

The Political Origin of Refugee Crises
Plenary Remarks to the 10th National Conference of the African Refugee Network,
African Refugees: Re-Examining Practices, Partnerships and Possibilities,
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Thank you. It's an honor to be with you here this morning to help ECDC kick-off your 10th national conference on African Refugees. By the looks of the program, you are in for a very stimulating and thought-provoking next several days.

We gather here today as our television screens and newspapers are once again filled with images of calamity - villages burned, innocent civilians driven off their land by orchestrated violence, families separated in the chaos...pillaging, rape, and the contamination of water sources intended to intimidate and discourage thoughts of return. An estimated 30,000 people have been killed. Two hundred thousand have fled to the relative sanctuary of a neighboring country - though in reality an inhospitable terrain ill-suited to support such a large influx of newcomers. Up to a million more are internally displaced.

The pattern, unfortunately, is all too familiar. Another refugee crisis is underway. And the international community is now mobilizing a major response to assist those who have been affected. Much will need to be done in response to the refugee crisis in western Sudan - from food deliveries, provision of water, health services, some form of accommodation in the host villages that are themselves very poor. If the crisis is prolonged, schooling for the children will be needed as will some form of employment for the adults - among many other long-term tasks. Regrettably, a lengthy dislocation is a real possibility. The U.S. Committee for Refugees estimates that 7.35 million people around the world have been refugees for 10 years or more.

If fortunate, resettlement back into the home country will be possible. Otherwise, arrangements for integration into the host country or third country resettlement will need to be made. Each step of this process, of course, will require substantial outlays of resources and effort - from the host communities, neighboring governments, NGOs, donors, international organizations, and the UN among others. Inevitably, this support will fall short of what is required - causing further hardship on these new refugees and displaced persons.

At the end of 2003, according to the U.S. Committee for Refugees, there were 3.2 million refugees and 13.1 million internally displaced persons in Africa - an increase after a downward trend we had seen over the previous several years.

There are so many urgent concerns requiring an immediate response in a refugee crisis that we tend to overlook the root causes of these situations. Indeed, if there were a way we could somehow mitigate the problems up front, this would be a far superior solution to the human suffering, trauma, financial costs, and effort expended to respond in the aftermath.

I would thus like to draw our attention to the conditions that lead to refugee crises – and what we might do better to prevent them in the future. Yes, of course, refugees are nearly always created by some form of armed conflict. But conflicts, especially civil conflicts, which today are by far the most common type of conflict encountered, do not just emerge on their own.... There is a political origin of refugee crises.

Autocratic governments are in place in the country of origin in virtually every refugee crisis we see in Africa and around the world today. This fact may seem obvious to some. However, I believe it is central to our understanding of and ability to comprehensively address refugee crises....

Let's consider the top refugee and IDP-producing cases in Africa in 2003 - Sudan, Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Eritrea, Liberia – they were all generated under autocratic governments – political systems where there is a monopoly on power and there are few opportunities for ordinary citizens to express their views. This is not a mere coincidence. Rather, a listing of the largest refugee flows in Africa for the last 20 years shows that in nearly every instance, autocratic governments were at the helm. One must count up to the 50th largest incident to find something of a more democratic context – Sierra Leone in 1999 – and there, of course, it was not the government that was causing the instability.

This fact is closely linked to the reality that autocratic governments are also much more likely to fall into civil conflict. These conflicts, in turn, spawn armed conflict among neighboring countries 30% of the time. In Africa the propensity of autocratic governments to be involved in conflict is nearly double that of countries on the path to democracy. Autocracies have been in conflict one year in five, on average, over the past 20 years. Examples are not hard to recount - Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, DRC, Liberia, Somalia, and Angola to name a few. The rate is substantially lower - one year in ten – for countries that have made attempts to democratize. (And that's using a pretty loose definition of democracy – an issue I'll return to in a short while).

Reasons why Democracies are Less Conflict-Prone

There are a number of reasons why democracies do a better job at conflict avoidance. Governments based on respect for human rights and the rule of law have a stronger basis for resolving their differences in a non-violent, legal, and morally defensible manner. Democratic leaders and the societies that elected them are also accustomed to balancing multiple and competing interests. They accept the inevitability of disagreement and the need for non-violent compromise. Autocratic leaders, in contrast, are more likely to have learned their political skills in environments that reward the use of coercion to resolve disputes.

These qualities seem to be of particular value to democratic leaders in ethnically diverse societies – typical of much of Africa. Research by Paul Collier, former Director of Research at the World Bank, has shown that ethnic diversity has no effect on economic

growth in democracies. In autocracies, however, ethnic diversity reduces economic growth by up to 3 percentage points of GDP. This reflects democracies' ability to accommodate better the mix of competing interests present in their societies. Autocratic governments, on the other hand, frequently rely on a very narrow sliver of the general population for their support. Political and military leaders typically come from a single ethnic group. They sustain their hold on power by keeping this select group of supporters happy. In the process, however, they tend to fuel resentment and anger among other groups – sowing the seeds of conflict.

Finally, by design, democratic executives cannot act unilaterally. They need the support of cabinet ministers and the legislature, and must also take public opinion into consideration – all brakes on the power to initiate war.

These tendencies are reinforced by research showing that autocracies are far more likely to become failed states. In a comprehensive study undertaken at the Center for International Development and Conflict Management at the University of Maryland, 80 potential factors predicting failed states were examined. Democracy was one of three conditions that were shown to be highly relevant in preventing state failure. (Material well-being as captured by infant mortality rates and engagement with international partners as measured by trade were the other two).

So, What to Do?

So, having recognized the autocratic root in conflict and refugee crises in Africa, the natural follow-on question is what should we do about it? I offer the following suggestions:

In the early stage of a crisis, equivalent to what we saw in Darfur in 2003, much more could have been done to pressure the Sudanese government to cease its scorched-earth tactics that were displacing tens of thousands of people. Early, universal international condemnation of these actions could have isolated the government, causing it to pull back from its aggressive policies, and enter into genuine negotiations with the rebels. Indeed, such a policy could be effective for the very reason that the Sudanese government cares deeply about its international reputation. It has strong incentives to be seen as a moderate Arab state that is a reliable partner in the war on terrorism.

In cases where early international engagement has not been undertaken or has been ineffective, there is scope for a much clearer and more robust international protocol in response to an emerging refugee crisis. In my view, concerted international action is currently hindered by two key issues: (1) the lack of authoritative information and, (2) uncertainty over whose responsibility it is to respond in the face of an unfolding crisis. Lack of clear information leads to mixed interpretations over what is happening on the ground. This, in turn, breeds indecisiveness. Indeed, this is a primary reason why the perpetrators of refugee crises attempt to obscure their egregious behavior. The Sudanese government, for example, has barred journalists and international humanitarian organizations from gaining access to the affected areas of Darfur. Meanwhile they have

constructed numerous mass graves away from settled areas in order to cover up the evidence. To overcome this *information deficit*, the UN Security Council, ideally in conjunction with the respective regional body involved, such as the African Union, should proactively authorize a fact-finding mission in cases of alleged ethnic cleansing in order to make a credible determination as to what is actually happening.

Refusal to allow the investigators full and unhindered access to sites of alleged atrocities and any individuals they wish to interview would be grounds for an immediate indictment of the political authority responsible.

Now, this investigation would carry far more clout than an ordinary bureaucratic assessment. It would be automatically linked to a second stage of response. If an emerging refugee crisis were deemed to be the result of a concerted effort of genocide or ethnic cleansing, then all members of the Security Council would be *obligated* under the international convention on genocide to use all necessary means to reverse this crime. *Immediate* action need not be military intervention. Immediate economic sanctions could be imposed, including barring the purchase of all major commercial exports from a country where the government has been identified as the egregious party. This would be coupled with political repudiation – leaders of the government and their families would be prevented from traveling outside the country. Similarly, assets held in international accounts by the leaders as well by the state would be frozen.

Another tactic to be employed as part of the effort to clearly articulate the costs to the offending government for lack of cooperation, is to stipulate that all expenses incurred by the international community in the resulting humanitarian intervention will be ultimately borne by the government in the form of reparations – akin to the payments the Libyan government was forced to make for its involvement in the bombing of Pan Am flight 103.

Targeted political and economic sanctions, stringently and universally imposed, have enormous potential to change the criminal behavior of an offending government. Indeed, the degree of unanimity of the condemnation internationally, I would argue, is a far more powerful lever of influence than virtually any other action that the international community could pursue. It has extraordinary potential to precipitate rapid change – and points to the vital importance of concerted action.

If, however, these economic and political measures are ineffective in stopping the offending behavior, as determined by the Secretary General, then a military intervention to protect the population under assault would be authorized. This intervention, again, would involve in some way or another *all* members of the Security Council, which has ultimate *and collective* responsibility for enforcing international conventions of genocide. Ideally, any such step will involve robust participation from the respective regional political organizations, as well.

I have emphasized the automatic nature of the political, economic, and military actions that follow once an independent, authoritative determination of ethnic cleansing has been made. This is intended to overcome another of the key factors acting against decisive

action in times of humanitarian catastrophe – the shirking of international responsibility. A refugee crisis borne from civil conflict is a classic challenge of collective action. All members of the international community are worse off because of the crisis - yet no one state or international entity accepts responsibility to lead a corrective response. Indecisiveness over whom is responsible and what can be done breeds inaction – as we saw in Rwanda – and could be seeing again in Sudan. A protocol that acknowledges that genocide is automatically the responsibility of *all* states and demands action by the international community, as embodied by the Security Council, can overcome this indecisiveness. Once genocide has been identified, immediate collective action is required not optional. We must move past the stage of having to deliberate on whether and what type of action should be undertaken each and every time an incident of ethnic cleansing is occurring. With the recognition that all countries on the Security Council are obligated to act, the political pressure on each individual government for taking this action is substantially reduced.

Clarifying International Norms for Legitimacy

Over the long term, shaping a less autocratic governance environment in Africa, and thereby reducing the risk of future refugee crises, would be aided if the international community sent clearer signals over the advantages stemming from democratic governance. Specifically, the world's democracies and international institutions should distinguish between those African governments that are democracies or making genuine efforts toward reform versus those that are determined to monopolize power at all costs. The legitimacy of these respective types of governments varies greatly. This should be acknowledged in the actions of international bodies. Currently, however, official development assistance provided to autocratic governments in Africa is identical to that allocated to democracies, as a percentage of GDP. Similarly, democratic leaders are accorded no more flexible conditions or timing for the assistance they receive. Meanwhile, autocratic leaders are granted the same level of prominence and honor at international fora as are democratic leaders who, by contrast, have been selected by their citizens.

International norms should vary to match the legitimacy of the leaders involved. With this, incentives for greater political openness and participation will grow.

African Leadership

Any progress toward these recommendations will require leadership among Africa's democrats. It is through their words and actions that norms for the region are ultimately established. It is they who must condemn self-appointed leaders remaining in power indefinitely, unconstitutional seizures of power, and human rights transgressions in their neighborhood. Without that, anything the broader international community attempts to do will be muted. It is this sort of regional plus international pressure that forced Charles Taylor from the scene in Liberia. And it is the absence of this combined effort that has allowed Robert Mugabe to remain in control in Zimbabwe – putting this once proud country on the list of potential failed states. Indeed, it has been the silence of too many

African leaders on Zimbabwe combined with the selection of Sudan to the U.N. Human Rights Commission just last month that puts Africa's commitment to democracy, human rights, and the rule of law into question. Notions of African solidarity when it applies to defending ethnic cleansing and despotic leaders ring hollow. What difference will NEPAD make if there isn't a genuine commitment to good governance? Old stereotypes of Africa as a patronage-laden basket-case will only be deepened.

This is unfortunate. Not only because Africa can benefit from increased international engagement but because it obscures the fact that there has been real progress in the region over the past 15 years. Democracy has taken root and produced healthy fruit in a number of countries – Benin, Botswana, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa, and Tanzania. These countries are notable not just because they hold elections – nearly every African country holds at least sham elections today. Rather, they are remarkable because these countries have created new governance systems that share power and ensure checks and balances. This is what avoids radical policies. Not coincidentally, these countries have been free of conflict and refugee crises. Unfortunately, too many others remain immersed in personalistic and patronage-based political systems. Among those deserving special mention include, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Equatorial Guinea, Gambia, Gabon, Liberia, Mauritania, Somalia, Sudan, and Zimbabwe. Political leaders in these countries continue to live *above* rather than *under* the rule of law. Refugees, war, and the risk of state failure continue to emanate from their borders.

What we have, therefore, is a story of two Africas. I am confident the democratic, prospering, and conflict-free Africa will continue to thrive. And indeed it portends a more promising future for the continent than anything we have seen in recent memory. The real question, however, remains how long will the failing, conflict-prone, and autocratic Africa persist? This is the Africa that exists to serve its leaders rather than the other way around.

The answer to that question also tells us for how long we'll need to mobilize to meet the tragedy of refugee crises in Africa.

Thank you very much.