The Truth About Congo

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The on-going violence and consequent human crises in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has had extensive news coverage. But the news reports don't really tell the true story. They highlight the plight of the Congolese people and blame the rebel Tutsi militia, led by self-styled General Laurent Nkunda, for this crisis. But we have been here before; the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 was attributed to violent conflicts between Tutsi and Hutu militias. And before Rwanda we have had other barbaric acts of violence and carnage in other parts of Africa.

Many observers point to the plethora of natural resources in these flash-point areas as the cause of the continual strife. But many other parts of Africa with little or no natural resources to fight over have also seen violent unrests in recent history. And many other regions in the world with considerable natural resources are able to avoid sinking to the depths of barbarism we see in African conflicts repeatedly.

In Africa, if it's not Tutsi militias then it's Hutu militias. And if it's not DRC then it's Rwanda, or Sudan, or Liberia, or some other African country facing another crisis costing the lives of many poor, ordinary Africans. And this takes us a bit closer to the root cause of the current problems in DRC. The reality is that the DRC conflict is simply a net effect of a bigger issue in Africa; an issue that *is* the root-cause of all of Africa's problems today – the lack of effective leadership across the continent.

Nelson Mandela highlighted the "…tragic failure of leadership…" in reference to the recent political debacle in Zimbabwe. However this leadership failure is evident right across Africa, and the violence being perpetuated by Laurent Nkunda in the DRC today simply epitomises the ripple effects. On one hand, leaders of African countries in the region seem unable to govern effectively such that such tribal conflicts do not flare up repeatedly. And on the other hand, if Laurent Nkunda is successful in installing himself as head of some governing junta in the region, history suggests that he is unlikely to be any more of an effective leader than the very same African leaders who seem unable to prevent such barbaric routes to power being adopted repeatedly.

Poignantly, just as we saw in Rwanda in 1994, while the UN and EU make efforts to find solutions to the current strife in DRC, I haven't heard anything from the African Union (AU). The AU's delayed response to a catastrophe on its own turf is a repeat of its reaction to other recent unrests in Zimbabwe, Kenya, Sudan and elsewhere. It's incredible that, despite numerous antecedents that provide ample opportunities for 'learning from experience', a body of *African national leaders* is unable to react to political and social discord *in Africa* in a timely and effective manner.

Yet, in many ways, this in itself illustrates the very leadership crises at the heart of Africa's collective quagmire. Sadly, the resultant effect is not just the loss of lives from the sort of violence we see in DRC; it also manifests in Africa's inability to make significant progress in social, economic and political development so many decades post-colonisation.

Well, I think it's time we faced up to a critical truism: Africa's various problems will only be solved by Africans, and our evolution along the path of progress is only possible with effective leadership in African countries. The relationship between leadership and an entity's ability to

grow, develop or succeed is not a novel concept. We see evidence of this frequently at both micro and macro levels all over the world, from Louis V. Gerstner's leadership of IBM's turnaround in the early 1990s to Prince Rainier III's stewardship of Monaco's development as a successful commercial centre and tourist destination.

Sadly, Africa seems to exemplify the flip-side of the coin; the continent is riddled with ineffective governance and corrupt leaders who do a good job of holding the continent back developmentally. Time and time again we see African leaders come to power with promises of improving the lives of their people. And time and time again we see no real results, only evidence of corruption and economic mismanagement, violent tribal and religious conflicts and worsening poverty for the common man in Africa.

Pan-Africanism proponents, who prefer to gloss over Africa's deep-rooted problems, may decry these views. But, as an African myself, who has lived and worked in Africa and elsewhere, I am well-qualified to comment on the virtues and ills of the region. Also, Africans must be prepared to face some bitter home-truths if we are to make *significant* progress with our development; progress starts with self-awareness and self-analyses. Unless there is open discussion of these issues it is unlikely that they will ever be robustly tackled, and will thus continue to deny Africa a place at the table of global development sweeping across the world.

Africa is beset by a myriad of problems – we need robust infrastructure, we need reliable utilities supplies, we need security, we need efficient government protocols and we need many other things including basic food and water for the poor. But our lack of all of these things in the 21st century stems primarily from our lack of effective leaders and robust governance. And that really is Africa's *greatest* need.

Effective leadership and governance that could prevent conflicts like that in DRC *is* possible in Africa. We need look no further than countries like Botswana and Ghana for evidence. Both are examples of African countries where sound leadership has engendered long periods of relative political stability and consequent economic growth. And there are other examples too.

Of course such countries still have their challenges. For example, Botswana still has one of the highest rates of HIV infections in the world. But – and this is the important bit – the Botswana government's response to HIV has also been exemplary: Botswana is one of the very few developing countries in the world to offer anti-retroviral drugs to everyone who needs them.

Ghana is as multi-tribal as many other African countries, and as recently as the early 1990s there were continuing undercurrents of tension between the Dagomba and Konkomba peoples in the north. Yet effective leadership and governance, coupled with increasing economic prosperity, has ensured that Ghana has not witnessed the sort of wanton violence and destitution that we have seen in Rwanda, DRC or Sudan. Ghana has been so successful in developing its political and economic fabric that it may be the location of Africa's first Silicon Valley.

Such economic growth is what *all* African leaders should really be pursuing. With the natural resources and relatively cheap labour African countries have, the potential benefits that could ensue from foreign direct investment (FDI) are vast. Outsourced manufacturing and offshore service industries such as call-centres, data warehousing, software development and engineering design are just a few examples of sectors which could be developed.

But such economic benefits go hand-in-hand with political stability; a status quo where disparate tribal, religious or political factions do not resort to guns and machetes to express their grievances. The onus is on African heads of state to be more effective leaders, and a good

starting point may be taking a tougher stance on renegades and tyrants like Laurent Nkunda and Robert Mugabe.

Until the majority of African countries have effective leaders in power Africa will continue to be plagued by one catastrophe or another, with debilitating effects for the common man in Africa, just like we see DRC today. Funny enough, disappointing as this may be, I am more worried about what such occurrences spell for Africa with the future generations of leaders growing up in this dysfunctional leadership climate. Are these African leaders of tomorrow likely to be any better than their predecessors? I guess only time will tell.