

The Human Side of Kofi Annan

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I knew Kofi Annan has to die. Somehow, I never thought it would be this early for him. More so, when we were only told that it was after a brief illness. Brief illness for a great African, one of the best human beings, sounds strange for an eighty-year-old with access to the very best medical intervention possible on earth. I had thought he could have gone on for as long as Madiba did.

I would be stupid to want to analyse on the great deeds of Kofi Annan that altered the strategic framework of our world. I will not be exhaustive even in a thousand-page volume on Kofi at the UN and on our planet earth.

Kofi Annan lived a simple life that reached out to all that came his way. I used to wear danshiki made from ankara as I served the UN in Somalia as a young Political Affairs Officer. The danshiki allowed me to aesthetically wear the mandatory flak jacket under my dress. That Kofi would notice me in the crowd and walked by and exchanged greetings in the few Yoruba words he knew was a great surprise to me, more so when he was the biggest possible boss on peacekeeping visiting UNOSOM II in Mogadishu to support and recognise the work of civilian and military peace foot soldiers. We became friends of a sort and I looked forward to his visits once announced. I tended to have the opportunity to provide political briefings to our boss and enjoyed his relaxing jokes and witty anecdotes.

A friend preferring to be anonymous shared the followings on Kofi Annan: "I personally knew and called him on a number of times when I had issues with my job in Iraq. He arranged my assignment to Cambodia and called me in my country to ask where UN should contact me and I told him through UNDP. Gone too soon!" Of course, another friend gave me an opposite experience about a decade ago. He insited that he was hounded out of his job with the UN for criticising Kofi Annan's second term in office which he had seen as not positive for Africa. However, I could not conclude during that lunch dialogue, that Kofi as Secretary-General, was part of hounding a P-3 officer out of his job because he did not like what he wrote.

I once had an experience that surprised me. Our Mission boss in Mogadishu had fixed a very early morning meeting for a strategic dialogue on what next in Mogadishu. We all arrived, including Kofi Annan, before time. But our boss, a surbordinate to Kofi was late by about 20 minutes. Kofi was relaxed and kept chatting with the rest of us. He always had clean witty anecdotes. Our boss arrived and there was no apology for being late and went straight into the substance of the meeting. Kofi was still his relaxed self. I thought about how so many less important potentates from my country would have reacted.

He used to be so close to many of us who were relatively junior staff members that some used to pick up the phone and tell him directly about the tensed moments we had in the Mogadishu of General Aidid's days when we went to bed and were not sure we would escape mortar bombs overnight and be alive on the following morning. When he went a notch higher and became the biggest possible UN Boss, his warm and accommodating friendliness made some think they could just call and announce to him that they needed to say hi to the Secretary-General while visiting NY. Alas, the bureaucracy had separated him from the people and phone numbers he had given out went to the situation room. He received enough criticism for that from those who felt he was an African and as Secretary-General should have advanced the lot of many African friends without thinking about the rules.

While in office, he broke down the repressive chain of communication that emphasised that UN NY knew it all and must be the only ones to say it to the world. Bosses in the field could speak and guide others under them to speak without first clearing with NY's little Buddhas.

Of course some, even including those who worked for the UN and understood how things worked, would blame him for Rwanda and Srebrenica. The Secretary-General, not to talk of an Assistant-Secretary-General, is a Secretary and not a General. He must take instructions from the five Permanent Members of the Security Council who must have a consensus or at least be indifferent on the execution of any issue. Kofi gets blamed, at times, for the prevention of action of the Security Council that immobilized the bureaucrats from giving necessary instructions to save lives in Rwanda. A uniformed General who rightly was crying on the ground could not receive the necessary support to use force to halt mass killings as a result of the objection within the P-5 (US, UK, France, China & Russia) member-states.

Powerful member-states are known to be unaccountable at the UN. Perhaps if one of Kofi's achievements at the UN, the Right to Protect resolution, which allows other countries to intervene in another country to protect and halt loss of lives had come earlier, Africans could have saved their own in Rwanda when Black-Hawk down had changed the course of the push towards a new international order being canvassed by the sole remaining super power of that period.

We have lost one of the very few voices who would find a diplomatic way to say the truth. It would be recollected that his saying such truth on US violating the norm under George W. Bush led to that President behaving in the characteristic "I am the world", that almost hounded Kofi out of office as the Secretary-General of the UN. The Tony Blair negotiated compromise was to turn him into a lame duck ceremonial S-G. He kept his cool and for history, went on in great spirit. It was a great relief for many human beings that nothing untoward could be personally pinned on this son of Africa in spite of the corruption associated with his adult son.

Kofi Annan, out of the office of Secretary-General went on with the strive for peace in many hotspots. He made a difference in Kenya in 2008 but was unable in Syria and left the scene calling on the Security Council to get its act together. He avoided being used for the Council's other style of peacemaking by having an envoy dance around for the CNN effect when all were aware nothing was being achieved.

Alas, here lies a sane and illustrious voice on the strive for a rights based, just, stable and developed world that has gone silent too early.