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Cross Studies: Borders in / and biographies

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Border conflicts in Africa

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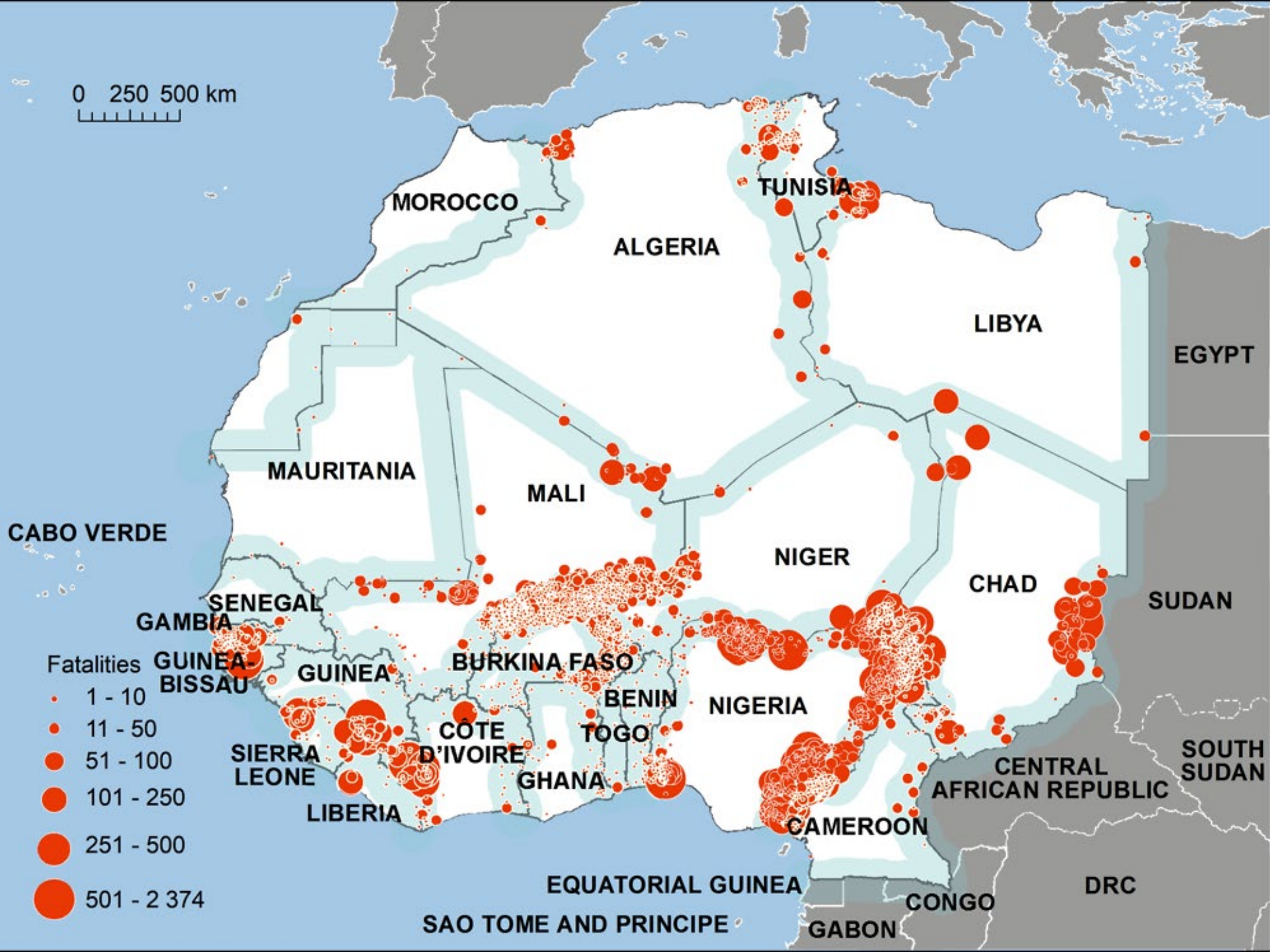
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Border conflicts in Africa: Reasons

- Throughout Africa, there are around 100 active border conflicts.*
- Conflicts range from disputes and instability to armed conflict and war.
- Each conflict is complex, but there are some common reasons behind them.

*number of 2022 by law scientist Gbenga Oduntan



History of Colonialism: Before colonial times only a few fixed borders existed in Africa (entities were rather defined by people, not the territory); borders were fixed by the colonial powers in the last decades of the 19th century.



Being a result of negotiations between colonizers, **border decisions were arbitrary** and did not consider cultural, ethnic, religious or economic bonds or conflicts. Some **treaties also lacked clarity on the position of the border or included mistakes** (e.g. wrong names of rivers).



Sticking to the colonial borders during Decolonization: African states agreed in the Organization of African Unity (OAU) on „principle of respect of existing borders on achievement of national independence“ in 1964, so African leaders accepted the arbitrary set and partly unclear borders. This was established to prevent new conflict but can be also seen as a contributing factor.



Economic reasons: Conflicts on natural resources (e.g. water, land for cattles, oil, minerals) can be intensified by factors like political instability and corrupt elites, lpopulation growth and the effects of the climate crisis.

Border conflicts in Africa: Impact on the affected populations

- Communities living in border areas often have close cultural and economic ties beyond national boundaries.
- Border conflicts can destroy these bonds and affect the population in many other ways, massively impacting their life conditions and increasing the risk of human rights violations.



Insecurity and violence: Fighting between armed forces, landmines or terrorist attacks can kill or maim civilians and cause psychological trauma. Damage of infrastructure, instability and the fear of violent attacks can impact all areas of life (e.g. deny access to medical help or prevent children from going to school).



Economic crisis and poverty: Restrictions on movement and other results of ongoing conflict hinder economic development and farming; insecurity will scare off companies; government facilities might be closed. This can lead especially unemployed young men to be easily recruited by armed groups.



Hunger and epidemics: As a result, food insecurity or even famine as well as the spread of diseases can threaten the life of the people.



Displacement: Refugees fleeing a border area face a lot of challenges, often staying in poorly equipped camps; they may also put more pressure on the situation of the host communities which have been affected by the conflict, too.

Strategies to resolve border conflicts

Different strategies have been identified to resolve African border conflicts and restore peace :

Achieving binding decisions: Political negotiations and legal mechanisms

Diplomatic Negotiation: Dialogue between affected states to find mutually acceptable solutions, recognizing the historical colonial context of borders.

Boundary Delimitation and Demarcation: Inter-state definition and clear marking of borders, following the principles of the African Union (accept the borders of the day of the independence of the states and strive for solutions “within an African framework). In 2007, the AU established a Border Programme to negotiate and resolve border conflicts.

Involving international law and frameworks: Bringing a case to the International Court of Justice and involving the UN Security Council for a Peacekeeping mission can also be strategies for resolving a border conflict.

„From barriers to bridges“: Regional cooperation, resource management and local community engagement

Regional Cooperation: Creating regional bodies or mechanisms to address border-related issues, including joint commissions or technical committees with members of the involved countries. This can also include joint security efforts if the border conflict involved also non-state armed groups.

Resource Management: To better deal with competition over resources as land, water or minerals, states need to work together to ensure fair access to them. This should happen with the local communities participating.

Community Engagement and Education: People from both sides of the borders should have a chance for cultural or educational activities that enable people-to-people interactions. This can increase trust and cross-border understanding and cooperation.



Guinea



Sierra Leone



Cote d'Ivoire



Liberia



Example 1: The Mano River Union

The Mano River Union: conflict escalation in spite of a regional association

Did it actually prevent conflicts?

Probably not. The Mano River Union could not prevent the internal conflicts and the civil wars in Liberia (1989 to 1997 and 1999 to 2003) and Sierra Leone (1991 to 2002). Armed groups from Liberia operated beyond borders and were supported by the army of the Liberian dictator Charles Taylor. Exploiting the rich resources of the countries was fueling the conflict. The border regions were affected very much, and during the civil wars the Mano River Union institution was hardly active anymore.

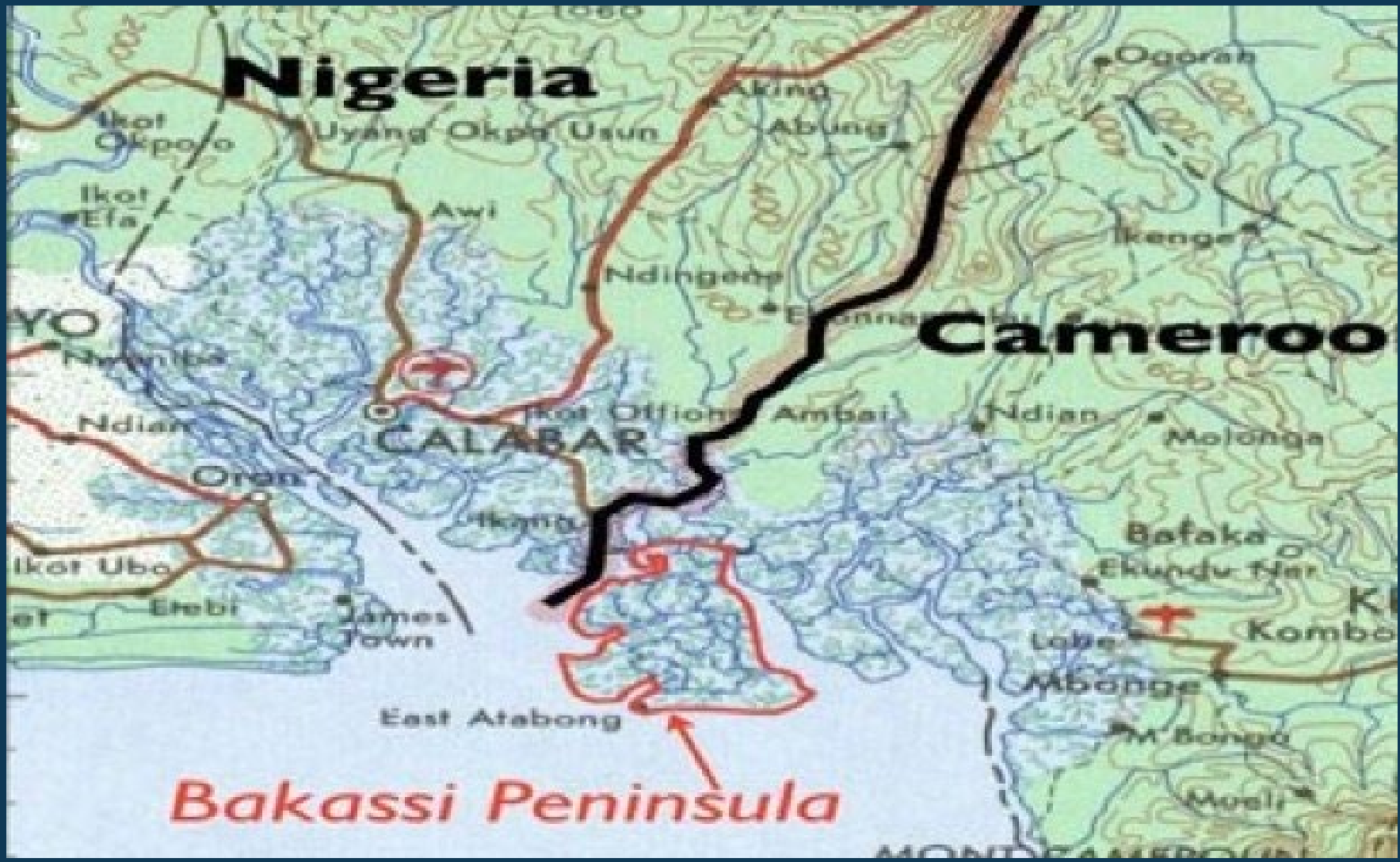
International intervention - UN Peacekeeping - was called for and present from 1993 to 2018. Today, the situation at the borders is more peaceful, but still volatile.

Regional cooperation to manage competition on resources

The Mano River marks the border between Liberia and Sierra Leone, two of the countries in the region that are rich in minerals like gold, diamonds or bauxite. The river has a paramount role for the water resources and forest ecosystem in the region. At the northern border of Sierra Leone to Guinea, conflicts between cattle herders and farmers on resources have been long ongoing.

The Mano River Union was established in 1973 as an international association between of two countries – with the idea to prevent conflicts and „accelerate the economic growth, social progress and cultural advancement” of both countries. In 1980, neighboring Guinea joined the Mano River Union. Since 2008, Cote d’Ivoire is also part of the union. Today the Mano River Union focusses on joint security in the – still conflict-affected – border regions and on economic and environmental projects.





Example 2: The Bakassi conflict

The Bakassi conflict: preventing war between Nigeria and Cameroon

Border conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon

Bakassi is a peninsula with lots of fish, oil and gas that was subject of a long enduring border conflict between Nigeria and Cameroon. After becoming independent, both countries claimed the area, referring to different colonial agreements. According to the African Union principles it was part of Cameroon, but Nigeria denied that and was de facto ruling the peninsula. The dispute escalated in the 1980s and 1990s and after a series of violent clashes, Cameroon went to the International Court of Justice in 1994 to avoid a war with Nigeria. In 2002, the Court decided that the peninsula should be given unconditionally to Cameroon, Nigeria accepted that. 4 years later, the Nigerian troops started to leave, the conflict ended in 2009 with an amnesty deal.

Did the International Court of Justice end the conflict?

The interstate conflict could be successfully ended by the judgement of the International Court of Justice because – in spite of its colonial origin – the legal situation was cleared. As the Cameroonian government wanted to avoid war, this seemed a good solution.

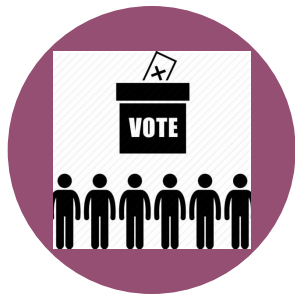
But: After the Nigerian government accepted and returned the peninsula, a new innerstate conflict with a Bakassi separatist movement evolved and is still ongoing.



Conclusions

The underlying factors for border conflicts in Africa are not easy to tackle: Especially the different economic potentials of regions and the competition on scarce resources can only be managed peacefully if governments really strive for equal living conditions. Regional cooperation is no guarantee for conflict resolution by itself, especially if they are not formed by democratic governments, as the history of the Mano River Union shows. Accepting International Courts to enforce border agreements from colonial times has worked in the Bakassi case.

From my point of view, the people who are affected most should be in the centre of all strategies to resolve border conflict. Some ideas:



Democratic procedures as polls or even a referendum might be used more. This includes the promotion of good governance, transparency and the fight against corruption.



Creating **better living conditions, education and social services in deprived border areas** will be helpful to prevent the continuation of border conflicts.



As some authors suggest, African leaders should take more responsibility and find **African solutions**. Maybe nations can even get back to a more flexible and cooperative understanding of using territories (as in pre-colonial times).



Local communities and civil society organizations should be strengthened and work together in creating understanding and solidarity between the populations in border areas.

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