



## AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO CONFLICT PREVENTION

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*Mediation and dialogue have converged to avert a potential disaster in Sub-Saharan Africa. On 31 January 2004, President Paul Biya of Cameroon and President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria will meet for the third time with the United Nations Secretary-General to review progress in resolving a long-standing border dispute between the two countries.*

Diplomacy, leadership and the support of the United Nations are key factors in efforts under way in Sub-Saharan Africa to defuse tensions and avoid the great human and financial costs that come with conflict. UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan affirmed his personal commitment, and that of the United Nations, to the Presidents of Cameroon and Nigeria, in “continuing to assist their efforts to settle their differences peacefully” in a decade-old dispute.

### **Border Dispute**

In late 1993, Cameroon and Nigeria came to military blows over issues relating to their 1,600-kilometre land and maritime border, as clashes were reported between the armed forces of the two countries stationed in the area of the 1,000 square-kilometre Bakassi peninsula.

The dispute had been simmering for years. Both countries claimed rights of sovereignty over the lands extending from Lake Chad to the Bakassi peninsula, and into the Gulf of Guinea, stretches of which are rich in oil and other mineral and marine resources. The two countries were equally concerned for the welfare and well-being of their respective national and ethnic communities in the disputed areas. Today, the situation is further complicated by boundaries which have become more blurred as desertification has intensified. Local populations relying on Lake Chad for their survival have followed its receding waters. The result is a complex web of social, economic, cultural and political issues, threatening constantly to spill over into human rights, and military tensions.

In 1994, Cameroon decided to bring the case before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague. Only States can bring cases to the ICJ, and both sides must agree in advance to accept the decision of the Court. Nevertheless, in 2002, there were rumours that Nigeria might reject the eventual ICJ ruling. A Government statement insisted, “These areas have always been administered by Nigerian authorities.” Ahead of the ICJ ruling, Nigerian forces were reported to have been put on high alert, and local populations threatened to

secede in the event the Nigerian Government accepted the ruling. For Cameroon’s part, the national press reported on the injustice of having Nigerian troops in Cameroonian territory, and the confusion brought to local Cameroonians in a province overwhelmed by Nigerian petroleum, currency, media and culture. Renewed conflict became a very real prospect.

On 10 October 2002, the ICJ confirmed Cameroon’s sovereignty over most of the territory in question, and delineated the border, citing colonial-era agreements between the United Kingdom and Germany in the early 20th century. Nigeria was required to withdraw from most of the Lake Chad area, and Cameroon from one village. Most sensitive of all for Nigeria concerned its withdrawal from the Baskassi peninsula where most of the natural resources and the Nigerian Efik fishing communities are found. The Court’s decision on the land boundary between Lake Chad and the Bakassi Peninsula, however, corresponded more to the position adopted by Nigeria. In these areas, a process of mutual transfer of authority will have to take place.

### **What has the UN done to prevent conflict?**

Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa, has been quick to praise the leadership of the two Presidents in making peaceful coexistence between neighbours possible. He also praises the UN Secretary-General, who recognized an opportunity to make a determined and constructive mediating intervention in preparation for accepting what promised to be a difficult decision for either or both parties.

Anticipating potential problems, the Secretary-General invited Presidents Biya of Cameroon and Obasanjo of Nigeria to meet him weeks before the ICJ ruling. Both parties agreed to respect and implement the expected ICJ decision, whatever the outcome, and to establish a mechanism to implement the ruling with UN support.

Following the ICJ decision, on 15 November 2002, the UN Secretary-General convened a second meeting with the two leaders, who then issued a joint communiqué asking the Secretary-General to establish a Mixed-Commission comprised of Cameroon, Nigeria and the United Nations “to consider ways of following up the ICJ ruling and moving the process forward”. Secretary-General Annan named Ould-Abdallah as Chair of this Commission.

UN Photo: Cyril Baillieux, 5 September 2002



Following a meeting in Paris with United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan (centre), the leaders President Paul Biya of Cameroon (left), and President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria (right), agreed to abide by a decision of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on a border dispute between the two countries and to restore their friendly relations.

According to Mr. Ould-Abdallah, the UN approach, on advice of the Secretary-General, was first to proceed at a measured pace “to create a friendly ambience” among Nigeria, Cameroon and the UN.

### The Mixed Commission

Since its first meeting in Yaounde on 1 December 2002, the Commission has met seven times and the benefits of this investment in time, resources and political will are becoming apparent. The first phase of Nigeria’s and Cameroon’s withdrawal – involving civil administration, military forces and police forces in the Lake Chad area – was completed on 18 December 2003. Some 33 villages surrounding Naga’a, Tchika, Doron Liman, and Darack were handed over to Cameroon. The village of Damboré was transferred to Nigeria. Mixed Commission Chairman Ould-Abdallah presided over formal ceremonies on 16 December in Tchika and Damboré to mark the handover, with the heads of the Cameroonian and Nigerian delegations.

Since the establishment of the Mixed Commission, both delegations have expressed the desire for both Cameroonians and Nigerians to live in

harmony. Mr. Ould-Abdallah points out with satisfaction that peaceful relations between the two nations are very much reflected in the cordial relationship that has developed between their respective leaders. Indeed, the real success of the Commission, which has made agreement and transfer of power possible, has been in enabling open dialogue.

The Mixed Commission has pursued a number of additional efforts to capture this atmosphere, reaffirming its commitment to guarantee the rights of all people affected by the Court’s decision, both Cameroonian and Nigerian, and identifying joint economic ventures and cross-border cooperation measures to strengthen confidence between the parties. These include reactivating the Lake Chad Basin Commission-- formed in 1964 among neighbouring countries--and upgrading, with the assistance of the African Development Bank, one of the main roads between the two countries.

There are good prospects for more progress and a lasting peace, but as Mr. Ould-Abdallah points out, “It is only over when it is over. Lasting peace is possible, but it will take time.” Mr. Ould-Abdallah firmly believes that peace will be achieved if the two countries are at peace within themselves, and that is why the continuation of democratic openness in their respective societies is so essential to enabling strong cooperation between the two. “Dictatorship is prone to confrontation”, says Ould-Abdallah. “Democracy is more inclined to dialogue.”

### Regional and International Aspects

Regional neighbours have also recognized their role in establishing peace in their back yard. Chad especially has provided assistance. Revival of the Lake Chad Basin Commission, which came to an earlier standstill in part due to persisting tensions between Cameroon and Nigeria, will also help ensure that individual nations in the regional partnership do not again come to blows. The wider international community, including the United Kingdom, France, Germany and the United States, has also been supportive.

Nevertheless, as Mr. Ould-Abdallah points out, a constant challenge is to encourage countries to lend financial support to solve disputes which have not yet resulted in conflict. With a projected budget of \$12 million for demarcation and \$13 million for logistical and operational costs until 2005, the financial price tag is not unreasonable. But resources are still hard to find.

## What is Conflict Prevention?

Conflict prevention is not new. The UN has been involved in many efforts, including boundary demarcation efforts between Iran and Iraq following the first Gulf War, and efforts to maintain a post-conflict peace between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Today, there is greater understanding of the essential building blocks required to obtain and maintain peace and security. This means more than a military solution – it calls for social and economic development, good governance and democratization, the rule of law and respect for human rights. UN agencies, funds and programmes are well poised to assemble these building blocks, whether this be UNDP's assistance in confidence-building measures and economic development efforts between Nigeria and Cameroon, or UN Office on Drugs and Crime technical support to strengthen and implement governments' legislation on acts of terrorism.

Photo: UNOWA



*The Mixed Commission: Challenges of field work - trying to go to Dambore, Lake Chad area, September 2003*

Tools to recognize and detect problems in the making, and to understand the deep-rooted causes which underpin conflict, range from the UN system's early warning indicators to a number of other indicators which capture the gaps in a country's development, rule of law, and the functioning of its institutions. There is, today, greater potential and opportunity to address tensions, grievances, inequality, injustice, intolerance and hostilities before conflict actually occurs.

The primary responsibility for conflict prevention, however, lies with national governments and other local actors, without whose political will and ownership prevention is unlikely to succeed.

## Conflict Prevention is Better Than Cure

The costs of not preventing violence are enormous. Added to the very visible and immediate impacts of conflict are the longer term consequences for families, communities, local and national institutions and economies, and for neighbouring countries. While every case is different, the failure of the international community to prevent conflict in Rwanda had devastating economic and human consequences throughout the Great Lakes region. Later reviews would indicate that there was ample warning of a looming conflict situation and an opportunity to prevent it.

The cost of conflict to the international community is also high. The 1997 Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict found that the international community spent around \$200 billion on the seven major interventions of the 1990s – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia, Rwanda, Haiti, the Persian Gulf, Cambodia and El Salvador. This does not include Kosovo or East Timor. Potential preventive action could have saved the international community \$130 billion, according to the Commission.

Nevertheless, existing problems often take precedence over potential ones, since the benefits of ending a current conflict are immediate. Benefits of preventing conflicts from happening in the first place are potential, hard to quantify and intangible. It is easier for donors to send their limited resources to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, and indeed Afghanistan and Iraq, rather than to the invisible peoples whose peace has not broken down, quite yet. Secretary-General Kofi Annan says that “the most pitiful lesson of the past decade has been that prevention of violent conflict is far better, and more cost-effective, than cure.”

The challenge then is to harness the commitment of national and international actors, including the private sector and civil society, to recognize and tackle problems in the making, and to mobilize the collective potential of the UN system with a focus on conflict prevention and find the cure.

<sup>1</sup> Preventing Deadly Conflict: Final Report of the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 1997)

<sup>2</sup> Report of the Secretary-General on Prevention of Armed Conflict (A/55/985-S/2001/574)