EDITORIAL

It’s time to unleash our power

I t is that time of the year again when we celebrate Interna-
tional Women’s Day. It is good that this should be so – not just as an opportunity for women to
dance their hearts at national sta-
diums but also that we should be able to check on the nuts and bolts
of women’s progress.

We at Africanwoman have, of
course, given women a voice throughout the year. It is a task that is empowering in many ways. It is also a task that can be most frustrating, especially when faced with the similarities that cut across the continent in terms of issues such as HIV/AIDS and the perennial reports of violence on women. In this special edition, we present some of the strongest sto-
ries we have carried in the past year. It has been a period of growth for us in terms of the ability to articu-
late the joys and pains of being African women.

How can it be otherwise when we are faced with the story of young Tanzanian women selling sexual favours in exchange for
maize as parts of the country suf-
ers under the grip of famine? We have repeatedly faced reports of women who have been infected with HIV in their marital beds, yet the legal and social regime in most countries fails to recognise women’s right to protect them-
seves from issues such as marital rape.

Yet women have refused to let their often disadvantaged positions stop them from giving their best: Take the case of Ghana’s Black Queens, who stormed their way in-
to the women’s soccer world cup despite being desperately neglect-
ed in favour of the men’s team which has recorded no victories worth speaking of in recent times. This is the true spirit of African women. We are survivors and have been since time immemorial. We are strong. We often hear talk of women who have had 10 children and more, and still managed to feed, clothe and educate them somehow. This is not to suggest that women should go out of their way to have large fami-
lies. It is just a pointer to the resilience of the African woman.

Amidst all the pain, we have carried stories of African women who have triumphed and made their mark on public life. They de-
serve a pat on the back for breaking through the barriers. It is only when there are enough women at the table that we will be able to bring our agenda to the table and get noticed.

Yet we have also found that women have largely failed to capitalise on the opportunities presented to us to change their world and that of their sisters. Even when they have been appointed to Cabinet, few have been able to translate authority into power.

It is important that women are able to bring their “softer” perspectives into is-
Says Ester Mchiwa, a mother of five, including teenaged girls: “What do you expect? A girl who has not eaten for days and knows of the extreme situation back home cannot refuse. She is only thinking of her survival.”

Selina Mirewa, mother of two

girls and three boys, told Africa-
woman: “We try to tell our daugh-
ters not to succumb to such invi-
tations, but the situation is very
tough. Many girls are thinking of
their own benefits, so they don’t
listen. We are forced to send our
girls there to sell charcoal so that
we get money to buy food. We
know of Aids and other diseases, but what to do?”

Ester Makasi, aged 18, says
many of her friends are involved in
the trade but she has not suc-
cumbed yet; she is being obedient
for her mother. “Even very young

First Lady Stella Obasanjo is on the warpath – not because
of the price increases on petroleum products or even in re-
gard to the lawsuit asking her and the wives of other
prominent leaders to account for money they have received
for their charity projects. She wants the wives of governors to stop
calling themselves first ladies. There is only one First Lady in Nige-
ria. Period. Her edict came on June 24, just six days before a nation-
al strike that paralysed business and government in Nigeria. She
was addressing the wives of governors of the 28 states under the
ruling Peoples Democratic Party, who gathered in Abuja for train-
ing on etiquette and protocol.

None of the governors’ wives has reacted in public to the direc-
tive, which has been widely interpreted here as a dangerous signal
of a potential slide into civilian dictatorship. Mrs Obasanjo is not
normally the voluble type, and her remarks coincided – unfortu-
nately for the First Couple – with a time of tension for her husband,
who has faced severe criticism for arbitrary and insensitive price in-
creases.

Churning with anger at the price increases, ordinary Nigerians have shown little restraint in expressing their pent-up feelings

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Memories of pain, death and despair

By Betty Muriuki, Kenya

The elderly women walked slowly down the dusty road, their steps heavy with sorrow. They had come to visit their loved ones who had perished in recent storms. The women were members of a local group that had been formed to provide support and comfort to those affected by the natural disaster. They carried flowers and candles, their faces sad and pained.

The women stopped at the entrance of the makeshift memorial. It was a simple structure made of wood and plastic sheeting. On it, they placed the flowers and lit the candles, their flames adding to the somber atmosphere.

The women then sat down on the ground, their backs against the memorial. They began to cry, their sobs echoing through the quiet street. They shared stories of their loved ones, their voices filled with grief and loss.

The women spoke of the young boy who had been swept away by a sudden flash flood, of the parents who had lost their only child, of the families who had been forced to leave their homes.

They also spoke of the hope, the resilience, the spirit of the people of Kenya. They spoke of the strength that came from within, that enabled them to endure and survive.

The women remained there, their presence a testament to the pain and the beauty that can be found in times of hardship. They knew that their loved ones would not be forgotten, that their memory would live on forever.


Sex-for-maize scandal rocks village

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reserves depleted. Since late Janu-
ary, there have been reports that vil-
lages have been subjected to de-
clothing and other forms of violence.

Dodoma is particularly prone to famine. The land is not ideal for food production. The main cash crop in the area is cotton, but there is no suitable soil for it. The government has been trying to diversify the economy, but progress has been slow.

Dodoma women and children have been affected by the crisis. Many have had to sell their food crops in order to survive. Others have had to sell their livestock. The situation is dire, and there is no sign of immediate relief.

Says Dodoma-based journalist Susama Sussama: “The problem is that women in Dodoma are the ones who are affected. They don’t have any reserves and they are vulnerable to exploitation.”

Many women have had to resort to prostitution to survive. They are forced to sell their bodies to survive, and the situation is causing a great deal of misery and suffering.

The crisis has also led to an increase in domestic violence. Women who are unable to provide for their families are often subjected to violence by their partners.

The government has been slow to respond to the crisis. There have been reports of food distribution points being understaffed and underfunded, and of the food itself being of poor quality.

But there is hope. The government is working with the United Nations and other international organizations to provide relief to those affected by the crisis. There is also a growing awareness of the problem, and a commitment to finding solutions.

Time to unleash our power

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and suffered horrendous injuries. They have been widely covered shovelling tears of pain at what they have wit- nessed.

But, far from seeing concrete action, we have instead seen an upsurge in crimes such as these. The challenge, then, is to move beyond tears and set up such high impact campaigns that we can begin to find lasting solutions to the problem.

It is not that there are no laws on the matter. The laws are there, and they are there to protect women. But, in practice, they are not enforced.

Women are afraid to report such crimes for fear of their safety. They are afraid of their partners or community members who might retaliate.

The problem is not just one of law enforcement. It is also one of social attitudes. Women are often seen as weak and powerless, and their experiences are often dismissed.

But there is hope. There are organizations and individuals who are working to raise awareness and provide support to victims of such crimes.

The time for action is now. It is time to unleash the power of women and ensure that their rights are respected. It is time to stand up for justice, for dignity, for equality.
Ghana’s Black Queens march against all the odds

By Audrey Dekaba, Ghana

Their hearts in the right place and little else to go by, Ghana’s Black Queens kicked their way to the fourth Pila Women’s World Cup hold from Sweden in June, four years after their maiden attempt. The team lost 2-0 to the USA in the opening match and went down 0-2 to less fancied Russia.

It was a vast improvement on their showing four years ago. Then they were hammered 7-0 by China, drew 1-1 with Australia and lost 0-2 to Sweden.

What ails the Queens? Despite the fact that they are very promising, the Queens have never received enough funding to ensure adequate training. A few days to the world tournament, the managers were compelled to launch an appeal for funds. The response was remarkably low. But even the very fact that they had to do so was an insult in itself. Before then, they had organised road shows and some friendly matches to boost their meagre kitty, but there was little to show for their efforts.

In contrast, the government doled out more than US$8,000 to be paid to the Black Queens as bonuses in their “must-win” African Cup of Nations qualifier against the Cranes of Uganda in Ramadi in June. The Stars could manage only a 1-1 draw. They were promised close to 40 million cedis each should they win the return leg with Rwanda in July in Kigali. Alas, the money remained safely in the government’s coffers.

Fuming after Ghana was kicked out of the World Cup, “grandma” Sackey (34) lashed out at officials of the Ghana Football Association, describing them as ineffective and inefficient and wondering what it takes to transform the game. “All they are interested in is interfering in issues which fall outside their domain,” she told Africa woman, apparently referring to alleged interference with Coach Oko Areyee’s training programme in the US.

Sackey — who has been in football, basketball and handball and only turned to football when she broke her arm — has decided not to retire and has offered to help the team qualify for the Olympic Games in Athens next year.

Despite the lack of support from the government, the women footballers have been rewarded amply by football. Sackey, Adjoa Bayor, Kulu Yahaya, Baselia Amoah-Tetteh and defender Elizabeth Raido are all on scholarships at the Robert Morris University in Chicago and Belinda Kanda is at the University of Ghana. The six foot tall Mimi Osei-Agyemang, daughter of an old footballer and now a business tycoon in the US, is a graduate of the Columbia Medical School.

The rest of the 18 members of the squad barely have junior secondary education and look up to soccer as their sole vehicle to financial success. Women’s soccer is still in its infancy in Ghana, however, international competitions like the World Cup that they can hope to get any cash.

Deputy Minister for Education, Joyce Amoako-Aggrey, a veteran sports journalist and avid critic of former sports authorities, now reckons that more money needs to be pumped into revitalising the sport. “After what I saw in Americ, I am more than convinced that women’s soccer has a future in Ghana and we need to pay more attention to it,” he says.

To the Black Queens, they won the African Cup of Nations four times. But it is a feat that has been equalled by Egypt and Cameroon. Their attempts to book a place in the World Cup have borne no fruit, making it even harder or to explain why the football association will not put its money where its mouth is — with the Queens.

Send our children to school — now!

By Sandra Njea, Zimbabwe

The message is loud and clear: invest in education, not war. Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon was dumbfounded.

He never thought African media women are all on scholarships at the University of Ghana. The six foot tall Mimi Osei-Agyemang, daughter of an old footballer and now a business tycoon in the US, is a graduate of the Columbia Medical School.

Of great concern is the brain drain of teachers from the developing nations as countries such as Britain continue to dangle hefty pay cheques in front of poorly remunerated teachers and other professionals. McKinnon said the ministers’ conference had agreed to set up a working group of senior Commonwealth educational officials to look into this matter and look at ways through which countries like Kenya that have announced free primary education for all will not be set back by a shortage of teachers.

Over 50 million children in the poor Commonwealth countries are out of school. Organisations such as Oxfam also made huge contributions in trying to lure the education ministers and the Commonwealth into fulfilling their millennium goals for education by 2015. “Warms words will not put one extra child into school,” said Malcolm Fleming of Oxfam. “The Commonwealth has an education crisis and rich countries must provide the funding they promised. All developing countries also need to prioritise getting children into school.”

In the keynote address, Commonwealth educationist Amartya Sen said: “If we continue to leave vast sections of the people of the world outside the orbit of education, we make the world not only less just, but also less secure.”

These sentiments were shared by many who attended the conference, who hoped that the heads of government meeting in Abuja would adopt strong measures to deal with the education crisis in the Commonwealth. Running concurrently with the conference was the first ever Youth Summit of Commonwealth students who came up with their own thoughts on how access to education could be improved in general.

These include the need to improve the quality of education, the need for young people to be directly involved in developing education systems, the selection of teachers, design and evaluation of resource materials and curriculum. Their views have been incorporated in a report being tabled before the Heads of State and Government.

The矿物质 education and other areas they want their leaders to talk about. These are: dealing with gender disparities in education, mitigating the impact of HIV/AIDS, supporting education in difficult circumstances, universal primary education, improving the quality of education and using distance learning or other methods.

Oxfam’s Head Mary Lafort-Lavigne told the conference that the lack of funding for education is a major barrier to achieving the millennium goals. McKinnon said the ministers’ conference had agreed to set up a working group of senior Commonwealth educational officials to look into this matter and look at ways through which countries like Kenya that have announced free primary education for all will not be set back by a shortage of teachers.

Aiming High: The Black Queens were a vastly improved side in the women’s soccer world cup.
One question only and the beauty queen lost her crown

By Jamillah Mwanjisi, Tanzania

University of Dar es Salaam law student Sylvia Bahame is Tanzania’s new beauty queen. Though some had reservations about her taking the title, there is consensus that she was the best of the 26 contestants — if not necessarily the most beautiful. That accolade rightly belonged to Nargis Mohamed, whom virtually everyone had put their money on. The trouble with Mohamed was simple: she may have been taller and slimmer, but she could not speak English well and failed to answer the critical question that would separate the commoners from the queen.

“Yes, she was beautiful and had a good figure but she could not speak one proper sentence in English,” says Rose Lungu, a beauty contest fan. “How could she represent Tanzania in the Miss World pageant? Bahame is smart. She is educated. She speaks perfect English.”

Even though Tanzania is the home of Kiswahili, which has just been declared one of the African Union’s official languages, it is English that is increasingly considered the measure of one’s education. Children in Tanzania’s public schools start learning English as a subject in standard three, at the age of 10. Kiswahili is the medium of instruction in public primary schools. The situation is reversed in secondary schools, with Kiswahili becoming the medium of communication in official matters only. By this time, however, most children have difficulty speaking English fluently.

The need for fluency has been brought home graphically to Tanzanians, however. Be it in the media, marketing, banking or hotel industries, people who can speak English fluently stand a better chance of landing a good job. This has set off a chain reaction, with parents paying through the nose for their children to attend private schools that teach in English. Private primary schools here charge between Sh200,000 and Sh600,000 (US$200 to 600) per term. This can only widen the gap between the rich and the poor, creating a vicious cycle of poverty for the majority of Tanzanians who live on less than a dollar a day.

A study done by Kuleana, a non-governmental organisation that advocates children’s rights, shows that many of the gains of the 1970s and 1980s — driven by policies and campaigns for better education — have been eroded by growing demands. Children fortunate enough to go to school face low quality education, overcrowded classrooms, poor teaching, lack of books and deteriorating structures.

Researchers and academics argue that Tanzania’s poor education system and the place of English in it have had a bigger impact on society than has been acknowledged. Says John Kiango, acting director of the Institute of Kiswahili Research, which promotes the use of the language:

“We don’t have inventors in Tanzania, but this does not mean we don’t have educated people. We do, but we can’t apply the theory to help us create new things. We learn theories in English but we don’t understand them enough. It is impossible to apply and use the knowledge.”

It is estimated that between 50 million and 80 million Africans speak Kiswahili. Most of them live in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Some southern African refugees who lived in eastern Africa in the 1970s and 1980s took the language back home to Mozambique, South Africa and Namibia. In Oman, Kiswahili is the second most common language after Arabic, from which it draws significantly.

Kiango and his institution see no reason why Kiswahili should be dropped as a medium of instruction in schools. Using the more familiar language will help children learn and understand the subjects better so they can apply that knowledge effectively, he says. “English and French should be taught, but properly, with qualified teachers and teaching aids,” he adds. “We can’t have it any other way.”

He points to countries such as Japan and Finland, where tuition is conducted in local languages — and which have benefitted tremendously from local inventions that have gone global. Why can’t we be proud of our language, which is spoken by more than 90 percent of Tanzania’s population? Why should we continue embarrassing ourselves like the beauty queen, who crammed the answer to the question but, even then, failed to say it the right way?

Minister for Education Joseph Mungai is adamant that English is here to stay as the language of instruction in secondary schools. If that is so, why not apply the policy across the board then, from kindergarten to the highest possible level?
Girls pay the price of negligence

By Yinka Shokunbi, Nigeria

It is estimated that there are 150 births per 1,000 Nigerian women aged between 15 and 49. As many as half of these could be teenagers. Along with the sexually active young population aged 10 to 24, 72 percent of boys and 81 percent of girls say they have practised contraception. Nevertheless, condoms and the rhythm method are the most practised contraception. Nevertheless, condoms and the rhythm method are the most practised contraception. Furthermore, contraceptives and the rhythm method are the most common and many do not practice contraception at all, and one result? Teenagers having children and abortions — and sometimes dying or becoming chronically ill in the process.

According to a survey of Cross River and Plateau states by the Planned Parenthood Federation of Nigeria, 65 percent of respondents consider teenage pregnancy a persistent problem. “Our recent survey of adolescents in the two states indicates that there is a problem on hand, not only in promoting responsible reproductive health but also in the fight against HIV/AIDS,” says O. Odusami, senior programme officer with the agency. “If the results from the two states are replicated in others, we are in trouble.”

The rise in teenage pregnancies can be attributed to poverty and unemployment, the search for material wealth and ignorance of matters sexual. Esiet believes, however, that sexual violence against girls by people supposed to be their guardians contributes significantly to the problem. “Sexual abuse takes many forms — including sexual harassment, unwanted sexual contacts, child marriage, rape, incest, prostitution and child trafficking,” notes Esiet. “Often, the perpetrators are not strangers but relatives, neighbours and acquaintances. The younger a girl is when she first experiences sexual intercourse, the higher the chances that the sex is coercive.”

The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development defined reproductive health as “complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of diseases or infertility in all matters relating to the reproductive system and to its functions”. It implies that people have the ability to have a “satisfying and safe sex life, and that they have the capability to reproduce and the freedom to decide if, when and how often to do so.”

Broadly speaking, this could be interpreted to mean that everyone, including young people, are entitled to accurate and unbiased sex education, reproductive health services, facilities and personnel in a friendly environment and a government back-up plan safeguarding their reproductive health interests at all times.

Although there are regulations supporting safe abortion and management of complications arising from abortions, there are no laws regulating the provision of abortion in Nigeria. Neither is there any law backing the provision of such services. Although the government is agreeable to abortion in order to save a woman’s life or to preserve her physical and mental health, this policy does not cover rape and incest.

More than 600,000 unsafe abortions are carried out in Nigeria annually and it is responsible for more than half of all pregnancies-related deaths and illness. Although there are many youth-friendly centres and clinics set up by non-governmental organisations, there seems to be little political will to deal with少女性 violence decisively. And most of these facilities are in urban centres and environments that only those with formal education can go to.

Those with little or no education consider them too “high-brow” for their comfort. Girls who work in homes or as apprentices do not often get to attend such clinics for counselling or assistance. For such centres to be relevant and accessible, government intervention will be necessary.

As things stand, the girls are driven out of school while their partners – who could be young, well-educated teachers or senior students – continue with their lives as if nothing happened.
here is a popular saying in Uganda that you cannot refuse a man, meaning a woman can never say “no” to a man’s sexual advances. Local legislators have tended this argument to the legal realm: they say that when women say “I do” they consent to sex any time, any place and any how. Consequently, there is no such thing as marital rape.

Yet a report released in Kampala in August 2003 indicates that Uganda’s fight against HIV/AIDS is greatly undermined by its failure to protect women from domestic violence and discrimination. Revelations that marital rape has greatly contributed to HIV/AIDS in women have led to renewed calls for urgent legislation to protect married women.

The 77-page report, Just Die Quietly: Domestic Violence and Women’s Vulnerability to HIV in Uganda, documents widespread rape and brutal attacks on women by their husbands. It is the first study to establish a direct relationship between HIV/AIDS and domestic violence and is based on interviews with 56 women and 120 local, religious and government leaders and non-governmental organisations.

The survey, conducted by Kenyan researcher and fellow at the Women’s Rights Division of the Washington-based Human Rights Watch Lisa Karanja, took place from December 2002 to January 2003 in the districts of Kampala, Butere, Iganga, Lira, Gulu and Tororo. Karanja also interviewed individual men and women from over 10 ethnic groups.

Harriet Abwoli, who is HIV-positive and has been treated at Mulago Hospital, told Human Rights Watch how her husband used to force her into sex. “He would beat and slap me when I refused. I never used a condom with him... When I gave birth, the child passed away, they told me I was HIV-positive. I cried. The doctor told me: ‘wipe your tears, the world is sick’.”

According to Karanja, many women became vulnerable to infection as a result of domestic violence in complex ways: “Most women saw domestic violence as an innate to marriage and viewed sex with their husbands as a marital obligation. Traditional attitudes that designate women as the physical property of their husbands deprived them of any authority over marital sexual relations.”

Cultural practices such as bride-price underscored men’s entitlement to dictate the terms for sex and to use force. Violence or the threat of it thus deprived women of their bodily integrity and compromised their ability to negotiate safe sex or even to determine the number and spacing of their own children.

Says the report: “In many cases, abandonment or eviction from home held even greater terror for those economically dependent women who, confronted by a hostile social environment, ignored their husbands’ adultery and acquiesced to their husbands’ demands for unprotected sex.”

Hadija Namaganda’s HIV-positive husband raped and beat her viciously, at one point biting off her ear. As he lay dying, too weak to beat her, he ordered his younger brother to continue doing so. “He used to force me to have sex even after he became sick. He would accuse me of having other men. He said he would cut me and throw me out. I didn’t know about condoms,” Namaganda reported.

“Being married should not be a death sentence for Ugandan women. Women should not give up their rights to physical security and sexual autonomy just because they get married,” says LaShawn Jefferson, the executive director of the Women’s Rights Division of Human Rights Watch. “Any success Uganda has experienced in its fight against HIV/AIDS will be shortlived if it does not address this urgent problem.”

Interventions focusing on fidelity, abstinence and condom use tend to minimise the complex causes of violence and incorrectly assume that women have equal decision-making power and status in the family. “Now we have a report in place with women’s voices talking about their experiences,” says Karanja. “It is incorrect to assume that women have access to decision-making in a home. Women are raped in their marriages and can’t protect themselves or even access information about protection.”

The coordinator of the Uganda Women’s Network, Jackie Asimwe-Mwesige, says the report confirms the need to hasten reforms to discriminatory laws. Women find it difficult to adopt the safe sex strategy since very few of them can actually negotiate it in relationships. “The pace of reform is so slow and does not take into account the number of women dying daily from domestic violence,” she adds.

Human Rights Watch has urged the Ugandan government to enact domestic violence laws and make women’s health, physical integrity and equal rights in marriage a central focus of AIDS programming. Local women’s rights activists have had little luck asking the government to pass laws addressing domestic relations, rape and battery of women by their intimate partners.

According to Asimwe-Mwesige, the problem with marital rape is that even women view it as the ordinary wear and tear of marriage.

This viewpoint is supported by the evidence of Masturah Tibejywa, a 46-year-old living with HIV/AIDS: “He never forced me into sex. He would beat me for other things but not sex. There were times I had sex with him when I didn’t want to. I would just do it. What could I do? In our tradition, the men don’t physically force you – but then they don’t need to.”

HIV/AIDS donor assistance to Uganda continues to be considerable. Uganda is one of 14 African countries slated to receive five years of Aids programme support from the United States. In February, the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria signed a grant worth over US$36 million to support Uganda’s ongoing fight against HIV/AIDS.

Human Rights Watch has urged the donors to ensure that Aids prevention programmes specifically target domestic violence, including sexual violence in marriage, as core components of their strategies.

**Marriage should not be a death sentence**

By Nabusagii L. Wamboka, Uganda

**“My husband would beat and slap me when I refused. I never used a condom with him ... When I got pregnant, I went for a medical check-up. When I gave birth, the child passed away, they told me I was HIV-positive. I cried. The doctor told me: ‘wipe your tears, the world is sick’.”**
Africa

SPECIAL ISSUE 7

World opinion is the first casualty of the war on Iraq

By Susan Naa Sekyere, Ghana

U

S President George Bush went to war on the understanding that his forces would disarm Saddam Hussein and free the Iraqi people, not destroy them. Was that why cruise missiles and sophisticated bombs never seen before rained on Baghdad?

Take note of this too: Civilians were not to be targeted. But they were still injured, inadvertently or not, in their thousands. And by the minute. Pregnant women miscarried and vulnerable people died of heart attacks.

The Americans told a world wary of this invasion that the whole exercise would take three days. It took them three bloody and messy weeks to take Baghdad. But those are the gruesome realities of war, brought to the world live by the international media.

It is these disturbing images, perhaps, that have led some to call for the resignation of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan.

His critics say he shouldn’t have withdrawn his weapons inspectors, that he should have left them there to be bombed out of existence alongside the ordinary Iraqis. After all, even journalists died there too.

Would the coalition forces have targeted their bombs more accurately had the weapons inspectors stayed? We will never know. What clearly emerged from the war was a world of divided opinions.

Some would say that this opinion business was the first casualty of the war. Did America not defy the United Nations and some of its European allies with its decision to start the war?

Throughout the world, ordinary women and men protested loudly, with some even taking to the streets on every continent. Indeed, it was the first time in the history of mankind that so many voices rose against war. But the warmongers paid no heed.

That loud “No” was ignored.

Before the start of the war, the African Union, Ecowas and other regional bodies added their voice to those cautioning against war and its likely effect on Iraqi civilians. Perhaps the boldest of the African leaders was Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and his predecessor, Nelson Mandela.

Seeing as South Africa is one of the select few countries that are on the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) programme of the US, you might think they would not want to risk sticking their necks out and choose to simply hide behind regional groupings. The only other protests came from Kenya, where there were demonstrations against the war.

And what of the leaders in the Middle East, many of whom did not so much as lift a finger, some preferring to ask Saddam to go into exile, ostensibly to save his country from destruction?

What did their silence mean? Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi condemned the American military operation but quickly added that Iran would not take sides in the conflict. Vocal opposition was left to ordinary people in the Arab world.

Thirty clear days after the start of the war, Jordan’s King Abdullah finally spoke out against it on April 2. Better late than never.

Unlike his peers in Africa, he at least made his opinion known. King Abdullah deployed the civil casualties, saying: “As a father, I feel the pain of every Iraqi family and child.”

Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the war on Iraq was a “black mark in history, with the new world now realising that it is right”. That country’s conservative Islamic opposition party went so far as to predict the eventual downfall of the United States. Other Muslim groups described it not as an attack on Islam but on humanity.

It is all over for Saddam Hussein and his cohorts. But as the world waits to learn the fate of the former Iraqi leaders, one question remains unanswered: Did Saddam really have chemical weapons of mass destruction? And if he did, why were they not unleashed on the American forces? Not that anyone’s opinion matters, of course, except that of President George Bush.

Perhaps President Bush should have played football with Saddam

By Margaret Ziribaggwa, Uganda

Sport is all about the spirit of friendship and togetherness. Rarely does any match end in acrimony and some players form lasting relations on and off the pitch. When it comes to national teams, the fans routinely forget their political differences, cheering and demonstrating their loyalty as one nation.

Sport can also override military and political tensions between countries. Uganda and Rwanda have had difficult relations for a long time, each country accusing the other of training its rebels. The Ugandan government believes that top soldiers Samson Mande and Anthony Kyakakha, who deserted the national army, have used a base in Rwanda to train their rebels.

Rwanda argues that the murderous Interahamwe have been trained and sheltered by the Ugandans. In March, Rwanda went to the extent of deploying armed forces on its border with Uganda.

Despite these tensions, Uganda Cranes and Rwanda’s Amavubi honoured an Africa Cup of Nations qualifying match at Amahoro stadium in Rwanda.

Rwanda’s President Paul Kagame watched the March 29 game. The Rwandese were overwhelmed by 6,000 Ugandan fans who turned up to cheer their national team, most of them dressed in distinct national colours and singing patriotic songs in favour of their country and president.

Looking upon the hospitality the Rwandese laid out for their guests, it was difficult to believe that the two countries had ever had political differences. The match ended in a goalless draw and the return leg is due in June, this time in Kampala.

The unity that sport can create is a vital part of any reconciliation process. Leopold Lant and I had accepted to travel to Zimbabwe for their cricket world cup game, there might well have been an opportunity to resolve the political standoff between the two countries. The players would have shaken hands and upheld the principle of fair play, setting an example for the political players. Who knows, the Americans would have thought the better of invading Iraq – and avoided the senseless killing – had the two countries worn out their differences on the pitch?

We need a new motto for the 21st Century: Make sport, not war.

Press freedom under threat!

They came, 700 of them, from the local and foreign media. Accreditation was chaotic but they managed to get their passes. The passes only allowed them access to go to the media centre and at least the People’s Forum. Unfortunately they had no access to the conference centre where the Heads of Governments were to meet, it was by invitation only. Once the invitations were given, the journalists were not allowed to ask questions or conduct interviews.

So what is the point of accrediting journalists to go to a conference and not give them access to the hub of information? If this is not press freedom under threat in the Commonwealth, what else is?

Where are the beggars in Abuja?

As the dignitaries began to arrive, the beggars started to disappear from the streets of Abuja, and the men in black replaced them. They have been kept away for the duration of the visit. Our camera crew bumped into two police vehicles and a lorry. The boys and girls in black would stop, pick up a beggar and hoist him or her into the lorry… Well this is what happens when your country hosts a major conference.

Obasanjo probably wanted to impress his colleagues in the Commonwealth, hoping to portray a clean house and probably reduced poverty levels.

When President Bush visited Kampala Uganda early this year, all the people living within the radius of 20km from Entebbe Airport were paid to stay away from their homes for the duration of Bush’s stay.

When former US President Bill Clinton visited Tanzania, and met with the heads of states from Kenya, Uganda and the host country, the leaders’ sitting positions were all changed at one point, so that no one was sitting in the same place as before. The streets were cleaned with soap and water, yet the people who pay the taxes do not enjoy such clean streets.

Talk of irony…

The sirennical music

Every other hour, there was music in the air as sirens blared to announce that a VIP was passing by. One wonders whether there are such birds when African presidents go to Europe or other developed countries. You can have all the convoys you want, but stop the noise pollution…
Democracy, censorship a tough mix

By Caroline Somanjane, Malawi

As it moves to repeal oppressive censorship laws dating back to 1986, Malawi finds itself between the devil and the deep blue sea. The ruling regime ruthlessly used the Censorship and Control of Entertainment Act to suppress dissent: one could be jailed for 18 months and fined 200 kwacha with the law are now jailed for six months and fined 200 kwacha (about $12.71/). The emphasis is on regulation and not on content, which is no international preferred method of regulating entertainment, publications and films, says the commission.

But Emmie Chanka, executive director of the Civil Liberties Commission, which is internationally preferred method of regulating entertainment, publications and films, says the commission.

The Malawian government argues that banning entertainment material does not contravene freedom of expression and people's right to information – especially adults.

The bill says the X-Rated material will be allowed for personal use only and not for public exhibition, but this has not appeased critics who see pornography written large all over the country's many video shops that are largely out of control of the authorities.

The chair of the special law commission, Supreme Court of Appeal Judge Anastasia Msosa, believes the changes are the country's advancement because “people will be able to explore their talents to the full” but expresses doubt as to whether Malawi has the capacity to monitor the law effectively.

The bill provides for stiffer penalties for offenders. Theatre managers or owners who fail to comply with the law will now be jailed for six months and fined 200 kwacha (about $12.71/). In the new scheme of things, they will be locked up for three years and be fined 250,000 kwacha (about $12.71/). “The emphasis is on regulation and not on content, which is no international preferred method of regulating entertainment, publications and films, says the commission.

The first lady syndrome

July 3, a columnist had this to say: “Mrs Obasanjo clearly has an ego bigger than those of the two Maryams.”

The first lady syndrome is a phenomenon where the first lady of a country can have a significant influence on the government. It is often seen when the first lady becomes involved in public affairs and uses her status and influence to promote various causes or initiatives.

The phenomenon of the first lady syndrome has been observed in many countries around the world. It typically occurs when the first lady uses her position to promote various causes or initiatives, often at the expense of the government's official agenda.

The first lady syndrome can have both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, it can help to bring attention to important issues and make them more visible to the public. On the other hand, it can also lead to the exclusion of other voices and perspectives from the decision-making process.

In some cases, the first lady syndrome has been viewed as a positive force for change. For example, in some African countries, first ladies have been known to use their influence to promote women's rights, education, and health care.

However, the phenomenon of the first lady syndrome has also been subject to criticism. Some argue that it can be used to divert attention from the government's official agenda and can lead to the exclusion of other voices and perspectives from the decision-making process.

Regardless of the specific concerns, the first lady syndrome is a phenomenon that is likely to continue to be relevant in many countries around the world. It is a reminder of the complex and multifaceted nature of leadership, and the need to balance the role of the first lady with the role of the government as a whole.