



# REALITY CHECK

DIVERSE VOICES ON INTERNAL CONFLICT

The Fund for Peace

*“Building Peace in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century”*

NUMBER 2 AUGUST 2001

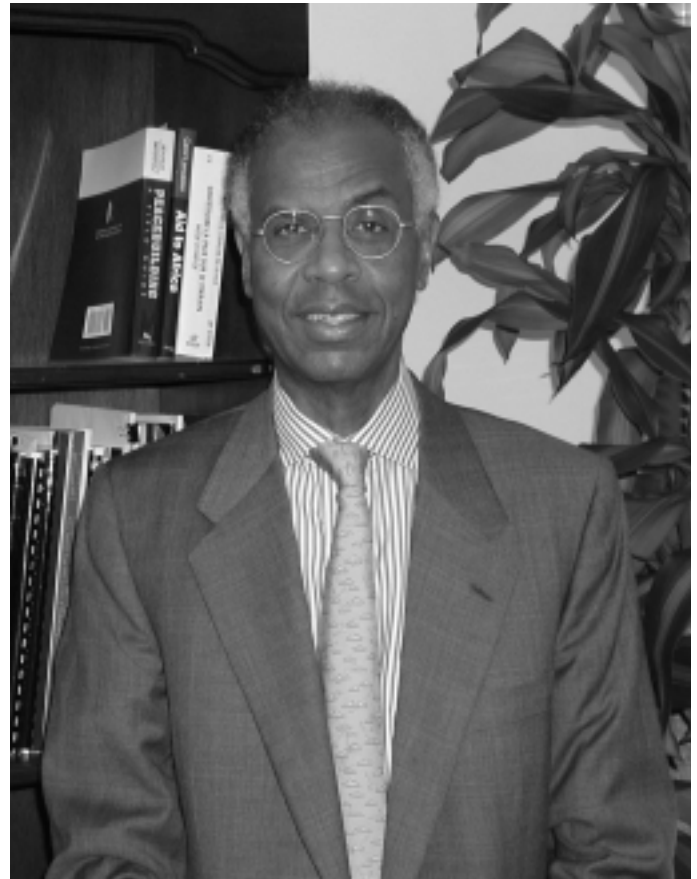
*Ambassador Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah served as special representative of the UN secretary general in Burundi between 1993-1995. He arrived after a failed coup attempt in which the president was murdered and widespread killing had broken out between the Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups. His mission was to restore democratic institutions, facilitate dialogue between warring factions, and establish a commission of inquiry into the massacres that resulted from the coup attempt. He arrived with two staff members. Ambassador Ould-Abdallah is currently the executive secretary of the Global Coalition for Africa. He has served as Mauritania’s minister of foreign affairs, and ambassador to the United States and the European Union. The Ambassador’s latest book is Burundi on the Brink, an account of his service in Burundi.*

**FfP: You stepped into a difficult situation. What was different from what you had expected?**

One thing I had not expected was the impact of external news reports on domestic actors. Everybody was very tuned into the Voice of America, the BBC, and Radio France Internationale. It has been helpful for me now to work with the press and to see how we could cooperate in advancing an agenda for peace rather than having press reports strengthen the extremists. A second surprise was that I thought the country would be in total chaos. On the contrary, it was thoroughly organized, not only by African standards, but even by international standards. Despite the president having been killed along with his four closest advisors, 800,000 refugees, and more than 300,000 or more internally displaced persons, the country looked stable, the streets were clean and well kept, and the telephones were working. You don’t necessarily expect that in a landlocked, poor African country. My third surprise was the beauty of the countryside. It compares easily to Provence in Southern France.

**FfP: When you went in 1993, there were calls for UN peacekeeping troops. Would they have helped?**

Since serving in Burundi, I have become skeptical about



**Ambassador Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah**

peacekeeping troops, especially in conflicts within national borders. In Burundi, the fighting has no frontline, the animosity is between neighbors, sometimes old friends, sometimes in-laws. There are no two groups for a military force to separate. Second, if the army is restricted from using force under Chapter Six of the UN Charter, what is its effectiveness, what is even its deterrent capacity? The people who are fighting know that UN troops’ actions are limited. Militaries are trained to fight, not to maintain law and order. How can they operate where people can shoot at them and humiliate them, and they cannot move? I am convinced that the notion of sending in military troops is a relic from the Cold War, when troops were sent between two states with a frontline, like between Syria and Israel, or Israel and Egypt.

**FfP: You wrote in your book that certain political figures seemed to be waiting for outside intervention. Did the possibility of military intervention affect the situation?**

When you announce publicly that you are sending military troops into a conflict, you cannot send them overnight, they cannot come by surprise, they have to be mobilized, regrouped, and flown in, and you have to prepare for their arrival. Therefore, the announcement plays into the hands of the extremists. In a civilian conflict, the fight is not necessarily for territory, it is about the very survival of your group, so you are ready to fight to the end. If you oppose the military coming in, you are going to try to kill more of your enemies before the military arrives. And those who are promoting the military intervention will be your first targets. On the other hand, those who favor military intervention may create more chaos deliberately to justify the sending of troops.

**FfP: How do you weigh the emotional pressures to deploy troops to stop the killing against the difficulties of military intervention?**

We have to see the long-term consequences. Sometimes, the Security Council seems to decide to send troops, not because it intends to do it, but to use the threat as a deterrent. Sometimes, it is just to appease public opinion in the member states. Governments want to say, "We are trying, we are doing something." But the international community has many means. Most rebels, wherever they are encamped, have some assets or interests in democratic countries and these could be targeted, their families sent home, their assets seized, their children's scholarships rescinded. We need to strengthen our ability to send strong but credible messages to bad guys.

**FfP: How would you assess the situation in Burundi today?**

People in Burundi are suffering, so the international community feels that it has to do something. Sometimes this has a perverse effect. A major problem today in Burundi, and it has been the case since late 1994 - early 1995, is the multiplicity of external actors. The factions in Burundi play on the emotions of major countries in the international community. They take advantage of the good will of private and official external actors. This is, in my opinion, what still perpetuates and exacerbates the conflict. In 1994, after the genocide in Rwanda and because Burundi has the same ethnic composition, everyone was saying Burundi is next even though most specialists know that it is not possible to have genocide overnight. Genocide is not

instant coffee. It is prepared, planned and carried out over time. But external actors rushed to Burundi, all acting without coordinating among themselves and without consulting the designated UN representative. At one point, there were about twelve mediators from the European Union, the United States, the OAU, and the UN, not to mention private actors.

**FfP: There was no coordination?**

Coordination, even harmonization, was not easy. They all had different approaches and were coming from different angles. And this is the same in the Republic of Congo today, in Colombia, and in Sierra Leone. Time has come for the international community to assess the negative impact of uncoordinated external actors. Today, President Nelson Mandela is trying to work something out in Burundi, but every time there is a rebel group saying no, you have outside actors trying, one way or another, to accommodate them. This gives extremists prestige.

**FfP: Has Mandela done the right thing to mediate an agreement where President Buyoya, a Tutsi, will remain president over 18 months and then turn over power to a Hutu president?**

Right or not, the lead mediator's position should be supported, especially initially. Nothing should be done to undermine it. All those involved in Burundi, the UN, Europe, the US, the World Bank, and others should organize behind President Mandela's position. External actors, public and private, must not send ambiguous or confused signals. You will never have unanimity among internal actors in any peace agreement. You always have people who are disgruntled because they have not been granted government positions and, subsequently, they decide to create their own groups to gain influence. If you give them any external support, you encourage them to weaken peace efforts.

**FfP: So the answer is to isolate the groups that do not agree?**

Yes. Why should they renounce access to the press, traveling in nice airplanes, and being lodged in good hotels? Why should they accept the agreement when they have a stake in the conflict lasting longer? The longer a conflict lasts, the more it can become a business affair. Nations where the extremists opposed to official mediation find shelter should expel them.

**FfP: Is there a role for military training, and an effort to balance the representation of ethnic groups**

## **within the military?**

Yes, I think it is very important in Burundi and in many African countries to train the army, and to help it become more professional. But the international community should be very careful in integrating rebels into official armies. They should be trained first. You have to think of psychological problems. Say you are in the regular army, and have been promoted from lieutenant to captain to major to colonel. And along comes the other side you are supposed to integrate with. These people have never been to military school and they have inflated their own ranks. Are you going to give the two sides equal ranks? Salaries are another issue. And you cannot have a bloated army, so some people have to leave. What will they tell their families? You must have a comprehensive approach and it will require funding. You cannot come from Washington, Paris, New York, and just tell people to demobilize, disarm, rehabilitate, and reintegrate. There are financial, human and psychological consequences that must be included in your program.

## **FfP: You emphasize psychology.**

I figured out fairly quickly that one of the most important dimensions of civil conflict that is ignored is the psychological: fear of the old order, and also of change, misperceptions, and rumors. The way people fight can be psychological. They can kill a pet, a little dog or a cat, just to make the owner suffer. And often they don't just kill, they also mutilate to further humiliate their victims.

## **FfP: What kinds of rumors?**

Fears and rumors are interconnected because people who are scared will believe in anything. For instance, I remember very well the day people came to tell me that there was a US carrier on Lake Tanganyika. I asked them, "How could a carrier get there from the Indian Ocean?" But the people were serious.

## **FfP: Sometimes fears are well-based. Isn't providing personal security an answer?**

In this kind of conflict, I see a role mostly for police, a kind of FBI or a French gendarmarie. You need people who can get close to the population, to understand its reactions, to collect intelligence, and to establish trust. You must also include the psychological dimension in peace negotiations. Otherwise when people sign agreements, it is just in order to gain time. And to gain time is just a way to keep fighting.

## **FfP: You said in your book that the UN needs serious reforms to be able to address some of these conflicts.**

First, I think we should not forget that the UN Charter entrusts the Security Council with peace and security. Second, you must admit that reforming a large bureaucracy is not easy. Secretary General Kofi Annan has greatly improved the organization and I believe it is more flexible and more open to listening. The UN is more credible in Africa compared to five years ago.

## **What about regional actors?**

The UN Charter contains provisions for cooperation with regional organizations. If regional organizations can do something, they should, for a number of reasons. The crisis is within regional borders and it can affect many countries within the region. A peaceful country like Tanzania suffers from conflicts in the DRC, Burundi, and Rwanda. And its infrastructure, roads, health centers, and food supply are all affected by refugees coming from

---

---

**We need to strengthen our ability to send strong, but credible messages to bad guys.**

---

---

Burundi and Rwanda. So they have to help even if they have limited resources. But regional organizations must have moral legitimacy. I argued that when NATO and the US intervened in Kosovo, they had moral legitimacy because they have democratically elected governments. In some sub-regional organizations whether in Africa or elsewhere, I don't see that there is legitimacy in trying to intervene in favor of democracy if you are a dictator like Abacha in Nigeria. He was trying to bring peace in Liberia and Sierra Leone, which is good, but what legitimacy could he bring to bear? If a sub-regional organization can help to stabilize, why not? But for me, it is important that they have the moral authority to do so.

## **FfP: How would you gain that legitimacy in Africa?**

You have to have two things: legitimacy and the capacity to be successful. The intervening countries must not only be democratic, but also transparent. Most people agree now that South Africa has a legitimate government. Nigeria

---

still has difficulties, but the president himself has moral authority. So some countries have moral authority, but how many have the capacity to intervene? Senegal and Mali have moral authority but not the capacity.

**FfP: What about unilateral intervention?**

That is very difficult. But what about a major democratic country interfering on a unilateral basis to stop a neighbor from oppressing its people? You cannot say no one can interfere in cases where there is no agreement in the Security Council, or NATO, or the European Union, or the OAU.

**FfP: You mentioned capacity. What is your opinion on the current debate about US military training programs in Africa?**

I am familiar with the debate on ACRI and Operation Focus Relief. I have a positive opinion of programs that engage African armies. African armies are crucial public institutions, long neglected by the international development community. They are in transition and will be for many years. Since most governments in Africa were military regimes, power was centered within the military. The leadership of African armies now, from majors up to generals, was recruited under that system. And such a culture is still very strong even in the lower ranks. At the same time, we now have more democratic regimes, more freedom of the press, and the military doesn't see any political future for itself. But the military also sees regimes that are often corrupt or elections that are rigged and fraudulent. Military coups d'état are now condemned everywhere, but "constitutional" coups are not. If you rig an election, which, in my opinion, is a constitutional coup, you can be accepted by the international community. But if there is a military coup, and I don't see any difference between the two paths, you will be condemned. I see where training for peacekeeping can give the military a sense of mission and usefulness, a new sense of life. It is true preventive diplomacy. If you can develop a relationship between high-ranking officers and other soldiers that is more professional and less politicized and an army where the spending is more transparent, I think you send a very strong educational message .

**FfP: Would you have any advice to the US for programs beyond military training?**

Most African public institutions are crumbling. You have a president and nothing else. The army is at least a national institution and strengthening it strengthens the viability of the state. Somalia collapsed when the army collapsed, Congo collapsed when the army collapsed, the same [can be said] for Liberia and Sierra Leone. Expectations are very high every time you mention America. America should remain committed to human rights, democratization, and fighting corruption. There are only a few countries who can speak loud and clear about it. America should not fall into the trap of some of my European friends who say, "It took Europe two centuries to have democracy and we will give Africa time." Yes, we should be given some time, but we do not have that much time when there are the Internet, cellular phones, faxes, and mass transportation. America must encourage the private sector, the judiciary and the press. I don't see any reason to support regimes that close papers or put journalists in jail. We cannot have democracy and fight corruption without a strong press that includes radio and TV.

**FfP: How would you explain support for President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe in the most recent OAU meeting?**

It may be just a diplomatic move. In the neighboring countries, he is viewed as an elder statesman and they give him support. How deep and far is this support? I don't know because I was not at Lusaka. But when you have a senior person, Africans have a tendency to say, "Yes, older brother."

**FfP: Your book is dedicated "To the innocent people of Burundi: May they help their leaders escape from their deadly and self-defeating game."**

I would not change that today. Burundese are so tired of war, insecurity, and privation. Before the wars, Burundi and Rwanda were among the very few African countries to be self-sufficient in food, and now they live on humanitarian assistance. They need to get back their pride and live in peace.

**-- Washington DC, July 13, 2001**

**Program on Regional Responses to Internal War**

*Program Director: Mary Locke*  
*mlocke@fundforpeace.org Ph: x212*

*Program Officer: Jason Ladnier*  
*jladnier@fundforpeace.org Ph: x235*

**The Fund for Peace**

1701 K Street, NW – 11<sup>th</sup> floor Washington, DC 20006  
Phone: (202) 223-7940 FAX: (202) 223-7947  
[www.fundforpeace.org](http://www.fundforpeace.org)