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Conflicts and Crises in West Africa: Internal and International Dimensions

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> And I heard the stories of how those who had access to power, or access to those who had access to power, of how they have robbed, and pillaged, or broken all laws and all ethnical norms to acquire wealth. It is out of this pungent mixture of greed, dehumanising poverty, obscene wealth and endemic public and private corrupt practice, that many of Africa's coups d'état, civil wars, and situations of instability are born and entrenched.[20]

Until West African states and their regional organisation figure out fully the internal and external connections of the conflicts and security crises that have bedevilled the sub-region for the last 15 years, it is unlikely that they will be able to resolve them adequately and, more importantly, prevent their recurrence. While these dimensions and connections are often closely related to the so-called 'root causes' they are not one and the same. They affect the incidence of conflict and impact considerably on how they are managed, resolved and prevented from reoccurring. West Africa is widely viewed as the most conflict-ridden sub-region in the world,[21] even on a continent notorious for instability, crises of all sorts, and incessant warfare. This unsettling reputation is validated by the recent spike in the conflict opposing on the one hand the governments of Mali and Niger and on the other disgruntled former *Touareg* rebels. Coming on top of the other ongoing breaches of the peace, the rekindling of the *Touareg* conflict in a sensitive geo-strategic area (the *Sahel* region) and in two countries touted for the strides they made toward more democratic openness and stability is certainly worrisome. That already the United States has become openly involved, in addition to countries closer to the region like Libya and Algeria, illustrates the external dimensions conflicts in the sub-region inevitably take.

The characterisation of West Africa as the most unstable sub-region in the world is also entirely substantiated by the interstate conflicts that occurred, a generation ago, between Mali and Burkina Faso, Senegal and Mauritania, etc, the civil war in Nigeria and, more recently, the bloody conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, and Senegal, to name but a few. While all this is certainly true, thankfully not all states are equally affected, the number of conflict has receded over the last few years, and where they linger they do not have the same intensity or effect on the sub-region as they did just a few years ago. All these conflicts had – and still have – domestic, regional, and international dimensions. It is critical to understand all these dimensions in order to effectively address their 'root causes' and prevent their resurgence. To be sure, conflict in West Africa has attracted considerable scholarly and journalistic analysis. So far, these analyses and prescriptions have had mixed, even controversial, results both on account of the diagnosis[22] and the prescriptive remedies for permanently shutting off West Africa's bountiful fount of crises and wars. These analyses have provided varying insights into just what makes Africa (and West Africa in particular) so conflict-prone and proffered solutions to this predicament.

The 'good news' is that, as Arie Kacowicz has satisfactorily established, West African states have, by and large, consciously renounced cross-border wars, establishing in the sub-region what he called a 'negative peace' among them.[23] Kacowicz shows that this has, nevertheless, been remarkable given the objective incentives for multiple territorial conflicts in the sub-region. This peaceful approach to relations between the states has certainly not obtained when it comes to contradictions within national boundaries, the two developments being connected. The insights – and oversights – of these studies can be judiciously exploited to further our understanding of the phenomenon. While these efforts continue, it is also fair to say that this all but permanent security crisis situation and consequent frequent violent conflicts have transformed ECOWAS and considerably slowed down the original economic integration mission its founding fathers envisioned.

As the regional organisation attempts to revert back to its original mission and integrate that of conflict management and prevention, efforts to help understand better in all its dimensions the extreme volatility of the sub-region must be redoubled. This chapter proposes to examine the international and external dimensions of the conflicts that have beset West Africa between the 1990s and 2008, with particular emphasis on the ongoing conflicts. Every conflict in West Africa, as anywhere in the world, stems first from objective socio-economic, psychological and political conditions on the ground in the confines of national boundaries. In an increasingly interdependent world, however, no conflict can escape the influence of realities and dynamics of the immediate sub-regional, regional, and wider international ever-evolving environments in which it unfolds. Indeed, these realities and dynamics, quite often, find themselves more or less

prominently in the causes of the conflict in the first place. These presumptions inform the present analysis of the internal and external dimensions of the conflict that have devastated West Africa starting in the late 1980s up to the present. It bears also saying that conflicts in (West) Africa are multidimensional and complex phenomena and that the space allocated for this analysis cannot possibly adequately encompass all their many dynamics and dimensions.

The chapter consists of two main sections which, respectively, tackle the internal and external dimensions of conflicts and crises in West Africa. To set the stage for the analysis provided in the two main sections of the chapter, a preliminary section provides a brief, relevant historical and socio-political background to the sub-region. First, while it is not necessary to address the theoretical aspects of the central concepts of this study, it is useful, however, to state that, subscribing to a definition by two well known theoreticians of conflict, by 'conflict' we mean 'a situation in which *actors use conflict behaviour against each other to attain incompatible goals and/or to express their hostility.*[24] 'Crisis' is operationalised as a situation of heightened tension in a polity that increases the probability of a conflict between relevant actors. 'External dimensions' refer to aspect of the conflict relating to actors and dynamics outside the national boundaries of a conflict-affected state, while 'internal dimensions' refer to dynamics inside those boundaries. Of course, this dichotomy is for convenience only since dimensions of conflict overlap necessarily, and are too intertwined to be neatly categorised.

West Africa: Relevant Background

The sixteen states of West Africa[25] present all the socio-political and economic diversity and face all the challenges readily associated with the entire continent. To that extent, with its nearly 250 million, almost 30 per cent of the total population of the continent, it is a microcosm of Africa. It should not be surprising therefore that the convulsions, trials and tribulations found elsewhere on the continent are also found, albeit with more intensity in its most populous sub-region. A critical starting point for any background note must be to say a word about the political realities and challenges the postcolonial state in West Africa faced as it came on the scene. Part of those realities is that, under the pressure of the nationalist and independence movement, a decidedly alien, repressive and exploitative colonial state was handed over, as it was, to a national elite to become the instrument of the national project. A postcolonial state that retained all the characteristics of a colonial state – the *raison d'être* of which was to carry out policies that were entirely contrary to the interests of the populations – was singularly ill-suited to the tasks that awaited it. In all the multiethnic, multilingual, haphazardly drawn, poor colonial territories that became 'national' states, that task was to forge national unity, develop the infrastructure (both physical and symbolic) of a modern state, where none existed.

This daunting mission was also supposed to be pursued in an environment characterised by a raging Cold War and former colonial powers, (singularly France, the former colonies of which constitute nine out of sixteen countries), that had not renounced the privilege they enjoyed just a few years earlier as the colonial master.

Soon enough, as the independence era got under way, the daunting character of the postcolonial undertaking became apparent. In nearly all the states in West Africa, already fractious national elites became caught up in the contradictions between carrying out a genuine national project which served as the basis of the anti-colonial movement and the strong inclination of many of them, backed more or less directly by former colonial powers, to simply man the inherited state and carry on with business as usual. Along these more or less ideological lines of division among elites (within countries but also across national boundaries)[26] were other lines of fracture that would soon prove deadly in many states. In effect, never far off the colonial project, in fact in large part created by it, ethnicity, region of origin, religion, in other words, identity politics quickly became a permanent fixture on national life in most West African states. In this context, the national development project rapidly receded, in some cases was even abandoned altogether. A mad race for self enrichment and aggrandizement started to rage among elites, and of course, to make this possible, the artificial democratic political systems hastily bequeathed at independence by the colonial system were jettisoned and replaced by authoritarian and repressive single party regimes. These became the instruments of a veritable looting operation carried out by the faction of the national elite that happened to have won out in any of the rivalries mentioned above.

As this went on, one of the symbols of the 'national sovereignty' supposed to have been won at independence entered the fray of national politics throughout West Africa. In nearly every single country, military intervention to take power became routine ushering in a political culture of military rule and a certain militarisation of political and social mores across the sub-region. It wasn't until the 1990s that, with the changes in the international system and the growing chorus worldwide for more democracy that a new political reality started to take shape in the sub-region (and throughout the continent). This new era, just as the previous one, entailed serious challenges for the states and their people.

The crises and conflicts that have singularly afflicted West Africa, staring in the 1990s and beyond, can be said to result from the confluence of the legacy of the colonial and post-colonial era as well as new challenges stemming from the reconfiguration of the world in the late 1980s. It is against this background that any analysis of the internal and external dynamics of conflict in West Africa can be done.

Internal Dimensions of West African Conflicts

By 2004, any objective observer of the sub-region would have had to concur with Peter Schwab (and notwithstanding his ominous 2001 book *Africa: A Continent Self-destructs*) that, indeed, West Africa was 'on life support'.[27] The most recent of its many conflicts, the civil war that has all but partitioned Cote d'Ivoire was in full gear with no end in sight, despite concerted efforts regionally and continent-wide with the full support of the United Nations. The outcomes of the decade-old civil wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia were uncertain; the acute governance and security crises in Guinea Bissau, Guinea, and Togo showed no sign of abating and even in countries where no openly tense situation prevailed such as Burkina Faso, The Gambia, Senegal, and Nigeria, low-intensity security crises could be discerned. In the latter two an unmistakable low-intensity internal warfare with occasional flare-ups existed. And denoting the frequent incidence of conflict in Africa, as of 2005, there were 14 peace missions of the United Nations in Africa, and three of them prominent in West Africa, namely in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Cote d'Ivoire.[28]

Thankfully, by 2007, the situation in West Africa has markedly improved and, using Schwab's allegory, the patient could be said to be breathing on his own and showing signs of steady improvement, even if any definitive prognosis must be reserved for the time being. The question, of course, is what characteristics do all these conflicts and crises share, and relatedly, which of their common features are generated and sustained by domestic dynamics. There is a consensus among observers of conflicts and crises in Africa that typically, these stem from, and have a structural, policy related, or behavioural character. This section examines some of the domestic characteristics of these conflicts.

An appropriate starting point to examine the internal dimensions of these conflicts seems to be the distinctive nature of the post-colonial state, the cardinal characteristic of which is its disjunction from the aspirations of the people it is supposed to serve. In all West African states in which these conflicts take place, the state has no legitimacy to speak of and no organic link with the populations who, decades after political independence, continue to view it as an alien, awkward institution from which they should not expect anything, and in which they have no stakes. Pita Agbese and George Kieh capture quite cogently this attitude when they observe the following:

> The typical African state is noted more as a repressive, brutal, corrupt and inefficient entity than as a mechanism for the promotion of the collective well-being of its citizens. Consequently, the modern state remains largely irrelevant to the needs, interests, and aspirations of the people. A telling evidence of the vote of confidence in the African state is the fact that even the African leaders who serve as the custodians of the state have little faith in its ability to cater to their well-being.[29]

Agbese and Kieh go on to back up and illustrate this attitude toward the state of the very people who are in charge of running it. They use for their family and themselves virtually none of the service they are supposed to make available for their people (including education, health care, etc) and, of course, they invest the product of the loot of national resources in foreign bank accounts. The end result being that '[c]itizens have no faith in their leaders [who symbolise the state] and they entertain no illusion that the state would address their concern and material well-being'.[30]

Given this widespread attitude toward the typical state, any challenge to it is welcome, indeed applauded, encouraged. Such challenges are often viewed by large segments of society as almost conducted on their behalf and deserving success, at least when initially launched. This discontent with the state as a structure that failed to live up to the expectations of the peoples of West Africa can certainly be seen in many of the conflicts listed above. Liberia is of course the typical illustration of this phenomenon, although not a former colonial state in the usual sense, it shares, as Ebo argues, the same 'neo-colonial structures'[31] with other neighbouring states that estranged the state as an institutional and political presence, from the overwhelming majority of the population. This alienation of the state from its people is of course widespread throughout the region where, because not only of its poor record of economic development, but repressive interaction with populations, the state is viewed more as a predatory and suffocating presence than a good Samaritan or even a useful tool. The crisis in Cote d'Ivoire has also been analyzed as one in a long series (not all as dramatic) and attributed to the utter failure of its successive leadership to seize upon numerous opportunities to create the appropriate connection between the post-colonial state and the people.[32] The same can be said of nearly every other state of the sub-region that found itself victim of intractable tensions, violence and war. All were caught up in the fundamental, eminently conflict-generating contradiction of societies at odds with the very tool supposed to ensure their security and provide for their other needs.

A second, very much-related common internal dimension of all these conflicts is a failure of governance on the part of regimes, more or less democratically elected. Even when, starting in 1990, the sub-region and the entire continent started to abandon the repressive policies that characterised earlier years, the outcome was more of the same failures, notwithstanding an opening up of the political space and the empowerment of more socioeconomic groups in society. Old habits die hard and even the improvements made did not eliminate the proclivity of the political leadership to violate the basic tenets of democratic governance. In other words, the extreme tensions and conflicts West Africa has experienced over the last few years are also directly related to what can be referred to as a double deficit in governance (to use a well-worn conceptualisation).

By failure of governance we mean not only the bad governance that has haunted the continent with repressive, ineffective leadership, exclusionary policies, but also the failure of the same leaders to anticipate and adequately address conflicts when they occur. In effect, political tensions and subsequent conflicts are often the result of the manner in which those who have been in power have run the affairs of the polity. They are also the logical outcome of how they have treated their compatriots who may not be of the same political persuasion, the same ethnicity or religion.. When power is used to exclude, to repress, and to deprive some people of their human and political rights and of their birthright to the 'pursuit of happiness' as the cliché goes, the logical consequence is the creation of an atmosphere where violent conflict is only a matter of the next trigger. Because of this particular deficit in governance characteristic of so many of the countries affected by conflict (notably Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau and Guinea Conakry), the conditions were so ripe for conflict that it took only a coup attempt or some other challenge to the existing order to trigger a spiral of violence. Even more than engaging in such undemocratic and repressive practices, the most remarkable aspect of this deficit is the failure of the typical leadership in West Africa to appreciate perceptively the likely price of their policies. As Raymond Copson has pertinently noted in the mid-1990s, during a period of turmoil in the sub-region,

> [m]istakenly, leaders believed that they could undermine opportunities for participation without encountering significant opposition from within societies they governed. It turned out, however, that many states were far weaker than their leaders realised, and that in many societies there were sources of opposition with a strong indigenous base. These included factions with a political, ethnic, or clan origin; regionally based opposition forces; religious movements; and local leaders and strongmen'.[33]

Compounding this miscalculation were serious policy decisions made 'with little or no attempt at consultation with affected groups and no genuine effort to accommodate the interests or obtain their consent,'[34] in an admittedly conflict-prone environment with many fracture lines as typical for West African states.

Fracture lines – be they religious, ethnic or regional – are not a source of conflict *per se*, even though they can very rapidly become the locus of conflict, intentionally or not, as Ero and Temin have shown.[35] This forms the connection with the other governance deficit variable mentioned above. In *Governance as Conflict Management,* William Zartman has noted that 'governance is conflict management. Governing a state is not only the prevention of violent conflict from destroying the country; it is the continual effort to handle the ordinary conflicts among groups and their demands which arise as society plays its role in the conduct of normal politics'.[36] The governance deficit resides also in the unwillingness or inability of many African governments to keep within bounds or adequately resolve and on a timely manner 'normal' conflicts and thereby

allow them to escalate into even more complex and deadly confrontations. With lightening speed, these conflicts reach well beyond the given government's ability to cope with them, even more so because it is not democratic to begin with, and has not developed popular and institutional capacity to handle the legitimacy and the confidence of the societal groups involved to increase the likelihood of success.

As a direct result of these intangible aspects and dynamics of conflicts, a non-democratic government sees retaliatory violence and repression as the only appropriate means of addressing conflicts. In itself, the attitude in itself only exacerbates conflict rather than resolve it. A careful scrutiny of the measured, responsible answer of the democratic Malian government to the recent resumption of the conflict with the *Touareg* rebellion contrasts starkly with the earlier knee-jerk reactions of previous non democratic governments of the same country (and in neighboring Niger) to what is, after all, a conflict that can find its resolutions more by democratic means than all out assault.

To further contrast the Malian approach, consider the overreaction of successive Nigerian governments (with emphasis on the 'law and order' dimension) to challenges to the Nigerian state in the Niger Delta.

While the challenges are not identical, there is a clear difference in the overall approach to the resolution of conflict made possible; in the first place, by what is clearly a deficit in governance, i.e. *not* attending responsively and effectively to the grievances and needs of populations with a strong sense that they were wronged by their country. Reflecting on the decisions that led in the past to serious deterioration of initially manageable conflicts in Africa, West Africa in particular), Copson suggests that '[m]ore prudent governments would have taken care to build consensus among key elements in society before launching major policy initiatives; and they would have sought to avoid shocking abuses of power that could alienate them from those key elements'.[37] Again, this double governance deficit is a major factor in the conflicts that affect West Africa. As long as it persists, conflicts are likely to continue to occur, escalate, and more importantly, when 'resolved,' to recur.

A third internal dimension of conflict in West Africa, not unrelated to this double deficit, is that they occur in an environment of widespread oppressive poverty, deteriorating economic outlook, and growing inequalities. As just argued, conflicts are a normal occurrence in any polity. They need not be destructive conflicts. For that they must be anticipated and managed competently and effectively. It is also widely accepted that conflicts naturally grow out of scarcity and competition for access to resources. Therefore, the socioeconomic environment prevailing in the states individually, and in the sub-region as a whole, will intimately affect not just the incidence of conflicts, but how (and the means with which) they will be approached and resolved. For example, with a long decried

near exclusive focus on blotted urban centres, it is evident that governments will be unable to find the right approach to conflicts whose epicentres are typically the countryside and its dynamics and the specific concerns of those who live there.

Very richly endowed in natural resources and therefore with the potential to provide decent living conditions for all their people, the sub-region has not been able to use this situation to the benefit of its people, and reduce the incidence of conflict.

Indeed there is a copious literature dealing with the existence of certain mineral wealth and how this is linked to civil wars.[38] Nevertheless, with a per capita GDP of 527 USD on average in 2004, West African states' economic growth over the last few years after some improvement, has considerably slowed, certainly since 2003. The growth of real GDP for the region has shrunk from an average of 4.2 per cent between 2000 and 2003 to 3.4 in 2004, according to the 2005 African Development Bank report, and stands at '1.7 percentage point below the continental average'.[39] A welcome statistic, however, is that, the external debt as a percentage of the GDP has significantly shrunk from 73.1 per cent to (a still sobering) 54.4 per cent in 2004.

A closer look at the landscape reveals that for 2004 (?), out of a group of 12 countries among the least performing in the world, nearly half (Benin, Guinea, Mali, Liberia, Niger) are from West Africa alone, the highest concentration of any region of the world (and Africa!), with nearly zero growth, if not negative growth altogether, according to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).[40]

With regard to the critical issue of food production, every country in the region had a negative per capita production, according to the World Bank 2006 world development indicators report.[41] Over the 1990s, many of the West African states had the lowest percentage of their populations with access to sanitation, safe water or health services, with Mali, Sierra Leone, and Liberia and Niger faring the worst. Not surprisingly, all have been conflict countries throughout that period and beyond. For the same period, according to the World Bank, West African countries have also had the highest proportions of their people living with only a dollar a day, for example, Mali (73%), Sierra Leone (57%), Burkina Faso (61%), and The Gambia (59%).

Meanwhile, the income distribution is one of the most skewed of the continent with up to as much as twenty times of the national income controlled by the top 10 per cent than the share controlled by the bottom 10 per cent of their poorest compatriots.[42] In addition to the other equally worrisome statistics on life expectancy, infant and child mortality as well as on unemployment, particularly the youth, these statistics result in extremely constraining conditions. These not only favour the emergence of conflicts, but make it more difficult for even the

most democratically minded government to manage or resolve these conflicts. Little wonder then, as Ero and Temin have noted, that '…conflicts centred around competition for scarce resources have intensified since the 1990, as leaders could not longer rely on aid from abroad to secure their position',[43] or for that matter, even address conflict effectively and genuinely if they wanted to.

The most visible inequalities (quite readily displayed in most countries) make a mockery of the pretension of belonging to the same nation. Policy processes and decisions or maladroit actions (even when unintentional), suffice to exacerbate these dimensions, accelerate or trigger conflicts with devastating consequences. As conflicts erupt (and they inevitably do), these constraints limit the ability of governments to divert them by reducing to, and remaking them about, the distribution of material rewards. When a solution is eventually found, they eventually contribute to reigniting future conflicts in two ways. First, ceasefires tend to rely on immediately carrying out measures that involve the rapid mobilisation of resources, the so-called deal sweeteners. When these are not forthcoming from the international community, the ambient economic constraints deny governments the ability to take those crucial measures in a timely manner to consolidate the ceasefire. Second, and possibly more importantly, they make it impossible to fulfil the central part of most peace agreements, addressing the root socioeconomic causes of most conflicts by investing economically and carrying out long term reforms to meet the needs of the aggrieved parties.

This makes it almost inevitable that the conflict will reignite in the near future. The non-application of the socioeconomic clauses of conflicts is not always attributable to the bad faith of the government (though that can be the case as for Taylor's Liberia and Gbagbo in Cote d'Ivoire) but, quite often, to the intractable dire economic conditions that are the backdrop of the conflict itself.

The resurgence of the Touareg crisis in Mali and Niger largely illustrates this entirely internal dynamic of conflict in the sub-region. So does, at least in part, the inability of Senegal to permanently solve the Casamance crisis largely because of the country's severe economic limitations. Let's not forget that in Mali and Niger only a decade ago, disaffected and unemployed youth from the Berber dwelling area imbued with Arab or Pan-Saharan Berber nationalism took up arms and succeeded in calling attention to the predicament of a long neglected aspect of Malian and *Nigerien* social and economic fabric. In many respects, the rebellion was, quite simply, the logical outcome of years of neglect of the interests and needs of minority populations of the north whose culture and life style, and specific concerns were ignored (possibly unwittingly) for too long by the political authorities in both countries.

A fourth dimension of conflicts in the sub-region has to do with the militarisation of the political culture that occurred over the first three decades of the post-colonial era. The military's repeated incursions in the political arena and its exercise

of power (usually synonymous with the cult of brute force and physical violence, repression and brutalisation of opponents), have injected perverse and morbid practices in the body politic of all countries of the sub-region except Cape Verde and Senegal. The logical extension and consequence of this infusion of martial values and instincts could only be the spread of conflict on the one hand, and, on the other, its corollary, an *a priori* aversion to compromise and peaceful, civilised settlement of disputes as the preferred means of resolving social and political contradictions. In this context, premium is put not on the peaceful resolution of conflict for the common good, but on who can prevail.

Supposed to be one of the strongest symbols of the nation-state and guarantor of its independent sovereign existence, the national army has become, by far, its most destructive institution by virtue of its necessary role in conflicts, and because of its role in causing these conflicts in the first place.[44] This can be measured by the impact militaries in Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire and Liberia, (in fact in every conflict country) have had in the origins, management, resolution of conflict as well as in peace building and peace consolidation. That role is more often than not problematic from the first fatidic step (meaning?) onwards.

The very act of coming to power through force is, in itself, a factor of conflict within the armed forces. It then seeps into society's fabric and other institutions and processes. For,

> However welcome and even salutary it may seem sometimes; the intervention of the military in the political arena invariably brings about an array of uncertainties and dangers. Not only is the potential for deep divisions within the military a very likely outcome with a chain of coups and counter-coups, but the potential for violence as the preferred means to solve contradictions increases sharply.[45]

Whether used by civilian authoritarian regimes to subdue or suppress opposition or doing it on their own behalf when in power, West African militaries are associated with exactions and unspeakable brutality that have driven people to enter into overt rebellion against the state, and led to a very low regard for and trust in the military. Once a conflict has erupted, these attitudes and sentiments will contribute to the continuation of conflict and make peace also difficult to attain and to maintain. While in armed conflict atrocities are sometimes committed by all belligerents, when they are committed by the national army in conflict, and even more so in cold blood in the absence of armed conflict, its impact on what lies ahead in terms of conflict resolution and prevention cannot be overstated.

There is a sense of betrayal that cannot be cast aside easily. It becomes a formidable psychological factor that will weigh on the management and resolution of conflict. It becomes an independent dimension of the conflict with its distinctive impact to be taken into consideration as a factor driving the conflict. Where military rule lasted, one of the dimensions of conflict quickly became, in most

cases, that there was (or is) no sense that the state (and those in charge of it), were apt or willing to honestly mediate the legitimate grievances of parties. Instead, the dominant feeling was that all that the state is interested in was to crush any part of society that dares to test the military's will.

In sum, this section has identified and analyzed the internal dimensions of conflict in West Africa. Among the many factors that affect how and why conflicts erupt and degenerate is the estrangement of the postcolonial state from the population it is supposed to serve. Another factor is the long running poor governance and the related inability of leaders to anticipate and properly manage even the most benign of conflicts once they occur. Other internal dimensions of conflict reviewed are, as a backdrop, dire endemic economic conditions made worse by poor economic performance over the last several years, and a history of militarism and abuses often committed by the military, the very institution charged with protecting the people. These internal dimensions of conflict are, unfortunately, often compounded by the external dimensions.

External Dimensions of Conflict

To discuss the external dimensions of conflict in West Africa, it is necessary to distinguish between the strictly sub-regional dimensions of these conflicts from those tied to, and affected by actors and forces outside the continent. The former refers to the impact a given state may have on a conflict or crisis originating outside its own national boundaries but occurring in another state of the sub-region. It refers also to the impact of the states of the sub-region acting collectively to affect the evolution and outcome of conflict in the neighbourhood. The latter refers to the dimensions of conflict as affected by the actions and attitudes of powers and actors outside the continent, typically world powers and the institutions they control. In this regard, the entire history of West Africa has been marked by the impact of activities of foreign powers in pursuit of interests and agendas that were (are?) not necessarily those of the peoples or states of the sub-region.

It should not come as a surprise that conflicts in the sub-region, even when indigenous in origin and nature, are also sometimes determined, heavily influenced and driven by dynamics directly related to these outside actors and forces. Indeed, as Copson has argued, the involvement of foreign powers in African conflicts has resulted in the increase in the level of violence in the 1980s.[46] Before examining some of these influences on a number of conflicts in the sub-region, it is appropriate to examine the dimensions of conflicts as determined by, and stemming from, the activities and policies of sub-regional actors and the impact of entirely sub-regional dynamics.

Sub-regional Dimensions

Invariably, any conflict in any state in West Africa affects and is affected by neighbouring states. This is due to the complexity and depth of the demographic, political, economic, and cultural ties that exist between countries whose boundaries were, after all, carved haphazardly. By and large, these countries share the same realities, in particular the internal dimensions of conflict discussed above, are therefore under the same pressures, and are, in addition, susceptible to be victims of the contagious effects of events occurring across their borders. A conflict in any country entails a high probability of rapidly spilling into its immediate neighbours if it does not, by its nature, affect already the citizens of these same neighbours who happen to reside in the affected country hence drawing in their country of origin. It is, therefore, only natural that as soon as a conflict situation is threatening in a given country, the reactions of its neighbours have the potential of profoundly affecting for ill or for good the trajectory of that conflict. Indeed, in some cases, conflict-affected countries accuse neighbouring states of having played a surreptitious role in their predicament and either threaten to take, or actually take, reprisal actions. In some cases they retaliated by fomenting conflict in accused neighbour, expanding, and complicating the initial conflict and pulling down the entire neighbourhood.

At any point during the Cote d'Ivoire conflict in September 2002, in Senegal throughout the 1980s and 1990s, throughout the Mano River basin, neighbouring countries have accused one another of interference Whether or not the accusations were founded, and whether or not the neighbouring countries liked it, the very nature and intricacy of these conflicts and their immediate impact on the entire sub-region made it inevitable that these conflicts would take a regional character and involve the concerned countries, individually and all the countries of the sub-region collectively. For once, even when circumscribed to the national boundaries of one state, because of the movement of populations, the victimisation of foreign nationals and the severe economic disruptions they often occasion, conflicts will rapidly cease to be 'an internal affair' governed by the international principle of 'national sovereignty'.

The propensity of domestic conflicts to rapidly turn into massive human rights violations, veritable massacres against minorities, and unarmed civilians all but guarantee that states and regional organisations will become involved and give the conflict external dimensions that soon overshadow the strictly domestic dimensions.

Since the 1990s, the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau and, more recently, Cote d'Ivoire have led to sustained diplomatic and military inter-ventions of the ECOWAS, the regional organisation. Those actions and the heavy intervention of concerned neighbours such as Burkina Faso in the Ivoirian crisis,

Senegal in Guinea Bissau, Guinea in both Liberia and Sierra Leone, and even more recently the implication of both Algeria and Libya in the conflict in Mali and Niger gave to all these conflicts a definite sub-regional character that transformed both their dynamics and outcome. This is not to say that the role of intervention in conflict originating in their neighbours is always or even often positive. The role of Charles Taylor in both Sierra Leone and Guinea was most destabilising, for example. It is also well known that President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso meddled in the conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone, allegedly for personal gain, and that President Jammeh of The Gambia played an unhelpful role in both the Casamance conflict and the civil war in Guinea Bissau. It was also the bitter rivalry between Presidents Conté of Guinea and Taylor of Liberia that complicated all the Mano River basin conflicts and prolonged the miseries of the people of that area.

Finally, an external dimension to consider for some of these conflicts, most recently the Ivorian conflict, is the involvement of European mercenaries, used by both sides. The same were notoriously used in the Sierra Leone civil war. More importantly, the use or potential use of 'armed and aimless'[47] regional 'professional' mercenaries made up of unemployed youth toughened by previous wars in which they participated has become a worrisome dimension of conflicts throughout West Africa. Of course, when military intervention as ECOWAS did in Liberia and Sierra Leone, most notably was decided, the regional dimension trumped the domestic and bi-lateral dynamics altogether.

This does not mean that those dynamics will not remain important and cannot complicate the military intervention or mission, as indeed was the case in both Guinea Bissau and Sierra Leone. It must be added that the relative success achieved by ECOWAS and its continued vigorous engagement in the various conflicts in the sub-region significantly alter the dynamics of conflict since parties to potential conflicts will now make it part of their calculus and strategies that they have to contend with a very close by and determined external actor. This, in the end, will be a factor in conflict in the sub-region although ECOWAS' role in conflict management has absorbed an inordinate amount of energy, talent, and resources that could have been used to pursue its original economic development and integration mission.

International Dimensions

While West Africa was not as affected by Cold War politics as East or Southern Africa was, it did not escape the determination of powerful states in the world to pursue aggressively their own geo-strategic and economic interests and agendas on the continent. Pursuing their Cold War objectives in West African countries, the United States, but also former colonial powers, namely France whose former colonies make up the majority of the states in the sub-region, and Great Britain,

arguably the lesser involved did, over the years, impact the nature, evolution and outcome of various conflicts in the sub-region.

The most immediate effect of these external actors on conflict in the sub-region was that they typically supported (through arms transfer and financial backing) some of the most repressive regimes in the sub-region, whether Samuel Doe in Liberia, Eyadema in Togo, Houphouet-Boigny) in Cote d'Ivoire and others. This support contributed to building in West African states all the ingredients and domestic factors of conflict discussed above. One particular aspect of the role of external power that is directly related to conflict is that, according to Copson, '[f]oreign actors had initially helped to widen state-society gaps in Africa when their aid encouraged particular regimes to believe that, because of foreign backing, they were capable of imposing their will on society'.[48]

As the former United Nations Secretary General also put it, speaking for the whole continent, 'undemocratic and oppressive regimes were supported and sustained by the competing super-powers in the name of their broader goals but, when the Cold War ended, Africa was suddenly left to fend for itself'.[49]

This abandonment, the so-called marginalisation of the continent, no longer deemed strategically significant after 1990, that is, until the September 11, 2001 attacks, that suddenly revised this assessment, contributed another external dimension to the conflict that occurred in the 1990s. For many of these conflicts West African states were left to manage, on their own, often without any serious attempts by major powers to help in any tangible way. For example, while under Samuel Doe the US was quite involved, even supporting his antics, when the civil war raged, the US was nowhere to be found, when a vigorous support of local efforts would have made a decisive difference early on. Furthermore, while the intervention of Great Britain is credited for ending the civil war in Sierra Leone, actually, it was the efforts of ECOWAS, through ECOMOG that shouldered the bulk of the peace enforcement efforts that made it possible for Great Britain to reap the glory of having imposed peace much later, when it remained on the sidelines for many years while the brutal civil war raged.

During the Cold War, France played its part in the tacit arrangement/division of labor between western powers Peter Schraeder calls the 'complementary Cold War regime,'[50] whereby its dominion was recognised over its former colonies, with the mandate of keeping them firmly on the side of the West, including hosting military bases and providing strategic minerals and products. That arrangement ended with the fall of the Berlin wall and was replaced with the uncertainties and tensions inherent in the post-Cold War world dominated by a single, now less accommodating superpower, the US. As a consequence, France was left to try and remain relevant even after it was forced to scale back its proclivity to intervene freely in the internal affairs of its former colonies to bolster friendly regimes or undermine those judged recalcitrant.[51]

These activities too contributed to the conflicts that erupted after the Cold War ended and direct intervention to defend Western interests was no longer necessary. When the September 2002 crisis started in Cote d'Ivoire, France did intervene under the pretext of protecting its citizens caught in the crossfire and ended up obtaining a UN Security Council mandate to position forces between the belligerents and to pursue efforts to end the crisis. While France continued to play a major role in this crisis, its presence on the ground and its diplomatic efforts arguably contributed to exacerbating and prolonging the crisis. Because of its record of pursuing its interest to the detriment of those of its former colonies, it was suspected by all parties to the conflict of having a hidden agenda and pursuing neo-colonial designs. Indeed, when the Licorne forces[52] opened fire on unruly and threatening young Ivoirians in November 2004, the external dimensions of the conflict were spotlighted. It is significant that with the domestic impetus for a lasting solution to the crisis, France's role, both diplomatic and military, is fast receding. However, France continues to maintain troops and military advisors in the country and other parts of West Africa and is likely to continue to play a significant role in the sub-region.

With the reconfiguration of the international system after the end of the Cold War and a reorientation of France foreign policy toward Europe, there has been an increased coordination of their Africa policies between the former colonial powers. France has also showed less willingness to intervene militarily and directly in the domestic Affairs of its former colonies or meddle in crises. However, old habits are hard to abandon as France's continued interference in Chad and Central African Republic demonstrate. Furthermore, France's interests in Africa (strategic military positioning and access to resources and markets, not to mention prestige) remain unchanged. It is also believed that France may very well have played a role in the current *Touareg* crisis in Niger and that this has to do with French businesses' unhappiness with Niger's new uranium policies. Nevertheless, there is a difference between France's attitude toward Africa today and its behavior prior to the end of the Cold War.

While the same could have been said about the United States throughout the 1990s, after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, the US Africa policy has markedly evolved and can be said to have become even more distinctly a dimension of conflict in the West African sub-region in particular.

The Pan-Sahel initiative aimed at preventing the implantation of terrorist groups in a vast, hard-to-control swathe of territory in the upper portion of West Africa has been one of the most notable American initiatives. It is in this context that the military assistance the US extended to Mali in the *Touareg* conflict must be placed. The United States' determination to prevent the growth in a region predominantly of Muslim movements hostile to its policies and/or sympathetic to its enemies has also been the basis of an intensification of its various efforts. Another

consideration is, of course, the fact that, since 2000, the US has imported more than 10 per cent of its crude oil from Africa, mainly Nigeria. This portion is destined to increase and so will the US efforts to guarantee secure supply of energy. The unfolding tensions in the Niger Delta in Nigeria, and the possible disruption of oil extraction in that area, may very well hasten the involvement in some fashion of the US. Whether or not this will contribute to resolving the crisis instead of exacerbating it is not easy to determine at this point in time. This suggests, however, that it is likely that the sub-region and for that matter the entire continent (with the current efforts to sell the unilaterally decided Africa Command, AFRICOM), will continue to be an area of interest and occasional interventions of the United states in its 'Global War on Terror' and to ensure the safe supply of oil.

Another external dimension of conflict in West Africa with an incidence on the economic backdrop to conflicts discussed above is the role of funding institutions. For decades, the IMF and the World Bank, though structural adjustment programs and other interventions, have affected the economic and social conditions of all West African states. Since it is widely accepted that, overall, the involvement of these financial institutions have failed to improve the socioeconomic conditions, and have instead, exacerbated them, it is evident that this outcome has an incidence on conflict and the ability of the states to handle them. For example, Eboe Hutchful has argued that the neo-liberal ideology inspired imposition of severe budgetary cut of military budgets inspired by Western donors as the Cold War ended has contributed to hollowing out many states' security sectors making them susceptible to, and unable to meet, the challenges posed by armed groups.[53] According to him, this has accelerated Africa's security crisis and its attendant conflicts.

Similarly, the 1994 devaluation of the CFA currency in the French-controlled monetary zone (UMOA (Union Monetaire de l'Afrique de l'Ouest) has also contributed to the economic weakening of many francophone states and indirectly sown the seeds of some of the crises, the civil was in Cote d'Ivoire in particular.

Conclusion and Implications for the Future

This chapter has argued that, in addition to an antiquated, inept post-colonial state, the countries of the sub-region share widespread poverty, exceedingly unequal access to income, wealth, and consumption, a history of chequered governance, militarism and poor human rights records as critical internal dimensions of conflict. They have experienced, to varying degrees, lingering social and political tensions that have escalated in destabilising armed conflicts in the 1990s and beyond as a consequence of the conjugation of these factors. These predicaments are dimensions of conflict the effect of which must be understood to better address the existing conflicts and prevent the occurrence of other destructive ones. Of course, understanding these conflicts and their dynamics in West Africa will be impossible without also examining their external dimensions.

These can be either the specific actions of neighbouring states (or their leaders), and their roles in conflicts beyond their borders or the usually salutary interventions of the ECOWAS. External dimensions are also the open or surreptitious role of powerful states and non-state actors outside the continent. That role has been, at times, nefarious and driven by selfish economic or strategic interests and has, in the past, complicated the solution to conflicts. Current circumstances, though different from those extant during the Cold War period, carry the same danger for the sub-region's ability to prevent conflicts or, when they erupt, to manage them according to its own interests and agendas.

In recent years, ECOWAS has embodied those interests and the forward-looking approach to the challenges facing the peoples and states of the sub-region. In this role, ECOWAS has certainly accumulated an invaluable experience starting with peacekeeping operations during the 1990s civil-wars in the Mano River basin. More recently, ECOWAS carried out relentless preventive and mediation efforts in various crises and conflicts, whether in Togo or Cote d'Ivoire.

The continued susceptibility of the sub-region to conflict and indeed the fragility of the peace settlements in the countries recently emerging from conflict dictate that ECOWAS must be ready to continue to take on this charge. It must continue to heighten the awareness of West African people and states of the long-term nature of conflict prevention and resolution. ECOWAS must make sufficient room in its future plans for extensive efforts both in preventive diplomacy and in strengthening its material, operational, and logistical capacities. It must also accelerate the implementation of its own pertinent instruments for conflict prevention and democratic consolidation, and the AU Peace and Security Council Protocol which have the same aim. The 2001 ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance provides an appropriate monitoring framework and instrument for conflict prevention and for avoiding bad situations reaching crisis proportions. Pertinent aspects of the AU Peace and Security Council Protocol are another avenue to monitor and bring needed corrections to the policies and behaviour of states that could endanger regional peace and stability. Article 3 of that Protocol states that its objectives are *inter alia* to 'promote peace, security and stability in Africa' (which is also one of the areas where the Council performs its functions) and 'anticipate and prevent conflicts'.

Another critical objective of the protocol is to 'Promote and encourage democratic practices, good governance and the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for the sanctity of human life…' all of which will help prevent conflicts. Finally, ECOWAS must, without delay, start implementing (or strengthening) its early warning mechanisms and the provisions of the stand-by forces in the AU protocol. In essence, the regional organisation must remain vigilant in order to abort any potential for conflict in West Africa, whether domestic or foreign in origin.