5. DISINTEGRATION

a) Failing states

Towards the end of the twentieth century, states all over the world were forced to adjust to new technological, economic, political, social and cultural developments. In order to survive, they needed to move forward. Many of these developments were facets of globalisation (see chapter 7) and first emerged in the 1980s, in other words, before the end of the Cold War. In fact, globalisation and its attendant changes played an important part in the ending of the Cold War, as Western states became more efficient and effective under the pressures of globalisation, while the Eastern Bloc collapsed under the challenge. Even so, the countries that survived the Cold War were forced to adjust their basic concepts of the nation-state. For example, control of a fixed territory, the foundation of the state par excellence, was challenged by the ‘virtual reality’ of new technologies, and state sovereignty proved no longer to be an absolute, but a divisible notion with relevance from the local to the supranational level.

Globalisation is first and foremost a technological and economic phenomenon whose greatest impact has been felt in the most developed regions of the world, in other words, in North America, Europe and parts of Asia. It largely bypassed Africa, due to the continent’s lag in technological development and limited integration into world markets, although its indirect consequences were substantial, especially for the position of African states. The end of the Cold War, which, as noted, cannot be separated from globalisation, drastically altered the global balance of power. Africa lost its strategic significance, and, by extension, African governments saw their guarantees of stability fade from one day to the next.

From Ethiopia to Mozambique, the implications were enormous. African governments would have to fend for themselves in the future, while the outside world looked on (at best). In order to survive, governing elites became more dependent upon their position in their own countries and their relationship with the rest of society. In developed countries, there is usually a complex interplay between state institutions, civil society and the private sector. These three elements not only contribute to social stability, but also complement each other. With the exception of South Africa, however, African countries were not familiar with this type of stable social system. In many cases, the governing elites had deliberately prevented the development of a civil society and the private sector, placing all their bets on the state. When the structure of the state began to crumble, both the position of the elites and the cohesion of society were therefore in immediate danger. African society slowly started to disintegrate.

In hindsight, it is clear that the African states could never have stayed the course they embarked upon in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, due to their low levels of socioeconomic development, their state structures had never amounted to very much to begin with. In addition, a state that has no counterweight, no system of checks and balances, will inevitably fall victim to corruption. In the African environment, in which relationships were more personal than professional and the distinction between the public and private spheres was almost non-existent, this phenomenon became very common. Throughout the continent, corruption took hold in state institutions, from the highest level to the lowest. Citizens had to bribe officials to receive basic government services. This was not just because civil servants were filling their own pockets; in addition from time to time, state power was systematically exploited to extort money from the population. In this manner, the state became a predator that fed on the resources of its citizens. This type of predatory state was far removed from the ideal of the state as an institution that promotes the development of its citizens and of society as a whole.

The predatory state was not a new phenomenon in Africa. Its origins can be traced back to the colonialism of the 1930s, when certain groups first began to exploit state structures to generate private income. These groups essentially lived on ‘rents’ (payments extorted from productive economic sectors such as agriculture and trade). Following independence, this parasitic behaviour, which used the state as an instrument for living off society, continued to characterise the African elites and became increasingly significant.
As the economic situation deteriorated, the internal revenues of the state began to dry up, forcing the elite to look for new sources of income. Political and military rulers often organised dubious schemes for personal gain, such as backroom deals to export natural resources or illegal drug trafficking. These activities were sometimes more lucrative than official means of generating state revenue, despite the fact that the government was extorting as much money as it could from the population in addition to receiving foreign development aid. The state thus became a shadow state, constituting little more than a useful façade for the private machinations of its leaders.²

Under these circumstances, the population could no longer regard the government as an ally, and the state became an enemy that needed to be kept at a distance. Especially in remote rural areas, where extortion was at its worst, the population tried to keep the state at bay. At the same time, the state was also becoming less popular in the cities, due to a deterioration in the provision of services and staff cutbacks. In the 1980s, states all over Africa lost a substantial amount of legitimacy in the eyes of their populations. They were no longer in the least representative, not to mention democratic. The state’s failure to promote development or even carry out its most basic tasks completed this dismal picture. The relationship between the citizens and the state was breaking down. This was exacerbated by the disintegration of traditional networks of patronage between the authorities and their clients in the cities, once the elite became short of funds and were less and less able to bestow government positions or smaller favours. On the contrary, lost jobs and an inability to meet expectations led to a dangerous rise in frustration and anger towards leading politicians.

In the 1980s, the bankruptcy of the African states presented the elites with a dilemma. Continuing on the same footing would destroy their societies, as next to nothing remained of the economic foundations of the state. However, the only alternative that presented itself, namely, the internationally supported structural adjustment programmes, did not offer a much better prospect. Through the IMF and the World Bank, international donors had instructed African states to restore financial stability, and this could not be achieved without cutbacks in public expenditure. In Africa, however, a higher proportion of public spending went to goods and services than in other parts of the world; basically, African governments spent a larger proportion on civil-service salaries than their counterparts in Europe or Asia, and less on investment. The required cutbacks were therefore bound to affect civil servants. As a result of lost public employment opportunities, the networks of patronage lost their importance and support for political leaders began to erode.

It is hardly surprising that African governments tried to delay these reforms – which were central to the adjustment programmes – for as long as possible. The people behind structural adjustment, most of whom were in Washington, were probably vaguely aware of the political repercussions of their demands, but were either unable or unwilling to take them into account. The struggling African governments would just have to sink or swim.

So what was the political and economic condition of the African state at the beginning of the 1990s? It is obviously difficult to speak of the African state, due to the great diversity among the more than forty countries of sub-Saharan Africa. Some states fared a great deal better than others, but none managed to evade the above-mentioned problems entirely. In different states, different factors dominated the overall picture. Some states appeared to have put the worst behind them and were back on track as a result of democratisation and institution-building, but in others disintegration was already so far advanced that it began to look doubtful whether the process could still be reversed.

The state’s ability to carry out effective policies was frequently compromised. At the centre of power, in the capital’s government buildings and primarily in the office of the president, policies were still being made, but the chances that they would actually be put into practice had become small. In fact, they varied according to the policy area in question. Policies regarding the security of the regime, which concerned the military and the police, and foreign policy, which concerned donor relations, had priority. African governments were also fairly active in the economic sphere, since the international financial institutions were monitoring this policy as part of the structural adjustment programmes. In some countries, however, government had all but ground to a halt in other policy areas. In many cases, civil servants still came to the office, at least for part of the formal working day, but their presence there was becoming increasingly symbolic. Their work was no longer aimed at achieving results, but instead took on a ritualistic nature. Despite its continued physical presence, the state had thus become non-existent from a practical point of view.
The term ‘non-existent’ sounds deceptively neutral. In reality, the failure of the African state constituted a very serious problem, whose magnitude was not yet fully appreciated in the early 1990s. In the absence of a functioning state, the simplest tasks in areas such as public safety, health care, education, infrastructure and water supply could not be performed – especially not in Africa, where there were few alternative providers of these services besides religious institutions. In many countries, the state aggravated existing social problems through corruption and predation. The social structure, based on clientelist networks, started to collapse, and some groups became estranged from the state, either because it was no longer able to reach them or because they were actively avoiding contact with it for reasons of self-preservation.

As the state’s power base narrowed, the elite turned to ever smaller groups whose loyalty it could still afford to buy. As a rule, these were ethnically defined and were granted material privileges unavailable to other ethnic groups. Struggling governments abandoned the politics of consensus, despite the fact that it had served as the basis for societal support almost everywhere in Africa since the continent had gained independence. This politically motivated ethnic fragmentation gave rise to tensions that could not always be controlled. The failure of the state thus led to new internal security problems (discussed later in this chapter).

African states are often characterised as having a ‘weak’ hold on their societies. This is most meaningfully translated as ‘ineffective’, rather than, for instance, ‘mild’. As little as the state was able to achieve, it was definitely not gentle, but remained as authoritarian as it had always been. The authorities fiercely defended what remained of their privileges. Depending on the stage of the state’s decline, as well as other circumstances, they usually managed to prevent it from collapsing completely. Chapter 4 (section e) describes how the so-called ‘new leaders’ of Ethiopia, Eritrea, Uganda and Rwanda gave new life to their war-torn governmental structures through authoritarian measures. Other states failed completely, but did not collapse. Zaire is the best example of this.

b) Mobutu and the erosion of the Zairean state

Zaire (now known as Congo), which covers most of Central Africa, has always loomed large in African history. In addition to its location and sheer size, it undoubtedly derives its importance from its rich supply of natural resources. The greed of King Leopold of Belgium, who was eager to get his hands on Congo’s wealth, was one of the main reasons for the international Berlin Conference of 1885, which established the rules for the partition of Africa by the European powers. The role of the country in the decolonisation process was equally noteworthy. The rapid decolonisation of Belgian Congo was a tumultuous affair, as were the first years of the country’s independence. Under the leadership of President Mobutu Sese Seko, Zaire achieved a measure of stability (with the support of the United States, France and Belgium), which lasted for a surprisingly long time after the end of the Cold War. However, Mobutu’s regime (1965-1997) did not provide a sound basis for the country’s development. In fact, development was never a serious objective for Mobutu, and most areas of political and economic activity actually deteriorated. By the end of his regime, state institutions had been reduced to a husk and hardly any were still functioning (diagram V).
Diagram V: Zaire under Mobutu

International actors

Especially the US, France and Belgium (governments and private companies)

International ties of the elite

National elite

Domestic ties of the elite

General population
Take the Ministry of the Interior. This would have ordinarily been an important institution in a country that is four times the size of France and has more than fifty million inhabitants. Instead, it was housed entirely within a single villa in Kinshasa. State institutions with larger premises, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, had many empty rooms. Even the most basic activities were no longer carried out there. If Western ambassadors needed landing permits for emergency aid flights from their countries to Zaire, for example, they had to type them up on their own typewriters. However, since they were unable to place an official Zairean stamp on the permits, they had to comb the empty corridors and rooms of the ministry for a remaining official who could do it for them.

The country’s tragic past – as a slave depot, exploited colony and Cold War pawn – points towards a series of historical injustices as the explanation for Zaire’s collapse. It would appear that the country never stood a chance. This approach is too simple, however, as the history of Congo-Zaire-Congo (the country kept switching names) is not just a catalogue of misfortunes. Like almost all other African ex-colonies, Belgian Congo experienced a period of progress after World War II. The 1950s, in particular, were a decade of economic success. The hostilities immediately following independence temporarily brought an end to this, but progress subsequently continued where it had left off. Not until 1974 did the country enter its long downward spiral, with a drop in the price of copper on the world market and, subsequently, a disastrous campaign of ‘Zaireanisation’. The country fell into uninterrupted decline in the 1980s and 1990s.

Apart from the price of copper on the world market (an external variable that could not be influenced) Mobutu’s policies provide the only explanation for the country’s decline. Mobutu leaned heavily on Western countries and companies, and this enabled him to operate independently of his country’s people. He thus required little domestic support to remain in power, and the bond that had developed between Mobutu and parts of the population when he put an end to domestic instability in the 1960s gradually disintegrated. The regime and the population both felt that they had to fend for themselves. In many respects, they actually succeeded in doing so (especially the regime), at least as long as the Cold War continued. After the end of the Cold War, however, the government’s international ties started to weaken, and Mobutu became increasingly isolated. Being a consummate politician, he managed to hold on to power for a number of years more. Using a policy of divide and rule, he did not hesitate to set population groups against each other while simultaneously cultivating the image that only he – the captain of Zaire – could hold the divided country together. He has been jokingly described as a *pompier pyromane*, a pyromaniac fireman.

If Nelson Mandela symbolises the promising aspects of recent African history, Mobutu serves as a symbol of its dark side. The manner in which he sacrificed his country’s political and economic potential for the sake of self-enrichment is reminiscent of many other African presidents. However, Mobutu’s position and conduct were more characteristic of Africa during the 1970s and 1980s than after the Cold War. During the 1990s, many long-serving African presidents – also referred to as ‘dinosaurs’ – came under fire from their own populations. One leader after another was forced to step down. The fact that Mobutu survived until 1996 was exceptional and, frankly, anachronism. In that respect, he is not such an appropriate symbol of Africa’s troubles after the Cold War, although his regime did bear a large share of the responsibility for a situation in Central Africa that largely determined the image of the whole continent at the end of the twentieth century.

Mobutu was extremely authoritarian, but did not control anything like the whole of the country, as state power was too weak for this purpose. At a distance from the capital and the provincial centres of power, local leaders were able to make their limited influence felt. But they were unable to influence national politics, which would remain in the hands of the president until he died or was driven out of the country.

It was to be the latter. The Rwandan genocide of 1994 brought the Tutsi-controlled RPF to power in Kigali and led to a massive influx of Rwandan refugees into eastern Zaire, where tensions between Hutu and Tutsi also began to escalate. In addition, the two groups continued their armed struggle on Zairean territory. Mobutu was powerless to stop the fighting; in fact, the Tutsi leaders in Rwanda managed to put pressure on the government in Kinshasa, supporting local Zairean exiles in their revolt against Mobutu. In 1996, the exiles began a march on Kinshasa under the command of the local rebel leader and smuggler Laurent Kabila. In a matter of weeks, they succeeded in breaking
Mobutu’s hold on power. Mobutu finally left Zaire in early 1997, only to die six months later in exile in Morocco. Kabila became the new strongman in Kinshasa.

However, few institutions remained for governing the country from Kinshasa, and the new president did not arrive in the capital with a substantial power base of his own. Kabila had been an opponent of the Mobutu regime for many years, but his power had never transcended the local level in eastern Zaire, and his name was unknown in the rest of the country. The fact that he had happened to find himself in a position to finally oust Mobutu made him a popular man in many Zairean circles, but did not mean that he could count on widespread support. Zaire was too fragmented for that, in every respect. The new president’s circle of loyal supporters was even smaller than Mobutu’s. In fact, Kabila’s position in Kinshasa depended entirely on the support of foreign powers: primarily the RPF regime in Rwanda, under the leadership of then Vice President Paul Kagame, and the regime of President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda.

Kabila’s close links with Museveni and Kagame, who were widely regarded as ‘new leaders’ (see chapter 4, section e), seemed a hopeful sign that he too would try to rebuild the state, whether in an authoritarian manner or otherwise. The new president certainly did everything he could to emphasise the break with the Mobutu era. He replaced the name Zaire, which had been introduced by Mobutu, with the country’s former name and the descriptive phrase ‘democratic republic’. This produced the peculiar result ‘Democratic Republic of Congo’ (DRC for short). After all, the country could hardly be described as democratic, even if Kabila may at one time have entertained thoughts of democratisation. In addition, the term ‘republic’ only applied in the most formal sense. With regard to the original meaning of the term – res publica or ‘public interest’ – there were few countries in the world where the public interest received less attention than in Congo. This book will henceforth refer to the DRC simply as Congo, unless there is a risk of confusing it with the much smaller country of Congo (Brazzaville), which is located on the other side of the Congo River.

The new regime did not bring economic recovery to Congo, and Kabila continued his predecessor’s poor policies. He allowed a lot of money to be printed, bringing inflation to dizzying heights, but also tried to maintain an artificially high exchange rate. That guaranteed the survival of the black market. In addition, the regime maintained restrictions on the use of foreign currency, plundered state-owned companies mercilessly and forced businesspeople, who had sometimes retained limited freedom of action under Mobutu, to place themselves increasingly ‘at the disposal of the government’. In accordance with time-honoured African tradition, the political authorities tried to seize control of private economic power. Once they had succeeded in doing so, they tried to enrich themselves. In this respect, Kabila and his entourage were worthy successors to Mobutu, although there was less and less to steal in Kinshasa. The Congolese economy contracted further each year. At the millennium, perhaps as much as eighty per cent of state revenue went to the military and the security services. Less than two per cent of the state budget was spent on health care, and less than one per cent on education.

In early 2001, when Kabila was shot dead by one of his bodyguards, whatever political control remained in Congo was concentrated in the hands of his family and a small circle of loyal supporters. As a result, the number of potential successors was limited, and Kabila’s son Joseph was immediately nominated. The succession was unconstitutional, as Joseph Kabila did not meet the constitutional requirements for holding the presidency (he was only thirty-one years old, rather than the required forty, and had not been born in Congo, but probably in Tanzania), but nobody made an issue of this. More remarkable even than the unconstitutionality of the succession was its monarchic character, which was a rarity for an independent African country. The monarchic succession in Kinshasa – ‘Kabila is dead, long live Kabila’ – demonstrated that the res publica, the public interest, had shrunk so much that it now covered just one family.6

The family and its supporters were entirely dependent on foreign powers. From 1997 until August 1998, those powers were Rwanda and Uganda, followed by Angola, Zimbabwe and Namibia. Territorial sovereignty was not much more than an illusion in many African states, but in Congo it was truly a fantasy. Instead of state institutions, an administrative vacuum existed in the heart of Africa. Neighbouring heads of state were aware of this. Thus, President Museveni of Uganda once declared that Congo was just an area on the map, not a country. The situation was unstable;
Historically, political vacuums have always sucked in the surrounding countries. Museveni’s assessment of the situation in Congo was undoubtedly at the root of the decision by Uganda and Rwanda to install a new government in Kinshasa in 1998, thereby plunging the whole of Central Africa into war (see chapter 6, section c).

c) New threats

In the first years after independence, the deterioration of the state did not have a serious impact on daily life in Zaire. For some years – in fact, for two whole decades – living standards gradually declined throughout the continent. Services such as education and health care grew more and more scarce, but the social structure did not collapse.

During the 1990s, however, that began to change in countries whose security was under threat. As noted above, the state institutions responsible for maintaining peace and security were often the last affected by the disintegration of the state, but this did not mean that they remained intact. The armed forces and the rest of the security apparatus also began to operate less effectively. Professionalism declined, corruption could no longer be resisted and demoralisation took hold. Police and defence-related expenditure sometimes stagnated and sometimes declined as a result of cutbacks. In general, there was less ‘bang for your buck’.

The decline of the security apparatus took place against a background of rising political, economic, social and ethnic tension. The power base of the elite was weakened by the bankruptcy of the state and the subsequent structural adjustment programmes, making it impossible to maintain all the networks of patronage. As a result, alternative centres of power had an opportunity to make a name for themselves. Such a change in the domestic balance of power is comparable to a change in the balance of power between states. Just as the relative decline of a hegemonic power can lead to war with newly ascendant powers, so too the weakened position of governing elites encouraged violent conflict within African states. The government’s monopoly on violence is one of the main characteristics of the modern state. Its breakdown opens the way to internal conflict.

The risk of such conflict is greater in societies consisting of groups with different historical, linguistic, economic, religious and cultural characteristics. In such ‘multicultural’ societies, loyalty to subgroups can easily become more important than loyalty to the state. For struggling politicians, manipulating ethnic loyalties can be a simple and occasionally effective way of advancing their own interests. Inciting mutual feelings of hatred between population groups can lead to what, in the African context, has been described as ‘tribalism’: belligerent posturing by population groups in the supposed manner of ‘old-fashioned tribes’.

The potential for violence in heterogeneous societies is reduced when significant distinctions do not coincide; for example, when local or religious minorities do not consist exclusively of rich or poor individuals, but display the same variety as the rest of the country when it comes to the distribution of wealth. Shared interests among individuals from different groups prevent too much tension from building. If there are no shared interests, which is often the case in Africa due to simple social structures, there is a greater risk of irreconcilable differences. In addition, if one group completely dominates another, there is a risk of revolutionary violence. For these reasons, violent conflicts often have their roots in political, economic and cultural inequality and discrimination, as well as marginalisation and exclusion. In consociational societies, in which distinct but equal groups live side by side, conflicts may arise if elites pit their followers against each other. In situations of this kind, power-sharing agreements among the elites can keep a lid on tensions.

In some African countries, valuable natural resources were a major source of conflict. As long as the state was strong, it could prey on such resources, without regard to ordinary sources of state revenue like taxation. However, if ever the state’s hold on natural resources weakened, other, non-state groups emerged that sought to wrest control of them by force. In cases where they succeeded, the state lost much of its revenue, and gained a rich and powerful rival.

The economic and political implications of this were considerable. Occasionally, governments that were powerless to combat such ‘rebels’ would single-handedly attempt to avert the danger with the help of private security organisations, which essentially consisted of mercenaries. These organisations were often remarkably professional and well equipped, and considerably more effective
than what remained of the state’s own armed forces. However, substantial risks came with delegating such a fundamental aspect of national sovereignty to private organisations. When the contract ended, so did the security. In addition, there was no link between the public and the security services, which further eroded the legitimacy of the state’s actions. The rise of competing centres of power, each with its own economic base, clearly posed a danger to the continued integrity of the state.

In the 1990s, the rise of alternative centres of power within the territories of African states was a new phenomenon. During the Cold War, roving bandits had stood no chance against the armed forces of the internationally supported regimes in the capital. Now that this support had disappeared, warlords cropped up in various places, especially in locations where valuable resources, such as diamonds, could be exploited. Charles Taylor, in Liberia, was the first significant example.

However, it would be a inaccurate to view warlords as something entirely new to modern Africa. After all, how great were the differences between warlords like Taylor and ‘legitimate’ heads of state like Mobutu in Zaire and Samuel Doe in Liberia, when it came to their economic base and their relationship with the population? Heads of state also preyed on the resources in their territory, and had often derived their veneer of legitimacy solely from their role in the Cold War struggle. If Taylor was a roving bandit, could Mobutu not be described, with equal justification, as a stationary bandit?9

One difference was that, in exchange for international support, the presidents of the Cold War period were obliged to abide by certain international rules. They were restricted to their own territories and had to refrain from interfering in neighbouring countries (though they did support rebel groups on occasion). The disappearance of the international order imposed by the Cold War turned the stationary bandit in the capital into little more than just another actor competing for power within the territory of the state. At the same time, the concept of territorial integrity was losing significance. If the international community cared so little about Africa’s internal borders, why should the warlords care about them? If Liberian diamonds were a source of wealth and power, why not push through to Sierra Leone and add the diamonds of that country to the Liberian diamonds to further increase the wealth and power? Due to the influence of African renaissance ideology (see chapter 4), the borders between African states were already seen as more permeable. It was thought that this would promote the development of Africa as a whole. It was in some ways a nice idea, but in combination with the decline of the state it made national borders seem almost irrelevant. In this context, it is worth remembering that the borders in question had been drawn by the colonial powers, not by Africans, as a result of which they had always had a special status.

From a political, economic and military point of view, Africa’s internal borders took on a new, far lower status in the 1990s. As national borders in the developed world lost their significance under the impact of globalisation, especially as a result of technological advances, the role of borders in Africa also changed. This change may have been of an entirely different nature, but it could be traced indirectly to the same process of globalisation.

In various African countries, complex military conflicts developed between all kinds of armed groups. In general, one of the objectives of the warring parties was to gain control of the capital and the remnants of state power. As long as state structures were responsible for international relations, which went together with status and, in particular, international aid, they were worth fighting for. For example, Taylor’s ultimate goal was to be president of Liberia, as this would crown his career, legalise his lucrative diamond trade and allow him to tax the funds that were made available for humanitarian aid and post-conflict reconstruction. Although the certainty of international support disappeared after the end of the Cold War, state power often remained interesting to warlords because of its international aspects. As long as Africa continued to receive substantial amounts of foreign aid, which was distributed mainly through government channels that originated in the capital, the African state system would never vanish entirely.

Areas rich in mineral resources faced the toughest challenges. Africa’s mineral resources have traditionally been regarded as a potential source of wealth, but in general they have brought the local population little more than economic exploitation and military conflict. In contrast, countries with less generous natural endowments, where agriculture is the main form of economic activity, have tended to enjoy relative tranquillity. It is true that most of rural Africa was heavily exploited, but at least it
did not hold much interest for the warlords. Largely agricultural states therefore did not generally become embroiled in a fight for their survival.

In the 1990s, there was only one country in Africa where the local warring parties were no longer interested in seizing control of central government. State institutions became irrelevant once revenues from natural resources, regular economic activity (such as agriculture) and international aid had all dried up. The state in question – Somalia – simply disappeared.

d) The demise of Somalia

Somalia is more an example of failed state formation than of a failed state. For ten to fifteen years, the Somali leadership was building up an impressive war machine, but doing little else. After the armed forces were demolished, there was almost nothing left. This senseless course effectively made it impossible to stabilise the state. Most political, social and economic activity that was still taking place was financed from abroad. The relationship between the regime and the population was a mix of patronage and repression. The regime of Siad Barre, which had been in power since the coup d’état of 1969, continued to rely on assistance from the West even after its defeat in the Ogaden War.

In comparison to the other African countries, Somalia did not receive all that much aid, but what it did receive was absolutely indispensable due to the country’s poor economic base. In the 1980s, development aid was the source of more than half of Somalia’s GNP. As the end of the Cold War approached, however, Western countries began losing interest in giving aid to Somalia. The extensive human rights abuses of the politically embattled Barre regime played into the hands of those who advocated discontinuing aid. This soon led to a vicious circle: the weakness of the government’s power base led to violence against the population, and this led to a drop in international aid that further weakened the government’s position.

In 1988-1989, the West froze almost all its structural aid to Somalia. This left the Barre regime unable to maintain control of the entire country (diagram VI). Rebel factions first seized large areas of rural Somalia, then moved on to the cities. In 1990, government forces even came under fire in the capital of Mogadishu. By January 1991, the regime was finished. The loyalist forces were comprehensively defeated, and the president fled the country.
Diagram VI: The demise of Somalia

International actors

International ties of the elite(s)

National elite(s)
(many factions)

Domestic ties of the elite(s)

General population
(many factions)
Somalia was at the mercy of armed factions, which were organised along clan lines. There had always been sufficient fodder for internal strife in Somalia, and President Barre’s policy of divide and rule had further strengthened animosity between clans. Weapons were widely available. Under the leadership of the warlords, the clans initially waged war against central government and, after the government collapsed, against each other. The main objective of these battles was the control of local economic activity, which was usually located in local population centres and their surrounding areas. This activity consisted of trade in legal and illegal goods, as well as agriculture, which was practiced alongside the rivers where the population centres were located. In 1991 and 1992, the fighting made normal economic activity almost impossible. The food supply was disrupted, and a widespread famine broke out. More than 100,000 Somalis died, and almost 1.5 million – a quarter of the population at the time – fled their homes to escape the famine and the violence.

The crisis led to calls for international humanitarian aid, but aid could not be distributed effectively in such a dangerous environment. For the warlords and their militias, foreign assistance was a potential source of revenue, but they realised that the funds would not start flowing if interclan fighting continued to spread. To turn the tide, various Somali clan leaders approached the United Nations for help in restoring central authority and rebuilding the country.

These requests were well-timed. The international community felt uncomfortable about the existence of a country without a government, a situation that had not arisen anywhere in the world since World War II. In its current condition, Somalia simply did not fit into the international state system, the basic paradigm of international politics (see chapter 1, section c). Furthermore, Somalia’s particularly barbaric brand of anarchy was an affront to the optimistic spirit of the 1990s, a decade of liberation and development.

Flushed with victory after winning the 1991 Gulf war against Iraq, the United States felt that the chaos and humanitarian emergency in Somalia could not be tolerated. President George H.W. Bush spoke of the ‘new world order’ that would succeed the Cold War and in which the United States would play a key role. Accordingly, US troops made up the core of a UN peacekeeping force that landed on the Somali coast in December 1992 and headed inland. The ambitious objectives of Operation Restore Hope were to restore security in the country, begin a process of national reconciliation, allow the numerous refugees and displaced persons to return to their homes and, obviously, provide humanitarian aid.

Against all expectations, the intervention, officially known as the United Nations Operation in Somalia (UNOSOM), ended in disaster. The various factions refused to cooperate with the peacekeepers, and the most powerful warlord in the capital of Mogadishu, General Mohamed Aidid, managed to evade arrest. Essentially a patron who had gone out of control, Aidid had appointed himself as Somalia’s interim prime minister. He was in fact one of those who had requested the UN operation, but the international community still regarded him as one of the main instigators of the anarchy that gripped the country. The peacekeepers were disappointed by the attitude of the Somali clans that they were meant to disarm. Instead of being faced with an organised force that needed to be brought under control, the UN troops were continually confronted with new groups and individuals who trained their weapons on them. The losses on the international side were considerable, especially in comparison to the 1991 war against Iraq. During the hunt for Aidid, two helicopters were shot down, killing eighteen US soldiers. On the Somali side, there were probably about 500 fatalities, including civilians.

The United States was shocked by the hostility it encountered not only from the Somali fighters, but also from the civilian population. Accustomed to being welcomed as liberators, Americans became confused. Their confusion turned to disgust when they were confronted with the television images of a dead US soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu to the cheers of Somali bystanders. The verdict of US public opinion was that such a barbaric country could not be saved, and the US government did not dispute this conclusion. The United States left Somalia in 1994. Apart from providing humanitarian aid, it had achieved nothing.

The UN diplomats also failed to attain their political objective of initiating a process of national reconciliation, though they did not immediately abandon their attempts to convince the clan leaders to agree to the establishment of a central government. Together with sixteen recognised factions, they discussed the reconstruction of the state at dozens of conferences, which ultimately led
nowhere. The factions displayed little willingness to cooperate, and were often unable to do so anyway, as they lacked the necessary legitimacy and power. Their ability to destroy was much greater than their ability to create. In 1995, the United Nations acknowledged the futility of its efforts and officially terminated UNOSOM, abandoning Somalia to the violent and arbitrary rule of clan leaders and warlords.

In hindsight, it is clear that some of the objectives of the UN operation were rather naïve. There was too little understanding at the time of what the disappearance of a state implied. It was believed that key Somali figures and groups would support the core of a new central government as soon as it had been established with international support. However, Somalia lacked not only a central government, but also subnational government institutions. The total absence of state structures meant that there was a critical lack of potential support for reconstruction. The UN operation also underestimated the forces of disintegration. The armed gangs that were responsible for the chaos that reigned in Somalia generally had no interest in the restoration of order, as their power, status and income derived from the use of force. As long as there was a chance of obtaining a share of the international aid, these gangs were reasonably interested in international involvement, but their interest in a political settlement for Somalia had faded completely by the end of the UN operation.

This did not mean that the violence in Somalia simply continued to escalate. The situation had reached its most tragic phase in the early 1990s, and many areas subsequently enjoyed a certain amount of tranquillity. This led to the emergence of local centres of power with more or less mutually recognised borders. At a certain point, most problems, ranging from disputes concerning the right to levy tolls to the theft of camels, had pretty much been fought out or otherwise resolved. To a certain extent, the fighting now retreated to the background, granting other members of society an opportunity to build up local government. In the north of the country, in particular, the population established the beginnings of new state structures. As early as 1990, a group in northwestern Somalia had declared the region independent under the name Somaliland. Interestingly enough, the borders of the new state, (which, incidentally, was recognised by nobody) coincided with those of the former colony of British Somaliland. As in the case of Eritrea, the force of the colonial borders thus asserted itself once again. In fact, border adjustments in post-colonial Africa always tended to focus on the colonial borders, however artificial they were.

A modest governmental structure developed in Somaliland, including means of maintaining public order. A start was made on the reconstruction of the region’s physical infrastructure, and schools reopened. Trade started up again around the port of Berbera, bringing the town and its surrounding area a modest amount of wealth, which quickly exceeded the level of prosperity that had existed before the collapse of Somalia. This relative prosperity made it possible to fund the new government institutions.

Peace also returned to northeastern Somalia, sometimes referred to as Puntland. The fighting had not been so heavy there to begin with, as the region was inhabited by just one clan and had a tradition of political compromise. In addition, there were almost no armed groups, and this allowed civilians to maintain the upper hand. The port of Boosaaso stood at the centre of a minor of economic recovery, though nothing like that of the port of Berbera in Somaliland. Disputes concerning the control and spending of port dues hampered the funding of local government for a long time, but did not lead to eruptions of violence.

The remarkable recovery in the north stood in stark contrast to the rest of the country. The capital of Mogadishu and its surroundings, as well as the areas to the south of the capital, remained in the grip of lawlessness and violence. Political and military power was fragmented. General Aidid’s once powerful faction had lost much of its power as a result of internal squabbling. In 1996, Aidid was killed in a shootout. He was succeeded by his son, who proved unable to command the same authority as his father. Mogadishu remained divided among groups that continued to clash, making it impossible to use the airport or the harbour. Trade suffered as a result, and it became increasingly difficult to make a living in the city. Thousands of Somalis who had come to the capital in the early 1990s in search of a better life began to leave again.

Armed youths terrorised civilians and made it impossible for the institutions in and around Mogadishu to function. International aid organisations were also unable to perform their functions
properly. The few institutions that continued to operate often did so under difficult conditions. For example, they could not fire employees that appeared on hospital payrolls but did not actually do any work, because the individuals in question possessed firearms and could use them with impunity if they felt their interests were threatened. A separate development was the spread of fundamentalist Islam in central and southern Somalia, which led, among other things, to the deterioration of the status of women. Islamist groups also sowed unrest in the Ogaden desert and as far as the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, where they carried out a number of bombings that provoked reprisals by the Ethiopian army.

However, the disappearance of the Somali state also led to a number of positive developments, especially in the north of the country, where there was relative order. Local private entrepreneurs rushed to fill the gap left by the state; for example, by taking responsibility for the supply of water and electricity. Such functions, which are performed in most countries by public utility companies, were usually performed very inefficiently in Africa. The new private service providers were expensive, but at least they were relatively efficient. Telecommunications was another area in which private entrepreneurs were able to achieve more, without state intervention, than so-called functioning African states. In a certain sense, the private sector in Somalia was already in a position to benefit from the technological advances that accompanied globalisation. In the rest of Africa, however, the state still formed an obstacle to such progress.

In many cases, the market operated more efficiently in Somalia than elsewhere in Africa, with prices fluctuating in response to supply and demand. The Somali market even took over a number of functions that are normally performed exclusively by states, such as the issue of travel documents. In 2000, for example, the price of a Somali passport in the market of Mogadishu, where it was prepared on the spot in the space of five minutes, was roughly twenty dollars. In general, commercial transaction costs were still relatively high, because it was almost always necessary to pay for the ‘protection’ of the ruling clan and because the whole of Somalia was once again subject to the levying of tolls. The Somali shilling retained some of its value, even in the absence of a central bank, but the paper money began to look the worse for wear as the years went by, as for obvious reasons new banknotes were no longer being printed.

From 1997 onwards, in what was known as the Sodere peace process, Ethiopia tried to bring no less than twenty-six factions together in a National Salvation Council with a mandate to form a transitional government for Somalia. However, the faction led by the son of General Aidid refused to cooperate, and, more importantly, the northern region of Somaliland preferred to go it alone. Initiatives by Egypt and Djibouti to restore the unity of Somalia also failed to get results. In 2002, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), a regional organisation, started fresh peace talks in Kenya, which were again boycotted by Somaliland.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Somalia was therefore still a unique case in Africa and the world. To all intents and purposes, the Somali state had disappeared, but the country still appeared on every political map of Africa. According to the prevailing political order, there had to be a state on the territory in question, whether it existed or not. The international community no longer concerned itself with Somalia, but continued to wait for somebody who would claim to represent the country. International organisations, such as the United Nations, continued to reserve a seat for Somalia. This situation would endure as long as no further drastic changes occurred in the African state system.

e) Liberia’s path to revolution

The small country of Liberia, which has a population of just over three million and is slightly smaller than England, was the scene of one of the most violent African conflicts of the 1990s. Its civil war was regarded both as a new phenomenon and as characteristic of Africa in the post-Cold War era, not so much because of its scale (with estimates of the number of deaths ranging from 60,000 to 200,000, it did not rank among the largest bloodbaths in postcolonial Africa), but due to the brutality and chaos, the abundance of warring factions, the use of child soldiers and the conduct of the warlords. Nevertheless, if the war in Liberia is considered from a wider perspective, it also appears to conform
to established patterns. For example, the sequence of events was consistent with the general theory on the origin of revolutions; namely, that they are the result of the frustrated expectations of groups which, after enduring long periods of oppression, have recently been emancipated.11 A parallel with the events surrounding the chaotic and hasty decolonisation of Belgian Congo also presents itself. To illustrate these points, let us turn first to the history of Liberia.

In 1822, philanthropists from the United States purchased Liberia, a hot and humid piece of land on the section of the West African coast where Africa and the Americas are closest together (opposite Brazil). It was to be a ‘land of freedom’ for emancipated slaves who were no longer needed on American plantations. A few thousand former slaves took advantage of this opportunity to return to Africa. The colonists and their descendants, referred to as Amerindo-Liberians, emerged as the new rulers of this as yet undeveloped section of the West African coast. They made their homes in the new settlement of Monrovia, which was named after James Monroe, then president of the United States. From the beginning, relations between the colonists and the indigenous population were tense. The former slaves regarded the native Liberians as savages that needed to be civilised and converted to Christianity.

The new rulers put the indigenous population to work under conditions best described as slavery. This ironic situation became most egregious when Liberia actually began to export slaves to the Spanish colony of Fernando Poo. This practice was discontinued after protests from Britain and the United States, but Liberia’s domestic power structure remained similar to that in other African countries, which had been colonised by European powers. The country may not have been a colony in a formal sense, but it possessed all the relevant features. Power was concentrated in the hands of a small elite of foreign origin. Only the members of the elite enjoyed civil rights, while the rest of the population performed forced labour. The elite held colonialist attitudes that differentiated between civilised individuals and savages, and the administration of sixteen ‘recognised tribes’ was based on indirect rule by externally appointed tribal leaders.

Liberia thus did not differ notably from the rest of colonial Africa. It was an attractive country for foreign investors, especially from the United States and Germany, as they could do business directly with a small independent elite instead of with the European powers. Immediately after World War II, foreign investment in Liberia increased substantially, particularly in plantations and mining. The indigenous population was forced to perform the necessary labour. Liberia became a classic example of a rentier state.12 The elite had a monopoly on state power and was able to collect revenue not only from the export of products obtained through forced labour, but also from foreign companies. It derived its wealth entirely from its position and had no economic base of its own. Some of the above-mentioned revenue was channelled to local leaders, who were responsible for maintaining order outside the capital.

Around 1960, when most of Africa was in the process of decolonisation, the Amerindo-Liberians in Monrovia (who made up just three per cent of the population) began to realise that the power structure in the country could not remain the same forever. At some point they would have to develop the interior and give the indigenous population a stake in the country’s economic and political life. They constructed roads between Monrovia and the hinterland, built schools and allowed young men from the interior of the country to enter military service. Nevertheless, the government was in no great hurry. As long as the Cold War continued, it was safe inside the sphere of influence of its old patron, the United States. The Eastern Bloc had no foothold in Liberia.

It was ultimately the international economic recession of the 1970s and the related decline in revenues that put pressure on the elite. With the United States doing little for Liberia (although it did complain about human rights violations), the elite in Monrovia found itself in rocky financial straits. As a result, the internal system of patronage began to falter. In addition, after many years of growth, the economy began to stall. For ambitious young men from the ‘sixteen tribes’, who had now been educated and were looking for work, the only jobs available were in the military. Towards the end of the 1970s, the armed forces therefore contained a large number of restless young men who were demanding a larger slice of the national pie for themselves and their communities. Due to the poor economic prospects, frustration also mounted among the young urban unemployed.

The tensions reached a climax in 1979-1980. A number of demonstrators were shot dead in riots that erupted over an increase in the price of rice. The army was divided and indecisive. A number
of junior officers, under the leadership of Master Sergeant Samuel Doe, carried out a bloody coup d’état, in which the president and some of his closest associates were killed. Other prominent members of the government were shot dead on the beach the following day. United under the banner of the People’s Redemption Council, the rebels thus put an end to one-and-a-half centuries of uninterrupted Americo-Liberian rule. The violent nature of the takeover drew protests from neighbouring and Western countries, but this did not prevent Doe from eliminating his brothers in arms, whom he regarded as rivals, and then doing the same to other potential opponents. This completed the first stage of the Liberian revolution.

Liberia was going through a transition the rest of Africa had experienced about twenty years earlier. The international environment was probably to blame for this delay. The country was located in a neglected corner of the continent. In the rest of Africa, the situation in Liberia had either gone unnoticed or else been too delicate and politically inconvenient to attract much attention. While the large colonial empires were breaking apart, the international community had been blind to the apartheid in this independent country of former slaves. The strong, protective arm of the United States had discouraged other countries from interfering in Liberia, while the United States itself had focused on other issues during the Cold War. A small degree of emancipation finally got under way in Liberia, but quickly stalled due to the country’s poor economic prospects. The domestic situation then became explosive. Liberia’s rigid political system had no mechanisms for dealing with this kind of tension, and the international community was not there to provide political or military assistance. As a result, the old order – the ancien régime – perished in an orgy of violence.

It quickly became clear that matters would not end there. Doe’s power base was narrow. He tried to take over the previous elite’s system of patronage in order to gain the support of the interior of the country, but the continuing international recession made this extremely difficult. In addition, the violence and instability of the regime led to the near-total withdrawal of foreign investment and aid. There was substantial capital flight, and the ambitious project of an annual minimum wage of USD 2,400 per person was doomed from the start. The government tried to cover its financial deficits by plundering the country. The prospects of the indigenous population were no better in the 1980s than they had been previously, despite the removal of the Americo-Liberian regime. Doe failed to pursue practical policies and also proved unwilling to share power. In 1985, he organised a fraudulent election in order to become president. Several attempted coups d’état from within the army followed. Soldiers from the Nimba region, in the northeast of the country, came closest to succeeding. In retaliation, Doe allowed soldiers from his own ethnic group to wreak vengeance on the Nimba region. They burnt villages to the ground and murdered or drove out the population. Divisions along ethnic lines within the armed forces and the opposition movements, both in Liberia and among Liberian refugees, were a significant new development in the sphere of politics and security.

f) The battle for Monrovia

Towards the end of the 1980s, the largest group of Liberian rebels, exiles and refugees was located on the border with Ivory Coast. This group, of which Charles Taylor would eventually become the spokesman and leader, received arms from various countries, including Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Libya. Calling itself the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), it became the strongest resistance movement opposing Doe’s regime. Around Christmas 1989, probably with support from soldiers from Burkina Faso, the NPFL invaded the county of Nimba, where it was joined by local groups that were determined to force out the government in response to Doe’s revenge. Thus began the march on Monrovia. As Taylor’s forces advanced, they were joined by an increasing number of armed, but untrained, young men. Within a few weeks, the fighting, which killed thousands of people, had reached the capital. The end of Doe’s regime was in sight.

At this point, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) took the surprising step of intervening. In its capacity as a peacemaker in Liberia, this regional organisation, which was established in 1975 and included almost all West African countries as members, operated under a formal UN Security Council mandate. It was encouraged and supported, financially and otherwise, by Western countries, which were thus spared the decision whether or not to intervene themselves.
However, the ECOWAS initiative cannot be fully understood without taking into account the special interests of the participating states, especially those of Nigeria, which had by far the strongest voice in the organisation. During the 1980s, a lively trade had developed between Anglophone and Francophone countries in West Africa, because the CFA franc had not been devalued, while the currencies of the Anglophone countries had been (see chapter 2, section d). Nigerian products, often unlicensed imitations, thus became very cheap in Francophone countries. Often they were smuggled in, with the willing participation of Nigeria’s political and military leaders. Nigerian leaders were also involved in other illegal activities, such as drug trafficking and money laundering.

Leading figures in almost all West African countries belonged to the networks that carried out such activities. Although they did so in a private capacity, and not, for instance, in their role as presidents or generals, these leaders did exploit the state power at their disposal. This ‘criminalisation of the state’, symptoms of which became visible throughout Africa from the 1980s onwards (see chapter 10, section b), was linked to highly flexible international networks, in which one contact could easily be replaced with another.13

Nevertheless, these networks were also bound up with national interests, as determined by historical and other local factors. In West Africa, the main feature of this kind was the distinction between the Francophone countries, with their close ties to Paris, and the Anglophone group, which was much more independent of London and where Nigeria called the shots on account of its size. The differences between the two groups had theoretically been bridged by ECOWAS, but they were often still in existence, especially in relations between Nigeria and Ivory Coast, which had supported Biafra’s attempt to break away from Nigeria in the 1960s. The Nigerian network, under the leadership of President Ibrahim Babangida, included Doe’s regime in Monrovia. Babangida was even the joint owner of Liberia’s state oil company. In addition, there was a predominantly Francophone network of countries led by Ivory Coast, which also included Burkina Faso and, behind the scenes, even Libya.

The Liberian rebel leader, Charles Taylor, was allied with the Francophone network. When it became clear that he would succeed in capturing Monrovia, Nigeria sprang into action. The transition of Liberia from the Nigerian network to the Francophone network would be too harmful for the economic interests of the military leadership in the new Nigerian capital of Abuja. Furthermore, as a potential regional superpower, Nigeria had a strategic interest in intervening. Preparations for intervention were made under the cover of ECOWAS.14 The international political climate worked to Nigeria’s advantage. Western countries were concerned by the mounting violence in Liberia, but preferred not to intervene themselves. They therefore pushed for so-called African solutions, such as an African peacekeeping force. Francophone ECOWAS member states, which held an entirely different view of the war in Liberia than Nigeria, were urged to participate in the force by Western countries, which used development aid as leverage. A proper international military force thus reluctantly came into being, but did so under the overall leadership of Nigeria and with a heavy Nigerian predominance in all its components. The force was known as ECOMOG, which stood for ECOWAS Cease-Fire Monitoring Group, because its mission was to monitor compliance with the ceasefire.

When the ECOMOG soldiers arrived in Monrovia in mid-1990, the ECOWAS-imposed ceasefire was extremely fragile. Taylor’s NPFL, which had almost conquered the capital, suddenly found itself face to face with a new enemy – officially an African peacekeeping operation, but in reality an invading Nigerian army. In the first few days of this new confrontation, a dramatic event occurred. Soldiers from a breakaway group of the NPFL tortured Doe to death in an area officially controlled by ECOMOG. The peacekeepers on the scene were unable or unwilling to intervene, and the shocking footage of the president’s murder was broadcast all over the world. In Doe’s place, ECOMOG established an interim government under the leadership of the widely respected Dr Amos Sawyer.

A relatively stable situation had emerged by the autumn of 1990. Dr Sawyer was the official president of Liberia, but his authority was limited to the capital of Monrovia, which was controlled by ECOMOG. The rest of the country was almost entirely in the hands of the NPFL, of which Taylor, after murdering his rivals, had become the undisputed leader. The NPFL was not strong enough to drive ECOMOG out of Monrovia, and the peacekeepers made no attempt to conquer the rest of the country, although partition was in nobody’s interest. However, violence erupted once again in 1992,
after ECOMOG refused to negotiate a settlement with Taylor on the country’s future. It is ironic that
the intervention of the ECOMOG peacekeeping force, which prevented a decisive military victory by
Taylor in 1990, prolonged the conflict until 1997. However, the leader of the NPFL also deserves a
certain amount of the blame; Taylor knew that he was unable to defeat ECOMOG – or Nigeria – but
still refused to work out a political compromise with the peacekeeping force.

After gaining control of the NPFL and the bulk of Liberia’s territory in 1990, Taylor’s next
objective was the Liberian presidency. In 1992, he launched a frontal military assault on the capital,
but ECOMOG managed to fight off the attack. None of the parties abandoned the notion of the
Liberian state. Liberia may have been weak, like almost every other African state, and it may even
have ‘failed’, but it was fundamental to everybody’s plans. In Liberia, power traditionally went hand-
in-hand with substantial revenues, which could be used to maintain a domestic network of patronage,
as well as a comfortable private life. For the first couple of decades after World War II, those
revenues were obtained mainly through contracts with foreign companies. From the 1970s onwards,
this method was supplemented by all kinds of more or less illegal activities. And as for the future,
Western governments had pledged extensive aid for reconstruction whenever the violence finally
ended. Aid money would be a clear target for ‘taxation’, and that was a good enough reason to make
the presidency in Monrovia the main objective of the struggle. Liberia was thus not destined to go the
way of Somalia, which basically disintegrated around the same time.

Although Taylor controlled ninety per cent of Liberia’s territory – which he referred to as
Greater Liberia – he was unable to control the state’s finances. In order to continue the battle for
Monrovia, he therefore needed to generate additional revenue. This was not difficult. Liberia is
extremely rich in natural resources, including diamonds, gold, tropical hardwood and iron ore.
Furthermore, there was no need for a functioning, formal economy to produce and sell diamonds, as
they could be smuggled out of the country and onto the world market in many different ways. The
revenues were used to buy weapons and ammunition, as well as to recruit new fighters. The NPFL
was not the only armed group that sought control of the diamond fields. Many breakaway groups and
factions were fighting for a piece of this lucrative trade. At one point almost twenty different groups
were involved. This led to the emergence of a genuine economy of violence, a mode of economic
survival that formed both the engine and the objective of hostilities. As a result, the ethnic aspect of
factionalism, which was still significant around 1990, gradually retreated to the background. The
decisive factor in the formation and fragmentation of alliances (alongside the role of ECOMOG) was
now the extent to which each faction could gain control of mineral resources.

For most young Liberian men and boys, the fighting in the interior of the country – and
occasionally against ECOMOG in Monrovia – essentially formed the only activity through which they
could support themselves. There was no legal alternative. The regular economy had collapsed, and the
state’s institutions had crumbled under the weight of the fighting, meaning that government jobs were
no longer available. On the other hand, it was always possible to obtain a firearm, which could be
used to earn a living.

This was not an entirely new development. Before the arrival of the Americo-Liberian state,
which was a recent occurrence in certain areas, young men in Liberia’s hinterland had found an outlet
for their ambitions by attacking neighbouring villages or tribes. However, this was not a clear case of
history repeating itself. The chaotic battles that characterised Liberia during the 1990s displayed
certain similarities to the past, but simultaneously put an end to other traditions. For example, the rite
of passage from boyhood to manhood (poroh) often could not be performed, because the jungle,
where it had to take place, had become too dangerous. Many male children thus joined the fighting
without initiation or a mandate from their elders. In addition, warlords sometimes manipulated the
poroh. The new status that a firearm gave these young men all but destroyed their traditional respect
for their elders, which was still one of the most important social ties in Africa. Thus, not only the
Liberian state, but also Liberian society, swiftly disintegrated as a result of the fighting. This
disintegration often penetrated to the most basic social unit, that of the family.

The conflict in Liberia seemed interminable, perpetuated as it was by the laws of the economy of
violence. Hundreds of thousands of refugees crossed into neighbouring countries, and even the
warring parties did not remain exclusively on Liberian territory. Taylor drew neighbouring Sierra
Leone into the fighting, partly to capture the country’s diamond fields (which were contiguous with
Liberia’s diamond fields and even richer), and partly to put pressure on the Sierra Leonean government to end its participation in ECOMOG. The spillover of the Liberian conflict into Sierra Leone would have fatal consequences for this small country (see next section).

Attempts were nevertheless made to contain or even end the fighting. Under pressure from Western countries, which had established an international contact group for Liberia, and from ECOMOG, the parties negotiated with each other from time to time and even established ceasefires. These never lasted, however, because the rewards of violence were too great for the fighters, and the lack of trust between the Nigerian leadership and Taylor, in particular, too deep.

This changed when General Sani Abacha came to power in Nigeria in 1993. The new military government wanted to put an end to Nigeria’s substantial involvement in the fighting in Liberia and was therefore willing to strike a deal with Taylor. In Abuja, the parties this time concluded a peace agreement that would last. Under international supervision, Liberia held presidential elections, in which the rebel leaders were allowed to participate. Showing striking pragmatism, an overwhelming majority of Liberians voted for the man who, in practical terms, was already in control of the country: Charles Taylor. This shocked the West, which not only regarded Taylor as the main instigator of the violence that had consumed Liberia for years, but also believed that the presidency should not end up in the hands of the country’s worst criminal. It was clear to all concerned, however, that the only way to end the fighting in Liberia was to install Taylor as president. The wandering warlord thus finally settled down, but without abandoning his raids in Sierra Leone. Taylor’s ongoing armed incursions into a neighbouring country led the UN Security Council to impose sanctions on Liberia. Relations between the Taylor regime and the rest of the world remained tense.

Nor had peace been fully restored to Taylor’s own country. Taylor quickly moved to eliminate all threats to his government. Rough handling awaited political opponents who did not escape the country in time. Oppression was the order of the day. It was only a matter of time before rebel groups (mostly consisting of fighters from earlier episodes of the Liberian wars) took up arms against the dictator. Liberia became the scene of renewed and sometimes heavy fighting, especially from 2002 onwards (diagram VII). The country’s internal power struggle had international ramifications; it was one of the major factors destabilising the neighbouring country of Ivory Coast.
Diagram VII: The end of the Taylor regime in Liberia

International actors

International ties of the elites

National elites
(many factions) foreign (African) elites

local warlords

Domestic ties of the elites

General population
(many factions) foreign (African) factions
In 2003, the fighting again reached the centre of the capital, Monrovia. Taylor was forced to give up the presidency and accepted asylum in Nigeria. ECOWAS peacekeepers returned to Liberia and the country’s political parties and rebel groups negotiated a settlement providing for a new, interim government. However, the international community had lost any confidence that Liberia could handle the situation on its own. The UN prepared to dispatch peacekeepers and play a large part in rebuilding the ravaged country.

g) Sierra Leone and the tragedy of Africa’s youth

The war in Liberia is often mentioned in the same breath as the war in neighbouring Sierra Leone, and with good reason. In Sierra Leone, where fighting continued almost throughout the 1990s, violence also corroded the foundations of the state and society. Like Liberia, Sierra Leone experienced the combination of a corrupt government that pursued bad policies, an economic recession, widespread unemployment, frustrated youth, rich mineral resources (again diamonds, to which any party could as a rule help itself) and readily available light weapons. More important, however, was Sierra Leone’s location, right next to Liberia, as well as the porous border between them, which let through rebels, weapons and diamonds. Sierra Leone, only about half the size of Liberia, could easily be destabilised by its larger neighbour. This was exactly what the Liberian warlord Charles Taylor had in mind when he sent NPFL units across the border in 1991.

The attack on Sierra Leone’s government combined Liberian and Sierra Leonean elements. The Liberians belonged to Taylor’s NPFL, while the Sierra Leoneans had their own resistance movement, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which had been established by young people, most of them students, in the capital of Freetown. Disheartened by the lack of prospects and angered by the government’s negative role, they had developed an ideology of their own at political gatherings during the 1970s. Interestingly enough, this ideology was not based on the socialism of the Eastern Bloc, but had its own unique, rather brutal features.

Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya served as a source of inspiration. Revolutionaries from Sierra Leone always attended the yearly festivities surrounding his Green Book. Towards the end of the 1980s, thirty-five of them received military training in the Libyan city of Benghazi. Most of the members of this group later refrained from participating in the armed struggle in Sierra Leone, but the leadership of the RUF nevertheless consisted entirely of individuals who had been trained in Libya. Their assessment of the situation in Sierra Leone was simple: the country had immense wealth as a result of its ample supply of natural resources, but its riches were controlled by a small group (including many traders of Lebanese descent) that held all the political power. That had to change, but the time for talking was over. In the view of the RUF leadership, the solution to the country’s political and economic problems was to be found in an explosion of destructive violence.

The RUF was true to its principles. In 1991, in emulation of the rapid success of the NPFL’s invasion of the Nimba region, it invaded a remote corner of Sierra Leone where the population was also heavily opposed to the government. However, the population was not as enthusiastic as it might have been about joining the uprising. Political opposition to the government could not be translated automatically into armed support for the RUF’s destructive ideology. Large-scale recruitment was only possible among the unemployed and disadvantaged youth, which included boys and girls. These ‘lumpen youth’, who came from the capital of Freetown as well as the diamond fields in the interior, began to form the core of the RUF. Despite their lack of training and discipline, or perhaps because of it, they managed to force the government into a corner and destabilise the whole of society, just as their leaders had planned.

The military responded with a coup d’état in 1992. Young officers from the front in the interior of the country formed a new government, which took over the resistance movement with renewed zeal. However, the military had difficulty replenishing its ranks with new soldiers. In fact, it was only possible to recruit from the above-mentioned group of rootless young people, as a result of which the government forces quickly became known for perpetrating the same atrocities as the RUF. Ordinary, often somewhat older civilians therefore wanted nothing more to do with either side and organised armed units for their own defence, which quickly became a third party to the conflict. Foreign soldiers also participated in the fighting. Neighbouring Guinea sent troops to assist the government in
Freetown, and ECOMOG dispatched a Nigerian battalion from Liberia to prevent the ECOMOG forces in Liberia from being attacked from Sierra Leone. The military situation was extremely complicated, especially along the border with Liberia, but in essence the entire country had descended into chaos.

This did not alter the fact that the RUF’s success was limited at first. In 1992, the movement was driven almost entirely out of the country. It only managed to survive in a few camps along the border with Liberia, where it decided to change its military strategy. The leadership was forced to admit that the RUF was too weak to carry out a successful frontal military attack and opted for a guerrilla strategy of hit and run. Starting from the camps along the border, the movement established a network of small bases from which it could cover the entire country. Between 1994 and 1997, the RUF operated in this manner throughout Sierra Leone, without possessing real military power. The young fighters made a name for themselves by kidnapping, abducting and mutilating people on a massive scale. Thousands of civilians had their hands or feet chopped off. In this manner, the leadership of the RUF managed to strike terror into the hearts of the population. As a result, in spite of its military weakness, the movement was considered important enough to participate in the innumerable peace talks that were held to determine the country’s fate.

Militarily, the RUF was defeated after the government purchased the assistance of a South African private security company known as Executive Outcomes. A few hundred of the company’s highly skilled mercenaries trained the military in antiguerrilla tactics, provided logistical support with their own helicopters and supplied valuable information on the enemy’s actions with their modern communications equipment. Even more significant, perhaps, was the increasing power of the population’s own self-defence groups. In some areas, these groups cooperated with government forces, but in other areas they were able to maintain security on their own. A guerrilla army can only triumph when the population is sympathetic to its cause. The RUF never managed to win the hearts of the people.

In spite of the terror, the country remained more or less in one piece. It even managed to hold elections, which were won by a civilian, Ahmad Kabbah. President Kabbah’s first priority was to implement the Abidjan Agreement, which had been concluded under pressure from the ECOWAS countries and the rest of the international community. The agreement included a ceasefire, the disarmament of the RUF’s rebels and the transformation of the movement into a legitimate political party that would participate in governing the country; in essence, it was thus a power-sharing arrangement.

The peace agreement came to nothing. The RUF groups refused to disarm, and the government forces likewise failed to cooperate. The leaders of both parties may have been willing to end the fighting – though that was actually rather doubtful in the case of the RUF – but the thousands of young people who did the actual fighting were not. These young people, in both the RUF and the government forces, had nothing to gain from peace. Their lives depended on the conflict. Under normal circumstances, they would be unable to acquire what they obtained by plundering, and their status, which was based on their firearms and knives, would immediately disappear. Violence enabled them to command respect, or so they believed, and respect was something they would be deprived of in peacetime. Under pressure from these thousands of young people who wished to continue the fighting, a number of army units carried out a new coup d’état, a bloody one this time. President Kabbah managed to escape across the border.

This was too much for the numerous countries that were working on resolving the conflict in Sierra Leone. Nigeria was determined to triumph, and the ECOMOG troops intervened forcefully, liberating Freetown and enabling the return of President Kabbah. In 1999, a new peace agreement was concluded, this time in Lomé. The leader of the RUF, Foday Sankoh, joined the government and settled in Freetown. To ensure that the agreement would be observed, the United Nations deployed UNAMSIL, a force of 17,000. It was the largest peacekeeping operation in the world at that time and the largest ever in Africa.

Once again, however, the agreement ran into significant practical problems. The fighters still refused to disarm, with all that entailed for the country’s security. After a year, only a quarter of all weapons had been surrendered. The young fighters made life extremely difficult for the peacekeepers; for example, they denied the United Nations entry to the diamond fields in the interior of the country.
In 2000, they even abducted a few hundred UN soldiers, who were later released, and heavy fighting erupted once again in the capital of Freetown. Until mid-2001, peace in Sierra Leone depended on the ability of the civilian population and the international community (United Nations, ECOMOG and aid organisations) to provide a counterweight to the desire of the young combatants on both sides to continue fighting. Britain, itself a former colonial power, dispatched several hundred marines to assist the government. As a result of substantial international support, in particular the effective British military contribution, the peace process eventually gained the upper hand.

The fate of Sierra Leone’s young people is the most harrowing example of the tragedy of Africa’s youth. Born into a world without prospects, they were caught up in a cycle of violence from which there was no escape. It was kill or be killed. Ordinary human values no longer applied to them. Abduction, torture and mutilation, such as the severing of hands, were part of their everyday experience. Drugs stilled their hunger and enabled them to live this kind of life day after day. Desertion was not an option, given the fear and hate they had already inspired. Young fighters who turned their backs on the RUF and fled the fighting would be executed for treason by their former comrades or, if they managed to evade them, shot in retribution by government soldiers or what in normal times would have been ordinary civilians. Return to a more or less normal way of life was impossible, as such a thing no longer existed in Sierra Leone. The conflict had to continue, with only a distant hope that one day, for whatever reason, it would come to an end.

Despite its rich supply of mineral resources, Sierra Leone has from time immemorial been one of the poorest countries in the world, by some measures the very poorest. The violence of the 1990s destroyed whatever material wealth there had been. More importantly, perhaps, it destroyed the country’s social structure. The self-defence groups that formed all over the country demonstrated the resilience of society, but were also an expression of the fact that all other forms of social organisation had disappeared. By the end of the twentieth century, Sierra Leone had totally disintegrated. Although from that point onwards things could only improve, almost nobody even dared to imagine a brighter future. As a result of the fighting, life expectancy in Sierra Leone had dropped below thirty and, according to one estimate, was no higher than twenty-six, making it the lowest in the world.

In early 2002, after the British and the UN had brought a degree of stability to the country, peace was officially declared. A few months later, elections took place and were won easily by President Kabbah. Britain made a commitment to financially support the country’s government for ten years, in the hope that this would restore international confidence in the country and attract foreign investment. In order to put its horrific past to rest, Sierra Leone set up a Truth and Reconciliation Commission. For the individuals bearing greatest responsibility for the atrocities, however, a Special Court was set up with both Sierra Leonean and international staff. The court produced some spectacular indictments, including one for RUF leader Foday Sankoh (who died in prison soon after) and one for the Liberian president, Charles Taylor (who had to flee Liberia and accept asylum in Nigeria). After order was restored, Sierra Leone could make rapid progress. However, being located in the middle of a highly unstable region, it was dependent on continued support from the international community, especially the British.

h) Proliferation of light weapons

Violence in Africa since the end of the Cold War, in particular the continuing violence within states, cannot be separated from the proliferation of weapons, especially light weapons. These are weapons that can be easily used or transported by individuals and small groups, such as rifles, handguns, hand grenades, mines and shoulder-mounted rocket launchers. Light weapons are easy to purchase, transport, use, maintain, repair and conceal. The best-known weapon of this kind is probably the AK-47 automatic rifle, also known as the Kalashnikov, tens of thousands of which can be found in Africa. In practice, however, ordinary tools and appliances must also be regarded as light weapons. In the region of the Great Lakes, in particular, many people have been killed with machetes, which are essentially agricultural tools (see chapter 6).

The word ‘light’ refers to the usual size of such weapons, rather than their potential in combat. An automatic rifle can fire hundreds of bullets a minute. Almost anyone could carry and use
these compact weapons, even women and children, and that fact made them potentially full participants in hostilities. Male children, in particular, opted to fight, some even before reaching the age of ten.

In theory, anyone could purchase and use these weapons. Prices were low due to the abundant supply. In Uganda and Burundi, a Kalashnikov cost no more than a chicken. In Kenya, which was not flooded with weapons to the same extent, the same rifle was more expensive, but hardly unaffordable: the same price as a goat. In Angola, finally, a rifle cost as much as a sack of grain, or about fifteen dollars. Once a group obtained weapons, it could use them to acquire more weapons. Control of natural resources also opened up plenty of opportunities to purchase weapons. In the mid-1990s, for example, the Angolan resistance movement UNITA is said to have spent almost half a billion dollars, which it raised from the sale of diamonds, on light weapons and ammunition on the black market.

Light weapons played a crucial part in the disintegration of quite a few African societies. Liberia and Sierra Leone are the best examples of this, but the conflicts in Angola, Somalia and around the Great Lakes were also dominated by light weapons. This represented a significant change from the Cold War period, when warring parties in Africa, often governments or clearly recognisable resistance movements, received their weapons from the superpowers of the day and their allies. At that time, conflicts were the result of decisions at government level, and weapons were simply a means to carry out those decisions.

All that changed after the Cold War. The government was no longer the dominant actor, but just one of the players in a cast that also included armed factions, militias, gangs and clans. During the 1990s, the relatively orderly arms trade of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, run by centres of power in the global North, made way for a more diffuse arms trade, which could be traced to numerous countries around the world, in so far as it did not manage to conceal its origins entirely. The general availability of weapons was the final proof that the states concerned had lost their monopoly on violence. The termination of the violent conflicts that ensued thus required the cooperation of many parties, but most armed groups proved to have little interest in ceasefires and peace agreements. Light weapons provided power, status and a means to survive. In this sense, weapons were no longer just instruments of combat, but became a driving force behind Africa’s conflicts.

It grew increasingly difficult to put an end to the scattered intrastate violence, which was often low intensity, but could flare up at any time. Agreements were only significant if they provided for the collection and destruction of weapons, but in practice this often proved the most difficult aspect to implement. Handing over weapons meant handing over power, with all the uncertainties that entailed for the lives of the owners. Young fighters preferred to hide their weapons, so that they could take them up again if the need presented itself. Furthermore, it was often less expensive for the military to give away weapons than to store or destroy them safely. Even after political problems had been resolved, it remained almost impossible to deal with the many weapons in circulation and, by extension, the threat they posed to social order. Furthermore, the weapons hardly ever stopped working and were easy to repair if they did. Their life expectancy was long, often longer than that of their users.

The violence that consumed Africa in the 1990s would never have flared up as it did, if not for the waning of state power and the above-mentioned changes in the nature of the arms trade. Almost all conflicts were fought mainly with light weapons. This applied in particular to conflicts in areas with mineral resources such as gold and diamonds for the plundering. In addition, many countries went through local conflicts of one kind or another, which were also fought with light weapons. Almost ninety per cent of fatalities resulted from these weapons. Most of the victims were civilians, including many women and children. This was in part because fighting could flare up in any location and the distinction between combatants and non-combatants was often difficult to make.

Light weapons also played a significant part in the large-scale conflict in Central Africa, which involved the regular forces of various states as well as several nongovernmental armed groups. In that conflict, however, it became clear that the greater the role of national authorities, the larger the weapons that appeared on the front. Around the Great Lakes, all available means were thrown into battle, from machetes to combat aircraft. A similar development took place in the conflicts in Sudan and Angola. In contrast, the new war between Ethiopia and Eritrea, which lasted from 1998 to 2000,
was the only real war between states (see chapter 6, section d), and it was therefore predominantly fought in a conventional manner; in other words, with standard military weaponry, ranging from automatic weapons to tanks and combat aircraft.

Where did this flood of weapons come from? Weapons such as machetes, which under normal circumstances have a different function, were obviously readily available, but began to be used for violent purposes once the fighting erupted. Other, ‘real’ weapons often came from elsewhere in Africa, either from the scene of a previous conflict (for example, the Mozambican civil war) or from the arms depots of foreign armed forces. As for the origin of the weapons, in other words, the countries where they were manufactured, Africa’s role was very limited. Only South Africa has a significant, long-standing weapons industry of its own, which has remained in operation since the abolition of apartheid. South Africa currently supplies weapons to several African countries. In addition, Zimbabwe, Uganda and Kenya launched their own, if limited, weapons production programmes during in 1990s.

Central and Eastern European countries have been the main source of weapons for Africa. Their stockpiles had become superfluous, initially because of the disarmament treaties concluded in the final years of the Cold War and then as a result of the end of the East-West conflict. The new NATO member states were also obliged to standardise their arsenals, which made more weapons superfluous. Many of these weapons – not just light weapons, but also aircraft and tanks – ended up in Africa. Destroying them would have been expensive, while selling them – legally or otherwise – could actually raise some money. Hungary, Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and, in particular, Bulgaria carried on a lively trade. For many years, Bulgaria supplied weapons to almost all the warring parties in Africa, sometimes even to different sides in the same conflict. In the above-mentioned countries, most of the companies involved were state-owned enterprises that had recently been privatised. The ringleaders often set up their own businesses to organise arms exports to third countries. This makes the arms trade very difficult to trace, all the more so because it is characterised by circuitous supply routes, false export licences, false invoices and false or missing end-user certificates. In fact, China is one of the few countries that openly supplies large quantities of weapons to African conflict areas.

Due to the weakened position of African states, the arms trade with and within Africa is no longer predominantly a national issue. Individuals and non-state groups have now become the key players. Intermediaries, often ex-soldiers or former members of Eastern Bloc security services, also play a vital role. For them, wars are lucrative events that should be prolonged as long as possible. Not surprisingly, the private arms trade pays even less heed than governments to international measures aimed at preventing arms sales to certain groups, governments or countries. Countries subject to arms embargoes have thus been able to obtain weapons without much difficulty.

In spite of these serious problems, various international actors, including both countries and organisations, have remained actively involved in arms issues. Their multifaceted approach involves monitoring the production of weapons more effectively, limiting the arms trade and subjecting it to stricter controls, encouraging a transition from military production to non-military activities, laying down stricter codes of conduct, imposing arms embargoes in conflict areas, buying up surplus weapons and destroying them, limiting the availability of ammunition and so forth. In Africa, the regional organisations ECOWAS (in West Africa) and SADC (in Southern Africa) have made a particular effort to tackle arms issues in their regions.

Since 1998, the member states of the European Union have adhered to a code of conduct on arms exports, which provides that they may not authorise the sale of weapons that may cause or prolong violent conflicts or exacerbate existing tensions in the country of final destination. As early as 1991, the United Nations established a global arms register that was meant to list all transfers of conventional weapons. In practice, however, the register did not achieve very much in Africa, because many governments, of both arms-exporting states and the African states that purchased the weapons, failed to report their transactions. And obviously, the entire illegal arms trade went unreported. The arms register thus only provided a very partial picture of the African arms trade. Only a small number of countries, among them the member states of the European Union, report all their arms exports to the UN register.
i) Disintegration and violence in perspective

In many African countries, society began more or less to break down after the end of the Cold War; in other words, there was a decline in social cohesion. In the governmental and administrative area, this decline was visible throughout most of the continent. The current chapter has referred to this process as the phenomenon of state failure. Instead of moving forward, most modern African states have gone into stagnation or even degenerated, causing significant problems for their societies. A few examples have been discussed in this chapter. In some countries, the breakdown was not limited to institutional structures, but permeated all areas of society, including the most fundamental level of all, that of the family and the everyday lives of ordinary people. However, disintegration that severe was always accompanied by violent conflict, as in the cases of Somalia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Sudan and Angola.

It is therefore important to re-examine the relationship between state failure and the outbreak of violent conflict. If all over Africa states fail, should we not expect to find fighting and chaos all over the continent as well?

Examination of the countries discussed in this chapter suggests that the above-mentioned relationship is, at the very least, not a direct one. Violence does not inevitably erupt in a failing state, but there is a greater chance that it will, because failing states are generally unable to maintain their monopoly on violence and to resolve political disputes or other domestic problems peacefully. However, violence did not erupt in many weak African states, and society continued to function there, despite poor governance. In cases where violence did erupt, there was usually another factor that ignited the conflict.

For example, the many failings of the Liberian state may have facilitated the country’s civil war, but they were not the immediate cause of the conflict. In fact, on the eve of Samuel Doe’s coup d’état in 1980, Liberia was not a particularly weak state. The outbreak of the war in Sierra Leone was similarly not the result of extreme weakness, but was largely due to the country’s geographic location alongside Liberia.

The conflicts in Liberia and Sierra Leone highlight the extent to which rich natural resources can perpetuate conflict. As the state weakens, natural resources, instead of forming a source of wealth that can be used for development, become a liability than can ignite and prolong hostilities. The impact of economic resources on Africa has differed from the European experience, in which states often plundered other states’ resources. In order to do so successfully, they needed to build domestic unity, and attempts to capture foreign resources thus promoted state formation at home. In Africa, however, subnational groups generally plundered their own country’s resources, which hindered state formation.

Other factors also left African society vulnerable to outbreaks of violence after the Cold War. The widespread availability of light weapons, in particular, was discussed in the previous section. In addition, the combination of rapid population growth and a poor socioeconomic outlook was an important factor. All over Africa, large groups of young people saw little or no prospect of improvement in their own countries. At the same time, however, the mass media showed them that living conditions were far better elsewhere in the world. This understandably generated considerable frustration, which sometimes led to violence.

The last significant factor in this context is the ethnic diversity of African societies, which provided politicians with an opportunity to manipulate and strengthen subnational loyalties. Politicians in trouble could always attempt to maintain or strengthen their authority by inciting ethnic conflict.

The total disintegration of the state and society in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone gave rise to dire predictions about Africa’s future. Robert Kaplan’s warning of ‘the coming anarchy’ is the best-known example. Disintegration nevertheless appeared to have its limits. In particular, it did not automatically lead to violent conflict. In fact, its consequences were not exclusively negative. The loss of social cohesion also made it possible to adopt new forms of organisation, whether formal (for example, through democratisation) or informal (for example, by establishing networks using new technologies). This provided young people with a chance to extricate themselves from overly restrictive social networks. Even the emergence of new social conflicts was not necessarily a bad thing, as such conflicts are an inevitable element of social change.
Disintegration thus has both positive and negative aspects. It is almost impossible to control politically, whether in Africa or in a broader international context, and attempts to influence the process therefore generally focus on preventing or reversing its negative side effects. State failure is currently addressed by promoting democratisation, institution-building and good governance, alongside efforts to prevent or resolve violent conflict. In practice, these policy approaches, which are still relatively new, have had great difficulty producing results. Experiences in the field of conflict prevention have been particularly disappointing. There are many reasons for this. For instance, many countries only invest significant political capital in ending a conflict after blood has already been spilled; in other words, when it is already too late to find a peaceful solution. By this time, economies of violence have already built up their own momentum, and the initial violence and casualties have created an atmosphere that is no longer conducive to peaceful resolution. The last section of chapter 6 discusses international conflict prevention in greater detail.

African countries have become more involved in African conflicts, in both positive and negative ways. They have become quicker to intervene in each other’s affairs, even to the point of exporting violence. From the 1970s onwards, the ties between the elites in different countries became stronger, at least in West Africa (diagram VIII). These ties, based on common economic interests, were often made official through marriages between presidential families. The British historian Stephen Ellis has even compared the networks connecting West African rulers to the marital ties connecting the royal houses of Europe during the eighteenth century. These efforts to strengthen regional ties can be regarded as an expression of the waning power of the African rulers. Lacking support from their own people, the elites had continued to rely on international support. But when aid from the West dried up after the Cold War, African rulers were forced to seek allies closer to home, in their own regions. Some leaders, especially in Nigeria, exploited this situation to strengthen their own influence in the region.
Diagram VIII: Linkages between elites

International actors

International ties of the elites

National elites
(sometimes many factions) foreign (African) elites

Domestic ties of the elites

General population
The above-mentioned networks were not limited to official rulers, but also included rebel leaders and warlords. In Charles Taylor’s days as a warlord in Liberia, for example, he already belonged to a network that included Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso. His capture of the Liberian presidency a few years later was symbolic of the ever fuzzier distinction between roving bandits and presidents, as the latter could increasingly be regarded as stationary bandits. In fact, even more traditional rulers such as President Mugabe of Zimbabwe had often been warlords of a kind, but in a different international environment. Mugabe acknowledged international borders, but only because this was obviously in his interests, since it brought in official international aid and allowed Zimbabwe to hold onto its seat at the United Nations. This situation changed in the 1990s. African governments began to intervene in the affairs of other states, and warlords had a chance to spread their wings. Weak yet rich, Congo was as attractive a target as it had been a century earlier, and its many neighbours plunged into the country on a massive scale. Some sought to profit from the situation in Congo, while others actually sought to prevent them from doing so. Whatever the political motive, however, Congo’s riches were looted from all sides.

But intervention in other countries’ affairs had another face: African regional organisations branched out into matters of peace and security. The ECOMOG operation in Liberia, initiated by ECOWAS, was the first of its kind. Although it should be judged generously as an initial attempt by African countries to take responsibility for peace on their own continent, the ECOMOG operation also highlighted the weaknesses of this approach. In particular, the peacekeeping force was a tool of the Nigerian military leadership, which used the troops to secure its own, predominantly economic, interests in the region. Moreover, ECOMOG provided a true reflection of its member countries, characterised as it was by mixed political, military and economic motives, corruption, excessive force, poor discipline, occasional cruelty and, more generally, disorganisation and ineffectiveness.

International efforts to prevent conflict could not stop violence from erupting in Africa. In fact, the final years of the twentieth century saw the outbreak of the largest African war of the century, if not of all African history. Although the intensity of the violence was limited and no major battles took place, the fighting involved the whole of Central Africa, as well as parts of Southern Africa, East Africa and the Horn of Africa. The reason for this remarkable geographic spread was the situation in Central Africa, which managed to combine all the aforementioned determinants of conflict: a large failed state (Zaire/Congo), rich mineral resources, socioeconomic malaise, an abundant supply of light weapons, frustrated youth, a faltering process of democratisation, foreign intervention and mounting ethnic tension. The Congo war had a hellish prelude in the small country of Rwanda.

1 Fatton, Predatory Rule.
2 Reno introduced the concept of the shadow state in Corruption and State Politics in Sierra Leone.
3 Young and Turner, The Rise and Decline of the Zairean State, p. 82.
4 In the words of Belgian journalist Colette Braeckman, quoted by Dutch journalist Dirk Vlasblom in the Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad, 17 October 1998, p. 35.
5 This was also the country’s official name between 1964 and 1971.
6 See the list of Kabila’s family members in positions of power in: International Crisis Group, Scramble for the Congo: Anatomy of an Ugly war, pp. 49-50.
7 International Crisis Group, Scramble for the Congo: Anatomy of an Ugly War, p. 47.
8 Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs memorandum on conflict management, p. 16.
9 See Olsen, ‘Dictatorship, democracy, and development’ for an interesting survey on roving versus stationary bandits.
12 Clapman, Africa and the International System, p. 70.
13 Bayart, Ellis and Hibou, The Criminalization of the State in Africa.
For the classic description of the *poroh*, see: Dr Paul Julien, *Kampvuren langs de evenaar (Campfires along the Equator)*, pp. 107-127.

Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy*.

Abdullah and Muana, *The Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone*, pp. 177-179.


Bootsman, *De herkomst en financiering van wapens in het Grote Meren conflict* (The Origins and Financing of Weapons in the Great Lakes Conflict).

Paul Collier, director of the Development Economics Research Group (DECRG) at the World Bank, has emphasised this issue; see the World Bank report *Economic Causes of Civil Conflict and their Implications for Policy*.

Kaplan, *The Coming Anarchy*.

Signer, ‘Falen wordt je vergeven, succes niet’ (‘Failure can be forgiven, but not success’), in the Dutch newspaper *Trouw*, 30 November 2002; Polman, ‘De vloek van het netwerk’ (‘The curse of the system’), in the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad*, 20 December 2002, p. 27.

Ellis, *The Mask of Anarchy* and ‘Liberia’s warlord insurgency’.

Van Walraven, *The Pretence of Peace-keeping*.