

Chapter Eight

Where to From Here?

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While conflict is not the only cause of sub-Saharan Africa's current plight, it surely counts among the principal ones. Considerable academic debate has been conducted about the causes of war on this continent, reflected in the introductory chapter to this volume. In recent years much of this has centred upon the 'greed or grievance' debate, as if the two were necessarily opposites or lent themselves to clear analytical distinction. Chapter One can do little but leave one in doubt that we will ever be able to construct a meta-theory of conflict with a view to creating a model with predictive capacity. It seems an incredible waste of time and talent to pursue so dubious a quest at the expense of analysing conflicts actual, incipient or possible, with a view to genuinely addressing their effects on human security.

It is far more rewarding, surely, to create accessible explanatory narratives of individual conflicts. By concentrating on aspects of two conflict clusters (Central Africa and the Horn), both of which are often overlooked, the authors of the chapters in this volume have done just that, without ever making claims that the ecology of conflict has a superior explanatory value to other issues.

The preceding chapters provide us with a salutary reminder that in virtually every case the cause and course of conflict are incredibly intricate. Journalists covering conflict, even those who have a nuanced view of what they are witnessing, are constrained by space or the sound-bite to present their readers or audience with a highly simplified account of what is happening. Unfortunately it is often this abridged and attenuated narrative that finds itself absorbed into such public debate as then ensues, including that in the realms of international policymakers; hence the importance of the creation of carefully worked explanatory narratives as a guide to action.

A word of caution is in order, however, for in times of conflict, narratives may serve a number of purposes. Each reconstructs and reconfigures the past, present and future along lines favoured by the narrator, who may himself be party to the conflict he describes and analyses, or may be duped into adopting a partial position. If he is a propagandist then his narrative is intended to have an impact on the conflict favourable to the side in whose employ he is by persuading others of the truth of his perspective. Not only does he create a version of events in an effort to persuade neutral observers

of the virtue of his cause; he also provides an interpretation of the conflict that serves as an ideological underpinning for fellow partisans seeking a broader view of their assumed position. This in itself may help provoke or prolong conflict, or embed its legends deeper into the psyche of potential protagonists.

Conflict, especially violent conflict, tends to become increasingly complex with the passage of time. It is a commonplace that battle plans rarely survive unaltered beyond the first contact between opposing forces; almost the same may be said of motives and intentions. It is also worth remembering that during conflict alliances and levels of commitment within the ranks of the antagonists tend to shift. In addition individual fortunes alter, and among the leaders in particular, substitutions may be made either as a result of death or injury or political and other considerations. Thus as conflicts unfold the perspective is always liable to change either gradually, or suddenly, as in a kaleidoscope. All of these considerations make the contemporaneous analysis of conflict extremely difficult, with obvious consequences for the efforts of those engaged in trying to understand, ameliorate, mediate or end the violence.

Of course, though this often goes unremarked, such external parties may also have an interest in embracing a particular interpretation of the conflict they wish to influence. Either they have a desired outcome of their own, proclaimed neutrality and altruistic stance notwithstanding, or they adopt, sometimes unconsciously, an interpretation of the conflict concomitant with their chosen method and level of intervention or neglect.

They may also use their own interpretation of conflict to divert attention from their own involvement, direct or indirect. In particular this sort of behaviour manifests itself in an attempt to focus upon the proximate causes of the conflict to the exclusion of the structural. That non-belligerent states, or their subjects, may have had an influence in creating the conditions for armed conflict elsewhere, or in exacerbating and prolonging conflict once it has started is not an issue that 'benevolent neutrals' want drawn to public attention.

In the broadest level of analysis, and as attested in the various chapters of this book, structural violence is seldom missing as an ingredient of intrastate or interstate conflict.

The current popular debate about African security is informed by a number of unspoken assumptions. From an internal continental perspective the most important of these have to do with the role of the State in providing security to African societies and the relationship of the State to its security apparatus. Many of the normative models we apply in these discussions are drawn from the historical experience of a handful of strong, capable and effective nation states, occupying a dominant position in the global economy. To what extent is this model applicable to what we see in Africa today, especially given the continent's tenuous position on the global margins?

This is an important consideration, because it points to the need to consider Africa's position in the world as an essential part of the debate about the security of its people. A number of well-meaning governments in 'the North' have attempted to focus the security debate more sharply on issues related to violent inter-state conflict, its avoidance and amelioration. Yet this approach defines the compass of security far too narrowly to be useful in the African context or, indeed, across much of the world. In part this narrowness of vision reflects the self-interest of the traditional security sector and its related military-industrial base in reinforcing its claim to the bulk of the state budget allocated to such vital matters. But, by focussing on inter-state competition as the principal source of security threats it also diverts attention from a phenomenon long identified in the social science literature: structural violence.

Structural violence may manifest itself in a multitude of ways and at various levels of interaction. Some of these will be mentioned later, but the level at issue here is that of structural violence at the international level, which consists in the deliberate maintenance of a global system based on fundamental and self-reinforcing inequity. We know that structural violence within countries and communities, even families, may lead eventually to actual, physical, violence, yet too many people persist in the belief that structural violence on a global scale will have no such consequences. In a 'globalising world' this is all the more unsafe as an assumption, and we see a number of conflicts that, while ostensibly local, also have global linkages to essential 'external' actors. Systemic structural violence may not be a sufficient explanation for the incidence of conflict, but it seems, in its manifestation of the increasing polarization of haves and have-nots and the marginalisation of ever larger portions of mankind to be a necessary component of any comprehensive explanation of most conflicts, including those in Africa.

Those who seek to narrow the security debate to areas of traditional concern not only condemn their analysis to an ineffective shallowness, they also, sometimes unintentionally, provide an alibi for the wealthier, more influential countries, allowing them to ignore their role in perpetuating this systemic imbalance. This is a welcome escape for politicians unwilling to take the long view or to persuade their electorates that their present pain is a precondition for global peace, and that equity, and self-interest, will demand that the citizens of the wealthy countries limit their claim to the bulk of the world's resources. For Africa to gain equitable access to the global market, for instance, certainly requires that the dominant players forego some of the extremely unfair advantage they currently enjoy.

This is a point that needs emphasis in any consideration of Africa's security.

Let us move on to other matters. The economic agendas of conflicts in which the business of war merges almost imperceptibly into criminal activity of an organised or opportunistic nature, have gained increasing currency.

The question might be posed as to whether we are looking through the right end of the telescope. Is it that wars are sometimes fought, primarily or partially, for the financial and economic gain they offer? Or is it more accurate to say that war alters the environment in which economies have to continue, at all levels, and that they adjust accordingly. The political economy of disorder offers opportunities not always available in 'normal' circumstances.

A number of the contributions in this book make the point that most of the countries studied have no unambiguous laws or custom that lay down who shall enjoy access to what resources and under what conditions. The authors argue that achieving such a set of accepted and equitable rules would eliminate at least some causes of conflict. Yet it is possible that this misses the point, for although international investors may prefer transparent and predictable legal environments in which to operate, political elites may choose to leave elements of the law deliberately vague, to allow them to promote their individual advantage in circumstances of dispute. In other words, equity is seldom in the short-term advantage of those with power and wealth.

Conflict alters not only the political but also the social landscape, placing a premium upon the ability to use, or threaten the use of, lethal force. Men-at-arms find themselves catapulted up the social ladder, often regardless of their lack of peacetime skills. Is it then surprising that some seek to take advantage of their newly elevated position to secure material wealth against the time when they find themselves once more unemployed or even unemployable? In the absence of a bank account an AK-47 may substitute effectively for a cheque-book. All this, of course points to the increasingly blurred continuum from violent crime to violent conflict; indeed, there are times when the two are virtually indistinguishable and may easily coexist in time and space. It seems unlikely that those who benefit from violence, structural or physical, will easily be persuaded to abandon their positions of dominance.

This is not a counsel of despair, however, for by making plain the causal linkages, proximate and structural, the analyst may make it more difficult for those implicitly involved in harming the human condition to justify their actions, behaviour and position in benign terms. 'Globalisation', as posited by the neo-liberal consensus, may have the potential to substitute the market-state for the political state, and to replace political democracy with market democracy, but the end of history is not yet upon us, and until such time it behoves us to believe that public opinion may still be moved for the good of the commonwealth.

The chapters themselves cover two conflict clusters: Central Africa and the Horn. The study on Rwanda makes clear that although land is not the root cause of the conflict in that country, its role is critical to understanding the dynamics of the situation. Land scarcity and the issue of rural overpopulation have frequently been identified as contributing to the Rwandan conflict; what has tended to be overlooked is the unequal distribution of land, which

is a direct consequence of elites' use of the state apparatus to secure their material interests. The competition for state power, though couched in ethnic terms, which intensifies and perpetuates a situation of constant insecurity, is to a large extent a mask for a zero-sum conflict in which material stakes are at risk. As in so many conflicts in Africa and elsewhere, diasporas play a leading role in funding the antagonists on the one hand and, on the other, constitute a threat to current property rights as refugees awaiting return to their already overburdened homeland. As long as this situation persists and no policy is put in place to address unequal access to land and resources, and no effort is made to diversify the economy away from its virtually absolute dependence on rural outputs, it is difficult to see how the pattern of violence is to be interrupted.

The salience of these issues strongly suggests that the Arusha Accords of the early 1990s offered only a superficial solution to the ongoing conflict and, indeed, with its emphasis on the importance of returning the refugees, played no small role in exacerbating it, to the point that made the genocide of 1994 a possible solution in the eyes of more extreme elements. The consequences of this oversight on the part of an international community eager for 'solutions' bought as cheaply as possible have since been felt throughout much of Central Africa.

Whether, of course, elite groups, especially those currently in power, can be persuaded in a resource poor environment that it is their country's and people's best long term interests to adopt policies based on so abstract a finding is a moot point. Any member of the elite encouraging such an altruistic move would probably find himself quickly displaced by his colleagues. The predominance of short-term considerations in politics, especially in so highly charged an environment as that in Rwanda, militates against so high-minded an approach. Only with a great deal of external incentive does it seem possible that Rwanda's rulers might be persuaded to adopt the long view. Failing that they will in all probability settle for the continuing situation of neither peace nor war for as long as this is sustainable. Unfortunately, the longer this situation prevails, the harder to take the long view, as the accumulation of extremist propaganda and the distortion both of history and analysis make it ever more difficult for any party to the conflict to retrace their steps.

For all the claims of the incumbent regime that they are pursuing a policy of national reconciliation, what limits have they set themselves in terms of the sacrifices they are willing to make on behalf of their supporters, whose loyalty they must continue to nurture?

As in the case of its neighbour, Burundi presents an interesting example of a minority-based elite manipulating ethnic consciousness for its own perceived advantage. Once again there is an agreement, also signed in Arusha, in 2000, that leaves a great deal to be desired. It falls short in terms both of inclusivity and implementability and, perhaps understandably given the essential limitations of formal agreements in so fraught a situation, fails to identify certain key

elements of the structural economic imbalances and opportunities embedded in current power relations. Nevertheless, there is little evidence that those involved in the negotiation of the agreement even considered such structural imbalances, beyond recognising the need for economic diversification away from an almost total dependence upon rural production.

Some of the most significant of these considerations centre upon the need to reform the all-important coffee sector, where profits are guided upwards to local politically dominant elites and further to overseas intermediaries and multinationals in the coffee roasting and retail trade, always at the expense of the peasants whose labour is essential to production. Access to a share of these profits in Burundi is assured only by sharing in the control of the state. This is not to say, of course, that coffee lies at the heart of the conflict, but that the weak bargaining position of coffee producers, especially those in Africa, whose market share is dwindling, makes coffee-dependent countries such as Burundi extremely vulnerable to the vicissitudes of a highly volatile market in which producer prices, though not the price paid by the end consumer, trend ever lower. That this state of affairs impacts adversely upon an environment in which human security, including food security, is constantly at risk, is hardly a matter for contention.

Regional co-operation is another area in which long-term amelioration of population pressure and ecological stress might eventually be achieved. However, extensive and significant co-operation between countries whose security prospects seem virtually intractable at present will be some way off, except in the military and diplomatic fields.

The Burundian case study raises some interesting, though unwelcome, questions about the extent to which a narrowly based elite might have an interest in maintaining a war psychosis among the population at large.

Though the chapter on the Democratic Republic of Congo focusses on the exploitation of colombium tantalite (coltan) in the zones occupied by rebel forces and their sponsors, it reveals a great deal about the international dimensions of what is often assumed to be a local conflict. This third case study on the Central African conflict system demonstrates another of the overlapping circles joining the web of insecurity in the region. The work of the UN Panel of Experts on the Illegal Exploitation of Natural Resources and Other Forms of Wealth in the Democratic Republic of Congo has already cast new light on the activities of foreign armies in the plundering of Congo's resources, sometimes in collusion with the authorities in Kinshasa, sometimes exploiting the absence of state control over large swathes of the national territory. It is also becoming increasingly apparent that this illicit or semi-licit exploitation depends on the co-operation of international traders and traffickers within and beyond Africa. Some of these elements in the high-technology commodity chain would be most irate to find themselves identified and labelled as accomplices or accessories in predation, yet that is what they are.

Nor does their complicity end with the ruthless and wasteful stripping of a country's natural resources. The methods involved in this desperate rush for quick profit while the essential conditions of political disorder prevail involves the use of forced labour in life-threatening conditions. It also requires the violent removal of many of the local population, contributing further to insecurity in an area already under considerable environmental stress. There is also major and probably irreparable damage being done to what was once a rich natural habitat for many rare and endangered animal and plant species.

This forceful insertion of a developmentally neglected area and its communities into global commercial networks is one of the most telling examples of what 'globalisation' may come to mean for most Africans. Whether the profits generated by this predation will prove sufficient incentive for key players to further obstruct the fragile Congolese peace process remains to be seen. Certainly those countries involved in genuinely seeking an end to Congo's protracted agony would be well-advised to realise that many of the protagonists mouthing a commitment to peace and reconciliation are identical to those reaping rich rewards from the existing, controlled, chaos.

The second conflict cluster centres on what is broadly defined as the Horn of Africa. In Sudan we encounter at least three overlapping conflicts: between north and south over the resources of oil, water and agricultural land, and between southern elements competing for the means to sustain a subsistence economy. These conflicts feed into each other as the pressure on the peoples of the south increases in an attempt by the central government to monopolise the region's natural resources. The south's ability to resist such pressure is vitiated by internal disputes which the government seeks to exploit to its military advantage and by the realisation that in modern war famine is an effective weapon. The other side of this particular coin, however, is that rebel leaders may profit inordinately from the subsequent international relief effort. Growing oil revenues also make possible Khartoum's acquisition of more advanced and destructive weaponry and the foreign advisers to use it.

The issue of water, both in the case of the Jonglei Canal project, and in the Ethiopian case study draws attention to the regional complications of the ecology of conflict. Given its historic stance on the primacy of its claims to the use of the Nile, Egypt perforce is constantly engaged in diplomatic efforts to see that its interests are not threatened, regardless of the effect this may have on the development prospects of the other states of the Nile Basin. In particular one notes here Cairo's implacable stand against the granting of independence to the southern Sudan, which blights even the remotest hope of a negotiated end to this thirty-year war.

Finally the Somali case illustrates the saliency of political power backed with armed force as key to access to land and resources in a context in which the state has all but disappeared. The intervention of other regional powers

in defence of their own perceived interests is also noted: Ethiopia determined to prevent the resurrection of a Somali state with a potentially irredentist agenda, and Eritrea willing to consider using Somalia to cause a diversion from developments in Tigray. It might be added in passing that Somalia's economy has received an even worse battering since the United States stopped the operation of certain banks alleged to be associated with Al-Qaeda. This effectively interrupted the flow of migrant remittances to Somalia, a vital link in the domestic economies of many poor Somali families. Such considerations tend, unfortunately, not to weigh too heavily in the decision-making processes of the wealthier nations.

In all six country studies we find the same observation, explicit or implicit: control of the state apparatus provides incumbent elites with access to scarce, and sometimes plentiful, resources, and the ability to decide how and to whom these shall be distributed. In other words, at the national and local level the politically dominant class determines who shall be included and who excluded. The same considerations apply in the formulation of development policy. As we can see from a number of the case studies, those who benefit from 'development projects' are seldom identical to those who bear the costs, for the latter are almost never consulted about the viability or desirability of such projects, especially when these are capital intensive. Increases in environmental stress as a consequence of 'development' is not uncommon, and this may lead to, or exacerbate existing, conflict. While conflict as an impediment to development has often been observed, the redistributive effects of development as a source of conflict are only rarely noted.

In several of the cases, notably those involving the exploitation of Congo's natural wealth and Sudan's oil, we find the close association of foreign and multinational companies and other external interests co-operating with authorities legitimate and illegitimate in the name of profit, and with little or no regard for the well-being of the local populations. Closely associated with these companies are often what can only be referred to as the 'entrepreneurs of violence'. This phenomenon is certainly not restricted to Africa, nor, indeed, to areas where violent conflict is in progress. The criminalisation of large parts of the global economy has made it incumbent upon organisations that would enter certain hazardous parts of the market to ensure that the ability to employ lethal force or the threat of it forms part of their broader portfolio. Sometimes, of course, this takes the fairly innocuous form of private security companies, but elsewhere its manifestation is rather more sinister, with the formation of private militias merging into warlord enterprises.

The unending quest of trying to understand African conflicts involves a constant movement between the general and the particular and demands the continuous questioning of established assumptions. In the light of the sheer weight of human suffering that results from these conflicts, it is difficult to remain dispassionate or detached. The awful icons captured and preserved

by today's technology, the carefully noted and catalogued statements of survivors and participants make a vast difference in perceptions held today as opposed to those of people recording and analysing war fifty years ago. Under these circumstances, what has been called "the pornography of violence" leads only too easily to the dismissive conclusion that Africa is descending into barbarism.

The temptation must be resisted to suspend critical thought and analysis by taking recourse to explanation by metaphor. Yet, this is a simple alibi for those from outside and inside Africa who continue to fuel and profit by conflict, however indirectly, and with however many cut-outs facilitating deniability. Only by continuing to gather and interpret information and by publishing what is known and can be verified will it become more difficult to prosecute conflicts that are too often characterised by the slaughter of the unarmed by the armed. The day is probably far off when war crimes tribunals and truth and reconciliation mechanisms can curb mankind's ability to inflict inhumanity. Recognising and naming the instigators, perpetrators and profiteers of individual conflicts for what they are, however, would not be a bad start.