Exploring the causes and dynamics of armed

conflicts in Africa by Ochinya O. Ojiji

I

**INTRODUCTION**

Africa has since the end of the cold war experienced more violent armed conflicts and

has endured more direct and indirect casuahies of war than any other continent of the

world (Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 2001). The violence which has been both

pervasive and brutal has played a key role in inhibiting social and political progress. It

has also prevented Africans from experiencing the unprecedented economic growth

that is enjoyed by people in some other parts of the world. Data about the state of

armed conflicts in the world by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

(SIPRI 2005) have continued to show that the low-income countries in the world are

those that have experienced the most armed conflicts and the bulk of these are in

Africa.

The loss of lives and destruction of vital infrastructure for development that usually

accompany these conflicts has compounded an already bleak picture of Africa which

is occasioned by disease as well as mismanagement of resources. Armed conflicts

therefore continue to remain a key challenge for African countries desperately seeking

to join4lie league of developed nations.

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Conflict as a phenomenon has been identified to be an important, intrinsic and

inevitable part of human existence as well as a natural part of daily life (Faleti, 2006).

It is mainly associated with disagreements, contentions and contest within and

between individuals or groups of individuals. It is also a fluid and infinitely elastic

concept that can be twisted into different shapes and involves various opinions

concerning its nature, causes and impact.

Most scholars argue that conflict is not all the time negative (Faleti 2006) in the sense

that, at times it can also be constructive. Destructive conflicts which is the focus of

this paper, essentially refers to violent and armed insurgence, wars, clashes and so on

that result in injuries and the destruction of lives and property. The worse forms of

the destructive type of conflict include mass murder and genocide against unarmed

civilians (Osaghae, 1994).

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However, despite the inevitability of conflict in human existence, a violent or armed

conflict is not inevitable and in our opinion an anomaly. While conflict in its general

sense can be understood to be the pursuit of incompatible interests and goals by

different groups, violent conflict is the resort to the use of force and armed violence in

the pursuit of incompatible interests and goals (Francis, 2006) with negative impact

that can be sometimes overwhelming.

Hence, it is in this regard that this paper hopes to explore and discuss the problem of

violent and armed conflicts in Africa, with particular reference to how the

proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) have contributed to the

prevalence of these conflicts in the continent. This paper is organized along four

specific themes. The first discusses the nature and challenges of conflict to Africa's

development, while the second focuses on the general causes of armed conflicts in the

continent. The third theme is devoted to exploring the challenges of arms trafficking

and violent conflicts in Africa, while the fourth examines the various strategies for the

management and prevention of conflicts in Africa and in particular points to some

possible responses that might open ways for the transformation and hopefully the

alleviation of the underlying problems. We shall now discuss these themes in turn.

**NATURE OF CONFLICTS IN AFRICA**

Historical and contemporary international developments have combined to determine

the nature of armed conflicts in Africa. In general, armed conflicts in the continent

can be classified into two broad categories: inter-state and intra-state. The armed

conflicts in Africa have predominantly been intra-state and inter- state conflicts.

Notably, the historic developments and events in the continent and the world as a

whole have played a significant part in determining the nature of conflicts

experienced in Africa.

Before the colonial period (the period before the 19"� century), the pre-colonial

African societies organized into Kingdoms, chiefdoms etc, engaged each other in

various battle to control territories and inter-tribal wars (Parker, 1993). There were

expansionist wars of the Kanem Borno empire in the 13"� century under the rule of

Mai Dunama, the Sokoto Caliphate around the 19"� century during Usman Dan

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Fodio's jihad in modern day Northern Nigeria, and the Benin and Oyo empires in the

Southern parts. In Southern Africa, there was the expansionist campaign by Shaka the

Zulu, the Buganda kingdom in Eastern Africa and the Ottoman empire in the Northern

region just to mention a few (http;//en.wikipedia.org)

With the colonization of Africa by European imperialist powers, the continent was

then thrown into a state of struggling for independence. Many countries in Africa

fought hard to gain their independence especially in the Portuguese colonies where

the struggle were lengthy, violent and bitter (Africa Policy and Economics

Department, 2001). This period also coincided with the world wars as well as the

early phase of the cold war.

The cold war, which was between two major ideological blocs i.e. the Eastern bloc

(communists) and the Western bloc (capitalists), led to emergence of the East-West

spheres of influence in Africa. It also brought about a system of client states in which

leaders were maintained in power for their allegiance to either of the power blocks

and such African countries were pitched against each other.

By the time the cold war was reaching its peak, a number of African countries had

obtained their independence, and these helped increase inter-state conflicts as

independent countries were assisting countries still under colonial administration, as

well as conflicts over territorial boundaries. The cold war interest fuelled two major

conflicts in Africa: in 1975 when South Africa intervened in Angola to prevent the

MPLA from coming to power and the Ogaden war of 1977-1978 between Somalia

and Ethiopia. The scale of conflicts in Africa at this period was no greater than those

experienced in Asia (Africa Policy and Economics Department, 2001).

From the post cold war period till date, according to the Africa Policy and Economics

Department (2001), four distinct types of conflicts can be deciphered as follows;

s the conventional conflict which is basically inter-state and also referred to as

�ars of attrition. The war between Eritrea and Ethiopia was the only conventional

conflict fought in Africa in the last decade. It was fought with regular troops along

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defined series of fronts and the targets and objectives were primarily military and

strategic.

The second type is the factional conflicts and it is mostly intra-state and fluid by

nature. It rarely involves a defined frontline and engagement is frequently

opportunistic rather than strategic. Small arms are the main weapons used, it is less

costly, and can easily be sustained without extensive support. The factional conflicts

which most of the time occur as civil wars revolve around issues such as struggle to

control areas of commerce, mineral and natural resources. Examples of this conflict

are; the Sierra Leonean conflicts which began in 1991, initiated by the Revolutionary

United Front (RUF) under Foday Sankoh over control of the diamond industry

(http://en.wikipedia.org'): the Liberia conflcits; first in 1989-1996 between three

factions of Samuel Doe (then President), Charles Taylor (leader of National Patriotic

Front of Liberia -NPFL) and Prince Johnson, and there was another one between

1997- 2003 (GlobalSecurity.org). There is also the Casamance conflict of Senegal

which is a low-level civil war waged between the Government of Senegal and the

Movement of Demoe�ratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) since 1982 (probably the

longest conflict in West Africa) till date over the question of independence for the

Casamance region (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1999).

Genocide and ethnic based conflicts are the third type of conflict and falls into the

intra-state category. These are centrally directed; involving virulent use of propaganda

and can spread easily leaving a huge and massive death toll. They are low technology

wars and mostly involve locally made small arms. The conflict in the Great Lakes

region falls under this type. The Great Lakes region in this context refers to the region

covering areas of Eastern Zaire, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, and Tanzania. The

conflict affecting this region is identified to be either constrained or facilitated by

three major factors namely: a) the irrational political boundaries; b) land shortages

and environmental stress; and c) ethnically differentiated access to power and wealth

(Griggs, 1999). Even though the history of the hostilities in this region draws from

pre- colonial times, the colonial interests of the German and Belgian powers further

worsened the situation that up to date has been difficult to resolved.

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Finally is the "new warfare'" or the regional conflicts which is also inter-state. This

type of conflict involves conventional state forces, frequently engaged to protect key

installations or may find themselves in capital intensive, attritional warfare with other

states. Intensive use of factional forces that act as proxies and protection or frontline

for conventional forces is also involved. The conflicts in the Horn of Africa such as

the conflicts in Sudan and Somalia, and that of the Democratic Republic of Congo

(DRC) are in this category. The war in DRC formerly called Zaire under President

Mobutu Sese Seko is the widest interstate war in modern African history

(GlobalSecurity.org). It has become an environment in which numerous foreign

players have become involved, some within the immediate sub region and some from

much further a field. The conflicts involves nine nations including Rwanda, Uganda,

Angola, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. The Horn of Africa which includes Ethiopia,

Eritrea and Somali,

**GENERAL CAUSES OF ARMED CONFLICTS IN AFRICA**

Having examined the typology of armed conflicts in Africa, we now turn to the

discussion of the general causes of conflicts in the continent. We use the term

"causes" in a very general sense to refer to factors contributing to conflicts rather than

the cause-effect relationship as the word "cause" implies. It is often difficult to

establish causal relationship with a social phenomenon as conflict.

There are many factors responsible for the outbreak and continued prevalence of

violent conflicts in Africa. These causes or sources of conflicts in Africa reflect the

diversity and complexities of the continent's historic and contemporary dynamics.

Some are internal, some reflect the dynamics of a particular sub-region, and some

have prominent international dimensions. Despite these differences, the sources of

conflicts are linked by a number of themes and experiences (Cleveland and United

Nations Environment Programme, 2007).

In many ways, the conflicts experienced in Africa have been linked to problems

rooted in history. The major root causes of conflicts according to Stewarts (1998)

include political, economic and social inequalities, extreme poverty, economic

stagnation, poor government services, high unemployment, environmental

degradation and individual economic incentives to fight. At various points, one or

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more of these causes have been reflected in African conflicts. The militarization of

societies and social tensions which have resulted from these conflicts have tended to

linger long after the violence subsides, having long-term effects on opportunities for

development and improved human being.

During the period between 1960s and 1970s, many African countries achieved

political independence from direct colonial control. Current tensions and conflicts in

several African countries cannot be fully understood without reference to these past

struggles. While in the Southern part of the continent, western countries have

continued to play pivotal roles, for most countries the anti-colonial struggle which has

endured for many years had a destructive impact on the social and political life as

well as environmental resources.

Past response to conflicts in Africa have often failed to understand the context within

which these conflicts operated or to address the causes. In order to effectively respond

or address Africa's conflicts, it requires agreement on and understanding of the

causes. To achieve this, it is necessary to distinguish between the root causes of the

conflicts and the secondary causes that enable and sustain the conflicts as well as

hinder the resolution of the conflicts.

**Root Causes**

Historically, many conflicts in Africa occur where there is a tradition of cyclical

violence. In such cases, political violence is entrenched and the instruments of state

such as the armed forces, police, and the judiciary sustain the process. History in

places like Congo Democratic Republic Burundi and Rwanda created a state model

based on artificial creation and the abuse of ethnicity to maintain power. Deeply

entrenched historic patterns of violence are amongst the most difficult to resolve as

they require major societal and political change.

Among the root causes, there is the problem of inequality between groups which is

probably the foremost cause of conflicts in the continent. This inequality is notable on

three mutually reinforcing levels; social, economic and political. Usually, unequal

access to political power perpetuates a similar lack of access to resources, revenue and

social amenities. Conflicts in coûntrres such as Liberia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone can

relate to this cause. \ /

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The collapse of state institutions has often led to internal and regional conflicts such

as the case of Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko. Even though the collapse is rarely

sudden, but it arises out of a long degenerative process that is mostly characterized by

predatory government operating through coercion, corruption and personality politics

to secure political power and control of resources. The state finds itself no longer able

to provide or sustain basic services or security to its citizens, thus it loses legitimacy

which often leads to a breakdown of law and order (Africa Policy and Economics

Department, 2001). Closely linked to this factor or cause is the problem of continuous

economic decline that can occur in different forms ranging from natural catastrophe to

major shifts in terms of trade. The Ethiopian famine of 1974 was the major factor

behind the overthrow of Haile Selasse's government and the violence that ensued.

Another cause linked to Africa's conflicts is wealth associated natural resource. The

conflicts are usually over control of existing scarce or abundant natural resources. The

most common conflicts of scarcity occurs over control of grazing or water rights

especially by nomadic people as is the case in the Mambilla Plateau of Nigeria.

Countries with abundant oil or mineral deposit face high risk of conflicts over control

of these resources as is the case in Sierra Leone and Nigeria. In relation to this

argument, some scholars have also tried to trace the roots of violent conflicts in Africa

to ways in which rapid population growth beyond the carrying capacity of the

environment, that in turn has bred resource scarcities and violence. The notion behind

this is that resource insecurity is at the heart of resource wars as people struggle over

shrinking resources (Obi, not dated).

**Secondary Causes**

Patterns of some conflicts in Africa have also shown that countries with high levels of

unemployment among young men and where male education is low face extremely

high risk of conflicts. Throughout the continent, the factional conflicts experienced

have drawn manpower from the pool of marginalized or socially excluded young men

e.g. Rwanda, Liberia and some cases in Nigeria ( Niger-Delta State and in the

Northern parts).

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The Niger-Delta crisis which is claiming lots of lives and property as well as

attracting lots of international attention by the day has been left entirely to the

Nigerian government to handle despite some of the foreign casualties involved.

Although, the Government has not been able to effectively resolve the crisis,

Nigeria's hegemonic status in the West African region and probably the fear of

loosing that status could possibly explain the reason why no other external

intervention is involved (Stratfor's Free Intelligence Report, 2007). Nigeria's

hegemony enjoyed in the West African region can be due to the big brother role it has

been playing in the continent as well as the huge funds and human resources it has

invested in the region especially in the area of peacekeeping (Hutchful, 1999).

In many communities in Africa, ethnicity has mostly been employed by political

leaders and belligerents who incite and increasingly make use of ethnic hatred for

their selfish political and economic benefits. The availability of small arms and light

weapons which will be discussed in the next section falls under this category too.

**THE CHALLENGES OF SMALL ARMS AND LIGHT WEAPONS (SALWS)**

**TRAFFICKING AND CONFLICTS**

Arms transfer and trafficking have remained major security problems in Africa. Arms

transfer in the general sense, may be essential to support a state's legitimate security

needs or to improve the capacity of its security force that are required sometimes to

use minimal armed force to stop violent criminal acts where there is direct threat to

life (Amnesty International, Oxfam International and International Action Network on

Small Arms, June 2004). In Africa as well as other low-income countries, the misuse

of these arms especially SALWs by licensed and unlicensed users to perpetuate

violence. The continent continues to have the greatest number of armed conflicts in

the world. In mid-200I, latent or open hostilities affected Angola, Burundi, Chad,

Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, Senegal, Sierra

Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania-Zanzibar, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

For sometime after the cold war period, global attention has focused on Weapons of

Mass Destruction (WMD) such as nuclear, biological and chemical weapons as a

major threat to international security. By the mid 1990s, global focus shifted towards

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the SALWs, after the Rwandan genocide as well as the conflicts in Sierra Leone,

Liberia, Somalia and other parts of Africa, where it was not these WMDs but SALW

that were used to cause massive destruction to lives and property. Despite the shift of

attention to SALWs, no serious international measure was taken until at the 2001

United Nations SALW conference when some Sub-Saharan countries argued for a

global prohibition on SALW transfer to the continent and there was global consensus

that SALW posed serious problems to peace, security and stability (SIPRL 2005).

Even though the influx of light weapons that are financed by cash, diamonds or other

commodities do not cause Africa's wars it certainly plays a significant part in not only

prolonging them but also in making them more lethal (Bureau of Intelligence and

Research, 2001). Several sources also provide data which have shown how various

governments of developing (lower middle income and low income) countries continue

regularly to commit huge proportions of their meagre national budgets to military

expenditure, ranking second to high income countries followed by upper middle

income (SIPRI, 2007; Amnesty International, Oxfam International and International

Action Network on Small Arms, June 2004).

The increasing rate of conflict as it relates to the proliferation of SALWs is traced to

the period after the cold war (Johnson, Marsh & Thurin, 2005) when nations and

manufacturers in their eagerness to dispose of the arsenals of arms saw Africa as a

potential and attractive market for their wares. The international community on it part,

has been unable to control the transfer and trafficking of these arms as such it has

contributed immensely to the persistence of the devastating conflicts in the continent.

Regionally, the porous nature of most borders of African States as well as the

ineffective national government laws concerning the sales and transfer of firearms

have greatly and continuously rendered Africa vulnerable to opportunistic arms

merchants.

Armed conflicts have been and are still among factors responsible for undermining

the processes of democratization and development in Africa. These conflicts

contribute to political decay, facilitate state collapse, cause widespread human rights

violations, exacerbate famine conditions and generate high number of refugees and

internally displaced people. Conflicts have most often, also resulted in the diversion

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of scarce resources from social services to military expenditure, as well as disrupted

trade and other socio- economic activities, discouraged tourism, and contributes to the

break down of family structures. There are also the grave psychological consequences

on women and especially children who become traumatized and accustomed to a

culture of violence e.g. child soldiers. Also, children born during conflict are deprived

of basic necessities of life and likely to suffer life-long deficiencies and loss of

capacity.

War profiteering by soldiers and guerrillas or militants has posed a difficult obstacle

to efforts to end Africa's conflicts. The arms market continues to offer many

opportunities to those who posses assets other than hard currency to finance weapon

purchases. Diamonds, other gemstones and as well as other mineral or natural

resources have enabled poor governments and insurgent or militant or rebel groups to

acquire arms in DR Congo, Sierra Leone, Uganda, Rwanda, Zimbabwe and Nigeria (

Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 2001).

In many cases, possession of SALWs has reduced the chances of the manage and

resolve conflicts because of the lack of credible externa! guarantors to peace

processes. This is particularly important when dealing with demobilization and

disarmament, where the stakes are high for the belligerent groups in terms of potential

loss of power and personal security.

**FACTORS ENCOURAGING THE PROLIFERATION OF SMALL ARMS**

Several factors can be identified as encouraging, if not supporting, the proliferation of

small arms and light weapons in Africa. The key one include the collapse of the

Soviet Union, International oil piracy; struggles over control of resources; refugee

crises and the local manufacture of Arms. These factors a briefly outlined below.

**1.Collapse of the Soviet Union;**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union which brought about the effective end of the

Cold war era, many Eastern European countries found themselves with huge stock¬

piles of Soviet-era arms that were surplus to their new requirements. Conflicts in

Africa, such as Angola, the great Lakes regions and West Africa provided attractive

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small arms markets for many of these countries to dispose-of these old stocks and

earn much needed revenues. Such revenues were badly needed for investment in the

transformation to a market economy, especially in stock markets.

**2. International Oil Piracy:**

Arms trafficking is a complex and convoluted business involving an array of brokers,

banks, transportation companies and transshipment points. As part of this process,

several international oil piracy rings have emerged to facilitate illegal and shady arms

deals and transfers. Some times, the oil piracy rings barter arms directly for oil. Their

activities were carried out through the availability of false end-user certificates to

circumvent UN Ann embargoes. These syndicate groups pose serious problems as

they serve as a source for illegal and non-state actors to procure arms which have

most of the time been used in intra-state conflicts especially those involving state and

non state factions. Security Council commission created to investigate violations of

UN embargoes shed light on some of their activities, including those of Victor Bout

and Leonard Minin. Bout, (a Russian national based in United Arab Emirates) has

come to symbolize the arms trafficking problem in sub-Saharan Africa and has

demonstrated an uncanny ability to deliver weapons and other military supplies to

clients throughout Africa. He transferred 14million USD worth of small arms, light

weapons and ammunition from Bulgaria primarily to DRC and Tanzania between

1997 and 1998. He currently simultaneously operates in many countries such as

Angola, Cameroun, DRC, Kenya, Libya, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan, and Uganda.

Minin, on the other hand has sold 68 tons of munitions from Ukrain to Liberia and

Sierra Leone in 1999 (Bureau of Intelligence and Research, 2001; Berman, 2007).

There are probably less known operators who trade arms for oil.

**3. Struggle over Resource Conflicts:**

In most of Africa there are spirited struggles over revenues from resources and how

such revenues should be shared. These struggles also contribute to the influx of

SALWs in Africa. As seen in the case of Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Niger- Delta

region of Nigeria, most of the weapons used for the conflicts in these areas which are

usually very sophisticated are acquired through exchange of these natural mineral

resources for weapons.

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**4. Refugees Crises:**

SALWs proliferation has also been facilitated by movements of refugees fleeing from

wars or areas of conflict. Some of these refugees who might have been combatants

take their weapons along while fleeing to safe zones. In most cases, they end up

selling such weapons or hiring them, usually illegal activities, including banditry,

robbery, and rebellion.

**5. Local Manufacturing of Arms:**

Many intra-State conflicts and local crimes in Africa have involved the use of locally

manufactured arms such as knives, machetes and guns of various calibers ease to

acquire. Most of these weapons originally, tools for other productive activities such as

hunting and farming are widely employed to perpetuate violent acts to threaten lives

e.g. the genocide in Rwanda.

**THE FUTURE: PREVENTING ARMED CONFLICTS IN AFRICA**

Conflict prevention is the first step required to address conflicts before the

management and resolution of conflicts. The prevention of conflict will entail

comprehensively addressing the root and secondary causes of conflicts in the

continent at the state, regional and global levels.

In Africa, conflict prevention will not be effective unless it is based on the continent's

as well as the individual state's experience and their capacity to respond positively to

problems and crisis. As a first step, it is necessary for the states and their citizens to be

committed towards having and sustaining an all inclusive government and institutions

as a way of accommodating ethnicity and inequality.

State actors should also uphold and sustain appropriate democratic values and

principles, such as respect for human rights, good governance and the rule of law

rather than coercion, corruption and the use of force to manage and maintain power

and legitimacy. They should also ensure the wellbeing and security of their people by

providing the required basic facilities.

Another step towards ensuring legitimacy and security of a state is through economic

growth and development. Natural endowments should be properly managed and used

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for the equal benefit and development of all communities and individuals. There is

also the need for states to adopt or engage development strategies for economic

diversification and reinvestments in other sectors as well especially in ensuring

human security of the citizens. Human security it will require addressing the seven

component aspects which are: food security, community security, social security,

health security, environmental security, and economic.

Effective conflict resolution processes of reconciliation and justice should be operated

at both national and local level to enhance peaceful co-existence and cooperation

among communities. This will also ensure the reintegration into society of people

who were actively involved in the conflict.

Peaceful techniques and measures such as negotiation, diplomacy and mediation

should be encouraged as first option in handling and resolving difficult problems,

differences and dissatisfaction.

As for the challenges of SALWs, the proliferation of small arms requires effective

global action that will involve intelligence information sharing as well as improved

co-ordination and cooperation between development agencies, donors and field

actors.

Adequate national and collective regional initiatives and efforts should be devoted

towards effective border patrol and other measures of control of illegal trafficking.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This paper has been an attempt to explain issues surrounding conflicts in Africa.

Owing to the devastating impact of conflict on the people as well as in thwarting all

facets of development of the continent, it has become necessary for all stakeholders to

put all hands on deck to positively respond and address the numerous problems from

all levels.

For a continent which has suffered such much from the scourges of conflicts,

diseases, natural and environmental disasters, there is usually high demand and

expectations for peace and democratic dividends which include democratic

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transitions, demobilization, reconciliation, re-integration and reconstruction.

Critically, it is imminent for the continent to be demilitarised in politics and

governance and in its place imbibe and nurture a culture of equal civic engagement

and popular participation through good governance, human rights and rule of law.

Also, the countries of Africa must start to seriously consider the inescapable options

of asking for reparation from the regional colonial powers and those countries that

have used Africa as footstool. Unless these parties are concertedly engaged, and

confronted, they will continue to see African nations as pawns in their game

domination or neo-colonialist globalization.

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