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Bold leadership vital as UN fails its task

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THE past few years have been marred by a global crisis in terms of the role of diplomacy in conflict resolution and the restoration of peace and stability. The United Nations (UN), a symbol of global commitment to the protection of human rights, has been reduced to a talk shop in which member states seem to be primarily concerned about their national interests, instead of upholding human rights and the betterment of humanity.

The US circumvented the UN and invaded Iraq on apparently unjustifiable grounds.

The Israeli campaign in the south of Lebanon made it clear that the UN is incapable of reaching a resolution before conflict escalates into human catastrophe. It took gruesome footage of the massacre of children and women in the south of Lebanon for the UN to consider the situation unacceptable. It was only after the unnecessary deaths of people caught in the crossfire between the Israeli Defence Force and Hezbollah fighters that the UN Security Council finally passed a resolution calling for a cease-fire.

Here in Africa, Sudan continues to reject any UN resolution aimed at interfering in the continuing massacre in the Darfur region. Western countries, notably Britain and the US, have maintained that the killings in Darfur are systematic and consistent enough to amount to genocide; hence the global community should interfere.

African leaders are quite uneasy with the west's uncharacteristically hasty conclusion that genocide has occurred.

As some African academics have written, the west seems to be aiming at overstating the crisis in Darfur so that Africa can be seen to be a host to yet another episode of human atrocity.

This, it is believed, does not only fuel Afro-pessimism but, most important, undermines the moral base of African leadership.

The crisis in Sudan could easily be resolved - if only diplomacy was not riddled with self-interest and point-scoring.

It has been suggested that the UN needs to be restructured to restore the power balance among all member states.

The reigning system, in which only five permanent security council members (France, Britain, the US, China, and

Russia) have veto power over whatever resolution is proposed in the UN, has recently come under attack by developing nations, who feel left out in the UN's decision-making processes.

But no amount of restructuring will assist the UN to live up to its founding principles of commitment to the protection of human rights. There is no turning back: the UN is a stage on which countries trade votes on resolutions, concerned mostly about their national interests and global influence. What can be achieved by restructuring the UN is to place member states on an equal footing. Perhaps then their tussling will balance the scale. However, national interests will always be the driving point of countries' positions on humanitarian crises.

Just across SA's northern border is yet another example of diplomacy's failure: Zimbabwe.

There is no doubt that diplomacy has failed in dealing with the continuing crisis there.

The situation in Zimbabwe is a diplomatic quagmire for African leaders and it further highlights diplomatic opportunism and miscalculations on the part of the west.

Since western countries have touted "regime change" as a solution to Zimbabwe's problems, African leaders have been careful not to tread in that direction. This is partly because it goes against the notion of self-reliance, as well as displaying a reluctance to kowtow to western pressure or to anyone.

Even more disturbing is that the idea of regime change has been part of foreign occupation in the Middle East.

I have no doubt that African leaders believe in democracy and a periodic rotation of leadership. I believe African leaders would have adopted bolder steps to address the situation in Zimbabwe if only western countries had initially maintained their distance in relation to the matter. In an era in which Africa is attempting to find its own solutions to its problems, the west's meddling with the situation in Zimbabwe has resulted only in silence on the part of African leaders.

However, that the west has been meddling in the Zimbabwe situation does not necessarily justify the stance adopted by African leaders on Zimbabwe. If African leaders believe the situation in Zimbabwe has reached a point at which it is unacceptable, they should forge ahead with a solution.

While avoiding to be seen as taking a diplomatic cue from the west, African leaders should stand strong and uphold the principles of justice, peace and human rights, irrespective of who shares similar principles with them and what their motives may be.

The Zimbabwean situation would not have escalated to where it is had African leaders spoken first on the issues. In that way, the west would not have had an opportunity to set the tone of the debate on Zimbabwe and the regime in Zimbabwe would have listened.

As Africa is in an era of conflict resolution, Zimbabwe should be a lesson to Africa that it should take a stance on issues affecting the continent at an early stage, before minor problems escalate into humanitarian crises. A strong and decisive African leadership is necessary in an age in which diplomacy is facing a tough test, so that Africa does not become a stage for struggles between powerful countries.

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