



# The Coming Peace: Africa's Declining Conflicts

David T. Burbach

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**Africa is often presented as a war-ridden continent, but this depiction is becoming outdated. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the amount of warfare in Africa has declined dramatically, and today most Africans are more secure than ever.**

“Africa” and “conflict” are words all too often linked in Western minds. From Cold War proxy wars, to what Robert Kaplan saw as “the coming anarchy” in the 1990s, to Boko Haram massacres today, news from Africa may seem dominated by never-ending conflict. That image is out of date. In 2002 Tony Blair was justified in describing the state of Africa as a “scar on the conscience of humanity”, but in the years since there has been an underappreciated success story in Africa. The amount of warfare in Africa has declined dramatically, and today most Africans are more secure than ever. Troubled areas remain, unfortunately, but the larger picture of receding conflict has implications for how we think about African security needs. Outside actors can help reinforce positive external and internal trends that mitigate conflict, can avoid creating new conflict zones like Libya or South Sudan, and should recognize emerging human security needs that are becoming relatively more important as armed conflict declines.

### **Africa's waning wars**

Quietly over the last 15 years, many African wars *did* end, to paraphrase Scott Strauss. Lingering Cold War struggles like the Angolan civil war burned out. West African nations including Liberia and Sierra Leone ceased being playgrounds for warlords and regained their status as functional, if weak, states. Eastern Congo is still violent, but far less so than during the 1990s

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“African World War”. Overall, 21<sup>st</sup> century Africa has seen more wars end or abate than ignite.

The trend towards peace in Africa can be seen by using various datasets on armed conflict (for more on data sources, tabulation, and trend analysis, see [Burbach and Fettweis 2014](#)). The Center for Systemic Peace (CSP), for example, tracks conflicts from 1946 to the present, scoring each for the intensity of its societal impact. Figure 1 shows the yearly sum of conflict intensity assessed by CSP, for both Africa and the rest of the world. The end of the Cold War brought peace to much of the world, but African conflicts *increased* in the 1990s. States like Somalia and Sierra Leone collapsed into warlordism, for example. Central Africa was hit by the Rwanda genocide and bloody chaos in Eastern Congo, killing one to five million people. At least three-fourths of the world’s total war deaths in the late 1990s took place in Africa ([Burbach and Fettweis 2014](#), Figure 4).

After the year 2000, the tide of war receded. Africa’s total conflict intensity as measured by CSP fell by approximately half. A similar pattern is shown by the [Uppsala Conflict Data Project](#). Using somewhat different definitions, the Uppsala data shows that the number of conflicts in Africa resulting in 1,000 or more “battle deaths” per year declined from an average of 12 in the late 1990s to an average of 3.5 from 2010-2013. Some decades-long wars ended with formal peace accords, as with Angola in 2002; elsewhere, states gradually gained the upper hand on armed disorder. Given the unfortunate rise of warfare in the Middle East, Africa is no longer the most violent region of the world.

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The decline of warfare in Africa is even more dramatic in terms of individual risks. Africa's population is growing rapidly, up 150% since 1980. Declining conflict despite a much larger population means the mortality risk from war has fallen substantially. An average of 32 people per 100,000 population were killed per year in the 1980s and 45 per 100,000 in the 1990s. In 2013, though the rate was only 8 per 100,000 (Burbach & Fettweis 2014, Figure 5). World Health Organization data shows an astonishing 95% decline in African conflict deaths from 2000 to 2012. In the 1980s, warfare killed more Africans than vehicle accidents. Today, perhaps three to six times as many Africans die in road crashes than from conflict. Many more Africans are harmed by crime or domestic violence than by warfare. Africa is still afflicted by more conflict than most of the world and the suffering of those involved is very real. Nevertheless, a greater proportion of Africans live free of war today than ever in the post-independence period.

Celebrating African peace may seem premature given the civil war in South Sudan or the ravages of Boko Haram. Conflict has increased since 2011, but the level of armed conflict still remains lower than any time from 1970 – 2000. The most tragic development is the civil war in South Sudan, which the U.N. estimated had killed 50,000 as of spring 2016. Fortunately, South Sudan's case is nearly unique: a newly created nation, devoid of physical or administrative infrastructure, with ethnically divided, soon-to-be-unemployed armed factions eyeing the lucrative oil revenues awaiting whomever could seize power. As academic panelists noted in 2011 – two years before the civil war – predictors of conflict were flashing red in South Sudan. Few African countries contain such a combustible mix of problems anymore.

## Accounting for the decline

There are several factors behind the ebbing of conflict in Africa. One important change is the geopolitical environment. During the Cold War, the U.S. and the Soviets armed and funded rival factions in civil wars, allowing bloody wars to fester for decades in countries like Angola, Mozambique, and Ethiopia. Then, 1990s Africa fell into turmoil as superpower-sponsored regimes collapsed. A disinterested world mostly left Africa to its fate, but continued trade in weapons and resources *with warlords*. In the last decade, however, the *U.S.*, *Europe*, and *China* have all become more active in diplomacy, security assistance, and peacekeeping. The US and China are *together pressing* the South Sudanese factions to stop fighting, rather than choosing sides. The world has become somewhat less willing to *sell arms* or *purchase minerals* that directly fuel conflicts, admittedly with a *long way to go*.

Africans themselves deserve great credit for ending the wars that plagued their continent. Economic growth, improvements in governance, and greater space for peaceful political participation *have all* made state failure and internal conflict less likely. As *Paul Collier* among others has noted, civil wars tend to create vicious cycles that spread insecurity to whole regions. Many regions of Africa have climbed out of the conflict trap; political, security, and economic improvements are reinforcing each other. The nations of Africa increasingly *work together* through the institutions of the African Union to head off or resolve conflict, and to deploy peacekeepers to conflict zones. Needs still outpace available resources, but that cooperation is a marked change from 20<sup>th</sup> century Africa.

### **A peaceful future?**

Whether the trend towards peace continues depends foremost on Africa's leaders, but external actors can encourage positive trends in African security.

Most directly, partners can help the AU and its member nations improve peacekeeping and conflict resolution capabilities. Likewise, the world should continue arms embargoes against combatants and regulating trade in valuable resources where exploitation appears to be a key ingredient of protracted conflict. Ongoing encouragement and incentives for democratization and governmental reform are helpful. Western countries should consider, however, that broad efforts like anticorruption programs are probably more helpful than International Criminal Court [indictments of individual leaders](#), which can generate nationalist backlash.

The world should especially try not to *create* new ground for conflict. Libya and South Sudan are Africa's worst conflict zones today. Both were birthed through Western action – the removal by force of the Qaddafi regime, and diplomatically sponsoring South Sudan's independence from Khartoum. While the moral cases were sound, both countries were left with non-existent governments, antagonistic armed factions, and [grossly inadequate provision for disarming, demobilizing, and re-integrating fighters](#). American and European governments focused more on freeing people from hated regimes than on answering – let alone resourcing – the “what next?” question. Chaos followed, just as many African governments had warned at the time.

From a humanitarian perspective, advocates should consider whether other challenges in Africa deserve relatively more attention. For example, [Fearon and Hoeffler](#) suggest that domestic violence against women and children now imposes larger human costs than warfare, and also that domestic violence can be reduced more cost-effectively than armed conflict. The [ballooning toll of vehicle accident deaths in Africa](#) may represent an [opportunity for international technical or educational assistance](#) to pay off with many saved lives. Beyond

road safety, Africa is rapidly urbanizing. Western visions of menacing rebels waving AK-47s in the bush privilege the exotic, but most Africans confront more prosaic threats to health and safety. The human security challenges Africans confront are increasingly those of city-dwellers: crime, sanitation and utilities, safe and reliable transport, etc. Better policing, regularized urban housing, and expansion of infrastructure in megacities like Lagos and Kinshasa ought to be top priorities.

## Conclusion

Sixteen years ago *The Economist* magazine suggested Africa was a “hopeless continent”. Lately *The Economist* has been bullish on Africa, citing the decline in warfare as a key reason for the continent’s improving business prospects. With remarkable speed, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century African conflict declined and safety improved, a hugely positive change in the welfare of Africans. Africa’s international friends should ensure their priorities respond to contemporary human security challenges, not ghosts of the past – and certainly they should avoid making things worse. Recognition of Africa’s progress itself would be a boon: the continent’s increasingly out-of-date image as an undifferentiated war-torn anarchy retards investment and engagement from overseas. The tragedies of the moment deserve action, but we should not overlook that there is also much good news out of Africa.

Image by UN Photo via [Flickr](#).

**David T. Burbach is an Associate Professor of National Security Affairs at the Naval War College in Newport, RI. Dr. Burbach received a Ph.D in Political Science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and has expertise in African security, defense planning, and U.S. foreign policy. The views**

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