

In hot pursuit: Resource wars in Africa

Written by Marina Reyskens, Consultancy Africa Intelligence
Thursday, 24 November 2011 05:42



For centuries conflict and resources have been intrinsically interlinked.(2) In the present era, the fight for resources continues to be a feature of contemporary conflict. Most notable are the resource wars in African countries – both in the past, as well as the present day. With its diversity and abundance of resources, Africa is seen as a resource-rich continent – which has repeatedly suffered from exploitation, as well as a number of conflicts as a result of this.

Those nations that are heavily dependent on resource exports are 20 times more likely to “suffer from a civil war” than non-dependant countries.(3) It has been estimated that between 1965 and 1999, in the most severe civil wars, “almost all [were] driven by greed to control resources.”(4) Furthermore, to fully understand the situation in the African case specifically, this discussion will investigate why “resources threaten African’s security while they are potentially the source of its strength.”(5) To comprehend exactly why resource wars are so pronounced on the African continent, it is necessary to explain and discuss exactly what resource wars are, the reasons why they occur, as well as the consequences of these conflicts, with reference to specific examples.

Contextualising resource wars

In this discussion, it is appropriate to define resource wars as an “armed conflict waged to control valuable natural resources.”(6) Evidently, this definition shows that the control of natural resources is the most important factor in these conflicts. As one will see in the case studies in subsequent sections of this discussion, power and control for resources between Government leaders, foreign companies, and rebel groups remain the chief driving force in explaining resource wars. Owing to the nature of resource wars, they are a security issue and threat – both domestically and internationally.

Some trends can be identified in African resource wars. First, plundering of resources can prolong and exacerbate conflicts – even if they were not the root motivation for the conflict to originally occur.(7) Second, in some cases, the presence of strategic resources was a direct trigger for Governments and warlords to engage in violence.(8) Third, owing to the increasing scarcity of natural resources, major world powers have been known to either intervene in resource-rich countries or support the repressive Government in order to “secure ‘their’ supplies” of resources.(9) Therefore, global demand and industrialisation fuels the problem and

opens the door to the illegal exploitation of natural resources. Thus, the means of procurement has contributed to making highly-sought after resources a lucrative business.

In order to answer the question of why some countries are more susceptible to resource conflicts than others, one must discuss the importance of various economic and political factors that play a role. For example, some countries' economies are more dependent on resources than others. Other countries are plagued by weak Governments, which perpetuate corruption and illegal activities.(10) For example, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Nigeria, and Sudan all have "long histories of coups [and] military rule."(11) Typically, organised crime, corrupt Governments, and the military are involved in the competition and conflict of Africa's resources.(12) Additionally, "resource dependence tends to [negatively] influence Governments."(13) As a result, they will become more vulnerable to conflict.

However, it must be emphasised that resources are "never the only source of a conflict."(14) Rather, a combination of other factors and events play major roles. Nevertheless, the presence of natural resources renders a country more likely to experience conflict of some sort.(15) For example, if a country is more dependent on mineral exports, it is more likely to experience high rates of poverty.(16)

Conversely, it is known that poverty increases if a country has a centralised economy (more resource-dependant).(17) However, it is of great importance to point out that merely the abundance of resources does not automatically mean a country will suffer from poverty. The presence of strong (transparent) governance, suitable infrastructure, and management is required for a country to prosper from its resources. In other words, coupled with weak governance, corruption and feeble infrastructure, a resource-rich country is more likely to suffer from exploitation and conflict over resources.

An interesting example of a country with strategic resources that has not fallen into conflict is South Africa. With 75% and 73% of global manganese and platinum reserves respectively, it is an important commodity-rich country.(18) Additionally, both Namibia and Botswana are rich in diamonds, yet they have not experienced conflict over resources. This can mainly be attributed to their stable economies and relatively strong Governments.(19) Therefore, it can be argued that it is generally those resource-rich countries with weak, repressive Governments, and fragile, centralised economies that "descend into chaos," as a result of competition over resources.(20)

The 'resource curse'

A paradox exists when discussing resource curses in Africa. The paradox is that Africa – with its abundance of resources – remains poor, as the profits from the extraction of minerals and oil are not properly managed by Governments, while profits from resources, when properly managed, can enable economic growth and facilitate poverty reduction. This can be defined as the "paradox of plenty,"(21) or the resource curse: resource-rich countries have much lower degrees of development and higher degrees of severe poverty. A perpetual cycle can also be identified, as "resource exploitation fuels war, and war facilitates continued exploitation."(22) Indeed, "Africa bleeds because of its abundant wealth."(23)

Oil: The significance of black gold

To understand what drives these conflicts, it is important to discuss the most prominent resources with particular strategic significance. In general, conflict-prone resources consist largely of coltan, diamonds, gold, oil, and timber.(24)

In hot pursuit: Resource wars in Africa

Written by Marina Reyskens, Consultancy Africa Intelligence
Thursday, 24 November 2011 05:42

One of the most controversial resources is that of oil. This has been described as the “fluid, dark foundation upon which many of the world’s conflicts have been based.”(25) Energy – particularly oil – “plays a crucial role in Western economies,” specifically in the commercial, industrial, and transport sectors.(26) As such, oil is oftentimes referred to as ‘black gold,’ due to its significant value. This lucrative industry is thus subjected to enormous international influence – from countries, stakeholders, and multi-national corporations alike.

It is estimated that Africa accounts for about 12% of global oil production.(27) The majority of Africa’s oil is extracted from the Gulf of Guinea in countries such as Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Nigeria, as well as in the North African region.(28) It is significant to note that Angola, Cameroon, Chad, the DRC, Nigeria, and Sudan – all major African oil producers – have each experienced some type of conflict in recent years.(29)

As many Western nations require oil to be imported, “energy security” has become an important aspect of states’ foreign policies; for example, that of the United States.(30) In particular, the United States has been the leader in securing their “energy security” by, for example, engaging in strategic partnerships with oil-producing countries in order to ensure American allocations of oil.(31) Although Western powers have generally concentrated their oil interests in the Middle East, Africa has continued to gain recognition as an oil-rich continent.(32) However, weak governance, mismanagement, continued conflict, poverty, and corrupt leadership is more often associated with oil in Africa than with wealth.(33)

Sudan’s dubious oil extraction methods have had “an adverse influence on [the] conflict.”(34) For example, during the early 1980s, corrupt activities of President Jaafar Mohammad al-Nimeiri included means to purposefully alter Sudan’s state boundaries in order to ensure that the North “would have access to future oil earnings.”(35) When the Civil War resurfaced in later years, the continued corruption to “capture oil reserves” aggravated and worsened the conflict in the Sudan.(36) It is significant to mention that the majority of oil reserves lie in South Sudan.(37) North Sudan, as well as the Sudan People’s Liberation Army (SPLA), have repeatedly tried to gain access to this oil, with frequent clashes occurring. For example, the SPLA frequently attacked construction workers in the mid-1990s when the oil pipeline was being built from the southern regions to the north. Owing to the oil reserves being situated in the South, this could serve to aggravate future tensions in the two countries.

The role of diamonds

Diamonds are also particularly susceptible to become involved in conflict, as they are easily smuggled across Africa’s notoriously weak borders.(38) In addition, illegal or ‘blood’ diamonds often become mixed with legal ones whilst being traded. The fact that these ‘blood’ diamonds are often used to directly fund or support dictatorship systems in Africa contributes to the contentious nature of the diamond industry. The Western world’s fondness for diamonds as an over-valued object of wealth and beauty fuels the problem. Demand for diamonds is high and many diamond-trading companies are too interested in maintaining high profits from their lucrative sales to be concerned with the manner in which these minerals are obtained. Coupled with a “lack of transparency... and inadequate customs regulations,”(39) diamonds are one of the most contentious resources in African conflicts.

When one discusses conflict and diamonds it is imperative to take note of the way these resources are extracted. In addition, controversy over the way in which diamond profits are distributed, as well as the manner in which locals are involved in both the decisions of mining companies and the means of extraction are all important issues.(40) It is due to these reasons

that diamonds remain a controversial resource.

The trade of these so-called ‘blood diamonds,’ as well as their role in being used to support conflicts in various African countries, prompted an international response – known as the Kimberley Process Certification Scheme.(41) It was launched in 2003, and its main aim is to prevent trading in conflict or ‘blood’ diamonds. In essence, the Kimberley Process requires the compulsory certification of diamonds by Governments to ensure that they were not obtained from conflict zones.(42) Legislation and enforcements are also included in order to control the trade of diamonds.

Together with diamonds, Africa is also particularly abundant in chromium, cobalt, gold, and platinum deposits.(43) Although perhaps not as prominent as that of water – a resource and much sought-after commodity, which has the potential to “become the fuel” for conflict, owing to its importance in daily life.(44) Competition for water resources tends to involve a number of neighbouring states, as rivers often run through multiple countries. In this competition, states often monopolise on their fertile locations and control the flow of water into other countries.(45) By doing so, these monopolies serve to fuel tension between competing states. For example, the countries, where these water sources, have their origins “tend to try and gain the most control over the water” – such as along the Nile.(46)

The Angolan civil war

Although not the direct cause to the conflict in Angola (1975-2002), “resource-driven greed and corruption proved to be powerful fuel for its continuation.”(47) Corruption was rife during the civil war, as Government and rebel leaders frequently pocketed the revenues from foreign exports of Angolan diamonds and oil.(48) Needless to say, the local population did not benefit from this income and instead suffered in misery and desperation, whilst experiencing the displacement of approximately four million people.(49) Moreover, both diamonds and oil were used to purchase illicit arms and fund rebel groups in Angola – at the expense of the population.(50) Therefore, one sees how the Angolan civil war was associated with lucrative commodities.(51)

The Central African Republic (CAR)

Poverty and armed conflict are characterising features of the diamond mines in the Central African Republic (CAR).(52) Control of the CAR’s diamond sector is heavily controlled by President François Bozizé. For example, the 12% export tax on diamonds “makes smuggling worthwhile and fosters illicit trading networks that deprive the state of much needed revenue.”(53) CAR is rich in diamonds, but has historically been the victim of colonial and modern exploitation. However, approximately 90,000 unlicensed miners illegally extract diamonds, whilst foreign multi-national corporations reap the rewards, leaving the locals in poverty.(54) In addition, rebel groups frequently sell diamonds illegally, as well as receive funding from these illicit sales.(55)

The Democratic Republic of the Congo and Liberia

Like many African countries, Liberia has experienced corruption in the highest levels of its political system. Perhaps the most apt example of this corruption is that of Liberia’s former president, Charles Taylor, who sold oil resource rights to foreign companies, only to keep the revenues for himself.(59) Taylor also became notorious for illegally using diamonds and timber to support the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), as well as militia and rebel groups in the civil war in Sierra Leone.(60)

The case of Nigeria

The oil-rich Delta region of Nigeria is, in particular, plagued with political instability, weak governance, and continuous conflict, which only serves to aggravate the situation.(61) Conflict in Nigeria is worsened by competition for oil – both between multi-national corporations and the Nigerian Government.(62) As a result, fish stocks have been negatively affected, mostly due to the regular oil spills and leakages from the pipelines in the Niger Delta.(63) Furthermore, Nigeria's wetland areas have also been damaged.

In addition, frequent disruptions – such as insurgent attacks on oil pipelines by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) – characterise the Niger Delta.(64) Besides having an effect on short-term oil supply, market stability is also negatively affected as a result.(65) Oil theft is also extremely common and is then sold illicitly. In order to protect their oil, militia and rebel groups have been known to kill people in the Niger Delta, again, most frequently by MEND.(66) Evidently, this total disregard for human lives has led to African conflicts being some of the most bloodied.

Consequences of resource wars

Evidently, the consequences of any type of war destabilises countries and cause widespread devastation on multiple levels. Resource wars are no different and experience extensive negative effects as a result of ongoing conflict. In countries where the benefits of resource exploitation such as those of oil extraction and mining have only profited foreign companies and corrupt elites, the local populations habitually suffer from social, political, and economic problems. More often than not, this is the case in African countries.

Extracting natural resources has the ability to produce substantial profits.(67) However, these profits are often taken advantage of by rebel groups who steal and sell natural resources in illicit markets to fund their activities.(68) Indeed, many African rebel groups – as well as corrupt Governments – receive funding from the illicit trading of resources.(69) Here, the situation in the Central African Republic and the civil war in Liberia are appropriate examples to refer to.

Concluding remarks

Owing to the abundance of strategic resources, Africa can be viewed as having the capacity to become a key leader with great potential as a resource power.(70) However, in order for this to be realised, resource-rich African countries need to “effectively own and control” their resources.(71) The reality is that Africa is the victim of external competition. As long as competition, greed, and power exist in the global system, Western powers – as well as African countries themselves – will continue to see conflicts for the world's resources.

NOTES:

Consultancy Africa Intelligence (CAI) is a South African-based research and strategy firm with a focus on social, health, political and economic trends and developments in Africa. CAI releases a wide range of African-focused discussion papers on a regular basis, produces various fortnightly and monthly subscription-based reports, and offers clients cutting-edge tailored research services to meet all African-related intelligence needs. For more information, see <http://www.consultancyafrica.com>

(1) Contact Marina Reyskens through Consultancy Africa Intelligence's Conflict & Terrorism Unit (conflict.terrorism@consultancyafrica.com).

In hot pursuit: Resource wars in Africa

Written by Marina Reyskens, Consultancy Africa Intelligence
Thursday, 24 November 2011 05:42

- (2) Abigail Ofori-Amoah, 'Water wars and international conflict', University of Wisconsin International Environmental Problems and Policy Centre, Spring 2004, <http://academic.evergreen.edu>.
- (3) 'Natural resources, governance and civil war', SEEN Environmental Learning information sheet, No. 4: pp.1-5.
- (4) William K. Tabb, 'Resource wars', Monthly Review, 1 January 2007, <http://monthlyreview.org>.
- (5) Mwesiga Baregu, 'Resource wars threaten Africa', The Citizen, 13 September 2011, <http://www.thecitizen.co.tz>
- (6) Le Billon, P., 'The Political economy of resource wars', Alexander Hamilton Institute, 2000, <http://www.alexanderhamiltoninstitute.org>.
- (7) Michael Renner, 'Natural resources and conflict: a Deadly relationship', USA Today, July 2003, <http://www.usatoday.com>.
- (8) Ibid.
- (9) Ibid.
- (10) Michael Renner, 'Natural resources and conflict: a Deadly relationship', USA Today, July 2003, <http://www.usatoday.com>.
- (11) William K. Tabb, 'Resource wars', Monthly Review, 1 January 2007, <http://monthlyreview.org>.
- (12) 'Natural resources, governance and civil war', SEEN Environmental Learning information sheet, No. 4: pp.1-5.
- (13) Ross, M., 15 August 2003. Natural resources and civil war: An overview. World Bank Research Observer, pp.1-37.
- (14) Ibid.
- (15) Ibid.
- (16) Ibid.
- (17) 'Natural resources, governance and civil war', SEEN Environmental Learning information sheet, No. 4: pp.1-5.
- (18) Mwesiga Baregu, 'Resource wars threaten Africa', The Citizen, 13 September 2011, <http://www.thecitizen.co.tz>.
- (19) Ibid.
- (20) Ibid.
- (21) 'Natural resources, governance and civil war', SEEN Environmental Learning information sheet, No. 4: pp.1-5.
- (22) Ibid.
- (23) William K. Tabb, 'Resource wars', Monthly Review, 1 January 2007, <http://monthlyreview.org>.
- (24) Ross, M., 15 August 2003. Natural resources and civil war: An overview. World Bank Research Observer, pp.1-37.
- (25) Gonzalez, A., 2010. Petroleum and its impact on three wars in Africa: Angola, Nigeria and Sudan. Journal of Peace, Conflict and Development, 16: pp.58-86.
- (26) Watson, D.C., 2010. Does the pursuit of energy security drive resources wars in Africa? The Niger Delta in the energy security nexus. POLIS Journal, 4: pp.1-41.
- (27) Ibid.
- (28) Ibid.
- (29) Ibid.

In hot pursuit: Resource wars in Africa

Written by Marina Reyskens, Consultancy Africa Intelligence
Thursday, 24 November 2011 05:42

- (30) Ibid.
- (31) Ibid.
- (32) Ibid.
- (33) Ibid.
- (34) Patey, L.A., 2007. State rules: oil companies and armed conflict in Sudan. *Third World Quarterly*, 28(5): pp.1-19.
- (35) Ibid.
- (36) Ibid.
- (37) Ross, M., 5 June 2002. Oil, drugs and diamonds: How do natural resources vary in their impact on civil war? *International Peace Academy*, pp.1-39.
- (38) Michael Renner, 'Natural resources and conflict: a Deadly relationship', *USA Today*, July 2003, <http://www.usatoday.com>.
- (39) Ibid.
- (40) Heidi Felt, 'Natural resources and conflict', Heinrich Böel Stiftung, <http://www.boell.de>.
- (41) Ibid.
- (42) Ibid.
- (43) Mwesiga Baregu, 'Resource wars threaten Africa', *The Citizen*, 13 September 2011, <http://www.thecitizen.co.tz>.
- (44) Abigail Ofori-Amoah, 'Water wars and international conflict', University of Wisconsin International Environmental Problems and Policy Centre, Spring 2004, <http://academic.evergreen.edu>.
- (45) Ibid.
- (46) Ibid.
- (47) Michael Renner, 'Natural resources and conflict: a Deadly relationship', *USA Today*, July 2003, <http://www.usatoday.com>.
- (48) Ibid.
- (49) Ibid.
- (50) 'Natural resources, governance and civil war', SEEN Environmental Learning information sheet, No. 4: pp.1-5.
- (51) Watson, D.C., 2010. Does the pursuit of energy security drive resources wars in Africa? The Niger Delta in the energy security nexus. *POLIS Journal*, 4: pp.1-41.
- (52) 'Dangerous little stones: diamonds in the Central African Republic', *International Crisis Group Africa Report*, No. 167, 16 December 2010, pp.1-36.
- (53) Ibid.
- (54) Ibid.
- (55) Ibid.
- (56) 'Natural resources, governance and civil war', SEEN Environmental Learning information sheet, No. 4: pp.1-5.
- (57) Ibid.
- (58) Ibid.
- (59) William K. Tabb, 'Resource wars', *Monthly Review*, 1 January 2007, <http://monthlyreview.org>.
- (60) Ibid.
- (61) Watson, D.C., 2010. Does the pursuit of energy security drive resources wars in Africa? The Niger Delta in the energy security nexus. *POLIS Journal*, 4: pp.1-41.
- (62) Gonzalez, A., 2010. Petroleum and its impact on three wars in Africa: Angola, Nigeria and

In hot pursuit: Resource wars in Africa

Written by Marina Reyskens, Consultancy Africa Intelligence
Thursday, 24 November 2011 05:42

Sudan. *Journal of Peace, Conflict and Development*, 16: pp.58-86.

(63) Michael Renner, 'Natural resources and conflict: a Deadly relationship', *USA Today*, July 2003, <http://www.usatoday.com>.

(64) Watson, D.C., 2010. Does the pursuit of energy security drive resources wars in Africa? The Niger Delta in the energy security nexus. *POLIS Journal*, 4: pp.1-41.

(65) *Ibid.*

(66) William K. Tabb, 'Resource wars', *Monthly Review*, 1 January 2007, <http://monthlyreview.org>.

(67) Ross, M., 15 August 2003. Natural resources and civil war: An overview, *World Bank Research Observer*, pp.1-37.

(68) *Ibid.*

(69) Michael Renner, 'Natural resources and conflict: a Deadly relationship', *USA Today*, July 2003, <http://www.usatoday.com>.

(70) William K. Tabb, 'Resource wars', *Monthly Review*, 1 January 2007, <http://monthlyreview.org>.

(71) *Ibid.*