



July 7, 2003, 7:39am

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"Africans roasting on an open fire"

Printed on Thursday, June 19, 2003 @ 00:06:03 CDT (🖨️)

By Paul Harris
YellowTimes.org Columnist (Canada)



(YellowTimes.org) – Since you care enough about the world around you to read YellowTimes.org, you owe it to yourselves to dig a little deeper into the news that does not get a lot of coverage in the mainstream press. For whatever reasons there might be, since there are big news stories occurring all over the globe that don't appear sexy enough or sellable enough to hold the attention of most mainstream media, we try to help fill that gap with our News From the Front section (NFTF.ORG).

If you are a reader of NFTF (and you should be), you will have seen some disturbing references to cannibalism in our coverage of the current situation in Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Ethnic violence is raging in the northeastern part of DRC and news reports have noted that one group, the Lendu, have made an occasional practice of killing, cooking, and eating some of their captured adversaries, the Hema. It is also said that both sides have done the same to Pygmies who are not actually in conflict with either of them.

Naturally, most of us will find this pretty repulsive and clear evidence of barbarism and a failure of these people to get beyond the stage of savagery in their evolution; indeed, we might even question whether they actually have evolved. Even those educated enough to know that most of us come from racial stock that at some time in its past conducted itself in the same way or with other equally barbarous practices, we still congratulate ourselves on our superiority over these savage "people," to use the term loosely.

This kind of cannibalism has its roots in the belief that the victor can absorb the strength of the vanquished by consuming their flesh. It arises out of the adrenaline rush of defeating someone in close combat and proving to yourself, and those around you, that you are strong and virile. This is, of course, one of the things missing from our new and improved modern warfare where we never even get close to the people we are killing; we can kill them from great distances and never have to give thought to whether we should later turn them into lunch.

But it may be that our abhorrence over the very idea of cannibalism is part of what allows us to completely ignore the neediest people on earth. DRC is but one of a score of central African nations where conditions are pathetically desperate due to warfare, famine, disease, water shortages, and pestilence. It

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probably also doesn't help that most of the world has some measure of disdain, at least, for black people.

Should we help? Well, there appears to be a great deal of passion on both sides of that debate and a huge amount of ambivalence in between. I am not trying to take a stab at U.S. President George Bush, but his recent actions are symptomatic of the world's attention span with regard to Africa. In June 2002, the leaders of the so-called G8 nations met in Kananaskis (in Canada) and Africa was high on the agenda owing to the persistence of Canada's Prime Minister in getting it there. From those meetings came the "G8 Africa Action Plan," a policy document hammered out by these eight nations regarding a continent which was not even at the table. Many would criticize the goals and the emptiness of this plan but at least somebody had finally noticed where 12 percent of the world's population calls home. The first opportunity for the G8 leaders to get together and revisit the issue came in June 2003, at Evian, France, home of the famous bottled water with the unfortunate name (if read backwards). Bush only stayed for a few hours and departed for a peace-making initiative in the Middle East. As important as that is, the Evian meeting had been scheduled for a year and there seems little reason to suspect that the Middle East initiative would have suffered from a couple of days of delay. However, Africa is simply not on Bush's radar and without the Americans at the table, the rest of the G8 don't have a lot to talk about.

There is little question that there are many guilty parties in Africa on whom blame can be laid for many of the continent's woes, starting with the Africans themselves. Virtually all African countries were at one time the colonial backyard of some European power and most have not fared particularly well since achieving their independence. They have suffered a series of military dictatorships, or puppet governments designed to serve the interests of some Western country. Rapacious economic policies forced upon them by Western nations have helped to keep them on the thin edge of total collapse. In addition, they have allowed themselves to fall into the clutches of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. As if the foregoing were not sufficient, of course, they seem to reel through a never-ending cycle of famine, drought, flooding, disease, plagues of locusts, etc.

Paul Harris is a writer whose work appears in *The Observer* in the United Kingdom; so far as I can tell, we are not the same guy. (It should be relatively easy to tell our work apart; because I am Canadian, we are both trained to write in the British fashion but my editor converts all my "Anglicisms" and my British spelling into the less elegant American style; the other Mr. Harris doesn't have to suffer these indignities. Not that I'm complaining...)

Mr. Harris, the English guy, wrote an excellent piece for *The Observer* in February 2003 commenting on what is wrong with Africa and how the world has long accepted some measure of guilt for something that is actually the fault of the Africans themselves. He certainly has the credentials to back up his perspective: four years of living and working as a journalist in Africa and spending time seeing twenty of its countries firsthand. It is a well thought out article and well articulated, but its conclusion is utterly wrong.

Harris writes: "The fact is that Africa is a tragic place.

Unbelievably tragic. It is racked by war, corruption, AIDS, famine and repression. Yet Africa's leaders do very little to alleviate this situation. And when they get the chance to take action against the obvious misrule of one of their number, they let him off the hook with platitudes and a pat on the back. Africa's political leaders -- with a tiny handful of exceptions -- are worthy of little but international contempt. They are a cozy men's club -- and they are ALL men -- whose members only look after their own." That seems like a fair assessment of most of Africa's leaders, although it is probably disingenuous to imply that much the same is not true of the leaders of countries worldwide.

In Harris's article, which appeared in *The Observer's* Worldview Extra section on February 16, 2003 under the title, "Africa's Tragedy," he iterates many examples of the buffoonery that appears so rampant in African leaders with the horrendous result that war upon war is fought over absolutely nothing; as a single example, a two-year war between Ethiopia and Eritrea over a stretch of utterly barren and arid border region that consumed more than 70,000 lives while preventing millions of dollars in much needed aid from reaching their starving populations -- just because two heads of state thought it would enhance their images as decisive leaders. Again, it is hard to dispute Mr. Harris's analysis of this situation.

But, to quote him again, he writes: "Of course, many people on the left and indeed African leaders themselves blame the disastrous situation that Africa is experiencing on the old evils of colonialism. African nations, they say, just weren't given the chance to develop naturally. Their borders are all wrong. They were drawn by colonial officials at European desks, with no mind to facts on the ground. That, of course, is true. The borders that define Africa are a reflection of colonial prejudice. But then again, whose job is it to change them? It is Africa's." Again, Harris has hit the nail on the head. The borders are all wrong, and it is up to Africa itself to attempt to amend them but surely he can't seriously propose that Africans should just get out a pencil and eraser and redraw those lines on the map -- mankind has fought thousands of years of wars over exactly that kind of issue. Imagine Europe just deciding to redraw all their boundaries -- with the best will in the world, wars would surely erupt.

The fact is that Africa was dealt a losing hand by the Europeans and it is doubtful they can ever recover from that on their own by any method other than nationalizing the resources and businesses within their various countries and closing their borders until they figure out how to feed themselves. Since Western interests will not wish to lose access to very lucrative African resources, it is pragmatic for Western nations to help the Africans solve their problems. Harris is saying, in essence, the Europeans messed this up but the Africans have to clean it up.

Harris goes on to say that non-African countries providing aid to Africa actually removes responsibility from African governments. "If the international community will feed a country's population, support its schools, and run its clinics, then the government does not have to. It can feel free to spend its cash on arms and self-enrichment." This is pretty close to advocating that starving and sick African children should be allowed to die until they have the gumption to grow up and throw off the shackles of their horrible leadership; this is a very easy thing to say from the comfort of the relative affluence of England.

There is a great deal of truth in Mr. Harris' article and he has assessed the history and the politics of the area very acutely and accurately. However, his conclusion is flawed. He writes: "But where [does this leave] Africa? Well, it would leave the continent exactly where it should be: with the Africans. Aid will not solve Africa's problems. Nor will the West. The only people who can solve the problems of Africa, who can change their leaders, who can end corruption, who can make Africa rich and educated, who can end the African wars, who can make Africa relevant again, are Africans themselves. It is time Africa started to take itself seriously."

He is right, to a point. Nevertheless, Africa cannot solve these problems on its own except by telling all Western nations and corporations to get the hell out and leave their assets behind. Unless the world wants that to happen, the world had better start helping Africans to throw off the residue of its colonial history and half a century or so of banana governments. This is not going to go away on its own. Further, if it is left in the hands of the Africans to resolve themselves, millions of people will die, lots of corrupt government officials will get filthy rich and their Western bankrollers will get even richer. Or -- and here is the ominous part -- the Africans will move to Cuban-style nationalization as their only defense against looming failure. Once again, if you corner someone and his only way out of the corner is over the top of you, guess which way he is going to go.

Since the United Nations has proved itself so ineffective in working with Africa, perhaps some of the nations who consider themselves to be progressive -- like Canada, the Scandinavian countries, several of the Western European countries -- can see their way clear to putting their money and their actions where they have long put their mouths.

[Paul Harris is self-employed as a consultant providing Canadian businesses with the tools and expertise to successfully reintegrate their sick or injured employees into the workplace. He has traveled extensively in what we arrogant North Americans refer to as "the Third World," and he believes that life is very much like a sewer: what you get out of it depends on what you put into it. Paul lives in Canada.]

Paul Harris encourages your comments: pharris@YellowTimes.org

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