Fruits of the IMF

Ethnic warfare on the rise in Africa

by Lawrence Eyong-Echaw

Throughout Africa—in Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Ghana, Liberia, Angola, and Kenya—ethnic groups have clashed violently in the past year, leaving thousands dead. Ethnicity is threatening to destroy the fragile fabric of the African nation-state, while the conditionalities of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) are driving populations into total despair.

The most ferocious fighting has broken out over the last year in Burundi and Rwanda, two densely populated countries in central Africa. In both countries, the Hutu are the majority tribe. Since independence, the Hutu have been involved in a sporadic vendetta of bloodletting against the Tutsi, a minority tribal group which enslaved and ruled the Hutu in the pre-colonial period. Belgium, the colonial master of Rwanda, had always backed the ruling Tutsi, but then abruptly switched sides to back the Hutu at the point of independence, when the Hutu rose against the Tutsi.

The latest round of massacres began in 1993. In October 1993, Melchior Ndadaye, the first democratically elected Hutu President in Burundi, which has been dominated by the Tutsi tribe continuously, was assassinated in an attempted coup by the Tutsi-dominated military, at which point the United States ceased all aid to the country. This led to a carnage of inestimable proportions, as the Army went on a rampage, killing 100,000 Hutus. Since then, thousands of refugees have crossed the border into Rwanda. There, Hutu President Juvenal Habyarimana has retaliated in sympathy with the Hutus, by refusing to implement the power-sharing deal with the Tutsi-dominated opposition.

This deal had ended a civil war fought in 1992 between the Hutus and the Tutsis, who were backed by the Ugandan government. This civil war had brought 680 French troops into Rwanda in a peacekeeping venture. Outside forces also benefitted financially from the warfare. According to the Human Rights Watch Arms Project, the French bank Crédit Lyonnais made possible a $6 million deal for an arms shipment to the Rwandan Army from Egypt. Rwanda was also getting weapons from South Africa. The Rwandan war created more than 650,000 refugees and displaced more than 1 million of Rwanda’s 7.5 million people. The tribal warfare has also accelerated the downward spiral of the country’s economy. According to President Habyarimana, “Our economy was already ailing in 1990, and, of course, the war has not resolved anything. We signed agreements with the IMF and the World Bank, which we have, of course, been unable to honor, because we have had to purchase weapons and supplies.”

In Burundi, the ethnic conflict continues. On March 8,
some 50 Tutsi tribesmen were killed in the north of the country in retaliation for earlier killings in the capital Bujumbura, in which the Tutsi-dominated Army massacred about 200 Hutus in a predominantly Hutu residential area. The next week, fighting broke out in the Burundi capital, killing at least 1,000 people. It is believed that in March, 1 million people fled Burundi to neighboring countries, where, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, they are living on the edge of starvation.

Long list of conflicts

The Burundi massacres are the most prominent in a long list of conflicts which cause violence with untold suffering to Africa.

EIR April 8, 1994

International 47
In March, Ghana saw some of the bloodiest ethnic massacres since independence in 1958. In the northern regional town of Tamale, Dagomba tribesmen have had bloody battles with the Konkombas, the Nanumbas, and the Gonjas. The entrepreneurship of the Konkombas, who migrated from neighboring Togo in the early 19th century, has been a threat to the Dagombas, who have seen their land property at stake. They have been calling on the Konkombas to return to Togo, although by a 1956 referendum, these people had elected to become Ghanaians. The violence in March has taken the lives of 6,000 people, displaced another 15,000, and resulted in the total destruction of 200 villages by burning.

In Zaire, the democratization process has opened a Pandora's box, with more than 300 tribes at each other's throats. The main tribes have been divided between supporters of President Sese Seko Mobutu's government and supporters of opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi. Tribes which support the opposition, such as the Kivus and the Balubas, have been harassed by Mobutu's army and forced to take refuge in neighboring Zambia or Angola.

In Angola, the 17-year civil war has pitted the Ovimbundu-dominated Unita of Jonas Savimbi against the Bakongo-dominated MPLA of President Jose Eduardo dos Santos.

In Liberia, there has been a four-year civil war because the late dictator Sgt. Samuel Doe used his Krahn tribesmen to terrorize the dozen tribes of the country as well as the American-Liberians who had enjoyed privileges during the Tubman and Tolbert regimes.

In Kenya, the Rift Valley has been ablaze with ethnic clashes.

Legacy of colonialism

African nations have been described as "fragile patchwork of conflicting tribal states, artificially held together by authoritarian leaders with the help of western arms and aid." National unity is a far cry in most countries, where there are about 300 tribes, speaking different languages. In the pre-colonial era, most of these tribes fought bloody wars, and sold one another as slaves to European buccaneers. For instance, the Nigerian state of Benin exchanged ambassadors with Portugal in 1486. Today, the state of Benin has little in common with their compatriots of the northern state of Kano or Bornu, which had been parts of the Fulani empire of Usman Dan Fodio in the 17th century.

The manner in which colonial administrators governed virtually ensured the failure of African states after independence. Their practice of "divide and rule," favoring some tribes to the exclusion of others, served to accentuate ethnic divisions that have pulled Africans into different directions for centuries.

In Burundi, for instance, where ethnic animosity has been most tragic and debilitating to the nation, the Belgian colonizers perpetuated ancestral patterns of discrimination by allowing the Tutsi, who were the nobles, to have exclusive control over a strategic national institution such as the Army. The exclusion of the majority Hutu was a festering cause for later revolt which has plunged the country into a litany of violence and death.

Before independence, the colonizers were the common enemy. When they left, the major tribal groups in each country had to confront one another for leadership roles on a continent where tribal loyalties surpassed any allegiance to a nation. In addition, the colonizers became much harder to fight, hidden behind the screen of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

The pattern of discrimination encouraged by the colonial masters has survived since independence. Tribes which had facilitated colonialism and acted as informants or soldiers in the colonial administration's attempt to "pacify" the rest of the tribes, have earned privileges in the country's administrative apparatus.

In Cameroon, for instance, the Bamileke and Bassa tribes, which fought in the liberation struggle, still feel a sense of marginalization. The Bamilekes, who challenged the economic domination of the French, still feel persecuted by the neo-colonialist government in power, which accuses them of communist sentiments. In Nigeria, the Fulani hegemony which dominated other tribes and created an elaborate system of governance under the authority of the Emir (spiritual leader), was used by the British to govern the country. Today, the Fulani still dominate Nigerian politics, with the Yoruba and the Ibo often relegated to secondary roles.

Tribalism therefore remains in Africa a major factor in wars, business, elections, and power struggles. It often determines who gets jobs, who gets promoted, and who gets accepted at a university, because by its very definition, tribalism implies sharing among members of an extended family, making sure that your own are taken care of first.

A 'cultural obligation'

A prominent Nigerian political scientist, Professor Asiwaju, has said that in Africa, "to give a job to a fellow tribesman is not nepotism; it is a cultural obligation. For a politician or military leader to choose his closest advisers and his bodyguards from the ranks of his own tribesmen is not patronage, but good common sense. It ensures security, continuity, and authority.

Nationalism is a new concept in Africa, not more than three decades old, and since most Africans are unable to read and do not understand the concept of a nation, they readily fall back on the concept of tribal affinity. Furthermore, even the tribal system is under threat of total collapse at the point that the government—no matter which tribe might be dominating it—is unable to provide for the well-being of its people.

The rise in tribalism in Africa therefore is a direct corollary of the downward slide of Africa's national economies in the decade of the 1980s through to today.