Can the collapse of Africa be reversed?

by Linda de Hoyos

From Algiers to Capetown, from Monrovia to Mogadishu, the continent of Africa is being wracked with crises which are determining in the short term not only whether millions of people will live or die, but whether entire nations will slide into a nearly irretrievable economic and social devolution, a devolution the rest of the world would be foolhardy to believe it can escape if current policies are not reversed.

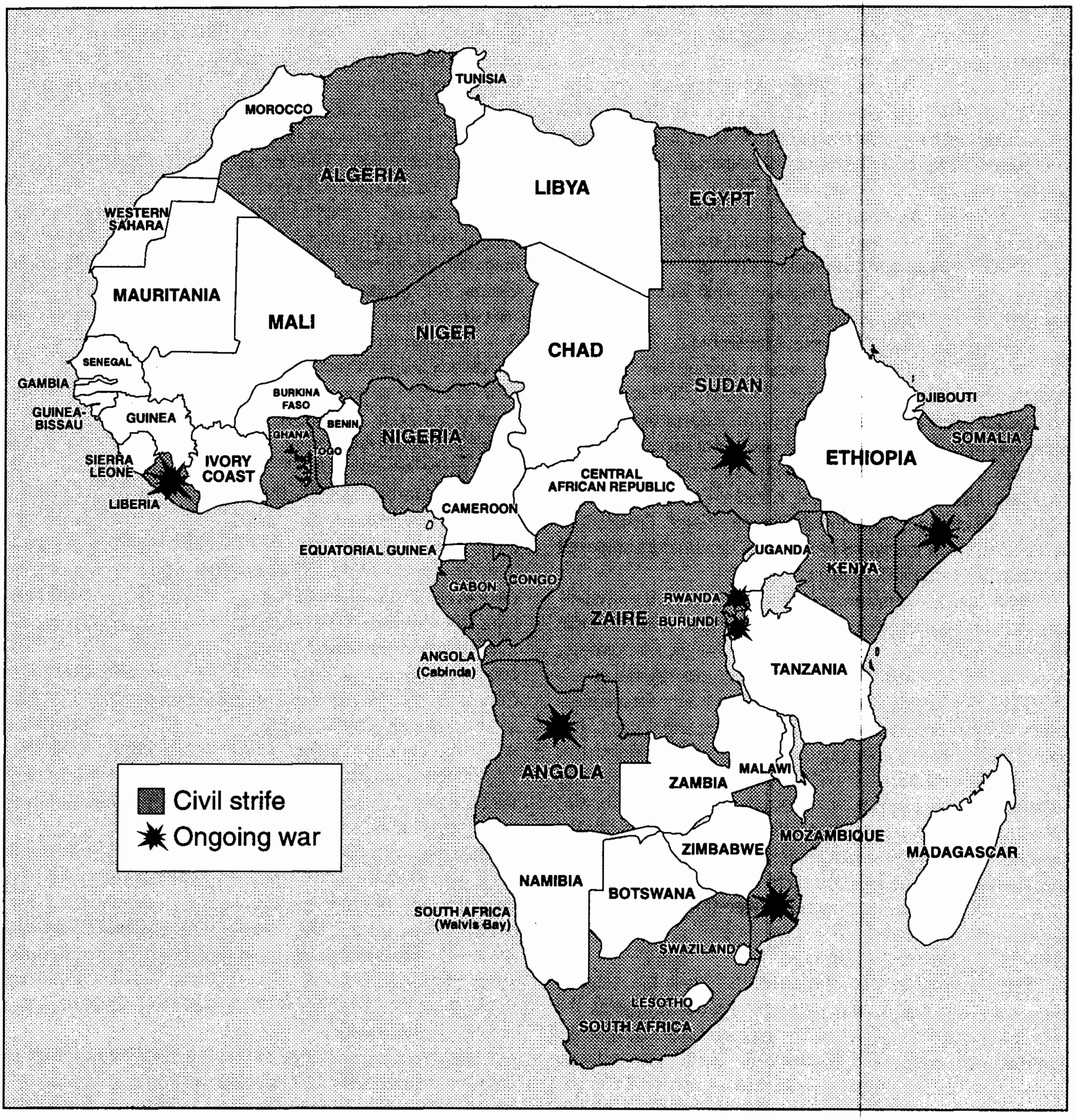
African leaders are not unaware of the problem. The problem lies primarily in three factors: first, extreme and unrelenting economic stress imposed on the African nations from colonial powers that created the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank and handed Africa over to their malevolent dictatorship; second, the social and political disintegration of nations as the inevitable byproduct of economies' collapse below subsistence levels; and third, the nurturing by the former colonialists of an African elite permitted to keep its grip on power only on condition of its corruption. Often, if an African leader attempts to buck such conditions, he is either physically or politically removed forthwith, or the nation is threatened with total financial embargo at the hands of the IMF and donor (colonial) countries.

The authors of the reports presented here on Somalia and Zaire are from Africa. Dr. Mohamed Osman Omar is an eminent diplomat of Somalia, speaking from decades of experience in northwest Africa. Lawrence Eyong-Echaw is a longstanding journalist in Cameroon. The point is not insignificant; for the most part, the post-colonial set-up has acted to prohibit Africans speaking to one another.

The road to zero

The title of Dr. Osman Omar's book, reviewed by our New Delhi correspondent Susan Maitra, starkly evokes the process that is now taking hold in more than one African country: the road to zero. "Zero" does not signify the intense suffering caused by a widespread but episodic famine, often the image of African suffering

Destabilization in Africa, 1994



presented in the western media. Zero is far worse: the obliteration of infrastructure and the rending apart of all social fabric, as if a country's physical and social structure had been smashed to pieces. As Dr. Osman says of Mogadishu, "Today if we want to have a conference there, we don't have chairs and tables, let alone microphones."

As *EIR* has documented (see Jan. 1, 1993, "1990s Decade: Breaking Point for the IMF or for Africa?"), Somalia's demise was the end-result of a process imposed by western powers to remove Somalian President Siad Barre (who in fits and starts had resisted the IMF's destruction of economic sovereignty), with the full knowledge that there was no national institution to take his place. Once Barre was removed, the western powers then pulled up stakes, leaving Somalia to its own collapse. Aid came only in the form of U.N. and U.S. troops, making of Somalia a precedent for the abrogation of territorial sovereignty as well.

Somalia is not the only country where the infrastructural underpinning to the population's existence has been devastated. Already, energy consumption levels in many African countries are only 1% of levels in the industrialized countries, so the term "zero" is not an exaggeration. Uganda was the first to go, with the coming to power of Idi Amin. Amin's ouster of the Asian community brought the economy to its knees; his brutality and the ensuing civil and regional wars during and after his regime destroyed what was considered the jewel of the British Empire in Africa.

Today, large areas of Angola, Mozambique, Zaire, Liberia, Burundi, Rwanda, and southern Sudan have become completely dysfunctional. Other countries, such as Nigeria and South Africa, are at the brink, if leaders do not take measures to brake the economic slide. Major dislocation now threatens the francophone countries—Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Central African Republic, Congo, Gabon, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Togo, Benin, and Ivory Coast—in the wake of the 50% devaluation imposed on the African franc in January.

Most African countries are already operating at such slender margins of stability, that it does not take much to push the country over the edge toward war. In Congo, for example, civil war broke out in January, between the regime of the President elected last year in Project Democracy-forced elections, and his opponents. The split is along tribal lines. The Jan. 27 *New York Times* quoted a Congolese economist as saying: "Democratic elections were the worst thing that ever happened in this country. It's unleashed a Pandora's box of tribal hatreds that may take generations to heal." With the nation's capital a battlefield, President Yhombi-Opango declared that relief would come soon when the IMF approves "his new belt-tightening program," according to Reuters.

Mortality rates on the rise

The approach to zero in the early 1990s is the result of the reversal in the decade of the 1980s of any gains the African countries had made since independence. Despite the International Monetary Fund-World Bank post-colonial framework, infant mortality statistics—one important barometer of the physical state of a population—register a steady decline through the 1960s and 1970s. Direct rule by the colonial powers had pushed infant mortality rates so high that average life expectancies in many countries were no higher than 29 years, in the late 1950s. The process of economic collapse in Africa began with the oil hoax crisis of the mid-1970s and the plunge of the terms of trade for most African export commodities in the 1980s, and the steady IMF-enforced devaluations of currencies, leading to rampant domestic inflation and collapse of industry.

According to a 1993 study prepared by the National Research Council of the U.S. Academy of Sciences, "Demographic Effects of Economic Reversals in Sub-Saharan Africa," studies of pre-industrial economies showed that a "10% increase in grain prices leads to a decrease of approximately 1% in fertility and marriage and to a 1% increase in mortality." In the 1974 famine in Bangladesh, the study notes, "mortality kept close pace with the increase in the price of rice" that had precipitated the famine.

In Africa today, the Research Council concluded, mortality is definitely affected by economic reversals—contrary to many of the figures published by the United Nations. In Ghana, for instance, touted by the IMF as its showpiece, "declines in the terms of trade and in the world price of cocoa, both of which were severe in the late 1970s and early 1980s, are associated with increases in child mortality." In Africa, as a whole, "the pattern is for child mortality to be above trend in a year in which Gross Domestic Product per capita falls, to be below trend in the following year, and to be higher again in the year after that."

AIDS has emerged as another major factor in bringing down life expectancies. In addition to rising infant mortality, a study on HIV infection by the U.S. Bureau of Census shows that "as a result of AIDS, substantial increases in mortality rates occur in the adult ages, where relatively few deaths are typically expected. The cumulative effect of this increased mortality is substantial." Life expectancies in many African countries are only 50 years or below. The 1993 Bureau of Census study, "An Epidemiological Review of HIV/AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa," estimates that the "net effect of this AIDS epidemic is to reduce urban life expectancy at birth by 17 years, or approximately 1 year decrease in life expectancy for each percentage-point increase in HIV prevalence levels in the population."

In short, under the current economic decline—which decline unleashed the AIDS epidemic to begin with—African countries are heading back toward the extreme physical depletion that marked the colonial period. Simultaneously, the hopelessness and desperation spawned by such economic stress fosters the reducing of populations' sense of identities to the most localist tribal levels and toward violence in the defense of that identity.

There is clearly no hope of braking this downward spiral unless the stranglehold of the IMF and "free trade" on the world economy is broken. That is a challenge not only for African leaders, but patriots everywhere. Even so, the threat posed to Africa's very existence today requires that Africa's elites take a hard look at the realities of post-colonial "independence" and break with the rules of power-politics in Africa. A continentwide dialogue must begin to define political and economic solutions that Africa's people so desperately require and deserve, and to forge the political will to carry them out.