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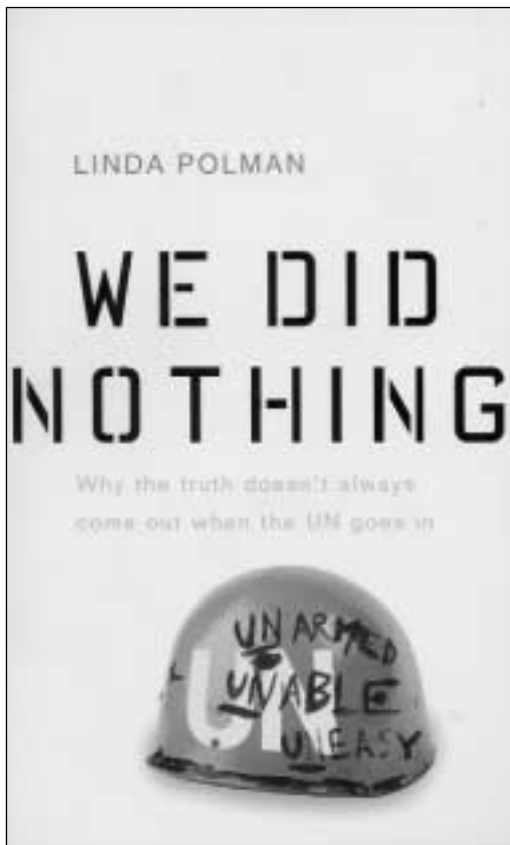
BOOK REVIEWS

WE DID NOTHING
*Why the truth doesn't always come out
when the UN goes in*

LINDA POLMAN

Viking, 2003.

234 pages



Recently, the UN Security Council has struggled to agree to resolutions, particularly the 'second resolution' on the crisis in Iraq. The UN has been criticised for this. Linda Polman's book, "We did nothing" suggests that the opposite may also be dangerous. Readily agreeing to numerous resolutions can result in a fiasco. Polman poses the question: Should the UN finally learn to say No?

Most of the pieces are written between 1994 and 1996. This book was originally pub-

lished in Dutch and the recent English translation has given it a wider audience. Before taking off for the disaster zones, Polman takes the reader behind the scenes at the UN. The UN, and particularly the Security Council, is presented as a chamber for endless secretive negotiations by hard-nosed diplomats with little real connection to the actual humanitarian crises. To an extent this is probably true. As Polman says, "Resolutions are like hotdogs". If we knew what went into them, we wouldn't want to eat them. Sadly, when a crisis occurs, hotdogs (resolutions) are the best the UN has come up with so far.

Somalia, Haiti and Rwanda are the scene for the main chapters. The UN missions in these areas in 1994/1995 are famously unsuccessful and Polman, who visited each of them, has the dirt on all of them. As a journalist, Polman is an experienced, and perhaps cynical, observer. She meets the troops, chats to the guerrillas and mingles with refugees. The chapters are a combination of personal travel notes, news stories and brief descriptions of the mission's progress.

The chapter on Somalia explores the thankless tasks that the UN blue helmets are meant to carry out. Despatched to some of the most violent places in the world, blue helmets are expected to work miracles with few resources and while staying within strict guidelines. Polman argues that the UN cannot say No when member states say Yes. When member states agree to an intervention, it is the job of the UN to scrape the money and skills together. The description of events and characters in Somalia fills in the details of the scene usually simply described in news reports as 'chaos'. Police Commissioners are given impossible orders; children play with grenades; and only the top half of uniforms arrive. A million things go wrong and they all cost money. The scenes are farcical and would be funny if they weren't also sad.

The account of the US troops in Haiti (September 1994) might confirm most peo-

ple's worst fears about them: massive amounts of equipment and very little local knowledge. But Polman's descriptions of her interaction with the individual soldiers show where her sympathies lie. Sent off to take part in Operation Restore Hope in Haiti by the diplomats in New York, the friendly GI's are just doing their jobs it seems. The same crowd of reporters and NGO officers has moved from Somalia to Haiti and have some catching up to do while the citizens of Part-au-Prince watch in amazement.

News reports are used to set the scene in Rwanda. The terse accounts of Belgian troop withdrawal, UN failure, French invasion and fleeing refugees quickly give an idea of the scale of death and confusion. Polman's trip to see the gorillas in the Ruwenzori mountains brings her into contact with the Rwandan Hutu refugees in Goma. The destruction of the forest mirrors the genocide of human communities. Forests are reduced to bushes, villages becoming abandoned clearings.

The account of ZamBat (UN peacekeepers from Zambia) is enlightening and is a good example of a situation where all the normal rules of humanitarian intervention make no sense at all. Eighty ZamBat soldiers set up camp in a sea of Hutu refugees who are policed by Tutsi government soldiers. The Zambians are able to do very little but watch as a massacre is carried out. This image, of well-intentioned UN soldiers overwhelmed by the scale of violence, is the defining image of the book. Polman is clear that the individual members of the Security Council need to bear this in mind when agreeing to send troops in to save the day.

BEYOND THE MIRACLE

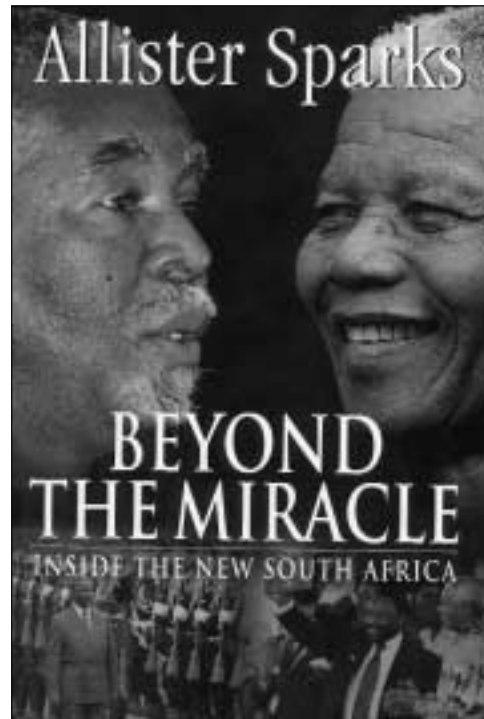
Inside the New South Africa

ALLISTER SPARKS

Johathan Ball Publishers, 2003

370 pages

Allister Sparks is a veteran commentator on SA and this is the third book in his series on South Africa's history as he sees it. As the cover makes clear, the book tells us about



what has happened since Mr Mandela's miracle under the new leader, President Mbeki.

For the most part, the book is written in an easy style where the author occasionally intervenes to explain his own role in events and his personal opinions rather than the consensus view. The profiles of leaders and ordinary citizens trying to renew a department or make a living convey the sense that the changes in SA are brought about by individual efforts, not faceless committees.

The economic data and other statistics are carefully used to show the scale of the problems and the value of the achievements. Just about every pertinent part of life in SA has caught Sparks' attention: rural communities, government departments, labour meetings, urban braais, public ceremonies and church services. The broad range helps keep the view of South Africa in perspective but will probably bewilder those not already familiar with South Africa. This is not a bad thing: South African's, as Spark's points out, desperately need to learn more about themselves.

Beginning with the moment of Mr Mandela's inauguration, Sparks points out the successes and how easily they are taken for granted. But nine years after the beginning of

the new SA, the honeymoon is over and much remains to be done. Sparks wastes no time explaining all the shortcomings without seeming overly pessimistic or gloomy.

Three revolutions are identified: the first is the transformation toward a non-racial society, the second is the construction of a competitive, international economy, and the third is the move away from agriculture and mining to an export economy. All clearly explained, these different revolutions give a good indication of the priorities that compete for attention in South Africa.

Sparks does not limit himself to the post 1994 period and in the chapter entitled "Portraits of Change" gently reminds us of how it used to be. The events described in Boksburg and Brakpan in the 1990s are excellent examples of how much things have changed and of how critical it is that positive change continues.

Subsequent chapters on press freedom and the new public broadcaster offer some warnings and personal insights. As an insider, Sparks gives an exciting account of the battles for power behind the scenes. Sparks warns that mistakes have been made in setting up the SABC but reminds us that there are no easy answers.

Other intriguing facets of SA history that Sparks touches on are Afrikaner nationalism and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Though consigned by many to history, both of these keep cropping up in South Africa often enough for them remain current news. Once again we have to go back to the 1950s and 1960s to understand the more recent events. Even though little of this information is new, it cannot be skipped over by those wanting to 'move on'. Many South Africans have waited decades for these stories to be told and Sparks takes up the challenge.

Amidst all the social change, many are preoccupied with the economic benefits of the new era. Without using complex jargon, Sparks outlines how the social goals of the Freedom Charter are being pursued using capitalist means. The tension between the two is unavoidable and frequently causes a ruckus, or worse.

The last seven chapters focus largely on the work of President Mbeki and the tone becomes more imperative. Mr Mbeki, while working in the background under President

Mandela, now takes centre stage as Sparks writes about AIDS in SA, poverty in the SADC region and the new state of parliament and opposition after Mr Mandela's departure. Sparks is quick to point out the opportunities missed. History is full of those and SA has more than its fair share. Sparks also writes about the urgent need for the new leaders to make up for lost time. Education, health and economics are all presented as hanging in the balance, waiting for the next setback. A little too gloomy perhaps.

At the end, Sparks turns to international examples for hope. Many are in worse shape than South Africa (Brazil and Argentina) and international trends toward fair global trade hold promise for SA. Writing that educates and informs, such as this volume, may help infuse SA with new energy to complete the three revolutions.

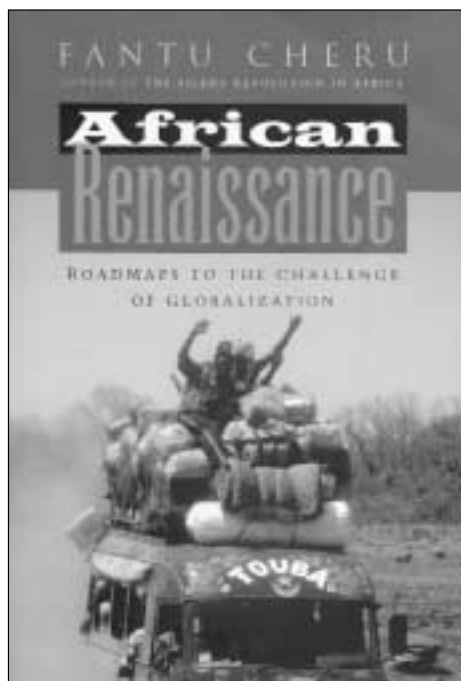
AFRICAN RENAISSANCE

*Roadmaps to the challenge
of globalization*

FANTU CHERU

Zed Books/David Philips, 2003

253 pages



Dr Cheru's book is part of a growing body of African writing that accepts globalization as an "irreversible process" and proposes ways that Africa can be a positive part of the process. This is quite a change from the debate about whether globalization should be accepted or rejected and shows progress.

Like the renaissance that Cheru envisages, his book is complex and contains many strategies for use at different levels. Its wide scope and careful structure give it the feel of a handbook and perhaps the reference to roadmaps in the subtitle is confirmation that this was intended. Certainly, the text is very dense and all the routes are described in more than enough detail for the average reader.

The book ends with a "Wake-up call to Fellow Africans" which might just as well be right at the beginning. The roadmaps that Dr Cheru offers are not for tourists. They are long, difficult journeys that offer some hope for the hard-pressed citizens of troubled African states. The author warns that "caring about Africa is an ancestral obligation that we cannot escape from, no matter where we choose to reside." Sadly, many who have the choice, have decided neither to reside in Africa, nor to care about it. As Dr Cheru admits, this volume is partly a response to views in the international media that Africa is hopeless. Presumably he aims to rebut Afro-pessimism in the Western media and appeal to the Diaspora of Africans who have the power to help.

As a resident of Washington, Dr Cheru is well placed to monitor the international view of Africa which can, at times, have greater impact than any number of on-the-ground accounts. The section entitled "A Continent in Despair" confirms the worst views of Afro-pessimists and goes on to explain that the future looks just as bleak as the present. While rightly acknowledging that the international way of doing things makes life tough for African states, Dr Cheru is clear about the final analysis: "the solutions to Africa's economic and political crisis can only be found within Africa". This seems to contradict earlier views but presumably the emphasis is on African leadership, regardless of who the actual followers are.

When forced to choose, the option that Dr Cheru proposes for African states is this: "the

guided embrace of globalization with a commitment to resist". Though it sounds cryptic and contradictory at first, readers have ample time to explore the meaning behind this dictum in the chapters that follow. The restoration of democracy follows the introductory chapter and sets the scene for discussions on education, agriculture and rural development, regional integration, urban rural relations, and post-conflict reconstruction.

Dr Cheru is an advocate of "common sense" approaches to development. He accurately describes President Mbeki's African Renaissance as an "expression of desire, need and hope rather than a plan for the future". The practical steps have yet to be worked out amidst all the talking and debating. Heated debates in corridors and in plenary sessions have yet to bear fruit. The sort of common sense solutions that Dr Cheru proposes are hard to find in the chapter on democracy. Much better is the chapter on reforming education. His proposals include harnessing new technologies, decentralizing decision-making and opening space for community involvement in the education process.

Explaining the decline of African agriculture is a tougher than it sounds. Dr Cheru avoids taking sides in the debate about whether external or internal factors are to blame and is happy to accept that both play their part. The rest of the chapter, though, seems to suggest that internal factors should be the focus of leaders' efforts. None of the answers are easy and many of them rely on education. State intervention is recommended particularly in the areas of research, storage facilities, transport and communication.

Transport resurfaces in the discussion on economic integration. Trade amongst African states is blocked by difficult transport routes. The bad road between Nairobi and Moyale is a case in point. Ethiopia imports toilet paper from Europe rather than pay the high airfreight charges for shipping from Kenya. Once again, common sense is overlooked.

The chapter on conflict describes the dire situation accurately enough but struggles, as others before, to identify a really new approach that hasn't already been tried and found wanting. Perhaps the truth is that principles matter more than methods. The basic principles Dr

Cheru lists include: seeking political solutions, empowering civil society, redressing gender disparities, rehabilitating the economy, improving the quality of governance, and civilian control of the military. Nothing new there, but they bear repeating.

Following the author's own advice, any leader with common sense might ask where to

begin. There's no easy answer to that question since all the facets of development are presented as imperatives: 'ignore this or that aspect and you're in trouble', it seems. But unless a start is made, the renaissance will remain elusive. Democracy is the obvious start despite the tendency to emphasise ending foreign intervention in Africa as a good first step.