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The Gazette (Montreal, Quebec)

April 30, 1998, Thursday, FINAL EDITION

SECTION: EDITORIAL / OP-ED; Pg. B3

LENGTH: 740 words

HEADLINE: We all must feel responsible for African violence

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BODY:

For too long, conflict in Africa has been seen as inevitable or intractable, or both. It is neither. Conflict in Africa, as everywhere, is caused by human action, and can be ended by human action. This is the reality that shames us for every conflict that we allow to persist, and enables us to turn our rhetoric of commitment into a reality of genuine engagement.

Since 1970, Africa has seen more than 30 wars, the majority of which have been intra-state in origin. Fourteen of Africa's 53 countries were afflicted by armed conflicts in 1996 alone. These accounted for more than half of all war-related deaths worldwide and resulted in more than 8 million refugees, returnees and displaced persons.

No one - not the United Nations, not the international community, not Africa's leaders - can escape responsibility for the persistence of these conflicts. Colossal human tragedies have taken place in Africa over the past decade - tragedies that could and should have been prevented. Not enough was done to address the causes of conflict. Not enough was done to ensure a lasting peace. Not enough was done to create the conditions for sustainable development. This is the reality of Africa's recent past. It is a reality that must be confronted honestly and constructively by all concerned if the people of Africa are to enjoy the human security and economic opportunities they seek and deserve.

The sources of conflict in Africa are as varied and complex as the continent itself. The significance of history and external factors cannot be denied. But more than three decades after African countries gained independence, there is a growing recognition among Africans that the continent must look beyond its colonial past for the sources and solutions to its current conflicts.

In too many cases, post-independence rule has been characterized by "winner-takes-all" politics, where victory at the ballot box has translated into total control over a nation's wealth and resources. With the absence of proper checks and balances, inadequate accountability and lack of respect for human rights and the rule of law, political power has too often become a weapon for the few rather than the instrument of the many. In these situations, the multi-ethnic character of most African states exacerbates already existing tensions and fears, making conflict virtually inevitable.

Good governance - ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law, strengthening democratization and promoting transparency and capability in public administration - is now more than ever the condition for the success of both peace and development. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that Africa's renaissance has come when new and more democratic forms of government have begun to take root.

In every aspect of Africa's emergence from conflict, new ways of thinking and new ways of acting are needed on all sides. In the area of peace and security, I recommend that African governments reduce their purchase of arms and munitions to 1.5 per cent of GDP; that an international mechanism be established to ensure the neutrality and disarmament of refugee

camps, and that these camps should be placed away from borders; and that the Security Council meet on a bi-yearly basis to renew its efforts for Africa.

In the area of economic development, I have suggested that creditors should consider clearing the entire debt stock of the poorest African countries while expanding the Highly Indebted Poor Countries program of the World Bank; that new rules guiding the transparency of public administration be implemented while international trade barriers to African products be removed.

Equally important is the understanding that peace and development remain inextricably linked - one feeding on the other, enabling the other and securing the other. The renunciation of violence as a means of gaining and holding power is only the beginning. Then must follow a renewed commitment to national development founded on sober, sound and uncorrupted economic policies.

The time is long past when one could claim ignorance about what was happening in Africa or about what was needed to achieve progress. The time is also past when the responsibility for producing change could be shifted onto other shoulders. It is ours and it is theirs - the world's and Africa's. The United Nations stands ready to play its part. So must the world. So must Africa.

LOAD-DATE: May 1, 1998