Is there an easy explanation for the Continent’s
"Resource Wars"?
By WJ Breytenbach

Rulers, Rebels and Mercantilists

The end of the Cold War in 1989 created the expectation that the end of East-West rivalries, the redemocratisation of many African states and the introduction of economic structural adjustment policies would serve to make the post-1989 conditions on the continent more stable, more affluent and more democratic. However, when the new millennium dawned Africa’s stability was seriously compromised as there were more conflicts and wars than in 1989 when the Cold War came to an end. The end of the Cold War therefore did not enhance stability and conflict reduction in Africa.

Africa’s conflict states are located in two areas: the first an arch from Eritrea on the Red Sea, through Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to Congo Brazzaville and Angola; and the other in West Africa. In West Africa, Sierra Leone became embroiled in a civil war that lasted for a decade, until intervention by United Nations peacekeepers led to the return of peace at the end of 2001. In addition, there is secessionism in the Casamance region of Senegal (driven by militants in Guinea-Bissau) that threatens the stability and the endurance of Senegalese democracy, at a time when religious and sectarian conflicts in a re-democratised Nigeria also threaten to split Nigeria’s territorial integrity apart, let alone to consolidate its fragile democracy.

This article attempts to seek explanations for these contemporary conflicts. Analyses of these wars reveal recurring characteristics. William Reno has identified three such characteristics: they happen in weak states, non-state actors such as rebels are prominent, and the privatisation of interstate relations is relevant. We conceptualise this as a triangle of interrelated forces with three types of role-players: weak-state rulers, rebels and mercantilists who capitalise on the profits of scarce resources. This triangular mindmap can assist in understanding Susan Strange’s question: who benefits? Unless proffered solutions also address this question, all peace plans may remain insufficient. However, this paper is not about solutions, but about a better understanding of the problem.

One of the major problems is to assess whether these conflicts of the 1990s were resource wars, as is often alleged (for example, over diamonds and oil) and whether other factors are relevant too. The question is really whether the economic explanations are sufficient.

In dealing with “spoils politics”, as it is known, Chris Allen highlights the issues of warfare, violence and state collapse in Africa when he summarises five lines of explanations: the “new barbarism” accounts associated with Robert Kaplan; the “economics of war” theories of Jean and Rufin, Keen and Reno; approaches rooted in the nature of African political systems associated with the thinking of Chabal and Daloz; the “globalisation” approaches of Mary Kaldor and Duffield; and finally, the approaches using social and cultural factors as explanations associated with the thinking of Richards, Ellis and Ferme. Such an overview suggests that economic explanations may indeed be necessary but not sufficient.

As the focus of this paper is on finding explanations for these conflicts, the methodology will be to compare these countries economically and politically - taking note of relevant cultural and global issues, so as to establish common characteristics. That may elucidate the question.

In his paper, The role of war economies in the understanding of contemporary conflicts, Sagaren Naidoo concludes that contemporary conflicts can be better understood given the dynamics of war economies (quoting Paul Collier’s study for the World Bank in 2000), but he also refers to both the political and global dimensions as well. On the political issues, Naidoo states that the new armed conflicts are predominantly intra-state and that they are sustained by both political elites and rebel movements without explaining exactly why. This article will focus on the interplay between economics and politics in weak, but resource-rich conflict states. With regard to the global context, Naidoo makes the point that the belligerents, and often the elites as well, have now turned to external support and trade networks. But he also makes another point related to globalisation and that...
is that the small arms industry has become more vibrant since the fall of the Soviet Union because there is a massive surplus of arms today. African wars have become obvious arms markets, and for rulers and rebels alike who can afford them.

But are these wars driven solely by the interrelationship between rulers, rebels and merchants? or do these variables also depend on other factors? This is an important question in light of the fact that not all wars are resource wars – there are also non-economic causes of African wars (religious and identity conflicts come to mind); while not all foreign mining and minerals companies are involved in conflict-generating activities (for example, in Botswana, Namibia, Ghana, or South Africa); and not all rebels, either warlords (who plunder) or insurgents (who want to seize power), are necessarily the main causes of the conflicts, but rather the rulers in undemocratic states who may rely on patronage for wealth and power.

This paper does not revisit the views of Allen or Naidoo, or indeed the World Bank. Instead, it tries to bring fresh insights into the question of why some states have turned out to be more risky than others. This is also not about assessing why peace agreements such as the Lusaka Ceasefire of the war in the DRC failed for so long. This is rather about why conflicts endure in special circumstances. On the basis of that, conclusions will be made.

Poverty and Uneven Access to Resources

The wars in Angola (over resources such as oil and diamonds), the DRC (diamonds, gold and other minerals such as columbite-tantalite, as well as the land rights of the Banyamulenge in Kivu), Sierra Leone (diamonds) and Sudan (oil) are obviously resource wars. However, in Sudan, the recent oil wars were preceded by age-old religious differences between Muslims and non-Muslims.5

In its recent report, The Scorched Earth, Christian Aid tells of companies from China, Malaysia, Canada, Sweden, Austria, the Netherlands, Germany, France and Britain who have interests in oil exploration in Sudan.6 The Sudanese government has gained from these revenues since 1999. Such revenue has led to expensive arms acquisitions which the state forces are using in their war with the Southern rebels – in whose territory oil has been discovered. In this way, a religious war has become a resource war as well.7

The quest for resources is also at the centre of conflicts in Congo Brazzaville (oil), Senegal and Guinea Bissau (food and rice), and in Somalia (food aid).8 What these states have in common is that per capita incomes are low, in some countries less than one dollar per day. The common characteristic is therefore widespread poverty, and uneven access to wealth-creating resources. William Thom and KY Amoako have noted that poverty is at the root of many African conflicts.9 This may explain why the majority of contemporary wars are more internal than international and why resource wars have become a feature of many poor states. It will be indicated that a particularly vulnerable poor state is the undemocratic regime, perhaps because of the pervasive nature of either exclusion or of patronage, or both, in such countries.

Moreover, Phil Williams and Doug Brooks make the telling point that formal economies in poor states offer limited opportunities for wealth-making, therefore shifts occur away from the legal and formal to the illicit and informal sectors, where prospects for money-making are much better.10 Table 1, which describes per capita incomes and human development, indicates that the 14 states primarily involved in the twelve conflicts under discussion (excluding the involvement of external parties) have at least two significant economic conditions in common: (a) they are poor nations with declining per capita incomes; and (b) they are also low-ranking in terms of HDI. All, with the exception of Congo Brazzaville (which is ranked medium), are in fact ranked as low HDI countries. Most of the countries have moved down the HDI rankings over the years, with some fluctuations. The HDI therefore reveals not only poverty, but stagnation as well. And there is evidence that societal conflicts are also fanned by an uneven distribution of incomes.11

The table also suggests that, while states with small or large populations are equally prone to poverty, those countries with a large population (e.g. DRC, Ethiopia and Nigeria) are more likely to suffer from lower per capita incomes. The average per capita income of these countries of US$352 in 1989 dropped to an average of only US$275 in 1998 — well below the cut-off line of one dollar per day. In that year, the range was between $100 for Ethiopia, $110 for the DRC and $120 for Somalia at the lower end, and $390 for Sudan, $530 for Senegal and $690 for Congo Brazzaville at the higher end of the spectrum. The general conclusion is therefore that conditions are deteriorating.

An important variation of the "war of economics" theme, is the discourse about food aid and water. Solomon and Turton’s publication makes an important contribution to the debate about water wars and asks the question as to whether this is in fact an enduring myth or an impending reality. In this publication, Anthony Turton and Peter Ashton conclude that "water wars" are

**Table 1: Population and Per Capita Incomes and Human Development Rankings during the 1990s**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Population (Millions)</th>
<th>Per Capita Income (US $)</th>
<th>HDI Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angola</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burundi</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congo Brazzaville</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>930</td>
<td>670</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRC</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eritrea</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guinea-Bissau</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria</td>
<td>123.3</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rwanda</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>310</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senegal</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sierra Leone</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somalia</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>29.5</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uganda</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>320</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>352</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**BULLET BOX BLUES** There is an explicit link between conflict, poverty and the absence of democracy in Africa.
unlikely to ever occur in Southern Africa. Yet the competition for control over a scarce and unequally distributed commodity such as water is a potentially explosive issue in Africa. In the past there has been tension between Egypt and Sudan and between Sudan and Ethiopia over the waters of the Nile. There has also always been low-intensity conflict between the pastoral and agricultural communities at the northern fringes of the West African tropical forests. In the Lake Chad area this conflict might on occasion have turned ugly, but sensibilities prevailed and four states now have legal access to the fresh water and fisheries of this lake. In the East African Rift Valley, similar tensions over access to and the use of fresh water prevail.

In Southern Africa, the desire to have access to the Zambezi River was a major motivation for imperial Germany to create the Caprivi Strip, as an extension of north-eastern Namibia, wedging in between Angola and Zambia in the north, and Botswana in the south. At the eastern point, the Chobe River that runs mainly through Botswana flows into the Zambezi River. Recently, there was almost a military confrontation between two of Southern Africa’s multi-party democracies - Botswana and Namibia - over the control over an island (important for cattle grazing) situated in the Chobe River on this boundary. An international judgement prevented the tensions from escalating further.

What are the reasons for the absence of water wars, especially in light of the fact that water is one of the greatest contributors to human security? Is it because water is not a high value commodity, or is Kadar Asmal (former South African Minister of Water Affairs) correct when he, as chair of the World Commission on Dams, said that water is a catalyst for peace, and will not be the cause of war? The answers, so far, are inconclusive.

The debate about food aid as an unequally distributed, scarce and politically-elevant instrument of power and patronage is clearer. The famine and hunger in Africa’s drought-ridden areas such as in Sudan, Kenya, Ethiopia and Somalia have caused much hardship and food insecurity, but to date not a “food war” anywhere in Africa. Quite often there is conflict, but that is generally over the distribution of charity-supplied food aid, such as in Somalia where warlords recruit armies on a clan basis and then become the “food lords” when food is stolen and distributed for profits or for patronage. In the East African Rift Valley, similar tensions over access to and the use of fresh water prevail.

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The above analysis of current conflicts suggest that the struggle for access to and control over scarce resources is a necessary explanation for these conflicts, but it is not sufficient. Another important dimension is the polarisation that takes place. This polarisation means that war is related to wealth accumulation in poor countries, hence the apt description of these conditions as “spoil politics”. Politically, this translates into a contest for power and wealth between rulers and rebels (often the included and the excluded), with mercantilists siding with either or both.

Rulers and Rebels in Weak Non-Democratic States

It is revealing that in only three of the 14 states in the table are there multi-party systems with functioning parliaments, namely Nigeria, Ethiopia and Senegal. The rest are non-democracies - that is, there is an absence of participatory and freely elected institutions, which is a very significant correlation. This could lead to the conclusion that contested states are mainly poor but also non-democratically contested states. This indicates a strong link between conflict, poverty and the absence of democracy. Williams and Brooks make the explicit link.

One particular feature of this absence of democracy is the exclusion of citizens from meaningful public participation, let alone free parliamentary contestation. For instance, René Lemarchand argues that the epicentre of the crisis in the Great
Lakes region is Rwanda, and that the basis of that is the politics of exclusion relating to the Tutsi/Hutu relationships in that part of the world. Allen also reminds us that such states (read: political elites) often initiate violence - they either recruit militia, or create monopolies in the world of commodity extraction, or grant exclusive export contracts, or set up their own national defence forces as military-industrial enterprises, or even invite foreign armies to assist them fighting their own rebels at home.

Examples of militia in the region include the Interahamwe and Mai-Mai who are recruited from former armed forces such as Hutu-based groups fighting the Tutsi-based regimes in Rwanda and Burundi. They became instrumental in helping former DRC president Laurent Kabila in his war against the Rwandan-Ugandan coalition. Examples of monopolies linked to ruling elites are Sonangol (the Angolan oil corporation) and Ascorp (the Angolan diamond selling corporation). These corporations channel huge amounts of money to MPLA elites. In the case of the DRC, an Israeli firm was contracted by the government to export its diamonds to world markets during 2000-2001.

Zimbabwe, in turn, provides an example of the National Defence Force venturing into mining: it has joined forces with the Minerals and Mining Corporation and the Mining...
The Zimbabwean army is simultaneously acting like a multinational corporation undertaking foreign investment, and like a private military company offering protection in exchange for rewards.

Mercantilists in African Conflicts

The analyses above reveal that the end of the Cold War indeed brought to an end the East-West rivalry in Africa and democratised African politics, but because of liberalisation and the outsourcing of state functions, state security has often been externalised, thus impairing the workings of state security and the criminal justice system.29

The 1998 World Investment Report found that the major reason for foreign companies to invest directly in Africa is "resource-seeking."30 This report mentions the significance of oil and gas reserves, diamonds and gold, while other important reserves include platinum, palladium, cobalt, copper, chrome, titanium and dioxide.31 But investors hardly make a distinction between democracies and non-democracies. At a time, for example, when neither Angola nor Nigeria were democracies, they were leading recipients of foreign investments due to their oil reserves.

A newly discovered metal in Africa is columbite-tantalum, which is used in high-technology and cellular telephone manufacturing. Its value has increased many hundreds of times, while it has co-incidentally been found in some of Africa's poorest countries such as the DRC, Burundi and Rwanda.32 The sites in the DRC are mainly in Kivu, where rebels and their Rwandan backers have been mining coltan, as it is known, since 1999.33 A UN Expert Panel Report published in April 2001 referred to this as the illegal exploitation of the Congo's resources, and blamed Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda.34 It names five key minerals in this conflict: coltan, diamonds, gold, cobalt and copper. Rebels and mercantilists are the major beneficiaries in this regard.

Unlike the case in Sudan where foreign companies exploit the oil reserves, the war in the DRC is not sustained by external commercial enterprises physically present in the country. Here, it is local exploitation (through Sonangol and Ascorp) that feeds into lucrative foreign trading networks, such as the Israeli firm, International Diamond Industries. This raises the issue of one particular form of commercial intervention in Africa: the private military company (PMC). This is an unfinished debate as its causes may either be the weak state that outsources security functions, or a new kind of mercantilism spawned by globalisation, in the wake of the end of the Cold War.

The end of the Cold War after 1989 brought with it an emphasis on arms control and disarmament in the West and the former East Bloc, leading to force reductions and demobilisation.35 Suddenly, former military professionals were available for employment in the private sectors of developed countries, quite often as security advisors and as private military companies where foreign direct investors from the West sometimes needed protection for their investments against warlords or militias fighting for or against the rebels.36

US and British companies dominate this market, although South African companies are also active. This has led to a trend of collusion between security companies, multinational corporations involved in mainly mineral exploitation and the ruling state elites, whose interests might be served by outsourcing security functions.37

One unintended consequence of the collusion of such interests is the rather bizarre example of foreign commercial interests fighting one another in the same country, as when the RUF rebels and dissident soldiers in Sierra Leone were supported by a Ukrainian military company and the government forces and their traditional allies, the Kamajors, were supported by another company, first Executive Outcomes (a South African private military company), then by British Sandline. This complex web became the combatants in this country, but they were also foreign mercantilists.

Doug Brooks makes a useful distinction between non-lethal service providers, private security companies and private military companies (PMCs).38 For us the question is what role they play in Africa's resource wars: are they stabilising or destabilising the states where they do business?
Those who take a positive view include Doug Brooks. He argues that by using private armies the slaughter of Africans can be ended, on the basis that African militaries do not have the capability to end African wars. Peter Cullen, too, argues that PMCs are different from mercenaries and that their major value is efficiency while the major problem is accountability. If they are accountable to home state as well as host state laws and regulations, then PMCs are no different from any other company doing business in foreign lands. Herb Howe echoes the same sentiments. Although William Thom does not defend PMCs, he makes the point that by Western standards, today's African armies are lightly armed, poorly equipped and badly trained, and thus dependent on external aid where outsourcing and privatisation make sense, as these trends tend to improve efficiency in weak states.

However, other authors such as Comfort Ero, Xavier Renou, Bernedette Muthien and Ian Taylor, and Emmanuel Aning are more critical. They argue that PMCs lack transparency, may be legal only in a vague sense, and are usually operating in rogue states. Moreover, because they work for money and not morality, their activities may prolong rather than end resource wars. Examples cited include Angola and Sierra Leone, where wars actually resumed after PMCs withdrew, challenging the view that PMCs really have the capacity to end wars in Africa. However, Thirion notes that the South African PMC Executive Outcome altered the course of war in Sierra Leone and forced the rebels to the negotiating table, and suggests that to blame PMCs for the lack of lasting peace in Sierra Leone and Angola, is to underestimate the complexities there.

The jury is still out on these matters. A tentative conclusion is that proper regulation is required, not only in the host state, but also in the home state, and by the United Nations and regional security organisations. In this, the UN should take the lead in formulating guidelines for the universal regulation of PMCs and for regional organisations to follow. The Ottawa Treaty banning anti-personnel landmines may be a useful example to follow. Another example of home state accountability is the South African Regulation of Foreign Military Assistance Act of 1998 that defines and bans mercenary activity, but creates legal space for security and military service providers to do precisely that but only after authorisation by the National Conventional Arms Control Committee.

Without any regulation, this problem may become a "free for all" with uncontrollable mercenaries plundering Africa. If there is an "FDI regime" today (within the rules of the World Bank), there might just as well be a "PMC regime" (within the rules of the UN Security Council) tomorrow. The point is that anything that regulates...
illicit trade, such as the attempted diamond certification schemes and the UN’s proposed embargo from diamonds from rebel-controlled areas in Sierra Leone, and that regulates “mercenaries” and the spoils attached to it, is better than nothing.

Conclusion

Economics, politics and globalisation may have conspired to create the deadly triangle of diamond and other resource wars in Africa. But more specifically, Chris Allen finds there is a thread that runs through all these threats to security and state survival in Africa: spoils politics. He places this in the context of violence associated with the process of state collapse.

For him, this has degenerated into “spoils politics” where violence and reward become mutually reinforcing. It is almost inevitable that this would be the case in poor societies where valuable resources are scarce and where the weak state hardly functions, let alone where democracy thrives. To blame globalisation for all ills in Africa as is fashionable in some circles is therefore not necessarily fair or informed.

This is a multi-faceted problem underlined by the fact that there are many answers to the question of “who benefits”. It is in this context that recent initiatives that set out to regulate the trade in illicit diamonds are steps in the right direction. But unless such processes involve all the profit-makers, including rulers, rebels and mercenaries, they will remain insufficient. This is an important dimension that should not be forgotten. It is the combination of poverty and scarce resources that brought them all together.

Moreover, democracies cannot work where warlords are rampant. This is why “solutions”, not based on a better understanding of the nature of Africa’s conflicts, will not produce peace.

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Notes & references

17 Williams and Brooks 1999, pp 82-84.
26 Ibid.
28 Williams and Brooks 1999, p 87.
31 Cilliers 1999, p 5.
36 Ibid.
41 Thom 2000, p 8.
44 Thirion 2000, p 35.
46 Allen 1999.