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JAPAN INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

**INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON CONFLICT IN AFRICA AND A CULTURE
OF PEACE AND COEXISTENCE**

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**AN AFRICAN SOLUTION TO AN AFRICAN PROBLEM?
CULTURAL DIMENSIONS TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN AFRICA**

The end of the Cold War has brought about a long overdue positive change in the attitude of the international community toward conflicts in Africa. During the Cold War, these conflicts were addressed mostly under the limited angle of the rivalries and confrontations between superpowers. In addition, national sovereignty was at that time an unchallenged principle behind which oppression was accepted by major powers.

Today this attitude has generally relaxed or disappeared. African conflicts are seen more and more by the international community as problems to be solved by Africans themselves, or by a rejuvenated United Nations and other external actors, official and non-official. Furthermore, globalization and the strong emergence of civil societies have weakened the principle of sovereignty.

As requested by JIIA, I would like to be more specific and focus my presentation on the case of the conflict in Burundi.

Underlying Causes

There are many underlying causes to the conflict in Burundi: political and institutional unpreparedness for independence in 1962; bad governance and the impact of the one-party system with its culture of exclusion; overpopulation/poverty; contagion from the violence in Rwanda in 1959 and Congo in 1961; silence of the international community until the 1990s on the massacres.

Principal parties involved

Under an apparent ethnic dimension, the conflict is mostly of a political nature. Two political parties: the pro-independence UPRONA and the pro-Belgian CDP were competing for power. The UPRONA won with 80% of the

votes, but its leader was assassinated a few days later (October 1961); hence political killing became the rule as in Rwanda (1959) and Congo (February 1961). Soon, in 1965, ethnicity (Hutu/Tutsi) prevailed and the conflict moved within the army and later, between the army and Hutu civilians.

During this whole period, in Burundi, as in the rest of world, civil society organizations were weak and even non-existent. Moreover, the polarization of the population into two rival groups left no space for the civil society to act decisively for dialogue and reconciliation.

Characteristics of the Conflicts

a) Like in most civil conflicts, in Burundi the main characteristics of the crisis were: fear, rumors, hatred and blind violence sparing no elder, woman or child. The more the violence, the more hatred becomes rooted. Furthermore, the longer the conflict lasts, the more it leads to trafficking in drugs, ivory, arms and minerals, with economic considerations becoming stronger than the original political causes of the conflict.

b) The traditional Burundese culture of “wise men” or “bashingantaha” has been crushed by the one-party system. Consequently, the old way of solving disputes and conflicts has thus collapsed, especially in the cities. With time it could be revived.

c) The end of the Cold War has given greater role to national and international civil society. A culture of peace now has a chance to take root. Time, peace and resources are needed, and practitioners should however be cautious not to be manipulated by partisan groups acting as representatives of civil society.

African Solutions to African Problems

This idea is laudable and there is no dispute as to the need for African governments to be involved in the active search for solutions to the conflicts plaguing many countries. Africans should initiate and undertake actions to help manage civil wars, in particular the one raging across the Democratic Republic of the Congo. However, there is a role and a responsibility for others to support peace in Africa. “African solutions to African problems” should not be an exit strategy or a comfortable way for the international community to abdicate its responsibility.

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