

## From Cameroon-Nigeria: a war averted?

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SIXTEEN months ago, and eight years after fighting broke out in 1994, Cameroon and Nigeria were once again locking horns on the eve of the International Court of Justice's border delimitation judgment. Indeed, the implementation of a final judgment on a disputed boundary is a complicated and explosive process under the best of circumstances. It involves actual demarcation in difficult terrain, the withdrawal of one party or the other from areas that are to be handed-over, the protection of the rights of local populations that must decide to stay or to go, and a score of other related issues that affect the lives of peoples and states.

To resolve such problems in the absence of mutual trust is impossible. Hence the need for a mechanism in which such issues can be discussed and negotiated, and where trust can grow again between estranged neighbours. The mechanism should also be lean and flexible, able to adapt, provide specialised advice, and follow-up on the ground. Most importantly, and this is new to me, it requires able and knowledgeable head negotiators on either side.

This past January, the United Nations secretary-general, Kofi Annan, met for the third time with Presidents Paul Biya of Cameroon and Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria to review the work of the Mixed Commission they established a little over a year ago to implement the ICJ's judgment. This meeting is a roadside pause — not a finish-line celebration — to take stock of a process that has proven to be laborious, sometimes difficult and, perhaps most surprising, successful so far.

Much like human beings, each conflict has its own personality and conflict prevention efforts must be tailored to that personality. In the case of Cameroon and Nigeria's bitter border dispute, the secretary-general's preventive effort centred on easing the key transition from the docket of the ICJ to on-the-ground implementation.

Crucial to such an enterprise is early and determined intervention. On 5 September 2002, a month before the release of the ICJ's judgment, the secretary-general called a meeting of the two heads-of-state and secured their renewed commitment to accept the decision. The meeting helped dissipate the tension surrounding the case and set limits on the exchange of verbal artillery fire that often erupts around such decisions. It committed both leaderships to a path of negotiation, and allowed them to begin preparing, psychologically and politically, for a difficult judgment.

Equally crucial is immediate follow-up. Within days of the ICJ Ruling made on 10 October, Annan called for a second meeting of the two heads-of-state. Before doubts could take hold or opposition congeal amongst potential 'spoilers', he secured the agreement of the parties on an implementation mechanism, a Mixed Commission within which the Parties, assisted by the UN, could meet, discuss

the problems arising from the decision and give it effect. Since then, this Commission has developed and adopted a plan for the enormous task of demarcating 1,600 km of border. It also prepared and carried out military and administrative handovers in the first area, that of Lake Chad, in December 2003.

Confidence is ever fragile, and susceptible to setbacks. Some very sensitive issues lie ahead. The work, in other words, is far from over. But very early on, the two leaders agreed with the secretary-general on two essential points: First, Cameroon and Nigeria are neighbours, and since neither can pick up and move, they are condemned to this condition forever. Second, given that every conflict must sooner or later end in negotiation, why not skip a prolonged conflict and get to the table now?

Today, the two countries are more democratic and enjoy greater freedom than at the military height of the dispute in 1994. Beyond Cameroon-Nigeria relations, sustained and structured regional co-operation is essential to lasting peace. The Lake Chad Basin Commission, for example, which gathers together Cameroon, Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and the Central African Republic, must be revitalised. Similarly, sub-regional co-operation must be extended to the Gulf of Guinea to prevent conflicts and to help ensure a peaceful, co-ordinated and environmentally responsible management of the area's many natural resources. These efforts will also hopefully lead to increased trade and economic development and to further integration of several consumer markets that have remained isolated for too long. Finally, greater involvement of civil society and private business on both sides is essential for the consolidation of this process of mutual reconciliation.

The gains made so far are the result of the commitment, hard work, and collaboration of the two Presidents and their administrations. The Cameroon-Nigeria dispute has already yielded one lesson for conflict prevention and management. While a juridical act is an essential first step, good leadership and mutual confidence are necessary to give such acts concrete effect. Only in this manner can the parties to a dispute get back on course toward a new and sustainable relationship. A tentative second lesson is that despite more than a decade of discussion about preventive diplomacy, it is still hard to focus the attention of the international community on averting a conflict.

Indeed, peaceful settlement of disputes draws less attention and lesser resources than a bloody war. It is hoped that preventive measures supported by the UN to help Cameroon and Nigeria end a long dispute will get the needed co-operation of the international community.

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