

OPINION

Dedicated leadership needed for Africa's revival

EVEREST EKONG

Hunger, poverty, refugee problems still haunt continent

THESE are the best times for positive reform to take root in Africa. The Cold War has long defrosted, apartheid is dead, democracy is no longer a curse but a cure. Can Africans breathe easy? Not just yet.

The post-colonial, post-dictatorship, post-Cold War and post-apartheid Africa is in transit and in a void.

Essentially three different Africas have emerged from the long years of painful struggle: An Africa of displaced and poor people, one of emerging democracies, and one that is partially ready to embrace home-grown cross-border business.

The new breed of African leadership is therefore facing unprecedented challenges and opportunities as the continent struggles to find a viable direction. These issues will be addressed at the Eskom African Business Leadership Conference at the Sandton Sun Intercontinental Hotel, Johannesburg, from

October 13 to 15.

The first big challenge for business, political and civil leadership is that millions of Africans are in the wrong place. Displacement as a result of war, civil conflicts and mass urbanisation has forced millions of Africans into unproductive spaces.

United Nations refugee agency, the UNHCR, says Africa has more than 15 million refugees and internally displaced persons, almost 30 percent of the world's refugee population. Despite a formal end to the conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Ethiopia and Angola, thousands of their citizens are still stranded in neighbouring states. UNHCR findings indicate that many of the uprooted Africans are increasingly being associated with criminals and terrorists instead of potentially valuable citizens.

As new emergencies such as the

current impasse in Sudan arise, long-standing cases tend to fade. The refugee challenge is also a leadership one.

How do communities integrate displaced people to become active participants in promoting the renaissance vision rather than being a burden to the host communities?

The best prevention for refugee crisis must be to avoid future conflict. The truth, however, is that support structures in many of the conflict areas are too weak to stop or reverse the tide of misery.

Wake-up call

A second and equally important leadership challenge is how to manage and sustain the newly emerging democratic clusters. Out of the ashes of past acrimony, a new seed of hope is sprouting.

The depressing picture that blighted the continent's prospects

for several decades is giving way to striking new examples of good African leadership. A handful of new political and business leaders are standing out because of their strength of character, their inclination to corporate governance principles and keenness to resolve conflicts without a fight.

Ghana is going into its third successive democratic elections next month despite underlying poverty. Nigeria, despite the ethnic clashes, is managing to hold on to its meagre democratic dividend.

South Africa has surprised all the prophets of doom and prospered in the past 10 years. Peace efforts in the Great Lakes region are alive – just. Continued efforts to strengthen the African Union may yet bear fruit.

Although the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad) is not an immaculate conception, it

carries the right genetic code for stemming poverty. The Nepad vision, however, is hungry for dedicated leadership and other resources to deliver tangible benefits.

Business drive

On a more positive note, African businesses now have the opportunity to invest in cross-border ventures despite the odds. Or is it because of the odds? South African corporations now invest more in Africa than companies anywhere else.

Since 1994, more than US\$1 billion (R6,46 billion) a year has been poured primarily into mining, retail, construction, financial services, telecommunications and leisure. Africa now ranks as the second most important destination for South African exports, after the European Union.

At best, African business re-

sources are only able to tackle a fraction of the challenges that have emerged after long periods of strife.

Which way forward?

These are the best times for positive reform to take root in Africa. What is needed urgently is a model for positive economic diplomacy, similar to the Marshall Plan initiated by the US to reduce hunger, sickness, unemployment, and political restlessness of 270 million Europeans after World War 2.

The Marshall Plan funds were not mainly directed toward feeding individuals or building individual houses, schools, or factories, but at strengthening the economic superstructure over a four-year period.

Post-war Africa still remains the world's poorest continent. It still accounts for only one percent of total world economic output.

More than ever, sound leadership strategies, urgent and sustained action is needed to close the void.

■ Ekong is publisher of Business in Africa magazine