

*Stefan Mair*

## **Conflict Management in Africa. Who cares?**

In the past 20 years Africa was the most conflict-prone region world-wide. The most recent Human Security Report states that throughout the '90s more people had been killed by violent conflicts in sub-Saharan Africa than in the rest of the world combined. But the Human Security Brief 2007 also states a remarkable success: the number of deaths from armed conflicts declined tremendously from 2002 to 2005 (from more than 9,000 to less than 3,000), though it slightly increased in 2006.

In general, four reasons can be given for this positive development: an improvement in governance and democracy, economic growth and development, the progress of African states in developing peace-keeping capacities and establishing a peace and security architecture, and finally the external engagement by the UN, the EU, and others. With respect to the conflicts more or less settled in the past ten years – Liberia, Sierra Leone, North-South Sudan and Great Lakes – weighing these reasons leads to a relatively obvious conclusion. It was mostly a combination of the last two factors that is able to explain the relative decline of violent conflict: the strong engagement of ECOWAS and the UN in Liberia and Sierra Leone as well as the African mediation efforts in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sudan

backed by two UN-missions and temporary EU-missions. There are several signs that these successes in reducing human suffering in African conflicts rest on fragile ground: first, the main structural causes – underdevelopment, scarcity of resources, political and social exclusion as well as antagonisms – are still unresolved even in those settled conflicts. Secondly, there are still violent conflicts going on or being close to eruption again: in Darfur, in the Eastern part of DRC and in Somalia. Thirdly, the progress in establishing the AU's African peace and security structure stagnates and external actors, the EU in particular, seem to be less determined to get involved.

These observations result in a set of three questions: Who cares about conflicts in Africa? Why should we, the Europeans, care? And if we care, how?

### **Who cares?**

The failure of African and external actors to deal effectively with the conflicts in Darfur, Somalia, and Eastern Congo but also with the crisis in Zimbabwe gives reason for the conclusion that nobody really cares – or, to be more precise: those who care, lack the means to do the caring effectively, and those who have such means do not care.

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### **Abstract**

**While Africa in the last 20 years has been the most conflict-prone region in the world, recent trends show some positive developments in this respect.**

**However, the improvements are resting on fragile grounds, and the permanence of regional areas of conflict suggest that it is still important to focus on the issue.**

**This policy brief intends to assess who should keep caring about conflict in Africa, including external actors.**

**Taking the reasoning further, the policy brief discusses why and how Europe should take responsibility in addressing regional and national conflicts in Africa.**

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A case of the first category is the UN. They have enormously stepped up their engagement in African conflicts since the disaster in Rwanda in 1993-1996. Since 1990, the UN have run 24 peace-keeping missions of varying robustness in Africa, among those the two largest world wide (Sierra Leone and DR Congo). Certainly, these missions have contributed decisively to the stabilisation of Sierra Leone, Liberia, and partly DRC. But the UN's failure to end the fighting in Eastern Congo, the killings in Darfur, the conflict in Somalia as well as the crisis in Zimbabwe demonstrates the limits of its engagement. Reasons for these limits are to be found, first, in the unwillingness of some of the UN Security Council permanent members to let the UN interfere in African domestic affairs and specific, mainly intra-state conflicts. This makes it impossible for the UN to play an important part in Darfur and in Zimbabwe. Secondly, not all parties to African conflicts accept the UN as a conflict manager either because it is regarded as being too weak or as being discredited by its past policies. Both approaches are certainly the case in Eastern Congo and in Somalia, as well. Thirdly, Western countries are still reluctant to contribute whenever the UN does play an active role in conflict management. Hence, UN peace-keeping missions in rather complex conflict environments rely heavily on relatively poorly equipped and insufficiently trained blue helmets. Again, this can be observed in Eastern Congo and in Sudan. The present involvement of the UN in peace keeping in Africa takes the organisation closely to the limits of its capabilities – not only with regard to troops but

also with regard to finance and administration.

So the UN may care but can hardly do more than it already does. How about the United States? Their role in conflict management in Africa has been very limited so far. The United States have certainly exerted pressure on or provided crucial support to conflict parties behind the scenes, e.g. at the Great Lakes and in Sudan. But after the disastrous experience in Somalia, the U.S. has shied away from playing an active role in mediation efforts and peace keeping for several reasons: American interests in Africa have been interpreted fairly, narrowly focussing on oil in the Gulf of Guinea and the threat of international Islamic terrorism in the Sahel and in the Horn of Africa. Apart from the perception of being overstretched by the military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is a growing realisation in Washington that a more intensive diplomatic and military engagement in the continent might not be welcomed. The difficulty to find a country which is willing to host the head quarters of AFRICOM certainly reinforces this perception. In addition, American interference in African conflicts is rarely regarded as being impartial, their diplomats often lack the image of being honest brokers. And the American financial and military support for Uganda, Rwanda and Ethiopia in the past 15 years did not make the respective regions of recipient countries more peaceful. The reluctance to get involved in African conflicts might change under the new Obama-administration. If one looks at key figures and posts in the new administration, such an engagement will likely focus on Sudan and take a form which is not necessarily suited to settle

this conflict. But it may well be that the Obama-administration will adopt the view of the preceding one: that the prime responsibility of dealing with African conflicts rests with Africans and with Europeans.

Europe itself seemed for a while willing, even eager to take on this responsibility. It put a lot of effort in writing a European-African strategy and negotiating its details with African leaders. In this strategy, peace and security play a major role. In addition, the EU created a new tool of conflict management, the so-called battle groups, whose inventors did not hide their intention that the prime zone of operation for these forces would be Africa. Within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), the EU defined civilian headline goals in order to expand its capabilities in civilian conflict management – not only in African conflicts but certainly there as well. Taking into account the role the EU has recently played in the conflicts in Sudan, Somalia, Eastern Congo, and Zimbabwe one can, however, only reach the conclusion that the EU by far falls short of its ambitions. The discrepancy between rhetoric and action is the more striking when the lack of enthusiasm to play a major conflict management role in Africa is being compared to Europe's engagement in the wars in Georgia and in the Gaza strip. The then President of the European Council, Nicholas Sarkozy, invested a lot of energy and political capital to end the fighting in Georgia and the recent line-up of European heads of states and governments in support of Egyptian mediation efforts in the Gaza war was quite impressive.

What are the reasons for Europe's declining willingness to manage conflicts in Africa? The military involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq has not only brought American but also European forces to their limits. The conflict in Georgia certainly caused some European countries to be again more concerned about classical security threats in their immediate neighbourhood than about new wars in fairly peripheral regions. Finally, Europeans have preached the mantra of African solutions to African problems – a position which is especially intriguing for a continent whose countries had caused a lot of African problems in the past. Thus, the Europeans are quite reluctant to take action in African conflicts unless it is based or integrated in African conflict management efforts.

But what is the state of affairs of African conflict management? Since its creation, great hopes were placed on the African Union as the legitimate source and force for this task. And it must be stressed that, taking into account the limited capabilities of this organisation, the part it played so far in conflict management was quite significant – even in Sudan. But it is not only a lack of resources which limits the role of the AU in African conflict management. It suffers from similar factors like the UN. The AU, of course, shies away from taking a determined position in conflicts in which one of its more important members is directly or indirectly involved. This is the case in Sudan, in Eastern Congo, in Somalia, and also in Zimbabwe. In some cases its credibility and impartiality is severely discredited – in the Ethiopia-Eritrea conflict – or it is regarded as being too weak to be taken seriously. The same can be said about African

regional organisations perhaps with the notable exception of ECOWAS.

In a nutshell, the UN, the AU, and African regional organisations might have the legitimacy to be involved in conflict management in Africa but operate close to or over the limits of their capacity. And sometimes they lack the acceptance as honest and powerful brokers. The US and the EU might have the necessary capabilities but lack the legitimacy of acting alone. More importantly, though, they lack the necessary political will to get involved. The latter holds also true for the new kid on the bloc: China which seems to have some difficulties in considering conflict management as one of its prime tasks in Africa. So, the gap is huge between a tremendous demand for conflict management in Africa and the insufficient supply of it. There are several voices in Europe who say off the record: Yes, conflicts are certainly a problem for the poor Africans affected by them. But are there not more immediate issues which deserve our attention: the Balkans and the Caucasus, the financial market crisis and climate change? So, should the Europeans really care?

### **Should we care?**

A new focus on the immediate neighbourhood and classical security threats would only be justified if Europe could be sure that it can de-link itself from Africa – a quite unrealistic assumption. The most obvious factor which binds Europe to developments in Africa is migration which has significantly increased in the past year and will remain to do so in

those coming. Then, there are the spill-over effects of state failure in Africa, less in the form of providing safe havens for international terrorism but for organised crime. The boom in piracy along the shores of the Horn of Africa and to a lesser degree along the West African coast line underlines to what extent state failure can threaten maritime security – which in turn is an essential precondition for the wealth of European trading nations. It is also naïve to believe that the consequences of African conflicts, their detrimental effects on the social fabrics of African societies and the psyches of African individuals, can be limited to the continent itself. Such an assumption had previously led to wrong conclusions in the case of Afghanistan as it might do with regard to African conflicts.

Finally, if Europe has the ambition to shape global policies it has not only to take over global responsibilities. It will also need partners to realize this ambition – certainly on the other side of the Atlantic but also south of the Mediterranean Sea. The potential to foster effective partnerships in global governance is still greater in Africa than in Asia and probably Latin America. But African countries will only function as partners of Europe in global governance if they have the impression that Europe also cares for their most immediate problems: and these are, besides poverty and underdevelopment, conflicts and insecurity. But how should Europe care?

### **And if yes, how?**

The fact that matters of peace and security rank high in the

joint European-Africa Strategy seemed to indicate an enhanced European engagement in African conflicts. With this in mind, the disappointment which the first action plan offers for the implementation of this strategy is even greater. It identifies three priority actions:

1. Enhance dialogue on challenges to peace and security.
2. Make the African Peace and Security Architecture fully operational.
3. And provide predictable funding for African led peace support operations.

These are certainly necessary steps but they fall short of the requirements because they limit Europe's immediate role to dialogue and load the operational burden of conflict management mainly onto the Africans. The dialogue on peace and security also seems to be designed to focus more on the context of conflicts than on immediate conflict management itself. Moreover, the dialogue seems to be mostly left to the working level of diplomacy and does not systematically involve relevant decision-makers. This impression is re-emphasised by the fact that the two European special representatives who presently deal with African conflicts lack the political prestige compared to some of their predecessors. The settlement of African conflicts needs a more high ranking and sustained involvement of European politicians and diplomats as it is the case in other conflicts – in the person of the High Representative of CFSP and foreign ministers of member states.

Deeper and sustained involvement is also needed on the operational level of conflict management. The action plan neglects the role of the UN in African conflict management. Its missions operate close and in some cases even beyond

their capacities. Increased efforts by African nations cannot compensate for that. Even if Europe sticks to its promises to invest substantially in the military and civilian capabilities of Africa to manage conflicts and keep peace more effectively, it will at least take some five to ten years to build these capacities and make capabilities operational. Until then, there is a need for Europe to bridge the capability gaps, especially in transitional justice and administration, in the rapid deployment of troops, air surveillance, logistics, and intelligence gathering.

Such a division of labour, at least temporary, and a deeper political involvement of Europe in African conflict management certainly contradicts the still dominant paradigm of African solutions to African problems. This paradigm has two roots: the unwillingness of Europe to get involved and the reluctance of Africans to accept such an involvement. But how appropriate is it in a context in which the collapse of housing loans in America is spiralling the whole world in an economic crisis and in which the operations of Somali pirates can significantly increase the costs of European trade? A merely regional approach to conflict management does not only fade out the consequences of globalisation, it also elucidates that Europeans have lost touch with reality. Europe would probably still have to deal with military conflicts in the Balkans if the Americans had maintained the position European solutions to European problems. African conflicts – as others in the world – need shared responsibility and solutions – and the most logical shareholders for that are the UN, Africa, and Europe.

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