



FROM CONFLICT TO CONFLICT: MIGRATION, POPULATION DISPLACEMENT AND REFUGEE FLOW:
WHITHER AFRICA?

Regional Session Africa
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SUMMARY

The pervasive nature of armed conflicts in Africa has plagued the region and largely contributed its underdevelopment. The conflict situation in SSA has worsened dramatically since 1980 when no less than 28 states have been at war, including 14 of the 53 African countries in 1996. Apart from the wanton destruction of life and property associated with most of these violent conflicts, they are both protracted and intractable. The origins of conflicts are manifold and complex, and are rooted in international and national arenas encompassing economic, political ecological, cultural and social parameters.

Changing Nature of Conflicts in Africa: Though armed conflicts are not unknown in Africa, the nature of these conflicts has been changing with time. While most of the conflicts in the pre-colonial era were mainly ethnic or tribal/clan in nature mainly for expansionary reasons and for control of natural resources, they were mostly abated during the period of colonization since the colonialists had the ability to put a lid on potential ethnic conflicts in Africa. This pattern of conflicts however shifted to military coups in the 1960s and then to protracted wars in the 1970s and 1980s. While some of these conflicts were inter-states in nature over border disputes, many were ethno-racial (intra-state) in character in various forms to challenge the status quo with others being political struggles. In the 1990s, the face of armed conflicts have changed into 'warlordism' resulting in "privatized wars" which are not based on any ideology but sheer use of violence to plunder for profit.

Root causes of conflicts in Africa: The causes of violent conflicts in Africa are many and varied in both their nature and destructive consequences. While some may trace their sources into history, some are the consequences of the legacy of colonialism and the exigencies of the cold war. Others emanate from bad governance, ethnicity, ecological disasters and greed among others. Since ethnic conflicts abound, and are escalating in contemporary Africa, many have simply traced the root cause of armed conflicts to the multi-ethnic composition of African states. The common notion is that the multi-ethnic African state is inherently conflictual and therefore conflict is an intrinsic phenomenon of the multi-ethnic state.

Several studies have concluded that the relatively higher prevalence of war in Africa is not due to the ethno-linguistic fragmentation of its countries but to high levels of poverty, failed political institutions and economic dependence on natural resources. The underlying causative factors include ethnic dominance and ethnic diversity, and the legacy of European colonialism, especially the artificial boundaries, and the colonial administrative policy of divide and rule which in most cases favoured a particular ethnic group among the others and making it a virtual ally in the colonial governance. Linked to the colonial legacy is the consequences of the cold war on the continent of Africa. The extension of this ideological war onto the continent where various regimes, irrespective of their status (democratic or dictatorship and in some cases, rebels) were supported and in some cases armed in an effort to propagate the ideologies of the supporting partner, contributed to the many immediate post independence conflicts. Another legacy of the cold war has been the



proliferation of smaller arms in the region – rearming of the continent, which has helped fuel many conflicts after the end of the cold war.

Politics and poverty have also emerged as major causes of civil war in Africa. The unequal international trade, corporate interests, bad governance, and the immense burden of debt have crippled the development potentials and trapped the continent under poverty and conflicts. Though the relationship between poverty, economic hardship and conflicts might not be direct, it is anticipated that where abject poverty and deprivation are the norm among the population, especially among the youth, the opportunity cost of rebel labour seems low, making the likelihood of joining rebel organizations high.

Globalisation has also been linked to the conflict situation in Africa given the rapid and the radical changes as well as the unequal competition associated with it. The process of globalisation breeds violence and conflict when it produces inequality, poverty, environmental destruction and unprecedented concentration of economic power for a few while the majority are marginalized and excluded’.

An unholy alliance between opportunistic and venal African leaders, warlords, and guerrilla fighters and big Trans-National Corporations (TNCs) has also been identified as a source of worry. Though these TNCs are not the originators of Africa’s conflicts, some of the deadliest conflicts in mineral rich states have received their support. The democratization process is precarious, and in some instances has resulted in unintended loss of state capacities and regime collapse. While some of the dictators would not want to loosen their grips on monopolised state power, intensified pressures from both internal and external sources for democratic change in badly divided and ethnically polarised weak states provoked fierce ethnic conflicts, mutinies and public sector protests and in some cases, state disintegration and mayhem and carnage.

Migration, Population displacement and Refugee Flow: The rising incidence of armed conflicts in the last three decades has propelled new movements not only within the continent but also into other continents. Africa accounted for 43% of the global population of refugees and approximately 3.5 million refugees in 2002 and estimated 13 million IDPs, representing 52% of the global population of 25 million IDPs. It has been observed that in most of the civil wars plaguing the continent, both governments and rebels forcibly displaced populations as a tool to increase control over them or deprive an adversary of a support base. The low levels of security in the high intensity conflict zones in Africa have resulted in the exodus of their highly skilled professionals. Many professionals have equally failed to return home after completion of their studies due to these conflicts among other problems.

One major concern of refugees and IDPs, which often adds to their woes, has been the issues of their livelihood, rights and entitlements. While refugees often receive international backing in line with the 1951 Convention on Refugees, the case for IDPs is often not so. Though international agencies can intervene when the situation is seen as a threat to international peace, the consent of the home government must first be obtained. This is a source of worry since in many cases, the government may not be willing (e.g. where the government is responsible for the situation) and/or incapable of providing the much needed care and security though IDPs are supposed to be protected by national laws, human right laws and international humanitarian law. The widespread violations of basic human rights that IDPs are exposed to, have revealed that adequate and consistent protection remain a major gap in the national and international response.



Though refugees are protected by both the UN and OAU Conventions, they also have their own share of problems, extending beyond their basic needs of survival. Among other things, the 1951 UN Convention requires host countries to provide refugees with opportunities to work, move about freely, own property and receive education, and basic rights that will enable them to live normal lives in dignity. This is often not the case. In certain instances, the participation of refugees in decisions concerning their own well being (e.g. repatriation, settlement in the host nation or resettlement in a third country) is either non-existent or minimal.

Development implications of Armed Conflicts in Africa: **The huge cost of armed conflicts in the region constitutes a major impediment to the development of the continent in general and the economies of the war-torn countries. The social cost includes the loss of millions of lives through bloody genocide and slaughtering of human beings (e.g. over 3 million in the 1980s alone and about 1 million in Rwanda alone in 1994), gruesome maiming of civilians (e.g. Sierra Leone, Liberia) and uprooting and displacement of millions of people. This constitutes a massive wastage of the continent's most important asset. Civil wars also slow economic growth. The economic costs include the destruction of physical and human capital that shatters the foundations of the economy, destruction of trade and economic activities, diversion of investment portfolios and triggering of massive capital flight, reduction of government's expenditure from production of social overhead capital (education, health, water, etc.) to finance the war, reduction in tourism and the plunder of natural resources by rebels to sustain the war which denies the government the needed revenue for investment.**

Conclusion: Wither Africa? : **As the OAU summit in 1993 observed, 'no single international factor has contributed more to the present socio-economic problems on the continent than the scourge of conflicts within and between our countries. They have brought about death and human suffering, engendered hatred and divided nations and families. Conflicts have forced millions of our people into drifting lives as refugees and IDPs, deprived of their means of livelihood, human dignity and hope. Conflicts have gobbled up scarce resources and undermined the ability of our countries to address the many compelling needs of their people. Over a decade on, the situation has not changed much, in part due to the misunderstanding of the contemporary conflicts in Africa from a broader perspective which remains a major challenge to peace building on the continent.**

For Africa, a new paradigm is required to define its conflicts beyond ethnic or external scenarios, but also located in basic human needs for group (ethnic) identity, security, recognition, participation and autonomy, policies and institutions and economic systems that deny or suppress such basic needs. While addressing the above issues, the phenomenon of 'privitised wars of profit' in contemporary Africa needs equal attention.