of corruption. Corruption, manifested in the embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds, has paralyzed development efforts and caused debilitating immobilize in the march towards socio-economic transformation and political integration in Africa. Africa's resources have been badly managed over the years that masses are fed up with their leaders. This has provoked militant nationalism against Africa leaders. The result, expectedly, is the unending conflict across Africa states. The Africa Union itself acknowledges the debilitating impact of corruption on the political and socio-economic stability of Africa states. This perhaps explains the adoption of the "Africa Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption" by the 2nd ordinary Session of the Assembly of the Union on 11 July 2003. The convention is meant to, among other things, promote and strengthen the development in Africa by each state party, of mechanisms required to prevent, detect, punish and eradicate corruption in the public and private sectors.

(5) Poverty

Africa is one of the poorest continents of the world. This is largely due to harsh environmental conditions, corruption and huge foreign debt that exacerbate the conditions of poverty (Iliffe, 1995:253). For instance, desertification has contributed to famines in a number of African states such as Ethiopia and Mali. As a result, the number of people living in extreme poverty in sub-Saharan Africa grew from 217 million in 1987 to more than 300 million in 1998 (Corbett 2005). If therefore the saying is true that a hungry man is an angry man, then conflicts may for long be a part of Africa life owing to this situation of absolute poverty prevalent across the continent.

Impact of Wars and Conflicts on Africa's Socio- Economic Development

The unending political tensions, wars and conflicts in the continent have had lasting negative impact on the socio- economic development of Africa because socio- economic development cannot be sustained in an environment riddled with violence, instability and insecurity (Conteh, 1998:20). Some of these are briefly examined below.

- a. **Problem of reconstruction:-** This is perhaps the most debilitating impact of wars and conflicts on Africa's development. All countries coming out of conflict face major challenges of reconstruction in order to avoid a recurrence to violence. It is needless to state that during war times, infrastructural facilities are wantonly destroyed while loyalty, patriotism and mutual relations are broken between hitherto friendly peoples and nations. Such broken relationships must be mended to ensure lasting peace between belligerent groups while the destroyed facilities are to be replaced. It is worthy of note that this amounts to a total waste of material resources and unnecessary dissipation of energy on unproductive ventures. This has been the general trend of events in Africa and has been retarding growth and development in the region (Global Coalition, 2004:7).
- b. **Unemployment:** Wars and conflicts in Africa have combined to compound the problem of unemployment in the continent. Today, throughout Africa, high rate of unemployment, particularly of youths, is a major source of concern. It has been growing at an annual rate of 10%. In countries coming out of conflict, many young people not only lack employment; they have also been denied education and economic empowerment because of war. It is

instructive to note that without other means of economic support, there is a danger that unemployed former combatants will engage in criminal behaviour, especially with the many small arms in circulation in war-torn countries.

- c. **Death/ Loss of lives:** A great number of Africans: young, old, male, female, civilians and military men alike, have lost their lives to various wars and conflicts on the continent. For instance, in the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, (Global coalition 2004:7) about 800,000 Rwandans were reportedly massacred. Similarly, the Burundi civil war claimed over 200,000 lives as at the year 2000. In Liberia, over 250, 000 lives were lost in the country's fourteen year civil war between 1990 and 2004. The same may also be said of Sierra Leone in which an estimated 200, 000 people were killed during the nation's civil war between 1991 and 2001. But perhaps the most pathetic situation occurred in Sudan. The civil war in Sudan has been one of the longest and costliest on the continent with an estimated two million lives lost to the war (Global Coalition, 2004:10). It is disheartening to note that this unprecedented loss of lives in Africa as a result of wars and conflicts is having debilitating impact on human resources available to Africa. The services of the departed souls whom God has endowed with great skills, talents and potentials are no longer available to be harnessed for Africa's development.
- d. **Refugee problem:** One of the attendant effects of wars and conflicts in Africa is the emergence of numerous number of displaced persons who have become refugee in different nations across the continent (Instituto Del Tercer, 1997:45;Uwechue, 1996:16). According to Article, 1 paragraphs 1 and 2 of the Convention Governing the Specific/ Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (1969) a refugee is a person who, owing to well- founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country, who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events in unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" or " every person who, owing to

external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality”

It is sad to note that violence and lawlessness have caused a severe humanitarian crisis in Africa as many displaced people are now spread throughout the continent. For instance, in Liberia, the 2004 Report of the Global Coalition for Africa (2004:8) noted that an estimated 700,000 were internally displaced as at 2003. The spill-over effects of the Liberian conflicts were felt in neighbouring countries through increased refugees flows. About 3000 Liberians were hosted by Nigeria at the height of the crisis while an appreciable number of them also became refuge in Guinea. In Sudan, an estimated 4.7 million Sudanese were displaced during the nation’s prolonged civil war. As at 2004, the total number of African refugees was put between 15 and 20 million (UNHCR, 2004). They became refugees in neighbouring countries in the region. As refugee, the affected persons have been exposed to serious risks of diseases and hunger.

- e. **Poverty:** Continued strife and political instability in most countries of Africa hurt the continent’s economic fortunes. Indeed, the disruptive impact of war and crisis on the economy of Africa has been considerable. The political stalemate and periodic eruptions of violence have resulted in significant cumulative declines in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). This problem has been compounded by the frequent recurrence of drought in some sub- regions of Africa. Prospective investors in Africa have been turned away of fear of instability, low profit and loss of investment to looting and arson during wars. Hence, the persistent failure to raise investment rates have translated into low GDP growth rates which had ranged between 3 and 4 percent for several years as against the 7 percent annual growth required to reduce poverty and reach the Millennium Development Goals. This has promoted poverty across Africa. As at 2003, an estimated 340 million Africans were living below poverty line. In all, the persistence of low growth rates across Africa means that most countries will not be able to make significant reductions in the 50% of their populations that fall below the poverty line.

Solution to the Problem of Wars and Conflicts in Africa

As a way out of the predicament of wars and conflicts that have bedeviled Africa, it is apt to offer some valuable suggestions based on a thorough analysis of the causes of the problem. In this wise, two major broad solutions may be experimented with to bail Africa out of recurrent conflicts and wars. These are committed and sincere leadership and eradication of poverty.

(a) Committed and Sincere Leadership

African states need committed and sincere leaders that will lead by example and who act as good, responsible and responsive fathers to all the component sections and peoples in their countries so as to promote peace and harmony within the confines of their respective countries. This can be done in a number of ways:

(i) Even distribution of resources

African leaders must ensure an even distribution of resources among the various geo-political zones in their countries. Marginalization of one unit/group should not be allowed in order to win the support and cooperation of all and sundry and to avoid any feeling of alienation.

(ii) Promotion of rule of law

African leaders should also endeavour to promote the rule of law. This involves equal access to justice by all citizens irrespective of their status, respect for court decisions by the government and influential, and conduct of free and fair periodic elections among others. When and where leaders promote the rule of law as indicated above, there are a guarantee of peaceful coexistence among people and a peaceful transition of power from one government to the other. Succession dispute related conflicts that are very rampant in Africa may thus be easily eliminated.

(iii) Protection of Fundamental Human rights

African leaders should also promote, protect and guarantee the fundamental human rights of their citizens. In particular, the fundamental rights of freedom of speech, association and religion should be guaranteed. People should be free to assess and criticize the performance of government without fear of persecution. Opposition must be tolerated while the fourth realm of government, the press, must not be censored. In this wise governments would

always be kept on her toes to provide qualitative and sincere leadership in their countries.

(b) Eradication of Poverty

Without much controversy, one may boldly declare that poverty is the root of all evils in Africa. A poor man, who has been economically humiliated and financially traumatized may not be said to be in his right senses. Hence, it may be apt to observe that a hungry man is a mad man. He can steal, kill, maim and destroy. Poverty can demean a man and affect his psychology negatively. Hence a major policy instrument for peace and stability in Africa that is riddled with wars and conflicts is the eradication or at worst, a reduction of the monster of poverty. This can be achieved in a number of ways as suggested below:

(i) Equal access to qualitative education

Governments in Africa should give their citizens equal access to qualitative education. The importance of education to the socio- economic development of a nation has been well articulated in the Millennium Development Goal. Education, no doubt, is a lever to human and societal development. Apart from imparting skill and knowledge in the citizens, it will also eliminate ignorance. Education will also empower citizens for employment in the future. It makes labour more mobile across the globe. Opportunities for survival are very much available to the educated people.

(ii) Provision of gainful employment for the youths

Governments in Africa should also strive to provide gainful employment for all their citizens especially the youths. Industries and factories should be established to absorb the teeming graduates of higher institutions of learning in African countries. Government should also encourage farming through mechanized agriculture. Modern farm implements and technology should be provided for farmers at cheap prices. Apart from eradicating the problem of hunger, this will no doubt equally enhance the economic empowerment of youths and eradicate idleness.

(iii) Adequate remuneration of civil servants

Government workers should be adequately remunerated while promotion should also be based on competence and performance. Their salaries should be enough to sustain their families. This will go a long way at reducing the

incidence of misappropriation and embezzlement of public fund that have always starved African governments the much needed fund for development.

Conclusion

Since independence in the late 20th century, African countries have been betting with the problem of civil wars and inter- state conflicts. This has taken its toll on Africa's development in a number of ways especially in death of her illustrious sons and daughters and alienation of her peoples which in turn has been hindering the process of integration and cohesion in Africa. Thugery, looting and arson have become part and parcel of Africa's political culture. This should not be allowed to continue if Africa is to witness sporadic growth and development and compete favourably with other continents of the world. All hands must therefore be on deck to halt this negative development and chart a new course for peace in Africa. This will not only enhance adequate security of life and property in Africa, it will also attract foreign investors to Africa for the adequate exploration of her numerous natural resources for growth and development.

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