A CONTINENT IN NEED OF PEACE

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About three decades after Africa emerged from colonialism amidst hopes of peace and future greatness, many countries have not yet embarked on any serious and sustainable economic development. Conflicts have made the realization of this dream nearly impossible. Today no other continent is involved in as many conflicts as Africa. Issues of self-determination of various nationalities, racism, ethnicity, religious intolerance and border claims have continued to divert resources and energy from any positive development. Many regimes have failed miserably to address these issues, and have instead resorted to crude ways of conflict containment. Civil wars are a result of crude, unaccommodating approaches to grievances. The overall effect is the reduction of opportunities and resources available for institution-building and development.

As Pope John-Paul II has indicated, peace is a condition sine qua non for development. In a war situation, development usually takes a backseat. The recent call by President Mengistu of Ethiopia to suspend all development programs in order to release more resources for the war effort against rebels is an example of this. As Africans turn guns against each other, limited resources are diverted from where they are needed most. Consequently, millions of people face a bleak future of famine, undernourishment, child mortality, diseases and epidemics. This is what is happening in Angola, Ethiopia, Mozambique and Sudan.

Africa's conflict spots are flung far and wide across the continent. In the Horn of Africa, we have Africa's longest, most passionate and intricate conflicts. The effects of these conflicts spill over to the neighbouring countries of Djibouti, Kenya and Uganda. In addition, Kenya has been involved in cross-border hostilities with Somalia over the issue of Kenyan Somalis. Somalis in Kenya continue to be viewed with suspicion as evidenced by the recent Kenyan government directive to screen people of Somali origin. Uganda, on the other hand, has its own internal conflicts to contend with. The overall effect of conflicts in the Horn, and in Uganda is an exchange of refugees and displaced persons within the region. Recent figures show that there are 660,000 Ethiopian refugees in Sudan; 350,000 Sudanese in Ethiopia; 365,000 Ethiopians in Somalia; and 350,000 Somalis in Ethiopia. There are a further 2,000 Ugandans in Sudan, 5,000 Sudanese in Uganda, 5,600 and 2,200 Ugandans and Ethiopians respectively in Kenya, and 2,000 and 30,000 Ethiopians and Somalis respectively in Djibouti. This accounts for 1.76 million people fleeing from upheavals in the impoverished Horn of Africa. These refugees are a resource drain to their countries of origin, and, more often than not, an economic burden to the host countries.

In southern Africa, the Republic of South Africa is largely to blame for the conflicts in the region. South Africa's apartheid policy, both at home and in Namibia, has been a major source of strife. This, combined with her destabilization policy against frontline states, has caused an influx of refugees and displaced persons similar to that in the Horn of Africa. Elsewhere, ethnic rivalries within Burundi and between Mauritania and Senegal have led to massacres and further displacement of people. Western Sahara is another conflict area. So was Chad until recently when, fortunately, its civil war was concluded. Africa needs to address the causes of these conflicts and move swiftly to resolve them.

Broadly, there are four major factors contributing to conflicts in Africa. First, there are the unjust economic, political and social systems that oppress and marginalize the majority of the people. While social and economic maladjustments remain the basic causes of war, social and economic welfare are a precondition for peace. Unjust structures which relate to the rights of citizens and control of resources remain at the heart of most conflicts in Africa. (The one existing in South Africa is merely an extreme case).

Second, we have the issue of rights of individual ethnic groups and nationalities. Professor Kwesi Prah rightly argues that in most African countries there exists a plethora of nationalities and sub-nationalities within each state's boundaries, which has been "a source of varying degrees of conflict and tension. These conflicts and tensions appear most acute when social-economic cleavages tend to parallel ethnic differentiation and rivalries". While colonial boundaries put together people from diverse cultures and ethnic backgrounds, others groups were split across two or more states. The adoption by independent Africa of these boundaries, was the expression of a wish not to arouse ethnic nationality which would be detrimental to the much needed national unity. While it is unlikely that new boundaries would have brought peace, we note that the existing ones have been the cause of conflict between Somalia and Kenya, a bitter war between Somalia and Ethiopia, and the current ethnic clashes, and subsequent displacement of people, between Mauritania and Senegal.

The third major factor causing conflict is the lack of a culture of dialogue. In a country inhabited by people of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, difference in opinion should be a matter of course. But instead of discussion or at least persuasion, any dissent voiced is met with coercion and repression. Repressive and undemocratic regimes retain an iron grip on the populace. The result is a people consumed by fear and hate, but checked only by survival instinct, knowing that opposition could cost them dearly, sometimes their lives. Such a people become a threat to the very peace their repression is aimed at preserving. For repression and coercion can check open expression of conflict, but only for a while. Here, one cannot help calling to mind two Gikuyu proverbs which most leaders in their selective wisdom...
choose to ignore. The one says that “he who is defeated through reason does not come back” and the other “he who is overcome by a club comes back” (when he has obtained a better club!). The meaning of these two proverbs is that the use of physical force can never bring a lasting peace. Rather we should opt for institutional arrangements that provide for the use of dialogue, reasoning, and tolerance for the other point of view.

But perhaps the major cause of conflicts is external manipulation. Africa has for a long time been used as an East-West chessboard and has been left the worst for it. In their competition for ideological and political influence, superpowers have not hesitated to support oppressive governments as long as they emerge one ally better than their rival. John Prendergast suggests that such superpower support for unjust regimes may be guided by myths. For example, the US has at times provided resources which helped to sustain conflicts instead of helping the suffering masses. In this light, the $1 million a day spent on war by the Sudan is at a level which clearly could not be sustained with foreign exchange earned from Sudan’s exports. Writes John Prendergast:

> The US, Middle Eastern and European governments have provided the means to continue the conflict well past the stage where a self-supporting government would have had to negotiate solutions or crumble under the weight of broad-based opposition.

At times foreign powers have not only fuelled conflict in Africa, but have also used them to their advantage. This may be illustrated by recalling briefly the Sudanese civil war before the 1972 Addis Ababa pact. The Soviets were the first to arrive with help for President Numeiri. At around the same time, the Israelis, the American surrogates, were involved in the Sinai feud with Egypt, then a Soviet ally. The Israelis came in with help for Southern Sudan. Being Soviet allies, the Egyptians were bound to avail their military facilities to the Soviets in the latter's endeavour to help Numeiri. By arming Southern Sudan, the Israelis saw this as a change to cripple Egypt in the Sinai war, since Egypt would now have to keep a bipartite alert. The Egypt-Israel war was being fought in the Sudan!

As the 1980s come to a close the world has witnessed a desire for peace shown by various groups which have been embroiled in conflict. We optimistically interpret these signs to mean that the world is realizing the futility of rivalry and war and opting for a more peaceful co-existence. The thaw in the East-West rivalry has ushered in a new era of dialogue between the United States and the Soviet Union. The result is not only the reduction of the nuclear threat, but also a chance to turn at least a few swords into ploughshares. The Soviet Union has literally done this by converting thousands of its tankers into cultivators. Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan has shown the former's willingness to recant previous wrongs, while the momentous changes and democratization process sweeping Eastern Europe are indicators of the desire for a new world order. The US has yet to reciprocate these changes in Eastern Europe by demonstrating in its policy the need to pursue peace in its spheres of influence.

But perhaps the most significant indicators of the desire for peace have taken place in Africa. Negotiations are going on between certain rebel movements and various governments: between the Angolan government and UNITA, between the Ethiopian government and the EPLF and TPLF, between the government of Mozambique and the MNR (Renamo), and between the Sudanese government and the SPLA/M. The tripartite treaty between Angola, Cuba and South Africa/US, apart from having paved the way for Namibian elections and its imminent independence, has brought hopes of peace and a new order to southern Africa. More recently, South African president de Klerk has shown a willingness to implement reforms at home. Even more important is his willingness to enter into dialogue with the representatives of the ANC, and in particular with Nelson Mandela.

As we watch with cautious optimism for the outcome of the current peace endeavours, we should also recognize that much as we blame the current conflicts on external interference, their settlement will largely depend on the combatants themselves. No amount of goodwill from outsiders will help if the parties are not ready for peace. Ten meetings called between the Ethiopian government and the EPLF between 1982 and 1985 failed, and we can only hope that in 1989 the parties have learned lessons in favor of peace. The same cannot be said of the talks between the Sudanese government and the SPLA/M that broke up recently when the parties hurried home to resume animosities against each other. A statement issued by former US President Jimmy Carter who mediated the talks said that neither of the parties came to Nairobi ready to take the difficult steps necessary for peace. “Both parties, at the end, seemed ready to emphasize their differences, postpone further action, and let the war continue.”

The stance adopted by the two parties to the Sudanese conflict is what Professor Hizkias Assefa would call 'positional approach' to negotiations. In the positional approach, parties to the conflict “marshall all kinds of evidence, history, and sophisticated argumentation to back their positions and to show why any other position would be wrong. Such parties are so blinded by the emotions associated with their positions that they do not stop to scrutinize the needs and interests that prompt such positions. If parties engulfed in conflict looked beyond their positions to their needs and interests, they would realize that they aspire toward the same goals. Professor Assefa, an Ethiopian himself and a specialist in conflict resolution, says that the needs of the people in the Ethio-Eritrean conflict boil down to peace for economic, cultural and political development. This may seem like an analyst's way of simplifying things for academic purposes, but let us concede that peace is within grasp if parties to a conflict look beyond their entrenched positions to their needs and interests.

The thaw in the East-West rivalry is such a welcome relief. On the face of it the superpowers will no longer fuel conflicts on the continent, and more funds might be available for development. But the less optimistic, on the other hand, have not overlooked the possibility that the excitement generated by the changes taking place in Eastern Europe might divert the West's attention from Africa's
problems. The impending creation of a European common market by 1992 and the opportunities being opened up by political changes in Eastern Europe may not work out in favour of Africa. This should go to press the urgency with which Africa itself needs to solve her conflicts and consolidate her resources for development. A peaceful and united Africa is more likely to weather the coming crisis. Even then one cannot help feeling that the detente in the US-Soviet relations will have relatively minimal impact on third world conflicts. Already there are signs that medium powers (Egypt, Libya, Israel, South Africa, etc.) might too readily want to step in the superpowers’ shoes. This was a concern raised recently by Professor Peter Anyang’Nyong’o. The superpowers may be making only a tactical withdrawal while they relegate their dark missions to their surrogates. Africa should therefore watch out for moves made by these medium powers.

All should recognize that the settlement of conflicts in Africa, both current and potential, will depend on how effectively the major causes of conflict are addressed with a view to resolving them once and for all. This is a task that demands the establishment of institutions that will engage in research in peace issues and specialize in peace-making. Peace and conflict studies should be introduced in Africa’s institutions of learning. Once Africa has her experts in conflict resolution, these can be utilized within the framework of OAU’s Council on Arbitration, Mediation and Conciliation, provided the inhibitive clause on ‘internal affairs’ is amended or done away with. Church bodies and other nongovernmental organizations could also run peace awareness campaigns within their countries. Such campaign should be co-ordinated throughout the continent. Such a campaign has been started in Kenya under the banner “People for Peace in Africa” and has featured lectures by academicians and church leaders.

This is a campaign that should be encouraged and supported elsewhere so as to reach more people. But perhaps the single most effective remedial measure would be overall democratization of society in Africa to allow free dialogue, tolerance and accommodation of alternative views. These are the areas in which Africa needs help. Rather than help African countries in the maintenance of a shaky order, the superpowers and the emerging medium powers should assist not only in solving the existing conflicts, but also in building capability for restraint, prevention, management and resolution of conflicts.

Africa’s need for peace is very real and urgent. She needs peace before she can embark on any sustainable development programmes. Development will remain elusive if Africa continues to spend on civil war and defence well above her economic ability. And peace cannot come if the people involved in the current negotiations are not people of special commitment and conviction, people who eschew the pain and mistakes of the past and hold a vision for a peaceful future.

References

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