Contemporary Warfare in Africa

Changing Context, Changing Strategies

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1 Introduction

There is increasing academic and journalistic interest in the apparent breakdown of organized society in much of Africa, in the context of prolonged war. Some commentators have gone so far as to identify a degenerative social disease in Africa that threatens to infect the rest of the world - 'the coming anarchy' (Kaplan 1994). While social dislocation and the frustration and delinquency of members of some social categories are important phenomena, this is a travesty of the complex power relations, economic and social structures, and military doctrines that determine the nature of contemporary warfare in Africa. Low technology it may be, 'primitive' or 'anarchic' it is not. As so often, such pejorative labels merely indicate that the writer is incapable of analysing what is, in reality, taking place.

It is difficult to generalize about contemporary African warfare. The highly-disciplined, highly-motivated fighters of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) are a stark contrast with child soldiers who form many of the shock troops of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). But some generalizations are in order, and it is arguable that the EPLF represents the exception, and the NPFL the trend.

This article briefly seeks to place contemporary forms of warfare in Africa in a historical context, namely the end of the Cold War, coinciding with protracted economic crisis.

The means whereby fighting forces are maintained and supplied are essential to understanding how wars are fought. Just as the economic crisis in Africa has had profound consequences for rural development and the provision of social services, it has had a profound impact on military establishments. Governments find it more difficult to sustain and control armies, which then turn to local sources of provisioning. These include requisitioning, looting and taxing local populations, involvement in commerce, and diverting humanitarian aid. Though the causes of wars in Africa and the aims of the combatants are still almost exclusively phrased in terms of achieving state power and affecting constitutional change, the realities on the ground reflect more intense predatory behaviour by soldiers.

The structural transformation in the means of mobilizing military forces is matched by new military doctrines appropriate to such self-reliant, low technology forces. Military commanders have found doctrines of counter-insurgency warfare and destabilization developed during the Cold War to be highly effective. There is careful, deliberate strategy behind much of what appears to be pathological violence.

2 Re-assessing Cold War Strategies

With hindsight, it is necessary to re-evaluate some of the key components of Cold War conflict in Africa. Superpower patrons competed for African clients, and supported favoured governments militarily and economically, or alternatively backing the guerrilla movements opposed to them. External military and economic assistance facilitated the creation of top-heavy centralized states.

African states used a variety of means to suppress insurrection, ranging along a spectrum between two radically different approaches. One approach centralized state military power in a massive, monolithic army. The paradigm of this approach was Ethiopia under Mengistu Haile Mariam. The contrasting approach was the deliberate fragmentation of military structures, so as to diffuse any threat to the government from within the military itself. The paradigmatic case of this is Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko. This section will briefly contrast the two.

The former Ethiopian government used mass, forcible conscription to create an army that at its height was about 500,000 strong. Excepting the Red Terror of 1977-8, conscription was arguably the most unpopular of the government's policies, especially among townspeople. Recruitment campaigns, initially envisaged as yearly events, became more and more frequent to the extent that by mid-1988 it was a continual process. 'Everything to the warfront' became the official slogan in 1988. Quotas for recruits for neighbourhood associations were replaced by violent press-ganging.

By 1990, Ethiopia had obtained an estimated US$8 billion worth of military equipment from the USSR, including over 1450 battle tanks and 120 combat aircraft (NOVIB 1991).

The conscripts were then given a rudimentary military training and sent to the front. They proved unwilling and unreliable troops. After monumental destruction and loss of life, the Ethiopian army was not only defeated but destroyed. The largest army in sub-Saharan Africa simply disintegrated between February and May 1991 under the final onslaught of the rebel fronts that now comprise the core of the governments of Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Mengistu's defeat dramatizes the shortcomings of a massive, centralized Soviet-style army. Neither has a similar strategy proved successful elsewhere, for example in Angola. Even before 1991, the lessons were being learned elsewhere.

In Zaire, Mobutu Sese Seko observed the vulnerability of central government in a huge country to military coup and regional insurrection. Three decades after being plucked from obscurity to impose order on the disintegrating state of the ex-Belgian Congo, Mobutu is still there. He cannot achieve any form of social or economic development in Zaire, but he is in power.

Mobutu's strategy was to fragment the security services and armed forces. The army has been run down to a strength of merely 20,000 men, most of whom are poorly equipped. In response to internal threats, a succession of clandestine special strike forces were formed, deployed and then dissolved. The President presides over no fewer than six specialized security services, including: (1) the 10,000-strong civil guard, (2) the Special Presidential Division (DSP), (3) the Gendarmerie Nationale, putatively a unit of the national army, (4) a clandestine hit squad known popularly as 'Les Hiboux', reportedly trained by the former South African government, (5) the Service Nationale d'Intelligence et de Protection (SNIP), the civilian security force and (6), the Service d'Action et de Renseignements Militaires (SARM), the military intelligence force. These all report to the President and are commanded by men hand-picked for loyalty. In addition, Mobutu has regularly used foreign mercenaries in defence of his position.

In the vast and dispersed regions of Zaire, military commanders run what are in effect semi-autonomous fiefdoms. Many of their troops are not paid. Instead they engage in private commerce,

raise contributions at roadblocks, or loot and pillage from the local population. Sexual violence against women is common.

Mobutu has also run down the transport and communications infrastructure of the country. At independence, Zaire had 140,000 miles of paved road; by the early 1970s, there were only 20,000 miles, and since then the network has deteriorated further. This also helps prevent the mobilization of military opposition to his rule.

The success of Mobutu and the failure of Mengistu in holding on to power holds lessons that many African rulers have not been slow to absorb. This coincides with structural pressures for more devolved and fragmented forms of military mobilization.

3 Structural Changes to Warfare

The era of powerful aid-supported centralized states has come to an end. Many governments remain strong; they can still command wealth, legitimacy and arms, and in some cases the positions built by their leaders during the Cold War seem to be virtually unassailable. But the relationship between governments and people has fundamentally changed, as rulers can no longer seek unlimited support from their foreign patrons.

This has not stopped the competition for state power, but it has meant that governments can no longer intervene with complete impunity in local affairs. In the extreme case, the removal of government can assist in building peace. The central rangelands of Somalia are a case in point.

This region is overwhelmingly pastoral, and the conflict of the 1980s was sparked in large part by central government manipulation of local conflicts over resources such as grazing and trade routes. While one clan could call upon paratroopers to support its claims, resolution of the disputes was impossible. The removal of the central government in 1991 has, while not necessarily restoring an 'equilibrium', at least meant that the problems and the means of resolution have been matched. Clan elders are negotiating over clan resources without fear of interference from a partisan government.

The weakening of states has also led to a blurring of the distinction between insurgency and counter-insurgency. This difference was already becoming less significant as more governments resorted to various forms of military mobilization based on paramilitaries. The chief remaining difference is air power, but some African governments are now without an effective air force.

The 'privatization' of national armies has become commonplace: almost every army on the continent is involved in business in one way or another. Even the ferociously centralized former Ethiopian army saw numerous officers selling arms and ammunition in the last years of the war. This privatization is often (though not always) accompanied by fragmentation. This break-up is often not explicit - it is only in centralized armies that there is a reason to mutiny; in fragmented armies, an independent-minded commander can do whatever he likes without mutiny.

Sudan: the militia strategy

The mobilization strategy adopted by successive governments in Sudan during the 1980s is an important case, showing how near-bankrupt states can mobilize when faced with the threat of insurrection. The strategies adopted by both government and rebels, working within a state in profound crisis, led directly to a classic post-Cold War conflict. The hinge on which this transformation turned was the 'militia strategy' - a means of waging war opportunistically seized upon by President Nimeiri and then developed by his successors.

The origins and development of the Sudanese civil war have been detailed elsewhere and will not be recounted here (Johnson and Prunier 1993). One component, however, has been insufficiently stressed, namely the promotion of the oilfield militias. This case is worth examining in some detail, because it indicates how apparently uncontrolled ethnic strife is a direct outcome of military and political strategy.

The 'Unity' oilfield, at Bentiu in Upper Nile, close to the internal north-south frontier, promised a huge economic windfall that would break Sudan's economic decline. For some years before the acknowledged outbreak of war in 1983, Bentiu area was

known as 'Beirut' because of the level of banditry and cattle raiding. This reflected the failure of the government to deliver on its promises of development, and the deepening marginalization of the pastoralists in the region. Discontent among former Anyanya guerrillas from Sudan's first civil war (1955-72), who had been absorbed into the Sudanese army, led to many defections and minor mutinies. In response to this local insecurity, the oil company Chevron proposed hiring mercenaries - reportedly from the Philippines. The government's counter-suggestion was to create a local protection force.

A militia was formed from the Misiriya section of the Baggara Arab pastoralists, who live just to the north of the internal frontier. This marked the beginning of the militarization of rural Sudan. The Baggara militias, commonly known as *Murahaliin* became the most active and most violent of the government forces for the first five years of the war. *Murahaliin* fighters armed themselves for a mixture of personal and communal motives, and the war became inextricably entangled in a whole set of local disputes between and within local communities.

The 'militia strategy' generated its own momentum through militarization, the expansion of cattle raiding, and the breakdown of customary and governmental mechanisms for resolving local inter-ethnic disputes (de Waal 1993a). The drought and famine of 1983-5 in northern Sudan drove destitute former herders to seek to replenish their stocks through raiding, and traders with squeezed profit margins to turn to financing cattle raiding as a lucrative business (de Waal 1993b, Keen 1994).

A complementary strategy followed by the government was to buy off fragments of the southern militias - all of whom called themselves Anyanya-2 - with money, weaponry, and promises of political rewards. At one time in 1984, Nimeiri was negotiating with no fewer than six different armed southern factions, all operating in the vicinity of the oilfields. These negotiations meant that a range of local concerns became central to the dynamics of the conflict - the personal, commercial and ethnic rivalries between the factions and their leaders. By 1984, a single, government-supported 'Anyanya 2' existed. An exclusively ethnic Nuer force, it fuelled Nuer-Dinka ethnic tension, helped portray the SPLA as a 'Dinka army', and posed the main military challenge to Garang for the first four years of the war, until Anyanya 2 split in 1987.

The 'militia strategy' served Nimeiri's political purposes well. In 1984 he canvassed the idea of mass conscription but quickly realized that it would lead to popular unrest in the main cities. Nimeiri also distrusted the army (with good reason, as it transpired) and was unwilling to entrust more power to them. A major purge of the army in early 1982 was followed by an outright bribe to the remaining officers: the Military Economic Board was set up, which transferred seventy public sector companies to military control. In an echo of Mobutu's policy, army officers could now also run businesses, with considerable tax breaks (de Waal 1993b). Commerce and war were closely linked thereafter. Merchant-officer partnerships made fortunes through smuggling, dealing in scarce commodities in garrison towns and cattle raiding.

Avoiding mobilizing the army also had the advantage that Nimeiri could pretend to his patrons and creditors that Sudan was not really at war, but merely beset with some localized ethnic problems. Finally, the militia strategy was cheap. It only required supplying small arms and ammunition - and many of the militiamen had armed themselves already in any case.

The subsequent history of the war has reinforced the local impulses towards fragmentation, as external sponsorship declined. Nimeiri was overthrown in April 1985, but his successors intensified the militia strategy, finally legalizing them in 1989. Drought and famine intensified the economic incentives for militia raiding. The parliamentary government of Sadiq el Mahdi also began to envisage the militias as a political counterweight to the army.

Military officers' attitudes to the militias are ambivalent. In the first six years of war, the army relied on the militias to do most of the fighting, so that the army itself sustained very few casualties, but also saw few military successes. The army also saw the militias as a threat to its position. The military government of Lt-Gen Omer al Bashir, that seized power in 1989, also began to recognize that the

militias were a danger. Some defected to the SPLA and some refused to fight.

Senior military officers also believed that only the army could decisively defeat the SPLA, if only they were given full support by the politicians. This belief was fostered by the military success of the only two major conventional operations undertaken in the South before 1989. The present government of Sudan has therefore tried to reverse the trend towards fragmentation. Since 1990, the Sudanese militia strategy has been to create a conscript paramilitary force, the *Mujahidiin*, who are raised in the name of Islamic extremism and who fight under the command of the army. It remains to be seen whether this novel and somewhat anomalous attempt at centralized mass mobilization will succeed.

4 The Fragmentation of Insurrection

The fragmentation of government military mobilization has been matched by the increasing structural incoherence of insurrectionary groups. During the Cold War, the centralization of power and resources in the state in turn centralized the struggle for power. While left-wing rebel movements developed radical intellectual critiques of the nature of state power, this was rarely translated into a practical agenda for dismantling states themselves. This was a cause of strain among rural followers whose agendas were both more immediate and more radical - the removal of a state presence.

In the independence struggle for Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) mobilized large sections of the rural population in support of its guerrilla war. Most commentators have supposed that this reflects an identity of aims and, if only passingly, of interests between the guerrillas, their leaders and the peasants. In fact, as Norma Kriger has recently shown (Kriger 1992), rural people had their own reasons for participating in the war. Many participated through coercion. Those who did so willingly were often pursuing local agendas of social change, with the targets of their grievances other local farmers, shopkeepers, administrators; more powerful local lineages; or their parents or husbands. While the ZANU leadership claimed that the promotion of women's rights was a fundamental tenet of their struggle, the reality on the ground was somewhat different. There was a vast gap between the token women who represented the front abroad and the experience of women in the villages and the fighting units.

Violent resistance is particularly common among pastoralists. Government policies that render illegal or unviable the livelihoods of whole sections of the community invite criminality as a response, both as a means of securing an alternative income and as a protest against forms of authority that radically transgress customary rights.

Pastoralists tend to make fierce fighters. However, the acephalous nature of many pastoral societies makes it difficult for them to sustain centralized insurrectionary armies. Pastoral nomadism implies a wide territorial spread, with authority for decision making devolved down to local units such as lineages. Much of this decision making involves diplomatic contact with neighbouring communities - a practice that has to be reversed if a central military authority is to be imposed. Rebel armies based among pastoralists therefore manifest considerable strain between these contrary impulses.

Almost all the African rebel movements that endured during the Cold War did so with external support. External sponsorship led to centralized control of supplies of arms, ammunition, food, intelligence, security and propaganda in insurgent movements. This led to a characteristic three-zone structure. A base area, either in a remote corner of the country or in a neighbouring country, provided a secure zone for training, resupply and the activities of internal intelligence. The base area might include refugee or displaced camps that were fed by the international community, enabling the rebel commanders to divert substantial amounts of food 'at source.' Beyond the base, there was a consolidated area, in which a recognizably normal economic life prevailed, with the rebel movement providing some administration and services in return for raising taxes and obtaining recruits. Beyond that, an operations area was contested with the government forces.

For insurgents too, the decline in external sponsorship is weakening military hierarchies. Without a

centralized supply or arms, provisions, propaganda and other necessities, the main impulses towards centralization are lost.

The Sudan People's Liberation Army

Sudan is, once again, a dramatic example of how constraints on mobilization have dramatically affected the nature of insurrection (African Rights 1993). From its inception in 1983 until May 1991, the SPLA relied upon Ethiopian sponsorship and Ethiopian bases to unify the movement. During this time, the SPLA had a three-zone structure. Its base area was in the Gambella region of Ethiopia. Adjacent to this, inside Sudan, was a slowly-expanding consolidated area. The remainder of southern Sudan was a contested operations area.

In contrast to Maoist doctrine, the SPLA only built up the most basic reciprocal relations with the local population. The best SPLA commanders were akin to paternalistic colonial administrators; the worst were predators.

Immediately after the fall of Mengistu and the loss of external support, the SPLA began to fragment. Just four months later, in August 1991, two senior commanders, Riek Machar and Lam Akol, split away and formed the 'SPLA-United' faction. Though the commanders' dissent was based upon issues of internal democracy, the division rapidly took on ethnic lines, recreating the Nuer-Dinka split of the early days of the war.

The three zone structure collapsed. Unable to divert food and fuel 'at source' in the base area, the SPLA commanders sought to obtain it from relief operations at the point of delivery. Riek's ability to command independent relief supplies to their headquarters, through Operation Lifeline Sudan, underpinned his initial breakaway. Maintaining a flow of relief thus became a strategic imperative. When the relief is inadequate or unreliable, the worst predatory tendencies manifest themselves. Many units sustain themselves through looting and cattle raiding, a reflection of the SPLA's failure to build up an internal economic base. Where commercial opportunities, such as smuggling coffee or logs, are available, they are exploited too.

The structure of the humanitarian programme in southern Sudan, with direct delivery (usually by air) to numerous locations, has helped determine the structure of political-military authority within the southern movement. Commanders are impelled to retain concentrations of hungry people to attract international relief.

Since 1991, the SPLA has continued to split. Riek Machar and Lam Akol have divided, their difference taking on a Nuer-Shilluk ethnic divide; and other SPLA-United commanders have gone their separate ways. Several of the commanders receive support from the government.

Local constraints, national aspirations

Throughout Africa, an important component of commanders' independence is their ability to control local commerce. The integration of commerce and violence in government armies has been matched by similar processes in rebel movements and militias.

In Liberia, Charles Taylor can finance his forces through commercial logging. In Angola, ivory smuggling and diamond digging lie at the centre UNITA's military strategy. In Somalia, control over the trade in the narcotic leaf *qat* has been an essential component of General Aidid's ability to maintain his militia.

An investigation of the role of ethnicity in contemporary armed conflict is beyond the scope of this article. But the salience of ethnic identification cannot be ignored, and it is quite possibly sharpening. With the devolution of military authority down to the level of local commanders, comes the identification of individual military units with their particular locales. Ethnicity is characteristically used by authoritarian rulers to divide and rule their subjects. Having been thus used, it readily takes on a life of its own, and becomes a means of local mobilization of armed forces.

In practice, the war aims of more and more insurgents and militias are more and more local and specific. Sustaining and enriching themselves, and securing supplies of ammunition, fuel and food have become the overriding preoccupation of some

groups. However, this is rarely explicit. Most still avow political programmes that hark back to an earlier era of nationalism. Sudanese factional leaders who control merely a tiny area and whose allegiance seems to be available at the price of a truckfull of ammunition still speak about the need to separate religion and the state, and the difference between regional autonomy, confederation and self-determination. In Somalia, leaders of local factions appear to be gripped by a nostalgia for a form of stable nation-statism that they have never had. Just as anti-colonial peasant revolts wanted to resurrect a moral order that had almost certainly never existed except in a (false) folk memory, it seems that a longing for a remote and receding form of ideal sovereign government is informing many African fighters.

The reality that the old days of aid-supported centralized states has gone has yet to be fully recognized; there is still the anticipation in many places that capture of a state will bring the same set of powers and privileges that Cold War rulers enjoyed by virtue of superpower patronage. The French government has played a central role in this. Under successive presidents, France has been the most active super-power in Africa. Mitterand's personal links with many Francophone African leaders, and his belief that France's position in the world depends upon a prominent role in Africa, led to France giving disproportionate support to its African friends.

5 New Military Doctrines

In Africa today, despite the apparent chaos of irregular warfare, military doctrine is evolving rapidly. One reason for this is simply that the continent has seen continuous warfare for the last three decades, so that commanders have tremendous field experience, and have improvized. Innovations can be seen in the adaptation of military technologies - for example the EPLF fitted captured Soviet-made tanks with new gearboxes so that they could operate more effectively in mountainous terrain. There is also a more widespread and insidious set of innovations, the development of new methods of combat, recruitment and use of social and psychological methods of destabilization. There is enough that is new, and enough that is the novel recombination of familiar elements, to warrant the description, a 'new doctrine' of warfare.

Contemporary African military theory cannot be found in manuals. It is not written down, partly because it is deliberately secret and untraceable, and partly because it is not imparted through formal military academies. Some of the leading practical theoreticians of new forms warfare are well known (Yoweri Museveni, Jonas Savimbi, Charles Taylor), others are anonymous.

Contemporary military discourse in Africa can trace its ancestry to many sources both inside and outside the continent. There are still-vibrant indigenous traditions of warfare, some of which are passed on in initiation ceremonies and secret societies, particularly in west Africa. As part of their initiation into these societies, young men are taught specific military practices which may have originated centuries ago. The methods of initiation and the means whereby discipline is maintained among the members of secret societies may have important parallels in military recruitment and organization - parallels that are necessarily obscure to outsiders.

It would be a mistake, however, to suggest that contemporary African warfare is essentially a resurgence of old practices. The key influence on the military discourse has been insurgency and counter-insurgency doctrine, developed in Europe, America, the former Communist bloc and the former racist regimes in southern Africa. These doctrines have been rigorously tested in the field and refined through experience.

The legacy of Maoist theories of 'people's war' remains significant in Africa. A whole generation of guerrilla fighters was schooled in Maoist practice and its Cuban variant. Socialist ideology and Maoist practice were, for the most part, intimately linked. Soldiers fight for partly for ideology and ideology is in turn central to effective discipline.

During the Cold War, the principal exponents of Maoist variants of guerrilla warfare were to be found in Eritrea, Tigray and southern Africa. These struggles centred on making appeals to peasant grievances and linking the conduct of the war to programmes of social and economic reform, such

as land reform, literacy and female emancipation. Recruitment to the ranks of the fighting forces was achieved through political mobilization. Relations with the peasantry in the liberated areas were characterized by reciprocity; the people fed and sheltered the guerrillas, and provided them with intelligence, in return for protection and a political programme that furthered their social and economic aims. Women were encouraged to join, in rhetoric at least on an equal basis. Mao's dictum that once the support of the masses is forfeited, the revolution is lost, was adhered to - or at least, it was not explicitly rejected.

In all of these cases, the analyses of the insurrections have largely been the work of those who sympathized with the revolutionary cause, and who relied on the accounts of members of the guerrilla elite and other sympathizers for their material. It is therefore unsurprising that adherence to the Maoist doctrines have been stressed. It is now becoming more acceptable and common to recognize the coercion and abuse that were also common in these wars. The failures with regard to women's rights have been particularly significant. The discrepancy between the aims of the fighters and the local people is also becoming more evident, a discrepancy sometimes fuelled by considerable social, economic and ethnic distance between the groups. But, especially in the cases where the fronts controlled large areas of territory for periods of time, there is no doubt that a significant component of the ideological commitment was genuine, and that the fronts really did rely on popular support, in part obtained through bringing material benefits to the people. In the case of ZANU, where the front did not succeed in controlling territory such that it could deliver tangible benefits, this case is weakest.

This tradition has remained alive, developing its own indigenous variants. The Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) adapted the doctrines its founders learned from the EPLF, arguably to greater effect. Frelimo's strategy was the basis for the National Resistance Army (NRA) in Uganda, which in turn informed the Rwandese Patriotic Front in Rwanda. UNITA amalgamated Maoist methods with right wing destabilization doctrines and land mine warfare.

New discoveries in counter-insurgency strategy

Parallel to Maoist doctrines of 'peoples' war', a counter-tradition of right-wing counter-insurgency terrorism and destabilization was developed during the Cold War. This, an invisible component of the super-power struggle, is key to understanding what has been happening in African military strategy since.

The roots of counter-insurgency practice, in British, French, South African, American and Soviet doctrine, are difficult to trace, but some commonalities are evident. A key component is that the people themselves are the target. Colonel Roger Trinquier, who advised the French army in Algeria, wrote: 'The inhabitant in his home is the centre of the conflict ... Like it or not, the two camps are compelled to make him participate in the conflict; in a certain sense, he has become a combatant too' (Trinquier 1964: 29).

There are many components of new military doctrines that cannot be discussed here, including the systematic use of rape, the deployment of anti-personnel land mines and the creation of counter-insurgency famine. Methods used to create and enforce discipline, in the form of military 'initiation' and brutalization, are a particularly rich field for examining the fusion of indigenous tradition and modern specialist practice, but will also not be discussed here. This section will concentrate on two of the most important innovations: the theory of destabilization and terror, and the use of children.

Destabilization is a logical development from British and French counter-insurgency strategies, as improvized by Rhodesian and South African military intelligence. The Rhodesian Central Intelligence Organization used 'pseudo-terrorists' who committed brutalities with the intention of discrediting nationalist guerrillas and sowing fear and confusion among the rural populace. This practice rapidly grew into 'counter-terrorists' - special irregular forces sent to infiltrate and attack guerrilla bases in neighbouring countries. Renamo in Mozambique was the leading exponent of this. Under South African guidance, sponsorship of Renamo grew into a strategy of destabilization aimed at all the neighbouring independent states - a strategy not aimed

at seizing state power, but destroying or humbling states.

A second transmission route for destabilization methods is from Afghanistan. Volunteers from across the Islamic world, including the Moslem-dominated countries of north Africa, joined the international brigades of the Afghan *Mujahidiin*. They were trained by US Special Forces in irregular warfare including destabilization, and also learned techniques developed by the Iranians and the Lebanese. Since the Soviet withdrawal, there has been a diaspora of these veterans to their countries of origin. Colloquially known as 'Afghanis', they are responsible for much of the violence in the Mediterranean littoral countries.

A key element in destabilization is the creation of ethnic discord. Military intellectuals have discovered that it only takes a few individuals to destabilize a large community. The would-be destabilizer needs only to engage in a few acts of violence against one ethnic or sectarian group (chosen arbitrarily) in order to create a climate of mistrust, and turn a community against itself. Random violence as a deliberate strategy then replicates itself as intra-communal violence, which can then spread and intensify with minimal effort by the instigator.

A second component is conspicuous atrocity. The essence of terrorism is spectacle. To achieve his aim, the terrorist or practitioner of destabilization must not only commit acts of violence, but do them in a conspicuous manner. Renamo is a paradigmatic case. The seemingly mindless violence by Renamo soldiers has a number of causes, some material, some symbolic and psychological. Looting for economic reward is a part explanation. The systematic vandalism of economic and social infrastructure can be seen partly as an explosion of rage against the symbols of modernity - a modernity that under the Portuguese and the independent government had provided almost nothing to the people except a deep sense of hurt - but is also to be found in a deliberate policy of 'conspicuous destruction'. This was the annihilation of all symbols of the opposing order, as an element in psychological warfare. The graphic mutilation of captives was another aspect of exemplary terror. The captives were then released so that they would make their way back home, their horrific injuries on display. The purpose is to undermine the citizen's sense of security, in short, to destabilize.

Renamo's acts of exemplary terror were fewer than the macabre stories in the press might suggest. But they served their purpose. Graphic mutilation was commonest when Renamo was at its weakest; in its early days, in strongly pro-Frelimo areas, and after it had suffered military reverses.

Charles Taylor has developed the use of exemplary terror in Liberia. His chief refinement has been in the methods of advertisement, not the types of atrocity. On several occasions he promised a 'carnival of blood' and used the fear of his troops to great military advantage. Reversing the normal military doctrine that surprise is the key to success, more than once he has announced over the BBC World Service his intention to attack a certain town, causing the people to flee in panic. Taylor's rival, Prince Johnson also showed a keen appreciation of the effectiveness of conspicuous atrocity when he tortured and executed President Samuel Doe, and ensured that a video recording of the gruesome act was made. Copies of the cassette were widely circulated in west Africa and served Johnson's purpose well - they proved that Charles Taylor was not the victor in the Liberian civil war.

Children

One of the most characteristic facets of contemporary wars in Africa is that many of them are fought by young people including children. This is a wholly new phenomenon which promises to change radically the nature of warfare, with profound consequences for the ability to resolve conflicts and demilitarize the continent.

Few African societies have any tradition of child soldiers: fighting was the task chiefly or exclusively for young adult males. Children and youths did play a role in military mobilization in some societies, but rarely in the front line. It is the availability of cheap, light, easy to use automatic weapons that has made child combat a possibility.

One component of child soldiery is the recruitment of under-age boys to armies that are desperately short of manpower. This was for instance the case in Ethiopia and is common in southern Sudan.

Armies simply take younger and younger conscripts because the supply of able-bodied young men of the right age is drying up. This is common in prolonged wars and is not the main phenomenon under consideration.

More significant is the deliberate recruitment of children to serve as combat soldiers. This phenomenon has received some attention from human rights organizations and psychologists; its wider social and military significance is our concern here. The best known child armies are in Mozambique and Liberia, but 3,000 children under sixteen (including 500 girls) also fought with the NRA in Uganda in the mid-1980s and they are increasingly common throughout the continent, notably in Angola.

Child soldiers are preferred by many commanders for several reasons. African children are usually brought up to be obedient, and child soldiers can therefore be highly disciplined. They are also malleable; they lack inhibitions and a sense of proportion, and so can be persuaded to carry out acts of extreme violence. They have no responsibilities at home that may inhibit their commitment to fighting. When bored, they are less prone to contemplate desertion and a return to a civilian life. Child soldiers are particularly terrifying when manning roadblocks because they combine total, arbitrary power with a lack of judgement - they may shoot people for trivial reasons, or follow instructions to the letter without any readiness to compromise. Children are used by some forces to execute prisoners, a task that adult soldiers do not like.

Children are not merely used to fill the ranks of regular units; there are special units of children in some forces. These units are commanded by children who have been awarded with ranks (reportedly up to 'general' in the case of the Charles Taylor's Liberian forces) on the basis of their effectiveness in combat.

The use of children has a major effect on military strategy. Children do not understand conventional military strategy and tend to treat war as a street game. Professional soldiers are frightened of fighting children because the children do not know when to stop, nor when they are in an untenable military position and should withdraw. In any engagement that approaches a conventional battle, child soldiers will simply be massacred, but in an irregular or surprise attack they can be devastating. Hence children are sometimes put in the vanguard.

Child soldiers are cheap. They do not need to be well paid, and need relatively little training. Many Liberian child soldiers are paid in drugs, especially cocaine and marijuana.

Perhaps the most significant fact about child soldiers is the ease with which they can be recruited, especially from communities already disrupted by war. While a substantial minority of child soldiers have been forcibly recruited and brutalized, most are volunteers (Goodwill-Gill and Cohn 1994: 30-43). They seek out a military life from a sense of adventure, having been socialized into violence from an early age, or because they are looking for some stability and a sense of order in a disrupted life. There can also be intense social pressures for them to participate, both from adults and from their peers. Many orphans become camp followers to guerrilla forces and militias because they have no home to go to, and because they want to avenge the deaths of their parents. Commanders then progressively assign them to guard, checkpoint and ultimately combat duties. Children can also be recruited from communities where adults are unwilling to join up, perhaps because the adults know the likely consequences of warfare. The ease of mobilizing children is a genuine and ominous discovery in the development of military doctrine.

6 Conclusion

The pervasive militarization of society is one of the dominant features of contemporary Africa. The immediate roots of this lie in the legacy of the Cold War - including the supply of armaments, training in their use, and authoritarian forms of rule that cannot be sustained in the absence of super-power patronage. Such an inheritance is a guarantee of armed conflict, at least until new political dispensations are worked out. The decay of state structures provides both opportunity and encouragement for the use of violence to commercial ends. Meanwhile the supply needs of military forces can make them susceptible to loyalty on the basis of material support alone. The formal armies of nation states are being replaced by more diverse military formations,

with members who fight for a range of motives other than patriotism and discipline.

Other aspects of the Cold War have bequeathed a more insidious and perhaps more durable legacy. One of these is the success of minimalist state strategies (exemplified by Mobutu in Zaire) that deliberately fragment governmental authority in order to preserve an individual in power. Another includes new doctrines of destabilization and counter-insurgency, easy and cheap to use and very difficult to contain. They include conspicuous atrocity, the use of children in combat and the manipulation of ethnicity. Military intellectuals across the continent have learned these lessons, and are continually experimenting with new methods.

This is an explosive mix, leading to wars that are brutal and do not readily fit into conventional western categories. Hence there is a tendency to describe them as 'anarchy' and 'tribalism' (and often both, despite the contradiction). The diversity of small wars in Africa militates against a simple categorization, nonetheless we know enough to say that this description is simply false.

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