
Burundi on the Brink

Burundi on the Brink 1993–95

A UN Special Envoy Reflects
on Preventive Diplomacy

Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah

Preface by Olusegun Obasanjo



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To the innocent people of Burundi:
May they help their leaders escape from their deadly and
self-defeating game

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FOREWORD

Diplomacy, to paraphrase Oscar Wilde, is rarely pure and never simple. Diplomats are routinely expected to perform within complex and unpredictable environments, juggling principles and exigencies as they conjure personal influence and political leverage out of very limited resources. Yet even the most seasoned negotiator or mediator might well have declined the diplomatic role that Ambassador Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah accepted in 1993.

Ould-Abdallah arrived in Burundi in November of 1993 as the newly appointed special representative of the UN secretary-general for that country. He landed in a country that by all evidence was teetering on the brink of full-scale ethnic conflict. Burundi's history since achieving independence from Belgian colonial rule in 1962 had been punctuated by mass violence, one-party rule, and deepening hostility among the country's regions, clans, and Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups. Six months before Ould-Abdallah arrived, Burundi had tried to embrace democracy. The country succeeded in electing its first Hutu president, but in October of 1993 that president had been killed in an attempted coup that in turn had provoked violence and counterviolence throughout the country. Between 50,000 and 100,000 lives were lost during October and November of that year. Neighboring Rwanda was similarly afflicted; indeed, more or less the entire Great Lakes region was wracked by violence and instability. Into this situation stepped Ould-Abdallah, his mission being no less than to restore democratic institutions, facilitate

dialogue between opposing parties, establish a commission of inquiry into the recent massacres, and work closely with the Organization of African Unity. To achieve these goals, he had a staff of two, the (recently tarnished) credibility of the United Nations, and very little else.

As for the rest of the story, I will leave it to the reader to discover in the following chapters exactly how Ould-Abdallah went about his job and with what results. Suffice it to say here that in his two years in Burundi he did not—could not—transform the country into a model of democratic tolerance and governance, but he *did* persuade and cajole the politicians into patching up the existing democratic institutions and signing a power-sharing agreement. And though he did not end or reverse the tide of violence, he did help to prevent Burundi from following the course of genocidal violence that wracked neighboring Rwanda or from exploding into all-out civil war. These were not modest achievements!

While I don't want to dwell on the details of the challenges confronting Ambassador Ould-Abdallah—he explores them in his own account, which follows—I do want to emphasize one of the critical resources with which he tackled those challenges. That resource—and it seems to have been his single-most effective tool—was Ahmedou himself. Obligated to work in the context of a political system distorted by rumor, terror, and ruthless personal ambition, he nonetheless earned a reputation for personal integrity, honesty, and sympathy for the people of Burundi. His leadership skills included the ability to decipher hidden agendas and unravel labyrinthine deceptions, and to deal not infrequently with unscrupulous political godfathers. And his moral courage was matched by physical courage—as indeed, it needed to be, for he was not merely threatened with assassination but actually ambushed twice on the streets of the capital, Bujumbura.

At the same time, as this book reveals, Ould-Abdallah exhibited a keen and clear sense of pragmatism. When occasion demanded, he would assert all the authority (and perhaps even a little more) given to him by his mandate. When confronted with the prospect of another coup or more violence, he would threaten to expose unsavory details of the personal lives of would-be troublemakers. Throughout his two-year tenure as special representative, he drew on whatever meagre resources

were at hand to encourage short-term accommodation among the competing political factions and long-term reconciliation between the fearful ethnic groups. He worked closely with the diplomatic community in the capital; he solicited financial help and intelligence briefings from foreign governments; he sought to ensure that the work of nongovernmental organizations complemented his own efforts; he persuaded foreign dignitaries and celebrities to visit Burundi and voice support for the peace process.

His level of commitment was exceptional. As he notes in this book, "In my mind, my *mission*—the word is totally appropriate—had, it could be said, a spiritual dimension."

Not surprisingly, such dedication and firmness of purpose brought Ambassador Ould-Abdallah into conflict with individuals with very different agendas. Some of those who opposed or criticized his work did so from base motives: personal enrichment or career advancement, the pursuit of power for its own sake, a pathological attachment to violence. Some others, however, had nobler objectives and criticized Ould-Abdallah's approach because they believed it would not bring peace to Burundi. For instance, whereas Ould-Abdallah sought to keep extremists on the margins of the peace process, others argued that they should be included.

Burundi on the Brink is, thus, by no means an uncontroversial account of Burundi's plight and of the response to it by the international community. As the reader will discover, Ould-Abdallah as an author displays the same frankness and firmness of opinion that he showed as a special representative. This is not, nor is it intended to be, a dispassionate, scholarly study. And neither I—nor, I'm sure, the author—would want the reader to regard this volume as offering a complete picture of Burundi in the 1990s or of the possibilities of preventive diplomacy in general.

Instead, this volume offers a personal, thoughtful, and refreshingly forthright account of what it was like to be on the frontline of preventive diplomacy in the Great Lakes region in the mid-1990s. As such, it is an important addition to the limited number of firsthand accounts of preventive diplomacy in action. It will also surely become required reading for anyone interested in Burundi's recent past and in its prospects for a more stable, democratic, and peaceful future.

For these reasons, *Burundi on the Brink* more than justifies its publication within our Perspectives Series, which the United States Institute of Peace launched in 1992 to give readers the opportunity to hear strong, sometimes controversial, always considered opinions on important issues in the field of international conflict and conflict resolution.

The Institute's support for this volume dates back to 1996, when our Grant Program awarded Ambassador Ould-Abdallah a grant to write this book. That grant was part of a broad effort by the Institute to promote and disseminate research on efforts to reach a peaceful resolution of African conflicts. The variety of work we have supported may be gauged from the titles of some of books we have published over the past few years: *Angola's Last Best Chance for Peace*, by Paul Hare; *Elections and Conflict Management in Africa*, edited by Timothy Sisk and Andrew Reynolds; *Mozambique: UN Peacekeeping in Action*, by Richard Syngé; *Somalia: The Missed Opportunities*, by Mohamed Sahnoun; *African Conflict Resolution*, edited by David Smock and Chester Crocker; *State Building and Democracy in Southern Africa*, by Pierre du Toit; and *Somalia and Operation Restore Hope*, by John Hirsch and Robert Oakley. In addition, several Peaceworks reports have focused on Africa: *Removing Barricades in Somalia*, by Hussein Adam, Richard Ford, et al.; *Preventing Genocide in Burundi*, by Stephen Weissman; and *Creative Approaches to Managing Conflict in Africa*, edited by David Smock, as have several recent Special Reports: *Angola's Deadly War*, by John Prendergast; and *Postgenocidal Reconciliation: Building Peace in Rwanda and Burundi* and *Putting Humpty Dumpy Together: Reconstructing Peace in the Congo*, both by Prendergast and Smock.

The Institute has been equally supportive of work that examines the various tools and approaches—including, of course, preventive diplomacy—employed to resolve conflicts not just in Africa but throughout the world. Recent Institute books on these subjects include two volumes, *Herding Cats: Multiparty Mediation in a Complex World* and *Managing Global Chaos*, edited by Chester Crocker, Fen Osler Hampson, and Pamela Aall; *Coercive Inducement and the Containment of International Crises*, by Donald Daniel and Bradd Hayes, with Chantal de Jonge Oudraat; *Peacemaking in International Conflict*, edited by I. William Zartman and Lewis Rasmussen; and *Preventing Violent Conflicts*, by Michael Lund.

To its list of publications, the Institute is very pleased to add *Burundi on the Brink*. Illuminating, thought-provoking, and timely, Ambassador Ould-Abdallah's reflections on Burundi seem certain to enhance our understanding of the practice of preventive diplomacy in the most demanding of circumstances.

Richard H. Solomon, President
United States Institute of Peace

PREFACE

Olusegun Obasanjo
President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria

The 1990s opened in Africa with great euphoria, for what we called “the winds of democracy” were blowing throughout our continent. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the rebirth of democracy in Central and Eastern Europe raised our hopes that our own rigid political systems and inefficient, state-run economies would also collapse. Their crumbling, so we thought, would open a new era of tolerant regimes paving the way to democracy. I was personally very optimistic and became committed to and actively involved in the battle for democracy in Africa. Inspired by the Helsinki peace process, which helped to lessen tensions and to promote human rights, I worked through the Africa Leadership Forum with the Organization of African Unity and the Economic Commission for Africa for the evolution of the Conference on Security, Stability, Development, and Cooperation in African (CSSDCA) in 1991 in Kampala, Uganda. Its main objective was to facilitate the liberalization of our political systems and to advance our economic progress through collective security, cooperation, and integration. Many friends, Africans and non-Africans, individuals and institutions, joined and supported these efforts. We all were determined that, this time, Africa should not miss the new opportunities brought in by this “second independence”—a reference to the “first political independence” gained thirty years earlier from colonial powers.

The strong belief that the Cold War’s end would lead to the widely anticipated “New World Order” was reinforced by the easing of tensions between the great powers and even the beginnings of cooperation between them. But while we welcomed early democratic gains in many parts of Africa and the weakening of the apartheid system, we were taken

aback by the eruption of violent conflicts in many countries—Somalia, Rwanda, Liberia, and Burundi, to mention only the African ones—and by the continuance of wars in Angola and Sudan. These conflicts were bizarre in the sense that they were purely domestic conflicts and lacked any apparent external ideological backing. Disappointing and very costly, these civil conflicts were also bizarre in the sense that they were not regarded by the big states as threats to international peace and security, to the balance of power, to efforts to stem the proliferation of arms, or to global trade. To Africans, they constituted and continue to constitute a great disaster for our political, economic, and social development. Given the damages inflicted—in terms of deaths, refugees, internally displaced persons, and the destruction of infrastructure—they form a scourge on our body politic. Stopping, or better yet, preventing these internal conflicts from occurring at all or from deepening became the focus of the international community. It was also the concern of most Africans who were in positions to think about the issues.

It is in this context that my friend Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah of Mauritania was appointed the special representative of the UN secretary-general to Burundi in November 1993. Since its independence from Belgium in 1962, this Central African state has not been spared by violence and mass killings. In October 1993, its elected civilian president, Melchior Ndadaye, was assassinated during an attempted coup d'état. Mass killings followed in the countryside. The government was given protection by the French embassy, and most congressmen from the majority party went into hiding. Thousands of people took refuge in neighboring countries while others were displaced in camps within Burundi. It was a human and political disaster of serious proportions.

The UN special representative had a difficult mission: to restore the toppled democratic institutions and to foster dialogue between the different political parties and different ethnic groups. Preventive diplomacy—that was the special representative's real mission—was needed to save Burundi from plunging into total chaos.

The book, *Burundi on the Brink, 1993–95*, is an excellent account of that mission. The challenges were numerous, the resources few: limited staff and no funds, except those provided on a case-by-case basis by a few friendly governments; no troops to deter or exercise leverage; and, moreover, questionable institutional credibility, given the damage

done to the United Nations' reputation by the problems it had encountered in Somalia, Bosnia, and Rwanda.

The book describes how the special representative used many tools, traditional and modern, to carry out his difficult mission. Indeed, I myself was an enthusiastic and willing "diplomatic" tool, as I visited him twice in Burundi in 1994 and 1995.

As a former soldier, a former head of state of Nigeria, a promoter of democracy, and a member of the international civil society, I had important cards and a role to play in support of UN mediation in Burundi. To assess the situation, I visited many villages and camps within the country. Both the military establishment and the civilian political elite were keen and pleased to come to meet me in the UN premises. Hence, I was able to discuss the situation with them, advise them, and, when necessary, admonish them. In Africa, seniority gives one a number of rights that one should use when necessary. Of course, besides obtaining a firsthand view of this crisis, the main objective of my mission was to lend support and to strengthen the hand of Ould-Abdallah as the UN representative. I was pleased to hear that my two visits contributed to his efforts to prevent Burundi from following the genocidal course of its sister state, Rwanda. I was also made to understand that my visits had played a part in the establishment of a power-sharing government in September 1994. Maybe I was being given more credit than I deserved. I sometimes wonder, however, what could be done in a civil conflict when the parties are determined to ignore the virtues of dialogue and the need for reconciliation through give and take, to ignore the need to work for a great future that can be created only when conflict ceases.

In addition to giving an account of Ould-Abdallah's personal experience, this book has the great merit of drawing lessons for those who would be mediators and reconcilers in intricate civil conflicts.

Since the fall of Berlin Wall, democracy has made substantive gains in Africa. Those gains will be irreversible. Although most African countries are not at war, the domestic conflicts in many parts of the continent need to be resolved to help the continent move forward in a very competitive world—a goal embodied in the resolution of the Organization of African Unity in Algiers in 1999. Conflict prevention, conflict management, and peacekeeping are costly for those embroiled in conflicts and for the peacemakers. In Nigeria, we are aware of this but we will

continue to shoulder our share of the burden and to show solidarity with our fellow Africans, as we are doing presently in Sierra Leone, and as we just finished doing in Liberia. Whatever we do, we do it to be our brothers' keepers and in the interests of the international community.