



The Case for Mercenaries in Africa

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Summary

Despite the concerns surrounding the use of mercenaries, they remain an indispensable force on the African continent, so much so that they have been welcomed by governments, and grudgingly even been accepted by NGOs, international organizations and civilians. Private militaries are never going to completely go out of business because of the critical need for such services on the African continent. With the world unwilling to intervene in far-off conflicts, institutionalizing such a private force will almost inevitably become necessary to bring about regional stability.

In 1998, former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, stated in a speech that “When we had need of skilled soldiers to separate fighters from refugees in the Rwandan refugee camps in Goma, I even considered the possibility of engaging a private firm. But the world may not be ready to privatize peace.”¹ In some ways, he was revisiting an age-old international dilemma over the recruitment of private soldiers to manage deadly conflicts around the globe. Plenty of debate has occurred around the blight of mercenaries – freelance soldiers for hire – especially those operating in Africa. They have been blamed for everything ranging from inciting further conflict and committing human rights violations, to illicit arms sales and neo-imperialism.

Like all stereotypes, there is an element of truth in such accusations. Mercenaries in Africa earned themselves particular infamy during the 1960s and 1970s due to the activities of people like “Mad Mike” Hoare, Bob Denard and Jean Schramme who caused mayhem in various parts of the continent like in the Seychelles, Comoros and the Congo, amongst other places. These soldiers of fortune were mostly ex-military servicemen from foreign armies, generally known as *les affreux* or “the frightfuls”, who were reputed to thrive on instability and crime. Their legacies have been reinforced by their modern counterparts – corporatised entities such as the American-run Blackwater enterprise, known to have caused several war crimes in places like Iraq.

Nevertheless, it can be effectively argued that despite the concerns surrounding the use of mercenaries they remain an indispensable force on the African continent, so much so that they have been welcomed by governments, and grudgingly even been accepted by NGOs, international organizations and civilians. Incidents from the 1990s till now highlight the reasons why these soldiers are sought after – they have brought relative regional stability in some of the most unstable areas of Africa, effectively driven out trigger-happy militias, propped up collapsing governments, saved countless lives, and helped produce the circumstances necessary for economic development. They have also been much more reliable than state forces, and if one were to contrast private military companies in Africa to their conventional counterparts, they have been much less reprehensible.

Traditional Criticisms against Private Militaries

Public opinion and responses to private militaries have generally been condemnatory largely on moral grounds. Mercenaries have earned this disapproval because of two reasons. Firstly, since they are of foreign origin, they are not bound by laws of states, and hence are believed to fight in a non-regulated, wanton fashion. Secondly, they are considered to be driven simply by the profit motive rather than participating for just causes such as patriotism.

¹ Kofi Annan, Intervention, Ditchley Foundation Lecture, June 1998.

These reservations are based on several premises. States are hesitant in recognizing the advantages mercenaries bring to the table not only because states fear giving up control over their security apparatus, but they also believe that foregoing this control would somehow diminish state sovereignty. The idea of undercutting a government's sway over its use of force by privatization of security is explained by Peter Singer in his book, *Corporate Warriors*, where he says that when a "government delegates out part of its role in national security through the recruitment and maintenance of armed forces, it is abdicating an essential responsibility. When the forms of public protection are hired through private means, the citizens of society do not enjoy security by right of their membership in a state."² The inherent assumption here is that states like to have the power to decide who has the authority to kill, and under what conditions.

Furthermore, it is generally assumed that mercenaries provide security for financial reasons and not because they care about the citizenry. Such an assessment conjures up images of privatized soldiers as free wheeling thugs who are somehow illegitimate because they are fighting for money and not national ideals or causes. And when driven simply by the profit motive, such soldiers are considered to have become "corrupt". They are assumed to be economic agents whose loyalties are fickle, and who work only for the highest bidder.³

Yet, if one were to explore the historical use of mercenaries, neither of these underlying assumptions hold enough weight so as to dismiss such military privatization immediately.⁴ One independent assessment suggests that "even without formal regulation, [Private Military Companies] have not lived up to dire (and astonishing) predictions of disloyalty and brutality, they have not traded in human organs nor have they violently overthrown their contractors. In fact the majority of fears articulated by critics exist only as academic theory."⁵

Also, while norms such as respect for human rights and disapproval of the trade in private soldiers are generally accepted in the international community, realistically speaking, certain states find it detrimental to their interests to adhere to these norms. Such states might be forced to accept privatized security because it is the only viable option for security. Many countries in Africa that are either war-ravaged or just emerging from war are facing this dilemma. When a dichotomy arises between adhering to international norms on human rights and non-use of private armies at the risk of a severe breakdown in security structures

² Peter Singer, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise and Fall of the Privatized Military Industry* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 226.

³ For more, read Jurgen Brauer's "An Economic Perspective on Mercenaries, Military Companies and the Privatization of Force," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. XIII, no. 1, Autumn 1999, pp. 130-46.

⁴ For more on the historical use of mercenaries, see Sarah Percy's, *Mercenaries: The History of a Norm in International Relations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁵ Doug Brooks, "Protecting People: the PMC Potential," in *UK Green Paper on Regulating Private Military Services*, (International Peace Operations Association, 2002), p. 4.

and state collapse, governments inevitably chose to opt out of normative behavior and choose foreign intervention.

African Security Failures and the Need for Private Firms

In many ways, the African context is such that it automatically lends itself to privatization of security. A study of conflict trends on the continent in the post-Cold War era will reveal that most of the wars occurring today have arisen not from external but internal factors – caused by the weakened nature of the African state as well as lack of answerability and bad governance practices. The nature of wars has changed – most are civil wars in character and form wherein the biggest threats to states arise from their own people. Between 1956 and 2001, there have been 80 successful coups d'état, 108 failed coup attempts and another 139 reported coup plots in 48 of the sub-Saharan African countries. Most of these have been military-led, and reports suggest that coups led by armed groups have led to more coup behaviour.⁶ These numbers do not even include other forms of internal violence such as fights over resources, ethnic wars, criminal behaviour, etc.

Power in Africa is most often projected through the use of arms. A post-colonial legacy of unchecked corruption, greed and a survival-of-the-fittest attitude ensure repetitive waves of violence across the continent. Hence, internal political power is always up for grabs by people who command large military forces and hardware. One analyst explains this saying that in Africa, “the military has an unrivalled capacity to project force. This makes it an important tool for asserting state authority, enforcing the rule of law, and protecting the nation against external aggression. Unfortunately, such power, if not properly managed, can also pose a serious threat against civil authority as has been demonstrated numerous times in several African countries. African states’ failure to exercise effective civil control over the military is manifested by their highly politicized armies, recurrent coups and armed rebellions. This failure to rein in the armed forces is the central element of the military question in Africa.”⁷

Militarisation in Africa can assume different shades of meaning in different places and under varying contexts. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for instance, militias controlled by certain ethnic groups from armies outside the DRC conduct battles against other ethnicities. In other countries like Guinea, Zimbabwe, Chad and Sao Tome and Principe, soldiers regularly organize rebellions or owe their allegiance to certain “big men” proclaiming themselves to be heads of states. In Somalia, the region is divided up amongst warlords and clan leaders, all of whom have their own individual fiefdoms with no real functioning government. Access to wealth is guaranteed only through the barrel

⁶ Patrick McGowan, “African military Coups d'état, 1956-2001: frequency, trends and distribution, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 41, no. 3, 2003, pp. 339-370.

⁷ Nowamagbe Omoigui, “Military Defense Pacts in Africa,” in George Klay Kieh & Pita Ogaba Agbese, eds., *The Military and Politics in Africa: From Engagement to Democratic and Constitutional Control*, (Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), p. 131.

of a gun. With such diverse types of African militaries, the traditional definitions of civil-military relations fail. Regimes are almost entirely unstable because the politburo is unable to subordinate the armed forces to political forces. It is in such a security vacuum that private military companies, particularly foreign soldiers, have a space to offer protection, if not stability.

The privatization of African security has been given different names by different analysts. Some call it the result of the creation of “shadow states”⁸ – a parallel national government under the authority of a “big man” who secures his own place at the top of the hierarchy by hiring outside armies. Others refer to it as a form of neo-imperialism that has been invited, rather than enforced⁹ – when local elites invite foreign forces to fight off rivals who have their own international armies. Either ways, such decisions are made by governments in order to retain an advantage over their adversaries, and hence are considered pragmatic choices – not ones driven by morals or ethics.

Perhaps the most famous modern day example of mercenary intervention in Africa is the involvement of security companies such as Executive Outcomes (EO) and Sandline International in Sierra Leone. EO, when invited by the Sierra Leonean government, went to West Africa, trained the army and local pro-government ethnic groups like the Kamajors, and effectively defeated the Revolutionary United Front, a ragtag army causing serious havoc in the interiors. The RUF, who had come within a few miles of the capital and whose war efforts were being financed by hand-picked diamonds, were dispersed. During these military actions, Sierra Leone managed to conduct a democratic election for the first time. EO soldiers were hailed as liberators, and the RUF was forced to the negotiating table leading to the Abidjan Peace Accord in November 1996. Critically, when the new government came into power, EO’s contract was not renewed, and Sierra Leone returned to violence.

Sierra Leone is one example of a place where a government was left with virtually no option but to use private warriors. As long as EO was around, the bloody civil war remained abated. When the RUF militia demanded as part of the peace treaty that the EO leave and be replaced by a UN peacekeeping contingent (clearly aware that UN peacekeepers would pose less of a threat to them), it was to the detriment of the nation. This case study demonstrates that states can and should be allowed to use all means to protect themselves. In fact, in cases like Sierra Leone, the use of mercenaries even helps protect state sovereignty.

Some analysts even argue that had private military contractors like EO or Sandline International been used in other crisis situations like Rwanda, genocidal activities could

⁸ William Reno, “Clandestine Economies, Violence and States in Africa,” *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2000, pp. 433-59.

⁹ Jakkie Cilliers and Richard Cornwell, “Mercenaries and the Privatization of Security in Africa,” *African Security Review*, vol. 8, no. 2, 1999, <http://www.iss.co.za/ASR/8NO2/Cilliers.html>.

have been avoided. EO's Chief of Staff Chris Grove, even mentioned how EO, if given the opportunity to intervene, could have averted the disaster, all for a reasonable fee of \$150 million.¹⁰ Yet, they were given no green signal. The general belief is that with the end of the Cold War, there was little incentive left for major powers to intervene in areas of the world which were suddenly at the periphery of their interests. Withdrawal of assistance from abroad meant that Africa's already fragile state structures were up for grabs in this new power vacuum.

Incorporating the Private Military Sector into the Security Architecture

Because of the rigid resentment towards mercenaries, there has been little space created for their active participation in stabilizing war torn areas. This unfortunately has resulted in only temporary solutions to conflicts, and a naïve trust in peaceful negotiation has meant that Africa has been riding on the wave of periodic bursts of peace interspersed with war. Yet, the private military sector has much to offer in terms of enhancing security – critical to Africa's future success.

Constructive engagement with mercenaries, along with some level of regulation, will shore up international peacekeeping mechanisms in the field. Often, the United Nations is tied down by a vast labyrinth of rules and regulations on the use of force, much to the frustration of individual contingents or commanders on the ground. Incorporating mercenaries, who are not affiliated to any country, will allow greater flexibility.

The cost of hiring mercenaries is also significantly lower than entire peacekeeping budgets. True, mercenaries do not bring with them the capacities and capabilities of carrying out peace-building or post-conflict reconstruction work (activities that are included within the peacekeeping budgets of various international institutions), yet costs can also be kept to a minimum by allowing various private military companies to bid for contracts, thus increasing competition and ultimately capability.

Private security companies have the ability to deploy faster than traditional armies. This fits in line with the UN's ongoing aims to develop a "rapid reaction force" that can enter a conflict space faster and quicker than the more traditional time frames. Such soldiers could also be hired to train African militaries in conducting peacekeeping activities.

In conclusion, it is important to realize that private militaries are never going to completely go out of business because of the critical need for such services on the African continent. So far, their activities have been largely limited to providing stability in areas for as long as they are paid. The ethical norms against the use of mercenaries in wars ultimately fail when competing with realpolitik. With the world unwilling to intervene in far-off conflicts, institutionalizing such a private force will almost inevitably become necessary to bring about regional stability.

¹⁰ Doug Brooks, "Hope for the 'Hopeless' Continent," *Traders: Journal for the South African Region*, Issue 3, 2000, p. 7.