

Gloom over the third world is overdone, argues Bruce Clark

# Order amid the chaos

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**T**he nightmare prospect of war spreading uncontrollably through the Great Lakes region of Africa has given fresh credibility to apocalyptic theories about the future of the planet.

In particular, the looming conflict in eastern Zaire has reminded the world of the precarious existence of anything recognisable as a state in that vast area of Africa that is nominally subject to the rule of Kinshasa.

The authorities there, whose banknotes purchase nothing in large parts of Zaire's notional territory, might be capable of *provoking* trouble on the border with Rwanda and Burundi. But they are almost certainly not strong enough to *restrain* violence, or to control the flow of displaced persons, or perform any of the benign functions of statehood. The illness of Zaire's veteran ruler, President Mobutu Sese Seko, has raised questions about whether the country can maintain even the pretence of statehood once he is no longer on the scene.

None of this comes as a surprise to the American writer Robert Kaplan, who stirred a hornet's nest three years ago with an essay on "The Coming Anarchy", which vividly described the collapse of state power in countries such as Liberia and Sierra Leone. He suggested that the implosion of ramshackle governments in the face of demographic and ecological pressures was a stronger global trend than the happy "end of history" predicted by his friend Francis Fukuyama.

In a new book\*, Kaplan tests his theories on a wider plane. In west Africa, he is confirmed in his intimations of apocalypse, his sense that "just as states and their gov-



Reuters

Nightmare scenario: violence in Zaire is likely to spread

ernments were meaning less and less, the distinctions between states and armies, armies and civilians, and armies and criminal gangs were also weakening".

In the Arab world and Turkey, Kaplan argues, Islam has provided dignity and social organisation in the midst of overcrowding and poverty. But even in ancient nations such as India and Egypt, he detects signs that a weakening state may fail to keep the lid on violence that is ostensibly sectarian but in fact has ecological and demographic origins.

He is sure of only one thing: "We are not in control. As societies grow more populous and complex, the idea that a global elite like the UN can engineer reality from above is... absurd."

Like Fukuyama, Kaplan is a broad-brush thinker whose large, provocative ideas spur debate. His views on west African anarchy are informing academic discussion on

the future of war. A report\*\* by the International Institute of Strategic Studies in London discusses some of the points Kaplan makes more anecdotally. Prolonged intra-state war of the kind that has ravaged Liberia or Sierra Leone, has a deadly logic in which certain social and economic groups benefit. UN efforts to disarm the antagonists do more harm than good unless linked to political and economic strategies that give the ex-warriors a real stake in peace.

But perhaps the slide towards mayhem is not so inexorable as the pessimists suggest. Some places Kaplan visited - Azerbaijan and central Asia, for example - are on balance more stable now than two years ago: strongmen who once ruled in the name of Marx are using new versions of authoritarianism to buy off or subdue their opponents. Criminality and corruption are often described as cancers eating

away at the body politic of emerging nations, or indeed advanced ones. But much as it sticks in the Anglo-Saxon throat to say so, neither phenomenon is invariably threatening to the state: criminals can be co-opted by the ruler and certain forms of corruption can act as a kind of welfare system.

The recent history of former Soviet capitals Tbilisi and Baku, of Beirut and perhaps Istanbul in the 1980s has shown how the atmosphere in a city can change with remarkable speed from menacing anarchy to relative order. When this happens, it is often clear in retrospect that the "chaos" was never quite as random as it seemed at that time. The gunmen were, in fact, quite efficiently controlled by hidden manipulators.

Kaplan rightly says that "we" - in the sense of a western policy-making elite - are in control of less and less. But even in the most desperate conflict zones, the way is often clear for a clever despot to take charge. In cases where no local player is strong enough to impose his will, some outside force may do. In Sierra Leone, for example, a private security company manned by veterans of the British and South African forces seems to have established firm control of areas where state power has collapsed.

As an American optimist might say, there will always be those who see in anarchy not a problem but a challenge or even an opportunity.

*\*The Ends of the Earth: a Journey at the Dawn of the 21st Century, Random House*

*\*\*Disarmament and Demobilisation after Civil Wars: Adelphi Paper 303, by Dr Mats Berdal*