

Crisis Management in Sub-Saharan Africa

INTERVIEW WITH
JOHN PRENDERGAST

John Prendergast, a leading expert on U.S. policy in Africa, spoke with *YJIA* editor Lucy Moore in April 2005 about the ongoing conflicts in Africa's Great Lakes region, the future of the peace processes in Sudan and Uganda, and the future of humanitarian interventions in Africa. Prendergast is Special Advisor to the President of International Crisis Group and has previously served as Special Advisor to the U.S. Department of State and Director for African Affairs at the National Security Council.

■ **How effective is the December 2004 peace agreement between the Khartoum government and rebel forces in southern Sudan? Do you think the agreement will hold?**

So far the impact of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement has been largely negligible, but that is not necessarily a negative development. In the history of peace agreements, there is usually a long lag between signature and implementation, and this agreement is no exception. There is a lot of activity in preparation for implementation, but there are significant countervailing forces that need to be addressed before we see real implementation. A delegation from the Sudan People's Liberation Army went to Khartoum at the end of March to discuss the agreement, so we are finally seeing some progress toward the basic elements of a comprehensive peace.

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On the other hand, the agreement has had virtually no calming effect in Darfur. In the immediate aftermath of the peace deal, the government of Sudan thought it had bought itself a bit of breathing space, and government forces began increasing their military activities in Darfur. The level of atrocities increased, and we began receiving more reports of rapes, attacks on villages, and aerial bombings.

The Comprehensive Peace Agreement has had little impact in Darfur for three reasons. First, the Darfurian rebels should have taken advantage of a comprehensive agreement for southern and central Sudan, but they are terribly disorganized and failed to seize the opportunity when it was available. Second, the Sudanese government has no interest in negotiating with the Darfurian rebels. The government wants to destroy the Darfurian rebels through military action in the same way that it wanted to crush the southern rebels for twenty years. Third, the Darfurian rebels themselves are not prepared to negotiate. They are crumbling, and their command and control structures are disintegrating. The rebels are not prepared to articulate a clear agenda that would be negotiable or actionable, so the impact of the peace deal has been highly mixed across the country.

■ **What are the key elements needed to resolve the conflict in Darfur?**

Three elements are necessary: protection, accountability, and comprehensive peace. Protection is exigent. Everyone acknowledges that the present African Union force in Darfur is grotesquely inadequate for the job, so the first objective is to substantially increase the number of troops and enhance their mandate to include protecting civilian life.

Second, the United Nations Security Council needs to solidify the accountability measures that it passed on March 30 and April 1, 2005. These measures imposed targeted sanctions on anyone who commits atrocities in Darfur or undermines the peace process. The Security Council also miraculously voted to refer the case of Darfur to the International Criminal Court, which is an extremely important step. The Security Council has finally taken action and an accountability agenda has started to move forward. Now we need to implement that agenda.

The third challenge is to build a comprehensive peace. We need a substantial and serious peace process in place to address the root

causes of the crisis in Darfur and to link the process to the broader effort to restructure the Sudanese state.

■ **How has the renewed fighting in northern Uganda affected the stability of the region?**

The breakdown of the February 2005 ceasefire in northern Uganda is a major setback to the peacemaking effort. Since February the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) has steadily increased the frequency and ferocity of its attacks and that is having a damaging impact on perceptions in Kampala, the Ugandan capital, for the possibility of peace.

The outlook is already bleak in the minds of senior officials in the Ugandan government, and every attack by the LRA dampens their hopes. The Uganda People's Defense Forces and the government of Uganda have undertaken a series of actions that have alienated the LRA even further since the breakdown of the ceasefire. In particular, the wooing of the LRA's chief negotiator, Sam Kolo, to the Ugandan government's side in February was quite a blow to the LRA. The Ugandan peace process is hanging on by a thread, and unless something dramatic happens, there will be trouble.

The spillover from Uganda into southern Sudan has been devastating. There are as many LRA attacks in southern Sudan as there are in the North, and they are equally destructive. The UN Security Council could choose to become involved on the basis of the threat to international peace and security. The renewal of fighting in Uganda certainly crosses the border shared by Sudan and Uganda and creates havoc in both nations.

■ **How will the sexual abuse scandal involving UN peacekeepers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo affect the UN's position throughout Africa?**

I do not yet know the full repercussions of the sex scandal in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but I know that it is not an isolated incident. Abuse is pretty much par for the course everywhere international forces are deployed and has been for centuries. The problem here is magnified because this is happening in the context of a UN operation that is supposed to have some ethical standards and some basis in the rule of law. This situation has clearly been festering for a while, and no one has taken the lead to try to deal with it. This

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is not the 1800s. This is not some marauding occupational force that is raping and pillaging. This is a force that is supposed to be there to achieve and support peace efforts. For a UN peacekeeping mission to lead to the exploitation of the population is grotesque, but unfortunately not unique.

That individuals responsible for the abuse were caught is a positive step. A high degree of shame is important because that is the only way the UN will respond. Unfortunately, major institutions only modify behavior when caught and shamed and when support is conditional upon improved performance.

People are going to use the scandal against the United Nations for the next decade, especially in Africa, where there is already a strong perception that the UN is just another wave of soldiers coming to exploit the people. The effect on the UN's credibility in Africa will be significant because many individuals, particularly politicians, are going to ask, "Do we really want these guys here? Aren't they really just here to exploit us?" Whether they believe this is another story.

■ **How would you compare the African Union (AU) and UN peacekeepers?**

The peacekeeping missions in Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are similar because both require protection and accountability. The African Union and the UN have similar failings in situations where crimes against humanity are being committed. For the last decade, the world's standard approach to peacekeeping has been to provide humanitarian assistance to victims and observe ceasefires, but not to confront killers. This characterizes the approach taken by both the AU forces in Darfur and the UN forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Both are doing the same thing: a whole lot of very little for a lot of money.

Both missions are under severe pressure to do much more: to be more aggressive, more robust, and more proactive in challenging and confronting the militias that are killing civilians and preventing the delivery of humanitarian assistance. After peacekeepers were killed, the UN mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUC) made a decision last March to start challenging the militias. It will be interesting to see how this more assertive approach develops. A few weeks ago, hundreds of militia fighters were supposedly killed in a firefight

with MONUC troops and MONUC spun it as a real success. It now looks like the MONUC troops were ambushed and it was only because they had attack helicopters that they happened to kill a significant number of militia fighters. This firefight was not the well-planned operation that the UN claimed.

I don't know how long the UN is going to have the stomach to actually take on the militias in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. UN officials are saying that they will do something, but empty threats are not very helpful in persuading the militias to disarm. This is typical of the UN's posturing and warning without backing its positions with real muscle. MONUC forces will have to develop a more systematic approach to have real effect.

The AU, with only a few thousand troops in a nation the size of France, is hardly a force to be reckoned with. The AU mandate is largely to observe the ceasefire and monitor violations, not to protect people. If they do protect the people, it is usually the heroic actions of an individual commander or unit that moves into a village to protect civilians. These commanders are interpreting their mandate correctly. The authorization is fairly loose, and almost anything can be justified. But most of the peacekeepers recognize that they are too small a force to make a substantial difference.

The AU force in Darfur and the UN force in the Democratic Republic of the Congo clearly lack the ability or will to take the necessary actions to protect civilians. Consequently, death rates in these regions are higher than anywhere else in the world. It is a complete and total failure of the two institutions to staunch the bleeding in those two countries.

■ **Has the U.S. African Crisis Response Initiative played a useful role in training African soldiers to handle peacekeeping operations?**

No, I think it is a minor footnote in U.S. Africa policy. It was trumped up by two consecutive administrations as something bigger than it actually was. In reality, the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI) represents only a little more training for conventional peacekeeping soldiers than the United States was providing prior to the initiative.

What Africa needs are soldiers that are trained to go after militias to stop them from killing. That should have been the point. From the

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beginning some have argued that this should be ACRI's role, but people became skittish and went for a much more conventional mandate to train an observer force as authorized under Chapter VI of the UN Charter. An observer force is helpful, and there is a need for observers in Eritrea and Liberia, as well as for other situations where you have parties that are agreeable to implementing peace agreements. But in the real problem areas, like the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan, observer training is largely irrelevant. Observers are not trained to conduct counter-insurgency operations against spoiler elements or to undertake the kind of operations that are necessary to actively protect people. In the end, the U.S. government spent a lot of money and talked a great deal about something that had very little value.

■ **How would you assess the efforts by the Economic Community of West African States and the AU to pressure the Togolese government to hold presidential elections?**

The Economic Community of West African States and the AU worked together closely on Togo and were quite successful. It is very much in the interests of African governments to push the stance that there will be no change of government through military coups. That is what this action in Togo represents. You can still steal an election, like we saw in Zimbabwe, and African leaders won't say anything. But once leaders gain power they don't want to have to look over their shoulders and worry about a general or colonel overthrowing them.

This is an important advance. Stability is critical and Africa is moving beyond the very traumatic period of post-colonial history that was marked by repeated military coups. We are seeing a progression from the era of military coups to a time when multiparty democracy is becoming entrenched, and that is a positive development. But let's not oversell it. Leaders are going to make decisions that are in their self-interest at first. Any subsequent reforms are a bonus. ■