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Africa May Starve, But It Has Arms Aplenty

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IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to travel in Africa today without being overwhelmed by military images:

- The modern jetport in Douala, the steamy seaside commercial center of Cameroon, was built for boom times. Instead, it is enduring a bust. Nonetheless, during the long intervals between takeoffs and landings, the sky over the airport is sometimes full; paratroopers, being dropped from military planes, are practicing for some future battle with an unspecified enemy.

- There is a severe crime problem on the roads of Zaire, where armed bandits frequently stop traffic and demand tribute. But the problem defies solution, because most of the bandits are members of the Zairean army, who are rarely paid their official salaries. After two recent attacks in the south-eastern part of the country by rebels who had crossed Lake Tanganyika, President Mobutu Sese Seko decided to double the strength of the country's armed forces from 50,000 to 100,000.

- In downtown Kigali, the capital of tiny Rwanda, one can hardly move without encountering soldiers. They guard the entrance to the national radio and most other public buildings, and they loiter in front of many shops. But their pervasiveness is no surprise once you learn that Rwanda has 59 members of its armed forces for every 100 square miles of land; in its sister country of Burundi, to the south, the comparable figure is 74.3 military personnel per 100 square miles, the third highest percentage on the African continent.

- On Madaraka Day last June, the 22d anniversary of Kenya's first formal steps toward independence, life in Nairobi was interrupted by loud screeches and sonic booms. The main component of the official festivities was a fly-by, showing off the newest military aircraft shipped in by the United States.

Even in relatively prosperous African countries under reasonably stable civilian rule, such as Cameroon and Kenya, military expenditures represent a growing percentage of national budgets, and the arms trade composes a significant part of the nation's commerce with the outside world. Indeed, it is now a given of African politics that whatever the nature of a government, it cannot survive unless it keeps its military happy. It cannot convince its people that it is truly in charge unless it can stage frequent, ostentatious displays of elaborate modern military equipment.

There are practical factors that make some of this preoccupation with military matters understandable, if not entirely justifiable. Most African countries inherited illogical and unstable borders from the colonial era, and few have managed to solve the problem since. Several face the constant worry that their most prosperous regions or provinces may try to secede.

What is more, the flow of refugees across national frontiers — a result of ethnic or political conflict — is more severe in Africa than anywhere else in the world. In addition to the official total of 2 million refugees in Africa, millions more people are displaced within their own countries, and this contributes to instability.

There are psychological factors, too. In states where agriculture has failed or been neglected, industry has hardly gotten off the ground, and few other symbols of economic development and national achievement exist, the military domain may be the only available source of pride.

And it is a well-known phenomenon that the poor often spend their meager resources in extravagant ways. Impoverished countries sometimes buy advanced weapons for the same reasons that the poor in the United States buy Cadillacs: they are expensive to maintain and they may soon fall apart for lack of maintenance, but they make the owners feel good in the meantime.

Still, on a continent with such severe problems, including a fundamental inability to feed itself, the diversion of vast sums and significant manpower for military purposes is tragic. The trend is all the more troubling, given the extent to which it is reinforced by outside powers, including the United States and the Soviet Union.

More than half of the countries south of the Sahara are currently under some form of military rule. In several other countries the military, through the use of official violence against its own citizens, helps keep a repressive civilian regime in power. Even in South Africa, which purports to follow democratic

practices — at least for its white, Asian and mixed-race citizens — the military has come to have increasing influence over regional policies and, some believe, over foreign policy in general.

The trouble with every attempt to analyze the role of the military in Africa is that generalizations are difficult to sustain. Despite the contentions of some idealists, it is not necessarily true that any civilian government is better than any military government.

In Nigeria, the most populous country on the continent, for example, the military has often served as the primary modernizing, liberalizing — not to say detribalizing — force in national affairs. The civilian regime that held power for more than four years, beginning in 1979, after Nigeria had adopted an American-style constitution, was probably the most corrupt in its history. Its overthrow in a military coup was widely celebrated with dancing in the streets.

In Guinea, the 25-year "socialist" reign of Ahmed Sekou Toure was characterized not only by a failure to develop the country but also by an astonishing brutality; his opponents were often subjected to "the black diet," or starvation until death. Those practices undoubtedly would have continued under Sekou Toure's immediate successors — members of his family and political entourage — if the Guinean military had not seized power soon after his death and revealed the excesses of the past.

And it is a close call whether Milton Obote, who regained power in Uganda during the early 1980s, was any less brutal to his people than the notorious Idi Amin, the half-mad military man who ran that country into the ground during the 1970s.

What is clear from the available evidence is that even as many African countries become steadily poorer, their military budgets become more bloated. Ethiopia, the major current focus of international famine relief efforts, is a dramatic example.

The Marxist military council that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in 1974 has since fought with Somalia over the Ogaden desert and faced wars of secession in Eritrea and Tigray province. For those reasons, and because of its systematic campaign to kill Ethiopian intellectuals, the regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam devoted 10.9 percent of its gross national product to the military in 1980, more than twice as much as the United States. Military expenditures at that time were five times the amount spent on education and nine times the national budget for health. The ratio has probably increased substantially since then.

As the military grew without limits, the adult literacy rate in Ethiopia was only 7 percent and the average life expectancy at

birth hovered around 40 years. Indeed, even as the people of the world were being encouraged to open their hearts and their coffers to help feed Ethiopians, the Mengistu government was spending 42.6 percent of its own revenues for military purposes — far more than Israel, South Korea, and other highly militarized societies around the world.

Many other African states spend money on defense as if that were all that mattered. Mauritania, a desperately poor country on the edge of the Sahara, spent 25.9 percent of government resources on its military in 1980; Mali, a perennial victim of the droughts that have ravaged the Sahel, used up 20.5 percent of its budget for the maintenance of an 8,000-strong military force.

A number of Sahelian states keep their military budgets high, with Western encouragement, in part because they fear the Libyan leader, Muammar Qaddafi, who has seized a large chunk of Chad and made plain his designs on several other countries in the region. Qaddafi himself, because of Libya's small population and high oil revenues, can afford to spend more than half a billion dollars a year on his military — about 18 out of every 1,000 Libyans are in the armed forces — and still use up only 1.6 percent of his country's gross national product.

Similarly, many southern African countries justify military budgets disproportionate to their resources on the basis of the perceived threat to their security from South Africa, which has now developed the capability to build nuclear weapons. The large budgets do little good, however. The South Africans have marched, flown, or driven into Angola, Mozambique, Lesotho, and Botswana with impunity, and without meeting any significant resistance.

Few African states, with the exception of South Africa and perhaps Nigeria, produce any significant quantity of their own arms, so their military establishments depend greatly on the willingness of outsiders to supply them. Recent academic studies of "arms transfers" in Africa have stressed that the flow of weapons to the continent is the consequence not only of "push factors" — the aggressive marketing techniques of manufacturers and suppliers — but also of "pull factors" — the Africans' strong desire for weapons, a result of increased conflict and somewhat greater resources.

Outside powers have done little to resist or weaken the pull. On the contrary, the Soviet Union and the United States have often treated Africa as a strategic battleground during the past 25 years: a place to recruit surrogates and, grisly as it sounds, to field-test weapons.

It is widely acknowledged that as the war in the Horn of Africa ground on during the late 1970s, neither Moscow nor Washington

did much to try to stop it, in part because the Ethiopians were trying out some of the latest Soviet arms and the Somalis were doing the same for the Pentagon. At other times — particularly when they aided the Biafran secessionists during the Nigerian civil war — the French have behaved similarly in West Africa.

By far the largest suppliers of arms to African governments are the Soviet Union and its Warsaw Pact allies. According to CIA figures, the Soviets delivered arms and related equipment and services worth \$2.8 billion to Africa between 1970 and 1978 and had another \$1.1 billion worth in the pipeline at that time. The Defense Department estimates the value of Soviet arms-sales agreements with sub-Saharan Africa between 1977 and 1982 at \$5.6 billion, 60 percent of it to Ethiopia.

Eastern bloc weapons are, to begin with, considerably cheaper than Western models. Also, they can usually be shipped much more quickly, there being no need to go through a congressional appropriations process, to worry about public opinion or to submit to the scrutiny of the press.

Moreover, the Soviets — having provided weapons to many liberation movements during their struggles for independence — were in a position to continue doing so once the movements came to power. With few developing nations seriously willing to accept agricultural or other economic advice from the Kremlin — and with the Soviets unqualified or frankly disinclined to provide meaningful development assistance — the arms trade is sometimes the only channel for a Soviet-African relationship.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom in some U.S. political circles, the supply of Soviet arms to African states does not ensure a gradual communist takeover of the continent. The training that accompanies the weapons is usually inadequate, spare parts are often used as an instrument of Soviet pressure and domestic commodities may be depleted by the Soviets in order to extract payment for the arms. As a result, the recipients frequently feel more resentment than gratitude toward the donors. And Soviet emissaries tend to function poorly in Africa, treating their hosts in a condescending manner.

But the easy availability of Soviet weapons probably does contribute to African political instability, and it certainly adds to the pressure on the United States and other Western suppliers to provide more help to their African friends.

It does not take much to persuade Washington officialdom — Democrats or Republicans — to establish client relationships in Africa, based largely on military support. It would be comforting to believe that U.S. customers and beneficiaries were selected with special care and sensitivity, but that is typically not the case. The guiding principle often seems to be, "The enemy of my enemy must be my friend."

Therefore, any African country that displays hostility toward the Soviet Union, Libya or Cuba, claims to be menaced by one of those bogeymen or threatens to align itself with them, is a plausible candidate for U.S. military assistance. The most obvious, sustained winners of this contest in recent years have been Zaire, Sudan, Somalia, Liberia and, to a lesser extent, Kenya.

American economic assistance to Africa still far outweighs military aid. The relationship in 1983 was almost 3 to 1: the total U.S. economic aid to the continent was \$971.3 million while military aid totaled \$337.5 million. But the trend is in the opposite direction, with the Reagan administration increasingly sympathetic to requests for the provision of arms.

The risk, of course, is that when much of the American assistance, economic or military, goes to prop up repressive military rulers — as it has in Zaire, Sudan, Somalia and Liberia — it all seems like military aid. And when the arms portion is on occasion used by the regime against its own restive citizenry, it tends to provoke severe anti-American feelings.

For several years, Washington stood helplessly while Sudan's president, Jaafar Nimeri, resorted to Islamic law and other devices to keep himself in power and to try to deal with a Libyan- and Ethiopian-aided revolt in the southern part of that vast country. When Nimeri fell from power earlier this year, just after concluding a visit to Washington, U.S. prestige in Africa fell with him.

The circumstances could easily repeat themselves in Zaire or Somalia, where Mobutu and Mohammed Siad Barre, respectively, play their American imprimatur to the hilt as they hang on to power. Already, Samuel K. Doe, the soldier who seized control of Liberia in 1980, has made a farce of American efforts (and financial grants) to steer him in the direction of democracy.

The greatest danger in U.S. policy toward friendly African regimes is the growing assumption that somehow military establishments are the only ones that can be counted upon to protect U.S. interests there. This assumption has become so pervasive that even in Kenya, where the civilian government of President Daniel arap Moi has been unstintingly and embarrassingly friendly to the United States, some American officials have nonetheless hedged their bets by establishing an independent relationship with the Kenyan military. That kind of experimentation could have very serious consequences indeed, for both Kenya and the United States.

If given the chance, Africans will eventually decide for themselves the role the military should play in their affairs. It can only be hoped that the United States and other outside powers will help them realign priorities so that food, health, education, and other human needs come ahead of machine guns, uniforms, and fighter jets.