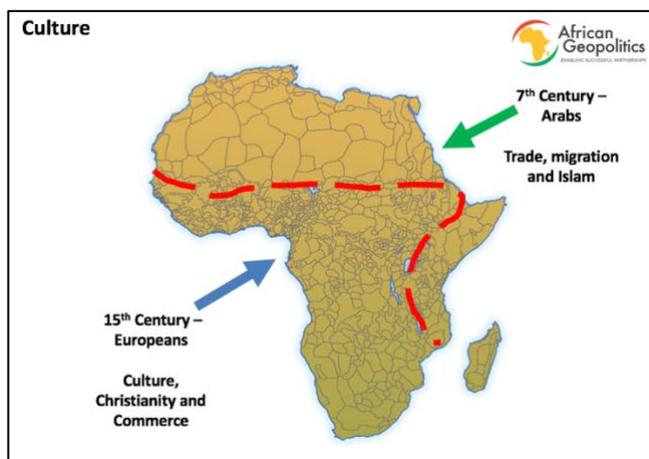


Conflict in the Sahel: The elephant in the room

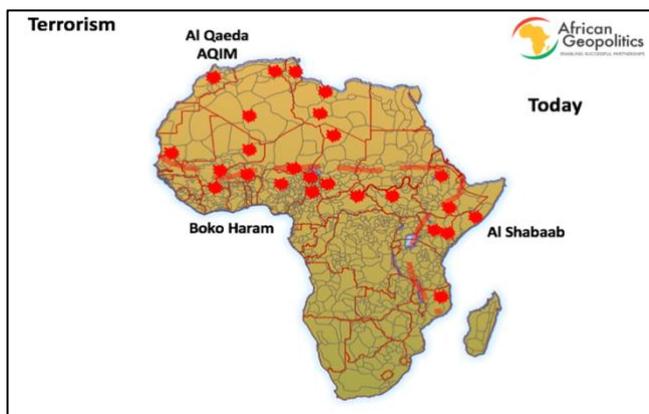
Conflict in its many forms is “the elephant in the room”. Everyone is aware of it, but few in our industry are willing to debate it in public, even with the recent murderous events directly affecting our personnel and our commercial activities.



Historical foreign political and religious influences on the many ethnic groups on the African continent

and ecological regions, but also of contrast in the social, political and economic makeup of the human communities in that region, irrespective of colonially imposed and often arbitrarily demarcated national and state borders.

This contrast, exacerbated by the historical events of Arab and European colonialism brought different political and religious influences and led to inequalities between ethnic groups.



A “mish-mash” of ethnic communities and artificial states stamped by the historical influence of colonialism; sites of recent unrest shown in red

The negative effects that conflict can have on our projects is obvious but consideration is seldom given to the effects on the well-being of the ordinary African or of the detrimental effects on the development of his or her country. As individuals or corporations, we can do more to engage in a meaningful manner with the African states that host us to see what can be done to eradicate “conflict” or at least mitigate its effects.

The panel session was introduced through a historical review by **Max de Vietri** of **African Geopolitics** who pointed out the importance of the southern edge of the Sahara, the Sahel, as an interface not only of contrasting climatic

This inequality fed feelings of “greed and grievances” which incited increasing unrest over the centuries. It evolved over time up to today, from the occasional street protests in stronger nation states, to the creation of fundamentalist cells in divided societies and government overthrows in weak states, to countries being torn apart.

At all levels of conflict activity in many states of Africa, this instability is accompanied by acts of banditry, trafficking of arms, drugs and people which African elites and their foreign contacts, especially benefit.

The most feared by our industry is kidnapping.

The objective of the panel discussion was to focus on the problem of conflict that affects all stakeholders and not just our own industry and to attempt to come to an understanding that could lead to remedial steps.



African Geopolitics' Max de Vietri chaired the "Conflict in the Sahel" panel discussion. Participants included from (left to right): John Welborn (CEO of Resolute Mining Ltd), Seth Appiah-Mensah (a former UN Peacekeeper and researcher in International Relations at UWA), Bertrand Montembault (Senior Lawyer with Herbert Smith Freehills), David Kamara (African Professionals Australia), Muhammad Dan Suleiman (Research Fellow at UWA, HE Bello Hussein, High Commissioner to Australia for Nigeria).

John Welborn representing the mining industry foreign investor and corporate world in the Sahel with a profit-driven but nevertheless socially-conscientious approach, acknowledged that "conflict situations" represented a major risk to foreign investment and therefore economic and social progress in the region.

For him, conflict needed to be considered and closely monitored, but as an underground miner it is not the only risk that keeps him awake at night. He emphasised that Resolute Mining, similar to most Australian companies operating in the Sahel, operates strictly in accordance with the Voluntary Principles on Security and Human Rights. These principles guide companies on how to manage risk, provide a platform for mutual learning and problem solving, and ultimately provide a platform for greater tolerance and understanding.

John emphasised that these principals place the primary responsibility for Security on the host government and the effective local police force and military. He indicated that miners see security as a risk to be managed and while they are active in supporting local communities, acknowledged that miners did not see an immediate responsibility to

influence regional and national aspects of conflict mitigation, and that miners strongly rely on cooperation with the host national government.

He stressed that his in-country team worked closely with the local community, and emphasized that mining companies operating in Africa have an essential responsibility to recognise the importance of the host national government as a significant stakeholder and that a collaborative partnership model is required.

Seth Appiah-Mensah approached the question of conflict from a political and military viewpoint. He was questioned on the successes of UN and AU peacekeeping missions. He cited Sierra Leone and Liberia as examples of well-completed peacekeeping missions. However, CAR, Mali and DRC still have tens of thousands of peacekeepers and yet conflicts in these countries continue. In terms of “success”, the impact of supranational peacekeeping forces in a conflict situation is, of course, intangible, as one cannot know what would have happened if they had not been present, nor what happens once they have departed.

He viewed conflicts from a supranational viewpoint, acknowledging that conflict situations were often very “complex”. He emphasised that international peacekeepers provide a conducive environment for peacemaking and peacebuilding processes to take root so that domestic stakeholders are able to sustain the peace once peacekeepers have departed.

The litmus test is thus continuing peace once peacekeepers have gone.

To this end, he called on Australia to join like-minded countries to provide troops and police, as well as training and assisting with high-end technical capabilities, for the local forces to do their job.

Bertrand Montebault had a more careful legalist’s approach to conflict, as the discussion touched sensitive examples of Herbert Smith Freehills’ tasks in the Sahel and conflict situations.

Bertrand spoke about the controversial nature of ransom payments and the legal complexities surrounding them. He also touched on the disagreements that exist within the international community with regards to the payment or non-payment of a ransom. He suggested that the legality of paying a ransom would depend on the laws that apply to a particular company. If the person demanding a ransom is classified as a terrorist or is subject to restrictive measures or sanctions under US, UK or EU laws the payment of a ransom to such a person could amount to indirect terror financing.

A DFAT representative noted that the Australian Government was concerned about security threats to Australians in Africa, especially but not limited to kidnappings. Since January 2016, there had been 11 kidnap cases globally involving 15 individuals, including three cases in West Africa. The Government’s “no-ransom” policy meant that the Government would not pay ransoms. Ransom payments to terrorist groups were illegal under Australian law as an extraterritorial offence and no-one was exempt, including private security firms and insurance providers.

David Kamara’s socio-economic approach reflected a very real concern for the ordinary youths in the rural regions as well as in the streets of the sprawling cities of Africa. His first comment was on the problem of poverty, touched on a little earlier by John Welborn and in Ex-President Obasanjo’s speech the evening before. Obasanjo had spoken of the prospect of 50 million disaffected youths

swelling the unemployment pool each year which by mid-century in their struggle for survival, would threaten the stability of European states to the north and beyond.

David spoke of there being more than “disaffected youth” to the incidence of conflict.

Many causes and resulting effects could be identified for conflict incidents in the Sahel but he simplified it down to a “Fire triangle”. He likened conflict to an uncontrollable fire, a situation needing fuel, oxygen for combustion and an ignition source. To David, militant ideologies and evident socio-economic inequalities were the “oxygen” and “fuel” for marginalised people to want to rebel. “Ignition” was provided by the arms and weapons that have increasingly become available to them from various sources.

With some 950 million small arms and light weapons in circulation in the world and a further 90 million manufactured each year, David made a plea for much stricter controls on weapons manufacturers and the international distribution of their dangerous products.

He emphasised the need for strategic engagement by elites for shifting mindsets from adverse unproven and accepted beliefs to ethical behaviour and discipline, laying the foundations for a peaceful and progressive society. This engagement calls for government elites to lead with good governance, accountability, and the reduction of power distance to their citizens. It is a matter of “being beacons of moral and ethical behaviour and giving example to the shadows they cast”.

On a leading question by the moderator on the dichotomy of Islam in Africa and the threat of militant radicalisation of Muslims by an imported brand of the religion, **Muhammad Dan Suleiman**, an academic and Research Fellow at UWA, gave a passionate contribution on the religious aspect of conflict in the Sahel.

A heated discussion with Professor Samuel Makinda ensued concerning the root of militant Islam, with very differing views expressed on the influences of different factions of Islam, of various influential players and importantly of the influence of Saudi Arabia and Wahhabism. At that point, the discussion went into an ideological disagreement, but was brought back to the present by a Somali participant in the audience.

The heated argument showed that there isn’t consensus, even among Muslims, as to how the destructive conflict environment in the Sahel had arisen or evolved and that the situation was extremely complicated.

In its roots, Islam was agreed to be a “political” religion, just as Christianity universally had been and continues to be in certain parts of the world. Fundamentalism is just an extreme expression of keeping to the roots of these two religions. Islam does not profess to ask its followers to “turn the other cheek” with injustices but teaches that true social justice is “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. Terrorism is not however, part of the religion and is an abhorrent manipulation by certain radical individuals and militant Islamic factions in their search for power.

Many people may carry “pat” answers to terrorism, but the debate again showed that the situation is much too complicated to lay the blame on any one person or event, let alone any one ideology.

On considering the social, political and economic impacts of the activities of radical groups in his country, **His Excellency Bello Hussein** gave multiple reasons for the understanding of conflict situations in the Niger Delta and north-eastern regions of his country.

He spoke about the ethnic, religious and economic differences that have contributed to so many conflicts not only in Nigeria, but most African countries. Discovery of economic reserves of oil and gas in 1958, had led to the neglect of a nascent mining industry in the central states and of an emerging cattle raising industry in the north of Nigeria.

Enticing mining companies into his country is the purpose of the strong participation of the Nigerian delegation at ADU, as the present Nigerian administration is focused on diversifying the economy away from oil and gas into the mining, agriculture and tourism sectors. Some fourteen Australian explorers and several soon-to-be miners are already in the country, but many more are needed if the mineral sector is to become a significant contributor to the Nigerian economy.

The issue of security is also one of the key agenda items of the present Nigerian administration and positive results – in spite of sensational news stories - have been recorded tackling the issue of insecurity created by insurgency in the north-east. The Nigerian Government has been able to bring the issue of Boko Haram under control and normalcy is gradually returning to the affected areas in the north-eastern part of the country. The multinational joint task force (MNJTF) efforts of Nigeria and other neighbouring countries has also helped to yield a significant result.

Peace and good governance would certainly open the country to investment and development with its unrealised and potentially enormous mineral potential.

In a closing statement, **Eve Howell**, Senior Adviser with African Geopolitics addressed the issue of conflict for the mining industry and Australia’s role in mitigating some of the sources of conflict.



Eve Howell, African Geopolitics Senior Adviser giving the closing statement

“We must help make sure that, in the communities, the young people find gainful activities and employment and don’t become fodder to terrorist groups who want to turn them into thieves, traffickers, arsonists and murderers.

We can also help shape policies and organise programs of national education and training to get marginalised and fringe groups in African countries to become part of their national development. Australia does some of that through scholarship programs, but we can do a lot more.

The mining industry should lobby Australian politicians to show greater and direct interest in Africa and in the Sahel to begin with, where it already has a small but significantly growing economic interest and in actively and directly involving itself diplomatically and politically with African countries to a level where Australia’s role in helping end conflict is recognised on the international stage.”

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