

22 July 2010
Kamlesh Sharma, Commonwealth Secretary-General
Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies
London, UK

2010 Nelson Mandela Africa Lecture
The Commonwealth and Africa

****1****

Introduction, thanks

I thank Dr Knox Chitoyo for his warm welcome: I am delighted to be back at the Royal United Services Institute today.

It was RUSI's illustrious founder, the Duke of Wellington, who said: 'I don't know what effect these men have on the enemy, but by God, they frighten me'.

And as I look around at those who are gathered to hear me today, I feel quite the same awe.

Whether your audiences are in uniform or not, they are uniformly exceptional – as they take the broadest view as to what constitutes the word 'security'.

I am very pleased to be here – thank you.

Let me also acknowledge two other partners who are with us in spirit today.

The first is the Brenthurst Foundation, which supports this lecture, and which supports economic growth in Africa.

For economic growth is our goal.

The insecurity which is RUSI's subject matter is the single biggest obstacle and antidote to that growth, and the principle and promise of democracy soon sound hollow without development.

And of course I also salute Madiba, Nelson Mandela, who gives his famous name to this lecture, and who famously said that 'the Commonwealth makes the world safe for diversity'.

It was another leader from another continent, Nehru, who also spoke eloquently of the Commonwealth's capacity to bring what he called 'a touch of healing to the world'.

Little did Nehru know then that one particular Commonwealth citizen from South Africa, incarcerated for 27 years, would bring such healing to his own country, to his own continent, and to the world.

****2****

Context

'Democracy', 'development', 'values', 'journeying'.

These four words hint at some of the things I would like to say today, under the broad title you have given me, of 'the Commonwealth and Africa'.

The topic is high in my mind, as tonight I fly to Uganda to attend the African Union summit.

Africa and the Commonwealth each number 54 members, and there are 19 Commonwealth countries in Africa.

So over a third of the Commonwealth is African, and over a third of Africa is Commonwealth.

I have said elsewhere that the two are 'joined at the hip'; that the two need each other; and that theirs is indeed a precious relationship.

The core of the relationship is shared values and shared journeying, towards the two, interlocking, goals of democracy and development.

And democracy and development, as a security organisation like RUSI well knows, are the sources of security and stability.

The Commonwealth has no battalions, no police, and very little funding, and so you will understand that I am not in a position to talk about the most obvious manifestations of security, for instance those of African military or peace-keeping operations, many of which are carried out by troops from Commonwealth countries, both from Africa and beyond.

The story of the relationship between two trusted partners – the Commonwealth and Africa – is one of incremental progress, and anniversaries are as good a time as any to reflect on that.

2009 saw the 60th birthday of the modern Commonwealth which replaced the British Commonwealth in 1949.

Meanwhile 2007 saw the first of Commonwealth Africa's 50th birthdays: that of Ghana – with Nigeria and Cameroon following this year.

Acknowledging the hundreds of thousands of years of African history, culture, language and tradition, our focus must – of course – be the here and now.

'The cradle of civilisation' it may be, but it is the new Africa which is our subject today.

And it is the very *youth* of the countries on its continent which is at the root of much of what we will discuss, especially in the field of democracy and good governance.

These British Isles have had some form of elected legislature for 700 years, a Prime Minister since 1721, and party political elections in something like today's form since 1802 – and yet this country's democratic journey is always evolving.

How, then, can Africa be expected to be plain sailing in so short a time, and why should we not expect change and evolution there, too?

This is the story of a 50-year partnership that – in taking small strides – has in fact travelled very far.

It is a partnership which Africa leads, with its leaders and its people employing their own thinking, their own will and their own skills to make progress.

It is a partnership where the Commonwealth helps where it can – and where it gives voice to Africa: nationally, regionally, and on the global stage.

Let me try today to add colour and form to the vast, 50-year tableau that has been, and is, 'the Commonwealth and Africa'.

I shall do so by looking at the way that the Commonwealth has strengthened security in Africa, first by promoting democracy, and second by promoting development.

****3****

Democracy

First, then, democracy – on a continent where the plentiful good news is often no news, and where the bad news will so often outgun the good.

I think that Nehru had many countries in mind when he prompted the founding members of the Commonwealth to accept his own country, newly a republic, as one of eight ‘freely and equally associated’ members in 1949. At the back of his mind was the hope for a process of decolonisation and independence to follow, right across the British Empire.

The Commonwealth was in many ways the handmaiden of that process. It pushed for decolonisation, and – once it was achieved – gave new countries a platform on which to know each other and to be heard. Not only did it support their new national status, but it gave them an international status, too. It internationalised not just some countries of Africa, but Africa itself – giving it an honoured place in an association numbering members on six continents. The Commonwealth Secretariat is itself the product of the internationalist thinking of, amongst others, Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana, who in 1965 was adamant that the running of the Commonwealth should be put democratically into the hands of *all* the members of this association.

Yet Empire died hard, and some of the Commonwealth’s most defining early work was in its implacable opposition to racism. Many still label us for our pioneering work in a 30-year fight against apartheid in South Africa, or in ending the Smith rebellion, and bringing Rhodesia to independence.

In Lusaka in 1979, our Heads of Government issued the powerful Commonwealth Declaration on Racism and Racial Prejudice, which established their abhorrence of any government founded on racism.

This was the Commonwealth hard at work in Africa, doing the ‘heavy lifting’.

But the death-throes of decolonisation and racism did not, by itself, usher in an era of democratic stability across the continent of Africa. What we have come to know as ‘imperial presidencies’ followed, and – with them – serious abuses of power. Indeed, when Commonwealth Heads met again in Africa (in Harare in 1991), the truth was that almost a quarter of them belonged to one-party or military regimes.

The aspiration of democratic principle which their predecessors had agreed in Singapore in 1971 had somehow been smothered by the realpolitik of the Cold War, and – by 1991 – was ripe for serious review.

As the end of the Cold War diverted aid and interest from Africa to Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, it also led to a renewal of democratic value, not least in Africa.

So there followed the Harare Principles of 1991, and then - in 1995 - the mechanism for enforcing them, in the shape of the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, or CMAG.

CMAG has most certainly been in action in Africa – in part punitively, but in a larger measure supportively where democracy has needed to be re-established.

So Nigeria may indeed have been suspended in 1995, but – with unrelenting Commonwealth pressure on the military regime of General Abacha; with its support for the National Democratic Coalition; with its assistance in the running of the state and national elections which led to a democratically elected government under President Obasanjo – the country was returned to its rightful place in the Commonwealth in 1999.

Sierra Leone was suspended during the darkest days of civil war in 1997, but even when it was returned to the Commonwealth in 2001, it actively requested to stay *on* the CMAG agenda, to consolidate its return to democracy.

This was remarkable: the country saw CMAG as supportive of its nation-building, and not censorious of its state failure.

And in support of rebuilding a shattered nation, the Commonwealth gave practical help.

For instance it helped to train the Sierra Leone police force, and to resettle former combatants by giving them employment in the housing construction sector.

Zimbabwe, meanwhile – in so many ways, as I have suggested, an offspring of the Commonwealth – was suspended from its councils in the wake of what our observers found to be seriously flawed presidential and parliamentary elections in 2002.

At the Abuja CHOGM in 2003, Zimbabwe's suspension was extended, but President Mugabe then chose to take the country out of the Commonwealth.

It was indeed an irony that the country which gave its name to the Harare Principles, which were adopted under President Mugabe's chairmanship, was found wanting when judged against those principles.

A real loss to the Commonwealth, and the precursor of much turmoil and suffering for the people of Zimbabwe, this episode was, however, a vindication of values.

And it will be by re-embracing those values that one day Zimbabwe will be able to return to the Commonwealth – and we will welcome that.

This is the Commonwealth of Values – aspiring to high goals, holding its members accountable for them, and doing all that it can to help its members reach them.

The Commonwealth has also exported its values.

Different elements of the AU, of NEPAD and its African Peer Review Mechanism, the APRM, bear a Commonwealth imprint.

Thus far, half of the countries which have voluntarily opted to go through the APRM process are Commonwealth members.

Similarly, a third of the countries examined thus far in the UN process of Universal Periodic Review on human rights, are Commonwealth members, and indeed a number have been supported by us in that process.

The Commonwealth's work to strengthen democracy in Africa continues. A key element is our Good Offices work – my own personal interventions, or the sending of senior Secretariat staff or special envoys, always at the request or with the concurrence of the country in question, to defuse situations of political tension, above all by bringing fractious parties to the same table. That dialogue has tended to focus on two broad areas: new or revised Constitutions, or new or revised parliamentary and electoral systems. In other words, the frameworks for establishing democracy, and the institutions which can best sustain it.

Difficult elections have prompted many of these interventions. We recall the tense elections in Lesotho in 1998, ensuing violence, and the establishment of an Interim Political Authority. In Swaziland, we responded to the request for assistance in navigating the sensitive path towards a more pluralistic constitutional monarchy, with space for the political opposition, media and civil society. Meanwhile, it was restrictions on the activities of opposition parties and the media in The Gambia in 2000, which was the cue for our Good Offices.

The results speak for themselves. I think immediately of the agreements we brokered between Zanzibar and mainland Tanzania in 1995 and 2000 ...
... or the new Constitution we helped to draft for Swaziland ...
... or our support for a new system of political representation in Lesotho ...
... or the brokering of agreements between parties and also on behalf of media organisations, in the run up to the Gambian elections in 2006.

But perhaps the best Commonwealth help that we can give, is in the painstaking work we do to strengthen the institutions of democracy. This is why plans are underway for us to implement the governance elements of the EU/AU strategic plan, with initial planning in Botswana and Nigeria, and hopefully new commitments from my good meeting with EU Development Commissioner Piebalgs last week. An event such as the 7th meeting of Commonwealth Heads of Public Service in Africa, to be held in Yaounde next week, may not gain much publicity, but it is our bread and butter in convening and sharing best practice. Likewise, the recent meeting in Accra of Commonwealth election commissioners made few headlines, but the Commonwealth Network of Election Management Bodies that it launched represented a huge step forward in sharing best practice, and in countries opening themselves up to the possibilities of peer support. We hope the network will help create the gold standard for electoral best practice.

We have, in fact, already begun to see mutual peer support, with Ghana itself exporting its electoral expertise to Malawi and Kenya.

The Commonwealth may have observed some 52 African elections since 1990, but it is the first to say that an election is merely the most visible form of democracy.

For it is the *dividends* of democracy, and the institutions that guarantee its services, which count the most.

That is why our practical Commonwealth support for National Human Rights Institutions, independent election commissions, anti-corruption agencies, offices of auditors-general, and parliamentary commissions has been so vital. In general, we have supported and strengthened such bodies which already existed.

But in Cameroon, for instance, we helped to create both election and human rights bodies – from scratch.

And yet of course the challenges to good governance in Africa – whether Commonwealth or not – are very real.

In particular, there are too many tensions – or blurred distinctions – between the executive, the judiciary, and the legislature, and indeed the army and the police force.

Also, there is an overarching need to take the animosity out of African politics. We are especially conscious of the persistence – in so many of our Commonwealth countries – of the ‘winner takes all’ syndrome, whereby the incumbency of power can be so overbearing, and where party political structures are so often personalised and not collective, and institutionally flimsy.

As my predecessor Chief Anyaoku, a Nigerian, memorably said, we have much further to go in building the concept of a ‘loyal’ Opposition, as an integral and respected element of African politics, working in the national interest.

Our Commonwealth ‘Government and Opposition’ workshops are designed to assist.

So where, then, does the ledger stand on democracy in Commonwealth Africa?

Are we swayed by the bad headlines, the good, or by the many incremental and unreported advances in between?

Where there is good news – for instance in the progress made by the interim independent election commission in Kenya, supported by the Commonwealth – let it not erase the lesson of the bad news whence it came.

In this case, that was the descent into anarchy and bloodshed in the 2007 year-end election in Kenya.

Perhaps two Commonwealth examples – of Rwanda and Ghana – will illustrate the case that the positive and the hopeful can prevail.

Ghana’s presidential elections in 2008 went down to the wire, with no more than 20,000 votes separating the two candidates after the first round of voting. Tensions ran dangerously high.

The Commonwealth election observer team, led by Baroness Valerie Amos, was much in evidence in the media, and much in liaison with the election commission.

Sense and reason prevailed; the second round went smoothly; power changed hands peacefully; Ghanaian and African democracy emerged triumphant; and it has been very publicly acknowledged that the Commonwealth was crucial to this outcome.

Meanwhile Rwanda, as we know, came to the very edge of the abyss in 1994. But when that country resubmitted a formal application to join the Commonwealth in 2007, our Heads of Government considered all the things that had happened in the years following – many of which President Kagame himself outlined in this very lecture at RUSI in 2006.

For instance, they took into account Rwanda's new Constitution of 2003 – based on power-sharing and consensus, and a commitment to multi-party democracy.

They looked at Rwanda's judiciary, and at the various institutional structures and policy commitments of good governance, and of human rights.

And they also saw what we inherently believe – that democracy breeds development, with a steady rise in national output.

That is why leaders demonstrated their political will and affirmation in welcoming Rwanda into the Commonwealth as its 54th and latest member, in November 2009.

We now await a presidential election in Rwanda on 9th August, which will be witnessed by Commonwealth observers led by the former Tanzanian Prime Minister, Dr Salim Ahmed Salim.

We hear the news as well as anyone, and are more than conscious of the challenges facing a young democracy.

Such is the nature of the democratic journey in Rwanda, Africa and across the Commonwealth.

And such is the nature of the Commonwealth role: if we have to, we raise our concerns – but whatever happens, we raise a helping hand, rather than a wagging finger.

****4****

Development

Let me turn now, more briefly, to the Commonwealth's contribution to the other source of security in Africa: Development.

I hope that the preface is taken for granted: the burdens of poverty, disease, lack of education, environmental degradation are all ingredients not just of under-development, but of insecurity.

So, again to pose the initial question: where does Africa stand on the Development ledger?

Are we pessimists, because the continent which is home to 15% of the world's population, generates just 2% of its trade?

As we try to meet the Millennium Development Goals, do we bemoan the serious shortfalls which are felt most desperately in sub-Saharan Africa?

Do we see latent threats further undermining the task of meeting those MDGs, for instance in chronic food insecurity in Africa?

Or do we even complain that we can't keep tabs on the African economy, when up to 80% of it is informal and unrecorded?

Or do we look on the positive side, and point to an average 5% annual growth in Africa, despite the rest of the world's economic woes?

Or to Africa's extraordinary reserves of natural resources?

Or to the large emerging economies eager to invest in Africa?

Or do we point to a huge growth in the numbers of companies listed on African stock exchanges, often in countries which have taken strides in macroeconomic stabilisation?

Post-apartheid South Africa has led the way, with a five-fold increase in its trade since 1994.

As with Africa and its democracy question, we can see the African development glass as half full.

Indeed, the African Development Bank tells us that a combination of growth, trade, new infrastructure, and legislative coordination would make the glass even fuller ... were it not for the serious shocks administered by the finance, food and fuel crises of recent times.

However full the glass, I know that the Commonwealth itself has poured in its own measure of that good cheer.

We are, for sure, a very small development agency – but one for whom over 40% of our funds are spent in Africa.

We make a little go a very long way, by applying our networks, our leverage and our body of best practice.

In part, the results are quantifiable.

Far too few people know, for instance, that it was the Commonwealth which was the initiator of both bilateral and multilateral debt relief, and that alone – for Africa – is worth over \$50 billion.

The £200 million of money channelled into Africa by the Commonwealth Private Investment Initiative is small fry in comparison, but it is indicative of a continent in which people want to invest.

It is also testament to the work which the Commonwealth Secretariat and others have done in helping to create the investment climate – laws, tax systems, and wider security – which makes such investment feasible.

It is this – more unquantifiable – work which is the larger part of our development work in Africa.

Let me briefly look at several niche areas of Commonwealth work.

We alone, of course, can't deal with the fact that over half of the people on the African continent now live in cities, up from just 2% in 1900. But a pilot network of 12 Commonwealth cities – including Dar es Salaam, Durban, Johannesburg and Freetown – is currently sharing good practice on how to address such issues in cities as inclusiveness, social cohesion and meeting the Millennium Development Goals.

Likewise, the Commonwealth cannot solve climate change on its own, even though it sees its effects writ large – and it reads the dire predictions of the Stern Report, that up to 250 million Africans could face severe water shortage by 2020.

But the Commonwealth is on the case.

We have been helping our smaller and poorer member countries formulate their negotiating positions in global climate change negotiations ...

... and we are now charged with helping developing countries to access the funding and technology that they need to adapt and mitigate their own carbon imprint.

We have launched a London conference on this very subject, for October.

HIV/AIDS is similarly a huge threat to development and security in Africa.

In Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland, more than one in five adults carry the virus.

What can the Commonwealth do?

Its small contribution has been to examine African national AIDS strategies, and to ensure that they are focussed as much on women and children, as men.

We have also developed a network of over 200 Commonwealth Ambassadors for Positive Living.

These are young people, all HIV-Positive, who work day-in and day-out – talking to schools, scout groups, junior football teams and more, and bringing messages of prevention, positive living, compassion and acceptance.

Similarly, the fact that in 2007 over 32 million African children were out of primary school – with over 7 million in Nigeria alone – is a devastating barrier to development, which neither the Commonwealth nor any other body can begin to lift on its own.

Even transformative UK budget support – which has allowed for free primary schooling in countries like Kenya and Tanzania – leaves many stones unturned.

For us in the Commonwealth, the quality and quantity of teachers is our chosen involvement, with 5 million teachers needed in Africa alone, merely to allow the possibility of putting every child through primary education.

We are giving support to African teachers by developing – alongside the Association for the Development of Education in Africa – the concept of multigrade teaching, which allows teachers to teach pupils of all different ages in the same class.

For this, we have conceived and tested both the strategy and the syllabus.

There are myriad other examples of the Commonwealth at work as a development force in Africa....

I could cite our working with our member states in world trade negotiations – on the global stage in the Doha Round, and with the EU in negotiating Economic Partnership Agreements.

The task remains: to address the skewed regime of trade tariffs and trade subsidies which so mitigate against Africa, and in favour of the major trading players.

We will not cease our advocacy for a truly open, multilateral world trading system, in which those who need it are given a leg-up to allow them to compete.

The Commonwealth can help with this ‘aid for trade’ and trade facilitation – it has, for example, overhauled customs systems in the Kenyan port of Mombasa.

I could also point to our development of information and communication technology capacity – in the form of brand new national strategies in countries like the Seychelles, or national e-health strategies in countries like Kenya.

I could direct you to the continent-wide youth programmes which we run from our regional centre in Lusaka – training youth workers, running vocational programmes, even running a youth rehabilitation centre for children tragically caught in the crossfire of conflict in Gulu, northern Uganda.

With a big grant from the Equity Bank of Kenya, we are currently going beyond microcredit to launch an ambitious programme of youth enterprise funding – from identifying youth businesses, to funding them, training them, and providing mentoring and evaluation.

The task is to produce job creators, not job seekers – and likewise to empower women and girls, every bit as much as men and boys.

Or I could lift examples from our enterprise support programmes

... helping Mauritius and Seychelles lay claim to 500 km² of seabed and other marine resources, for instance ...

... or advising the Governments of Ghana, Uganda and Sierra Leone on their burgeoning petroleum industries ...

... or developing national SME strategies ...

... or overhauling national export strategies in a dozen African countries.

That Mauritius has transformed itself within four decades from a poor, sugar-based economy to a vibrant export hub – dealing in everything from seafood to financial services and health care – is in no small measure due to the Commonwealth.

****5****

Conclusion

Distinguished guests, I have spoken of democracy and development as the keys to security.

RUSI, as a security organisation, believes in conflict prevention: democracy and development are the two surest ways of preventing conflict.

I have said it, and we have all seen it: these are a lifetime’s work.

Let me end by tying those two laces together into one bow: democracy and development are so fundamentally inseparable, as to be inconceivable apart, and to be so much more effective when brought together.

Indeed it was a Commonwealth study – commissioned by our Heads of Government, and delivered under the chairmanship of Manmohan Singh when he was Indian Finance Minister in 2002 – which said as much, and the world took note.

In the spirit of the Nelson Mandela lecture, let me leave you with a piece of his own brilliant and piercing clarity, as he spoke – on 10 May 1994, the day he assumed the South African presidency – of the journey towards democracy and development which has been my topic today.

“We understand it still that there is no easy road to freedom”, he said on that day.

But you know how he ended: “Let freedom reign!”

Thank you.

ENDS