

## **Peace and Conflict in Africa: Reflections from an African Peacebuilder**

### **I Causes, Dynamics and Implications for the Emerging Global Order**

Dr. Assefa: The discussion of large scale social conflicts, such as civil wars, is liable to be tragic, depressing and, at times, outright pessimistic, because it is about brother against brother, neighbor against neighbor, and children against their parents. And for some reason, Africa seems to have a large share of this tragedy. But it will be very presumptuous of me, or for that matter, anybody, to talk about African conflicts, their root causes and their implications in so short a time, and be definitive about it. Instead, I'm going to make some preliminary remarks and observations on large-scale social conflicts -- focussing on civil wars in Africa -- and look at three underlying causes. These are the breakdown of African institutions, issues surrounding leadership in Africa, and the global context and its impact on African conflicts.

When one looks at the continent of Africa, compared to many continents and peoples, it is a continent that has been deeply traumatized. It has been robbed, massacred, degraded, discriminated against, and brutally exploited, not just once, twice, or thrice, but successively over generations, and for centuries. And I will talk about three traumatic episodes in recent African history that have had significant impact on the breakdown of African institutions, and thereby on the incidence and the intensity of conflicts in Africa. And these episodes are slavery, colonialism, and the modernization process.

I know these days it's not very fashionable to talk about slavery and colonialism in discussions of African conflicts. People want to talk about the here and now. However, I also believe that one cannot understand the deep sources of conflict in Africa without understanding the deep traumas that have come from its history. And talking about these events does not mean that there are no other explanations for these conflicts. What is happening in current economic, political, and social life in Africa has a lot to contribute, but the advents of slavery, colonialism, and the modernization process provide a deep insight into the present situation. Secondly, I also notice that many accounts that I have seen of this era -- particularly of slavery -- seem to be very intellectualized. And I've found it is personally very useful to come face to face with the little evidence that we have of this dark period in human history by visiting museums or some historical sites that remind us of the transactions during this time. Then one begins to have a glimpse of what the human, social, political, economic, and spiritual consequences have been. Recently, I had the opportunity to visit the old slave markets in Zanzibar. And about a year ago, I was in Senegal at the port where most of the slaves from west Africa were exported to the New World. Some estimate that forty to sixty million Africans have been exported from west Africa alone during this time of slavery. In these Zanzibar markets, they were telling me that about twenty thousand people were sold every year. And the twenty thousands were only ten percent of the catch. The other ninety percent died along the way to the market. So about two hundred thousand people were captured yearly. And when you think of the number of years, of centuries, that slavery has prevailed in that continent, you can imagine the incredible amount of human displacement that happened during this time. Some historians talk about it as one of the greatest events of

human displacement in history. And one of the things that touched me deeply at this slave market was what happened once the slaves got there. The slaves would carry ivory -- and some of the tusks were so heavy that one person could not carry it -- and when they reached the market, both the ivory and the slaves were sold. But even for those that made it to the market, there was a test for who was going to be sold. And this would be decided by whipping the slaves in front of the prospective buyer. The one that could withstand the whipping was considered strong enough, and attracted a good price. Those that could not withstand the pain and fainted were considered weak and whipped until they died. And these slaves eventually served to build up the wealth of Arabia, Britain, France, Portugal, Spain, the United States and the Middle East.

The horror of slavery was not only its incomprehensible cruelty but also the complete traumatization of African societies, the impoverishment of communities by taking away its strongest and most productive members, and the destruction of the fiber that held communities together. And this was not the end of this greed and brutality. It was not enough for Europe to have the bodies of Africans and exploit their labor; now Europe wanted the land. So five European powers partitioned off the whole continent among themselves to colonize and exploit it without any restraint. Africans that escaped slavery now faced a new form of dehumanization and exploitation under the banner of colonialism. Under this system, the African was not considered a human being; he was a bit better than the animal, but lower than the European human. African culture, religion, and institutions were considered inferior and the African had to even give up his name in order to be accepted by the colonial masters.

Under colonialism and slavery, African traditional institutions of governance disintegrated or disappeared. The glues of African society were coming loose. Ethnic groups were pitted against each other for the purpose of weakening them in favor of the colonial master. In some instances, the colonists created ethnic hierarchy and some ethnic groups were made to rule over the others. This increased animosity and destructive competition. Then towards the end of colonialism, came the modernization process. The new economic, political, and educational systems destroyed whatever was left of the systems that African societies had evolved over generations, and put in place a totally alien value system. Western education in Africa generated even more alienation between the educated and the communities that they came from. Education became an instrument to supplant everything that is African instead of enhancing or adapting it to meet emerging needs of the African society. This is not to say that nothing good has come out of the modernization process, or everything that is traditional is good. There are many backward things about African traditions, and a lot of good has come from modernization. But all traditional societies like those in Africa, had developed values and institutions that enabled them to make sense of who they were, to coexist with each other, to cope with their environment, and to manage their resources. When this was brutally dismantled or discredited as it was during slavery and colonialism, a deep trauma and disorientation occurred. And this has significant implications on conflict at the personal, psychological, and social level. This lack of roots and the importation and imposition of values, ideologies and institutions on a society without the adequate consideration for whether it is well adapted to that social reality, contributes a great deal to understand African conflicts. When you consider all these traumas, it even surprises

me that Africa is not in a worse situation. In fact, one can say that the African people and their culture are survivors. There are still lots of positive and healthy things about that society that if managed properly, could be the sources of Africa's salvation.

Here I would like to share a poem with you, written by one of my mentors, Adam Curle. He was a professor at Bradford University before his retirement. It's called "Africa" and it goes like this:

"It is sickening to think how much we,  
the slavers, settlers, exploiters, and such like muck  
have messed the whole place up,  
canting culture-killer missionaries,  
corrupt traders in arms,  
junk, worthless drugs, smart-aleck experts, scads of smug officials,  
clowns all certain that they knew what is best for the natives.

This sorry crew have bled,  
starved, robbed, attacked, belittled, divided, racked,  
incestuously wrecked this motherland,  
the womb from whom came humankind.

Allow me opposed to calm my hungry mind  
before I pay humble tribute to the men and women,  
so patient, so forgiving.

When I would have longed to hit him,  
they obstinately forbore,

awaiting a change of heart that never came.

Only more cunning hidden pillage aid now the name for modern theft,  
but the result the same.

But not many really understand our implications in the sort of land.

Once when I told a friendly man that we had lived ten years in Africa,  
he answered, "Africa, eh?" reflected and said,

"A lot of troubles with the Negroes there, I've read."

The African state has generated much conflict and miserably failed to regulate conflict, as healthy states should. It has been repressive, the holders of state power have been brutal and unaccountable, and governments have been corrupt and exclusive of many social groups. When one looks closely at the African state one observes that it is not adapted to African tradition, life, worldview or social relationships. The modern African state mimics the colonial states which it followed. In the previous system, the state was a mechanism that subjugated the entire country. The entire economic, political, religious and cultural system was used for the benefit of one ethnic racial group -- in that case, the whites -- at the exclusion of all Africans. Most of the African political leaders that took state power in independent Africa were socialized under this system. So when it was their turn to be at the helm, they copied the model on which they grew up. They made the state an instrument of oppression for the benefit of their own ethnic groups at the exclusion of others. Many conflicts have erupted around competition between ethnic groups and the state is seen as belonging only to those that are in power. Therefore, there isn't much of a sense of accountability or internal checks and balances. As a result, there have been endless wars between those that are in power and those that have been

excluded for control of the state, just as during independence, African leaders struggled to take the state away from their colonial masters.

And let me make what I am saying clear. All these historical and global factors do not exonerate Africans from their responsibility for their plight. Many states have now experimented with independence for close to forty years, and some even for a longer period. Leaders can make a huge difference. They can bring the worst or the best out of people. If leaders opt for the best, it can still be done in Africa. People point to the miserable poverty of Africans that they say underlie many of the conflicts, but actually Africa is very rich, and with proper leadership, tremendous prosperity can be unleashed in that continent. Unfortunately, the continent has failed in generating leaders who have the capacity to bring people together, to heal their wounds, and inspire them to collaborate. Instead, the types that we are generously endowed with are those that thrive in hatred, exclusion and selfishness. One of the astounding aspects of Africa, as I said before, is that despite all this, the continent is rich and the people are quite gentle and friendly. African people have still a lot of humanity left. This is why even those who know Africa, once stung by the African bug can never get it out of their soul. The last words of David Livingston, one of the first explorers of the Nile were, “When I die, bury my body in Britain, but bury my heart in Africa.” And they took out his heart and buried it in Zambia.

The third element that I want to touch on is the global context in which Africa’s conflicts play out and the role that they play in contributing to or generating conflicts. Here, there are two main factors. The first is the contradiction between the professed values of the global political and economic order and its practice. Although the west and

the industrial North profess democracy and equity as desirable values and push it on the world, their own practices in the international arena dramatically contradict these values. The affluent societies that constitute about 25% of humanity control over 75% of the world's resources and also dominate the global, political and military power. Therefore, the model of governments and economic management that this global order presents for the rest of the world is not much different from the situation which prevails in many conflict-ridden African states -- such as minority rule, exclusion and unaccountability. The president of one state in Africa which got its independence about eight years ago, said in a press interview, "What I learned from my six years of presidency by looking at the global order is that might makes right." This is the stuff that is tearing apart the societies of Africa.

The second factor is that there are some specific policies that are emerging from the prevailing global order and feeding conflict in Africa. Specifically, these are the structural adjustment and privatization policies that are being pushed onto the poor and conflict-ridden countries in Africa. Even though the long-term benefit of these policies can be debated, what we are observing is that they are generating an increasing gap between the rich and the poor. More and more people are joining the ranks of the dissatisfied and angry and are turning to crime, armed robbery, prostitution or destructive insurgencies such as the Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone. When I think of my own country, Ethiopia, and the impact that these policies have, I am greatly saddened. In the late '60s and early '70s, I was in the student movement. At that time, the gross inequality between the rich and the poor had created a revolutionary situation in which students and other civil society actors were militating for rapid social change. But then

the social process went out of hand and created a revolution that ultimately overthrew the monarchy and brought about a very brutal dictatorship. And in the process of this change a high human price was paid. After a long time, with the collapse of the socialist systems in Eastern Europe, this system also collapsed, and we had a new regime that adopted the free-enterprise system as a remedy for the country's problems. Now, when I go to Ethiopia, I see that the rich are getting incredibly rich, but the poor are getting poorer. Again, I see cruel history repeating itself and I wonder when we are going to learn from the past. After all, sooner or later those that are disenfranchised are going to hear the calls of political demagogues. I get very angry to see how the international system forces us to get into situations that make us repeat what we thought we have left behind.

In conclusion, as we could see from this presentation that some of the causes and problems that underlie conflicts in Africa seem to emerge out of unique African situations while others seem to be shared by all of us as members of the global order. As we saw already, African history is also European, American and Middle Eastern history. Ironically, just as the colonized Africans and the slaves suffered, the enslavers and the colonists also suffered, because an ideology that degrades certain human beings at the hands of others also degrades all of humanity. The stories of slavery and colonialism are told not to point accusing fingers or inculcate guilt, but to warn all of us of the immense capacity that we all have for evil, and to challenge us to hold hands, examine our consciences and dismantle the values, practices and institutions that we still have today and which continue to enslave people and colonize their minds. There are oppressive and exploitative national and global economic systems that thrive on evil by supplying instruments of human brutality against each other. There are social and cultural systems

that deprive 2/3 of humanity and nature of their proper place on this earth. Perhaps there is hope of global partnership among those that have been alienated by the emerging order to cooperate across borders and contribute to the creation of a much more compassionate and inclusive global system. If we don't use the tale of this suffering to challenge us to bring about this transformation, then indeed the experience of African suffering has been in vain. Thank You.

Question: What does peace building mean and can you give some examples of what peace-builders do from experience in Africa?

Dr. Assefa: For me, peace building really implies working on peace from the grassroots up. I use the metaphor of constructing a house. When you build a house, you start from the foundation, then you build the walls and then the roof. For me, peace-building and the way I use it in my practice is trying to work with grassroots organizations like NGOs, women's groups, and youth groups to mobilize people to work together for peace and reconciliation in their society. For example, if the people have been denied peace because their leaders are at war with each other, we start by demanding peace from their leaders, and actively working for negotiations to identify alternatives to war. Or, in situations where societies have been torn apart by violence, peace building work begins by examining how reconciliation can be promoted between warring groups or groups that have suffered brutalities from each other.

Question: How has the legacy of some of the problems you mentioned like the history of slavery led to the current situation in Rwanda?

Dr. Assefa: The current situation in Rwanda is very directly linked with what happened in that country during Belgium colonialism. And the conflict is astounding because the Hutus and the Tutsis of Rwanda are the same people; they speak the same language, they have the same culture, they intermarry, and they share the same geographical territory. Instead of thinking of them as ethnic groups it is probably more appropriate to consider them caste systems. To a large extent the Hutus are farmers, while the Tutsis are pastoralists. But what happened during the Belgium era was that the Belgians selectively privileged the Tutsis and gave them political power and the Tutsis became proxies for collecting the products that Belgium expected from Rwanda from the Hutus. Naturally this generated a tremendous animosity between the two groups as the Tutsis were now seen as the agents of the foreign masters that exploited the poor Hutus. Ultimately the Belgians even began to identify physical characteristics that would distinguish the Hutu and the Tutsi. They said that a Tutsi is tall and has European features and is therefore qualified to govern, while the Hutu is much more African looking, and more appropriate for running non-administrative and non-government matter in the state. And after that, the distinction between Hutus and Tutsis began to take on a racial character. But this is not a watertight categorization because that there are still many Hutus that are tall and have Tutsi features and vice versa. In fact, during the war many people were killed by mistaken identity, and there were others that bribed their way to get a different identity.

So it is the perception rather than the reality of differences between these people that really was the stuff of this conflict.

After the Belgians left, bad political leaders continued taking advantage of the situation. But the Hutus were numerically superior, and their leaders felt that the time had come for political power to be in their hands. Which meant that the governing Tutsis had to be thrown out. And this started a cycle of revenge that when the Hutus were in power they would punish the Tutsis for what they had done in the past, and when the Tutsis were in power they punished the Hutus for what they had done or what they might do. And this was the cycle that led to the genocide in April 1994.

Question: Could you give us an insight into the Ethiopia-Eritrea war, and are you involved in resolving this conflict?

Dr. Assefa: I think the Ethiopian-Eritrean War is one of those conflicts that is very difficult to describe or analyze because it doesn't fall into the frameworks that we usually have to understand and analyze conflicts. And what is most tragic about this is that when you look at this conflict on the people-to-people level, even at this stage where lots of brutalities have been committed, the readiness of people to forgive and reestablish the old relationship is very high. And this capacity for people to forgive is the kind of thing that also gives me hope about Africa.

Unfortunately, Ethiopia and Eritrea have not been blessed by leadership that tries to take advantage of the good in people. There is a sense of incompatibility between the

leadership that is in Eritrea and in Ethiopia. The leaders in these two countries were very close colleagues at one time, but as soon as this conflict erupted they began to hit at each other's vulnerabilities and pushed it to a point of no return. And what is sad is that people are being held hostage by a conflict that is not serious enough to cause such bloodshed.

After all, there are many creative options to deal with a boundary issue. One possibility is to make the border loose so that people on both sides can maintain their common identity. But cutting the same people into two and giving them an artificial identity does not make sense to their history and to who they are. In fact, I am at a loss in terms of understanding that conflict. And many people are at a loss, which is why it has been so difficult to deal with. I have tried to work on a people-to-people reconciliation basis, and have been extremely encouraged by the kind of response that I was able to get both from the Ethiopian and the Eritrean side. Once I organized a meeting for about thirty officials from Ethiopia and twenty officials from Eritrea. The exchange that took place and the desire for reconciliation was amazing. But it does not seem to have political space, and this is its tragedy.

Question: Would you mind talking a little bit about Nigeria and the corruption that's so common for Africa. Do you think that Obasanjo has a chance to make a unity out of his disparate country which has so many tribalisms?

Dr. Assefa: I don't envy Obasanjo. He is has a very difficult balancing act. If he continues alienating the military I don't know how long he might stay in power. So, how

does he bring about reform that's acceptable to his own followers, the military and the international community -- particularly the World Bank and the IMF? So far, I think he is doing a good job. One of the things that I hear he has done is to restructure the military and to take out some of the corrupt military leaders that could be possible threats to him. But that doesn't give security because if a person has the intention to start an insurgency, it is not very difficult to do so. The other problem is that the IMF is putting a lot of pressure on Nigeria to repay its thirty billion dollar international debt. And therefore, instead of showing economic results from the reform process that he is undertaking in Nigeria, Obasanjo might have to use those same resources to repay the debt, and people will not see a difference. And they will ask, "We've got a new person but what difference has he made for us?" And this can create a new opposition that could undermine him. So I think it is too early to pass a verdict on his ability to bring about meaningful reform in Nigeria, but I commend him for his good start and the courage that he has shown in terms of dealing with the military.

Question: I come from Liberia. There's a story about a missionary who, when he first came to Liberia, saw that people used to paste the walls of their huts with sand from the river. And this missionary saw that the walls glowed in the night. He called the chief and said, "Look, all these shining things on the wall are evil spirits," only to find out that they were diamonds. He made out with so many diamonds that he came here and said do not go to Africa -- there's much evil there. My point is that corruption in Africa does not come from Africa. Corruption comes from here. What do you think will help us develop

Africa? What is it about this place that when we go back to Africa we have to rule our people before we know we are in Africa?

Dr. Assefa: Of course, what happens in Africa is also connected to what happens in the rest of the world. And sometimes these are the kinds of things that we miss. The danger in that kind of thinking lies in externalizing everything and saying that everything bad and evil comes from outside. There are some bad and evil things that also come out of the continent of Africa. But there is a fertile ground in the international system that tends to nurture and take advantage of these kinds of behavior. Take Congo, which used to be Zaire -- one of the most corrupt countries on earth that had an extremely brutal dictatorship. But, until recently, some of the greatest proponents of democracy including the United States and France, were its greatest supporters. They knew what was happening in the country but they never hesitated to provide weapons and advice for almost thirty years. So yes, outsiders did not make Mobutu. But, Mobutu would not have stayed as long as he did had he not been nurtured and supported by the international community. So, in a way, what makes dealing with African problems difficult is its interconnection with the global system. And in some instances, even if Africans were to say they want to have peace, the international system may not allow that to happen because it benefits from the consequence of conflict as arms suppliers, beneficiaries and illicit resource imports etc. Many are taking advantage of the tremendous wealth of Congo, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. For example, during the brutal war in Liberia, the brother of the French prime minister was actively engaged in exporting timber out of Liberia. And these are the secondary parties that are very difficult to bring to the

negotiating table and make peace-building even more difficult. Anyway, this is what I mean by a partnership between the North and South. And as much as there needs to be peace-building work in Africa, there also needs to be a similar drive in North America and in Europe. It is not only important to see what Africans could do to change the situation in Africa, but what it is that the big powers -- the industrial and affluent North -- can do to contribute to and restrain from the behavior that feeds these conflicts in Africa.

And often, Africans in the Diaspora are more extremists than Africans inside Africa. The latter have to be realistic about conflict and how to coexist with each other because coexistence is not a luxury -- it is a necessity. So, my message is also to those Africans in the Diaspora that would have to learn how to take responsible leadership. We also need to develop a new ethic for the African intellectual who thinks that everything has to be criticized, and the role and responsibility of the intellectual ends in destroying -- theoretically -- whatever exists there. While we need academic honesty, we need have to also be constructive --- we have the responsibility of also putting together.

Question: One issue that hasn't been mentioned is peace in settler societies like South Africa and Zimbabwe. Many people think that these countries are unique in the history of African peace building. And some people contest the idea that there is a universal way of looking at peace. They feel that you can't look at Africa as just one region, but as many regions. My question is, given what is happening in South Africa -- the unequal political and economic control of the resources, the involvement of the international community, and the refusal of those who control the means of production to share them -- how do you envisage the building of peace within that context?

Dr. Assefa: I think this is one of the difficulties of conflicts. To a certain extent, every conflict situation is unique and a solution has to be appropriate to that situation. And when it comes to African conflicts it is a great mistake to say that if this worked in one place, then it should work also in other places. However, we might be able to make observations. And there are lots of lessons that we can learn from each other in terms of various processes. We do not have to reinvent the wheel every time. In fact, there is a saying in my culture which says, "A fool learns from his own mistakes, but a wise man learns from the mistakes of others."

In the case of settler societies like Zimbabwe and in South Africa, I think the big danger is to realize, as in the example of South Africa, that because there has been a black take-over of political power the problem has not yet been resolved. In fact, you can even say an even more serious conflict is going on, which previously was blatant and easier to mobilize support from the world, but now has an invisible enemy. And to a certain extent, giving political power to blacks, while whites still control the economic system, is a way of perpetuating rather than resolving that conflict.

So, what happened under Mandela? What happened during that transition in South Africa? This is only the beginning of long journey for peace in South Africa. Sometimes we make the mistake of confusing the first step with the last, and we forget the commitment that we have to keep on with this work. And when things go back to the way they were before, we become easily disillusioned and say "Well, we tried it, it doesn't work, therefore it must be the fault of these people." But the fault is in our

thinking because this is not a short-term problem. If it took decades to develop, it is going to take decades to solve. Naturally we should celebrate hope when we see it, but we should not be deceived by what is happening on the outside. There is a lot of work that needs to be done in South Africa.

Question: There are many young people with a lot of potential to make many changes in the world. What events or conditions in your youth gave you the character, the motivation, and the ability to become a peace builder?

Dr. Assefa: It is very important to think of what kind of models we are leaving behind for our youth. And it's very important to involve them early enough and help them to begin making their own contributions. I realized recently that my mother suffers from rheumatism and she has been advised by doctors to rest. But when I call home, I don't find her. And that upsets me, because her suffering is not just hers, it is also mine. And once I had the opportunity to confront her, and after a lot of pushing, I came to learn that she and another seven or eight women had organized to go from community to community, to identify people that have been alienated from each other during a terrible period in my country which we called Red Terror and White Terror, and bring them together. And the more I pushed her, the more I found out that in close to a three-year period they had managed to reconcile over a thousand people. And the kinds of things that they were doing were just the reverse of what my theoretical training would tell me to do in those kinds of situations. Well, it humbled me tremendously that they didn't have to do a Ph.D. in conflict resolution to do this marvelous work that I am having

difficulty doing with all my 'training, skills, and experience.' So perhaps there were some innate characteristics in her and in the environment that I grew up in that passed certain values onto me.

I remember how much of a peacemaker my mother was. An aspect of my mother, which is also an important part of peace making, is her capacity to say that nothing is too small to share. It would amaze me how, if there were visitors and we had something at home, she would bring it out, multiply it and share it with everybody there. This capacity to make something large out of something small is a characteristic of traditional societies that is being replaced by the so-called moral value that more is better.