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RESOLVING REGIONAL CONFLICTS AND PUBLIC OPINION: THE NIGERIAN EXPERIENCE IN LIBERIAN CRISIS

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ABSTRACT: *Nigeria played an important role which led to the resolution of the Liberian crisis between 1990 and 1997. But between 1990 and 1993 towards the end of General Ibrahim Babangida's regime (1985-1993), Nigeria's role in the Liberian peace process became a major issue which preoccupied Nigeria's external relations within the West African Sub-region. This paper examines in how public opinion influences government attitude and posture towards the Liberian situation.*

KEYWORDS: Conflicts, Public Opinion, Nigeria, Liberia,

INTRODUCTION

Conflict spots dot various parts of the globe we live in basically due to cohabitation among peoples of diverse social, political and ethnic background. In other words, conflicts arising from interactions amongst peoples may be traced to racial, religious, ethnic and political differences. Over the years, such conflicts either local or cross-border had been prosecuted with vehement hatred and sustained with most sophisticated weaponry, resulting in colossal human wastage, horrendous destruction of property as well as displacement of persons. The world is littered with states carrying the burden of artificial boundaries. Indeed, only a few states like Australia, New Zealand and some other Island states, are immune from the traditional problems of artificial boundaries (Akinyemi, 2001; 3-4, Coles, 1981). Our argument therefore, is that most states in the world are multinational in composition. Europe, Asia, the Americas and Africa are classified examples of multinational states. Specific country examples are the United States, United Kingdom, Spain, France, India, Switzerland, Pakistan, Sri-Lanka, the Old Russian state, China, Nigeria, Liberia, and Ghana etc. The traditional socio-economic, ethnic and political problems generated by being a multinational and multilingual state combine to serve as source of friction amongst peoples, when such variables are not taken cognizance of by the statecraft.

The cumulative effect of the neglect of the socio-political differences amongst the people, by the managers of the state enterprise, is conflict, which sometimes lead to full scale wars with all the attendant consequences. This scenario reminds one of the 100 years' war in Europe, the 1914 and 1939 great European wars (Akinyemi, 2001; 4). Africans had also fought wars among themselves. The great old empires like Ghana, Mali, Songhai, Bornu, Oyo, Benin, Ibadan etc, fought series of wars to establish themselves as prominent states both in the savannah and the forest regions (Stride and Ifeka, 1973, Fage, 1969). In Asia, shortly before Japan embarked on a career of continental expansion, there was the 1894 – 1895 Sino-Japanese war (Palmer and Perkins, 2005; 439). Other wars in Asia included the great Korean war of the 1950s, where the United Nations collective security potentials blossomed (Kegley

and Wittkoft, 1993; 95), the Burmese war of 1824 – 1826 and Indo-Chinese war of 1946 – 54 (Cole, 1981). According to William Zartman, such conflicts often involve basic values of territorial integrity and political independence as well as domestic political consolidation and international rivalries of newly independent states. In all of this, the stakes are always very high and they are typical of the economic and political values that are features of nation building. In most cases, the conflicts involve external powers invited to lend support to the parties in the conflict or inserting themselves into the conflict because of their interest in the outcome or the parties involved in the crisis (Zartman, 1991; 2). In this regard, conflicts whether domestic, sub-regional, regional or interstate, present a real challenge for the maintenance of world order.

The concept of conflict is highly diverse as it is controversial. However, in this study, we shall adopt a very simple notion of conflict which fortunately reflects the situation in Liberia, leading to the intervention of the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group, popularly known as ECOMOG. In this connection, conflict is a simple contest of parties, each trying to impose a unilateral solution to a problem. The challenge to humanity here is to resolve and manage the crisis through multilateral solution to replace the attempt of each party to impose its will through a unilateral action (Zartman, 1991; 1). Although it is true that cooperation requires compromise over ends and means, it is equally true that people prefer to accomplish their objectives by themselves as much as possible. Of course, the desire to act alone may sound out of place in an interdependent world; it is basic to the egotistical nature of rational actors. For instance, in Namibia, Vietnam, Algeria, the Falklands, the West Bank, Kuwait, Afghanistan, the Western Sahara, the Horn of Africa, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Burundi, Nigeria etc; the parties in conflict at any point in time had always wanted to resolve the problem unilaterally, by holding on, and denying the claims of the challenging party. The opposing party equally insisted on unilateral solution to the crisis. But when two attempts at unilateral solution run up against each other, the end product is conflict. Thus if in the final analysis, one side does not prevail, as in the Liberian case, multilateral negotiation must come to the rescue. Therefore, conflict management and resolution becomes more attractive through multilateral means than through unilateral approach.

Our position, thus, is that multilateral solution has a very high and useful utilitarian value in conflict management. In the approach less destruction of lives and property are guaranteed. As peace returns to the society, trade and commerce would go on smoothly. The approach allows for agreement and a common definition of the conflict is found to placate the parties to the conflict. In other words, the multi-lateralists must show the unilateralists that the solution would leave all parties to the conflict better off. Our analysis has shown that the multi-lateralist usually is a neutral third party basically on a diplomatic peace initiative and a representative of an international organisation. But the international organisation itself has its operational guidelines in all its activities, including intervention. Multilateral diplomacy in conflict resolution involves intervention in various ways, ranging from preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping and post-conflict peace-building.

The terms identified above are fundamental to collective security. They are integrally related and are basically the ingredients that make intervention or multilateral conflict resolution a worthwhile experiment. Preventive diplomacy is an action to stop disputes arising between parties to prevent existing disputes from escalating into matured conflicts and to limit the spread of the latter when it occurs. Peacemaking is an action to bring hostile parties to

agreement, essentially through such peaceful means as stated in Chapter 6 of the Charter of the UN (Sohn, 1995; 24-25). Peacekeeping on the other hand is the deployment of a UN presence in the field, with the consent of the parties in conflict, and it involves the UN or other international organisations' military or police personnel and some civilians as the case may be. Peacekeeping is therefore, a technique that expands the possibilities for both the prevention of conflict and the making of peace. The success of these three areas of action would strengthen the opportunity for post conflict peace-building. It is the post-conflict peace-building action that would identify and support structures which would strengthen and solidify peace in order to avoid relapse into conflict (UN Secretary General, 1992; 1).

As noted earlier, intervention in the internal affairs of other states can only be realized under the umbrella of an international organisation, which may be the UN or other regional organizations, with the approval of the UN. But international law, which is the law that helps to organise the international society, forbids intervention in the internal affairs of other states. Specifically, Chapter one, Article 2(7) of the UN Charter forbids intervention in the 'matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state …'(Sohn, 1995;15-16). However to resolve the seeming helplessness, the same UN Charter in **Chapter 7, Articles 41 and 42** as well as in **Chapter 8, Article 52**, allows for intervention with conditions, particularly if the crisis in such a state may threaten international peace and security (Sohn, 1995; 25-28). **Article 41** allows for limited social and economic sanctions on the parties in conflict. **Article 42** provides for peacekeeping by multinational force through the combination of air, sea and land, if **Article 41** fails to stem the conflict. **Article 52** basically allows for intervention at the regional level, with the approval of the UN (Sohn, 1995; 27-28). Although, the UN Charter was a good umbrella for the West African leaders' peace building project in Liberia, the World body, the OAS and the European Union (EU), were too busy with the World's post ideological war situation that African conflicts were not important to them. In fact, it was only in 1991, after the ECOWAS had taken the initiative that the President of the UNSC issued a statement commending the efforts of ECOWAS to promote peace in Liberia and calling upon the parties to the conflict to cooperate with ECOWAS (Shaw, 2003; 1157).

It should be noted that the West African leaders were not unaware of the relevant articles, especially **Article 52**, of the UN Charter, which provides for regional initiative in the area of conflict management and resolution. Bearing this in mind and the colossal loss of lives and property in Liberia, West African leaders, under the leadership of Nigeria did not waste time in invoking the relevant articles of the UN Charter, relating to conflict resolution and the relevant protocols of the International Humanitarian law, which deals with the protection of civilian population and civilian objects against the effects of hostilities (Bory, 1982; 18. UNSC, 1992 and 1993). The adoption of such relevant articles and protocols becomes necessary because ECOWAS, as a sub-regional organisation, has no defence clause in its treaty to undertake a peacekeeping mission. Although, a protocol relating to Mutual Assistance Defence (MAD) was in 1981, signed by member-states of ECOWAS, as at 1990 when the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) troops, were to move into Liberia, the protocol had not been activated. But in addition to the UN Charter's provisions on intervention, the West African Leaders in their wisdom and at the insistence of Nigeria, established in Banjul, The Gambia, in 1990 an ECOWAS Standing Mediation Committee (ESMC), to give legal backing to the peace plans in Liberia. It was the

ESMC that created ECOMOG and authorized its intervention in Liberia on behalf of ECOWAS (Ate, 2001; 118. Eze, 1993; 12-17). Nigeria's pivotal role may not be unconnected with the country's concern for human disaster that large scale conflict may produce. Couple with this, is her long standing experience in peace-keeping operations in various parts of the globe, including Africa. The experience paid off as it was fully brought to bear in the ECOMOG operations in Liberia. At independence in 1960, Nigeria clearly spelt out the role she intended to play in the world affairs in the pursuit of peace and security within the framework of its obligations at the multilateral level. One of the Balewa's foreign policy thrusts, which of course, is very relevant to our purpose is 'promotion of international peace and security as well as measures aimed at reducing world tensions'(Oni, 2002; 8).

The test of Nigeria's commitment to world peace came within a few months after her independence. The country was feasibly represented in the Congo mission, under the United Nations, between 1960 and 1964. In Congo, Nigerian military, police and civilian personnel did creditably well. Henceforth, the country participated in many UN sponsored peace-keeping missions across the globe. In chronological order, Nigeria's presence had been felt in the following UN sponsored peace-keeping missions:

- The Congo Mission, 1960 – 1964; ONUC (United Nations Operation in the Congo);
- The Tangayika Mission, 1964;
- Indo-Pakistan Border Mission, 1965 – 1966 (UNIPOM – United Nations Indo-Pakistan Observer Mission);
- Lebanon Mission, 1978 (UNIFIL – United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon);
- OAU Peacekeeping Mission in Chad, 1981 – 1982;
- Iran – Iraq Border Mission, 1988 – 1991, (UNIIMOG – UN Iran – Iraq Military Observer Group);
- The Angolan Mission, 1989 (UNAVEM I, II and III – UN Angola Verification Mission);
- The Namibia Mission, 1989 – 1990 (UNTAG – UN Transition Assistance Mission in Namibia);
- The Somalia Mission, 1992 – 1995 (UNOSOM – UN Operation in Somalia);
- The Yugoslavia Mission, 1992 – 1994 (UNIPROFOR – UN Interim Protection Force);
- The Western Sahara Mission, 1991 – 1996,
- UN Mission for the Referendum in Somalia (MINORSO);
- The Iraq – Kuwait Mission, 1991 – 2002 (UNIKOM – UN Iraq – Kuwait Observer Mission);
- The Rwanda Mission, 1993 – 1996, (UNAMIR – UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda) and
- The Liberian Mission, 1993 – 1997 (UNOMIL – UN Observer Mission in Liberia) (Oni, 2002; 10-11).

The Nigerian Public and The Liberian Enterprise

Like most of the foreign policy initiatives taken by the IBB's government between 1985 and 1993, the Liberia peace mission also received its own share of public criticism from the ever articulate Nigerian population. As we have highlighted in the previous chapters of this study, the fundamental arguments have always been that the government should allow "charity to

begin at home and probably ends abroad". This is because most critics of the Liberian mission believed that the huge sum of money expended on the peace mission could be better utilized at home to provide employment and other social amenities. The argument went further that considering the crushing and excruciating economic condition at home, the Liberian adventure was a costly one which Nigeria could not afford. However, the protagonist of the peace deal himself, Gen Babangida, early in the Liberian operation, offered some explanations. At a press briefing in Lagos, on October 31, 1990, he explained that:

*... perhaps many do not yet know, nor appreciate either the danger of international embarrassment the Liberian crisis portends for all of us in this sub-region in particular, and to Africa and the black race in general ...Our critics tend to ignore the appalling human catastrophe which the Liberian crisis has created for us in this Sub-region .... for the avoidance of doubt, neither Nigeria nor the members of the ECOMOG forced their way into the Liberian conflict in a manner .... resembling military adventurism. Nigeria is a member of the Sub-regional group that took a solemn decision to restore peace by separating the warring factions in Liberia, which has been..., without any legitimately constituted authority (*Babangida, 1990*).*

Gen. Babangida still in defence of Nigeria's intervention in Liberia, rhetorically asked his critics:

... should Nigeria and other responsible countries in the sub-region stand by and watch the whole of Liberia turned into one massive graveyard? ...

*the massacre of thousands of innocent civilians, including those of foreign nations, women and children, some of whom had sought protection in the churches, mosques, diplomatic missions, hospitals and under the United Nations and Red Cross umbrella, contrary to all recognised standard of civilian behaviour and international ethics and decorum (*Babangida, 1990. Obasi, 1992;335-337) *(provided the justification for intervention in the Liberian crisis).*

In the final analysis, just like the former Togolese President believed, Gen Babangida seemed to be saying that if you see a next-door neighbour's house on fire, you must act speedily to help put it out, because you do not known when the resulting conflagration may spread to your home. In line with this position, Nigeria actually acted fast and today the UN has commended the country, for the relative peace in Liberia.

Nigeria in Liberia: The Constraints

The success of Nigerian led intervention in Liberia was not without some difficulties. A discussion of such constraints is not meant to write-of the whole operation, rather, it is meant to serve as an eye opener for future operations, since we may never see the last of military interventions in peace-keeping process within the sub-region. Except human beings ceased to interact, our position remains the most realistic way of looking at the competition for political power and sharing of scarce resources within the West African Sub-region.

Indeed, one of the major tasks of ECOMOG was to monitor a complete ceasefire and halt destruction of lives and property. But at the time ECOMOG forces landed at the Freeport of Liberia, a ceasefire had not been achieved and so there was no ceasefire to monitor. The

erring factions were still at each other's neck and in fact, Taylor's NPFL welcomed the multinational forces into Liberia with ferocious attacks (Iweze, 1993; 219). This problem was compounded the more because of the absence of a Force Headquarters, (FHQ). The FHQ was not properly in existence at the time ECOMOG arrived in Liberia. The allied forces did not also have enough intelligence reports about the situation in Liberia. There were no military maps on Liberia which would have helped in no small way in the gathering of intelligence reports (Iweze, 1993; 221). These developments affected the morale and disposition of the troops towards the whole operation. In an ideal legal military intervention, leading to peace-keeping operations, the impartial third party should have secured a ceasefire before the allied forces would move into the troubled-region, to create a buffer-zone for effective ceasefire monitoring and safety of all mortals involved in the operations. What is more, the core of peacekeeping operations is the FHQ and therefore, should be the first to be set up so as to receive the troops and brief them on the situation on the ground.

The initial high command of ECOMOG forces also had serious command problems and this manifested indiscipline among the rank and file of the forces. The conduct of the first Field Commander (FC) in person of Lt. Gen. Arnold Quainoo, within the short period of his command did not help matters. Apart from his inability to take firm decisions affecting the operations of the forces, he became negligent in his duties by allowing Prince Yomie Johnson of the Independent National Patriotic Front of Liberia (INPFL), a breakaway faction of the NPFL, an unrestricted access into the FHQ. This situation gave credibility problems to ECOMOG as an impartial arbiter. For one, NPFL and AFL as well as other interest groups accused ECOMOG of taking sides with INPFL, to the detriment of the others. Secondly, the situation finally paved the way for Prince Johnson to capture Doe, during the latter's surprise visit to the FHQ (Iweze, 1993; 229). An impartial arbiter would have organized a rescued mission to either retrieve Doe, dead or alive. But this was not to happen as the FC himself ran for cover and for some time he shifted his office into the ECOMOG war– ship. This had a demoralising effect on the troops as the Sierra Leone and Ghanaian troops also left for the ship, leaving the Nigerian soldiers at the FHQ (Iweze, 1993; 230). The FC at some point even believed that ECOMOG had no business being in Liberia and so should be withdrawn. It was in the midst of these confusion and uncertainties that a Nigerian officer, Gen. J.N. Dogonyaro, was posted to Liberia to replace the former F.C. It is instructive to note that inexperienced officers, particularly those who had never had experience of peace – keeping operations, should not be allowed to be at the top of the allied forces command.

Part of the initial problem of the multinational intervention force was the anomaly in the appointment of a Deputy Force Commander (DFC), which had been conceded to Guinea and who should be an officer not below the rank of a Colonel or a Brigadier. However the only officer of the rank of a Brigadier in the Guinean army was the Head of state. The next senior officer was Lt. Col. Lamine Magasoumba. The promotion of Magasoumba to the rank of a Major General, on arrival in Sierra Leone undermined discipline and control, such that when the Guinean contingent became contagiously unruly, the DFC supported them instead of calling them to order in line with military tradition. The Guinean contingent was always complaining of being assigned to do difficult duties, a situation they interpreted to mean that it was a deliberate attempt by the Anglophones to eliminate the Francophones (Iweze, 1993; 226). An act of indiscipline also played out when the Sierra Leonean president, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, visited to bid the troops fare well. A Ghanaian battalion commander was rude to the

ECOMOG chief of staff, who was a brigadier and a Nigerian, when the latter ordered the former to 'bring the parade to attention and hand over to me'. The Ghanaian officer looked at the Nigerian superior officer and said he as a Ghanaian could not hand over to a Nigerian. Although the Nigerian ECOMOG chief of staff stood his ground, the Ghanaian officer only complied grudgingly (Iweze, 1993; 223). Situations like these dampened the morale of the troops as indiscipline was encouraged leading to some soldiers engaging in some unethical practices of stealing consumables, automobile tyres, abandoned cars and motor bikes while some equally engaged in abduction and rape of defenceless female individuals. It took quite a lot of efforts on the part of the new Commander, to stem such vices.

Irregular supply of funds was another fundamental problem that faced the ECOMOG operations in Liberia. The initial dependence of the ECOWAS Secretariat on the good will of the troops contributing countries to take care of their contingents at least for some days, created some financial and related crisis. This problem became clear after each contingent had exhausted its initial supplies and the ECOWAS Secretariat could not immediately raise funds to support the forces. The ECOWAS Secretariat could not also provide enough drugs for the troops on schedule. The Ghanaian contingent which came with a field hospital, were busy taking care of their soldiers. The troops allowance which was put at $3per day was too meagre for soldiers, who were to fight, get injured or killed (Iweze, 1993; 238). Even when the allowance was increased to $5 per day, the payment was not as regular as it should be. There were also inadequate supply of uniforms, boots and related needs of the troops. These shortcomings diminished the morale of the soldiers as a fighting force that should be taken good care of. Prince Yomie Johnson must have exploited the situation to donate uniforms and boots for ECOMOG soldiers in return for some arms like the '105 HOW' weapons which he needed to blow up the state house, the Liberian Executive Mansion (Iweze, 1993; 231). It is important to note that in operations such as Peacekeeping, regular supply of funds was necessary to discourage the troops from looting and other vices.

The forces also encountered problem of logistics which had to do with lack of effective communication, inadequate transport facilities and almost non – availability of officers trained in logistics support. In all these problems, one thing was very clear and that was the fact that Nigerian government remained steadfast in its mission. This has shown absolutely that Nigeria's military establishment is a very important factor in the domestic and international political future of the great Sub-region of West Africa.

The sacrifices of Nigeria and other West African countries were too costly, yet their success was so brilliant that it should be used to the benefit of the sub-region. But this can only be achieved if the community bravely effects the necessary institutional changes taught by the glaring lessons of the conflict in Liberia. The community should jointly engage the international community in a partnership for trade, investment as well as financial and logistic support for conflict resolution, management, peace-keeping and regional security. The Liberian and other international crises had shown the potential of conflicts to undermine international human rights and individual freedoms and to exacerbate tensions that threaten world peace and stability. In this connection, international organisations, both regional and global, should collaborate for a new thinking on the sanctity of national sovereignty, such that the sovereignty of nations may no longer be held sacrosanct in the face of serious outrages and abuses of human rights, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, some of the institutional changes that would promote new arrangements and structures for peace and stability in the West African sub-region should include:

- Discouragement of war of proxy and direct or indirect support for political exiles, dissidents and insurgents;
- West African states and governments should promote and sustain good governance;
- Popular participation in democratic rule should be encouraged;
- Electoral processes should be free, fair and transparent;
- In case of conflicts, consultation, mediation and dialogue should be encouraged instead of strong-arm solutions;
- Protagonists should be included in the peace process instead of being labelled as rebels;
- Peacekeeping forces should be adequately equipped and administered for effective enforcement of economic and diplomatic sanctions as well as embargoes on arms and ammunition;
- A military staff committee should be instituted within the Executive Secretariat of ECOWAS;
- An office of a Special Representative should be established in the field to provide political direction to the FC;
- FCs should be answerable to the Authority through the Executive Secretary and not to force contributing states;
- Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) programmes should be credibly backed by arms-for-food and other incentive packages, and finally;
- Since ECOWAS, with the Liberian experiment has been able to transform and expand its mandate from political and economic matters to that of managing, resolving and preventing conflicts, ECOMOG, should be kept as a model for the rest of Africa, as an intervention force to tackle instability in the continent.

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