Ecology, Security, and Armed Conflicts in Africa

Like a disease . . . a damaged environment, particularly when combined with other stress factors, such as poverty, globalization, poor governance, inequality, and mass migration, can undermine societies and give rise to civil conflicts and failed states.

—William Mansfield, 2009

History shows many instances in which scarce resources and environmental degradation played a role in generating conflict, leading even to the collapse of societies and civilizations—some as early as the beginning of written history.[1] Examples include many peoples of Mesopotamia and parts of the Middle East, the Maya of Central America, the Khmer of Southeast Asia, and the Anasazi of the US Southwest, among others. As Mary Ellen O'Connell observes, "In the 1970s, Japanese leaders first argued that national security means more than being safe from traditional military threats. They made this argument at a time [when American] leaders were pressing the Japanese to spend more on security. Japanese leaders argued that sums spent on protecting the environment or food and energy sources should also count toward national security spending."[2] This nexus of environment, security, and armed conflicts typifies many African countries.

A complex relationship between ecology and conflict exists in Africa. A degraded environment can lessen the probabilities of a lasting peace and put people's future livelihood at risk. According to Peter Gleick, "Where water is scarce, competition for limited supplies can lead groups, communities, and even nations to see access to water as a matter of highest concern."[3] There is always a risk that resource depletion and environmental degradation can embroil a region in a vicious cycle of poverty, political instability, armed conflict, greater environmental degradation, and greater poverty.

In Africa, more often than not, social, economical, and ecological issues are tightly interlocked. Environmental degradation or resource scarcity is a potential trigger for violent conflict that might engulf and threaten the stability of an entire region. The Horn of Africa is one of numerous examples: "[It] is . . . a region devastated by environmental degradation in many forms: deforestation, soil erosion, soil salinization, desiccation, desertification, [and] loss of biodiversity. It is also a region of endemic conflict waged at many levels: state, region, nation, religion, tribe, and clan."[4] Another example is the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC): "[The DRC] boasts an abundance of precious minerals, [but] the country has been ravaged by diamond-related violence, disease, starvation, and tribal warfare that have resulted in the deaths of over 5 million people. Since the 1990s, rebel armies in the

DRC have been exploiting small-scale diamond fields and funneling the profits toward insurgent activities."[5]

The question about the causes of violent conflicts in Africa has received a great deal of scholarly attention and has prompted considerable academic debate in recent years:

> The traditional assumption that violent conflicts in Africa emanate from ethnic, religious or cultural differences is seriously limited. Except for "old" conflicts, ethnic dichotomies appear to be rather a consequence than a cause of violent conflicts. However, ethnic, religious and cultural dichotomies are very potent as people's perceptions of conflict—perceptions held by many fighters on both sides of the conflict divide. The longer, however, a conflict persists, the more these ethnic, religious and cultural factors come into play. In an old conflict, when even the initial causes have petered out or died away, that "abstract," ideological ethnicity, becomes an active material and social force.[6]

In most cases, as in Sudan, Rwanda, and Somalia, ethnicity appears to be a cover for competition to control scarce resources in times of environmental degradation. The ecological issues become extremely political; in reality, the situation involves an elite struggle for control of the state. "Violent conflicts are among the greatest threats to human security in Africa. Wars in Africa have inflicted massive destruction upon the continent's infrastructure, displaced millions of people, disrupted livelihoods and seriously damaged the environment."[7] According to World Bank estimates, in the 1990s violent conflicts in Africa consistently led to a 2 percent net loss of economic growth annually.[8]

Most African states are now seriously trying to prevent violent conflicts in the continent. The African Union has taken steps to promote peace and security by establishing the Peace and Security Council, whose mandate includes serving as an "early-warning arrangement to facilitate timely and efficient response to conflict and crisis situations in Africa."[9]

United States Africa Command's (AFRICOM) efforts to bring sustainable development and human security to Africa should have the larger aim of "winning hearts and minds" in order to prevent support for Islamic extremism and terrorism. Just as scholars in the 1990s suggested that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization could "view environmental degradation in the same category as oil shortages, aggressive ideologies, or weapons proliferation," so could AFRICOM adopt this perspective.[10] AFRICOM should also give a high priority to two related challenges: education and Africa's children. In fact, "each year of education reduces the risk of conflict by around 20%."[11] Another factor that plagues the world, especially Africa, is the increasing use of young children as soldiers—one of the most deplorable developments in recent years. Already in 1996, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated that during the last decade, child victims included

- 2 million killed;
- 4–5 million disabled;

- 12 million left homeless;

- more than 1 million orphaned or separated from their parents;

- some 10 million psychologically traumatized.[12]

In light of the sheer weight of suffering that these conflicts have inflicted upon children, it is difficult to remain dispassionate.

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Notes

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