THE USE OF MERCENARIES IN THE MANAGEMENT OF INTERNAL ARMED CONFLICT IN AFRICA: IMPLICATIONS FOR STABILITY.

Achonwa Ugochukwu, Onyekwere Anthony, Agwanwo Destiny
Department of Sociology
Kingsley OzumbaMbadiwe University Ogboko, Imo State
Email-achonwa2013@gmail.com.
GSM- 08038395431, 08066735023 (WhatsApp)

Abstract
Peaceful co-existence has remained elusive in some African countries due to myriads of internal armed conflicts. Relying majorly on desktop research, the study examined the role of mercenaries in the management of internal armed conflict in Africa. Findings reveal that the activities of mercenaries stand at daggers-drawn with the stability of African countries. Majorly driven by economic gains, mercenaries further worsen the conflict situation in their countries of operation. The study hence recommends among others that African countries should deepen peace-making strategies to forestall internal armed conflicts. The use of mercenaries should not be considered even in the face of full blown internal armed conflict.
Keywords: Conflict, internal armed conflict, mercenaries, stability.

Introduction
        The history of human society is replete varied accounts of conflict. According to Ramesh (2025) early human conflicts were centred on competition for essential resources like water, land and trade routes which later evolved into struggles for political dominance and territorial expansion, say of the Roman and Mongolian empires. Ideological motivations as seen in the crusades often intertwined with economic interests shaping the nature of conflict throughout history. Modern wars, including the world wars and cold war were driven by nationalism industrialization and ideological rivalries.

        Conflict took place in every year of the 20th century. The world was free from the violence caused by war for only very short periods of time. It has been estimated that 187 million people died as a result of war from 1900 to the present (Imperial War Museums,2025).

        The continent of Africa has witnessed myriads of conflicts. Almost all African countries have experienced some form of conflict. The fragile circumstances and transitions they have experienced from independence struggles to post-independence and the search for stability and state-building processes have left scars and unaddressed issues that have created the sources of conflict (Gluhbegovic,2016).

    Africa comes second in the number of armed conflicts per region with more than 35 non-international armed conflicts (NIACS)taking place in Burkina Faso,Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Mali, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan. Several armed groups fighting against government forces and/or against each other are involved in these conflicts (Geneva Academy,ND). It is estimated that Africa loses about US$18 billion a year because of conflict and armed violence (Oxfam cited in Gluhbegovic, 2016).

        A lot of studies have been conducted on conflict in Africa. Most of such studies focused on the causes of such conflicts. Others revolved around the effects of such conflicts. Studies have equally focused on the conventional methods to conflict management. There is however paucity/ dearth of studies/literature on the use of mercenaries in the management of internal armed conflict in Africa. It is hence such gap in literature that this study attempts to fill.

Theoretical Framework (Talcott Parson's AGIL Model)
        Talcott Parson's AGIL model is adopted for this work.
        For Parson, society can never be viewed in any other way except as an organism whereby its parts are contributing to the maintenance of the larger organism or whole. From this perspective, the large system is in trouble if one or more of its parts are in trouble or if there is disorganization or disintegration of the

parts (Opara, 2001). Parson in his AGIL model describes the universal functions that every social system must fulfil (Wickert, 2025).

The AGIL framework proposed by Parson is a model that identifies four key functions that any social system must perform to ensure its survival and stability (Sociology. Institute, 2022). These four functions are:

Adaptation: This refers to the relationship between the system and its environment (Opara, 2001). It involves the ability of society to acquire resources such as food and adjust to its environment (Sociology. Institute, 2022).

Goal Attainment: This refers to the need for societies to set goals towards which social activity is directed (Opara, 2001).

Integration: This refers primarily to the adjustment of conflicts. It is concerned with the coordination and adjustment of the parts of the social system (Opara, 2001). This function refers to the need for social systems to ensure that the various parts of society are working together (Sociology. Institute, 2001).

Latency (Pattern Maintenance): This refers to the maintenance of the basic patterns or values institutionalized in the system (Opara, 2001). It ensures that cultural values are passed down and reinforced preserving societal order over time (Sociology. Institute, 2022).

Following Parson's scheme, the use of mercenaries in the management of internal armed conflict represents attempts by societies to fulfil/perform their integration role. Mercenaries are co-opted to resolve conflicts necessarily required for the maintenance of order and survival of such societies. Whether invited by established authorities or insurgents, the overall aim is to restore order/stability needed for the survival of such societies.

The Concept of Conflict

Conflict refers to an active disagreement between people with opposing opinions or principles. It involves fighting between two or more groups of people or countries (Cambridge dictionary,2025). Conflict is the result of a disagreement between actors on the basis of perceived incompatible goals (Herbert,2017). Conflict is the perceived incompatibility of interests, needs and goals between two or more parties (State of Minnesota Department of Administration, ND). Conflict involves a situation when one group is fighting for independence or increased social, political or economicpower(e.gSudan/South Sudan, Syria (Malek, 2013).

The Concept of Internal Armed Conflict

Internal armed conflict refers to conflicts involving citizens fighting for internal change. Some are secessionist movements generally spearheaded by a group of people more often than not a minority within a community who take up arms to fight for the establishment of either an autonomous entity within an existing state or an entirely new and independent state of their own (United Nations, ND). Internal armed conflict involves the use of armed forces within the boundary of one state between one or more armed groups. Different terms can cover such situations: rebellion, revolution, internal disturbances, violence, terrorism, guerrilla warfare, resistance, internal uprising, civil war of self-determination (Haye,2009)

A second and larger category of armed conflicts within states often involves a group of people who are armed and ready to fight for the goal of seizing governmental power. Sometimes conflicts are matters of organized crime as opposed to politics. Money is the motivator for these groups. Unlike members of secessionist movements such groups are generally prepared to continue to live in the same territory with other groups regardless of the outcome of the conflict (Ayers, 2000).

Most armed conflicts are fought not only by regular armies but also by militias and armed civilians with little discipline and with ill-defined chains of command. Fighting in most conflicts is usually intermittent, with a wide range in intensity. It usually occurs not on well-defined battle field but in and around communities and is often characterized by personalized acts of violence such as atrocities committed by former neighbours and in extreme cases genocide in some cases. The fighting spills over to neighbouring

countries used by one of the parties in the conflict as supply routes or hideouts for combatants (United Nations, ND).

Home grown weapons such as matches and spears, maim many in armed conflicts but imported machine guns, grenades, mortars and armoured vehicle kill many more. The weapons are acquired by warring parties either through currency purchases or through what is known as parallel financing which involves the sale or barters of goods such as diamonds, oil, timber and coffee. Brief cease fires characterize most armed conflicts (United Nations, ND).

The Concept of Mercenaries

Mercenaries or private military and security companies provide armed security service, police and military training, intelligence gathering and analysis, participate in peace keeping missions and complete other tasks (Skuratova & Kokolkora 2020). They perform such roles which had traditionally been performed by the army and police (Nebolisa cited in Skuratova etal 2020).

Mercenaries are usually known to freelance their labour and skill to a party in foreign conflicts for fees higher and above those of native counterparts (Addo, 2024). Mercenaries or private military and security personnel tend to work in an area of armed conflicts, exposing their lives to immediate danger and unlike military personnel, they are not afforded any legal guarantees (Lehnardt, cited in Skuratovaetal 2020). Mercenaries generally provide various services to their clients some of which include under taking subversive acts against sitting governments and supporting a specific faction (either state or non- state actors) in armed conflicts for specific gains (Addo, 2024).

Article 1 (1) of the Convention of the OAU for the Elimination of Mercenaries in Africa (CEMA) (1977) defines a mercenary as any person who:
a) is specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict
b) does in fact take a direct part in the hostilities
c) is motivated to take part in the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a party to the conflicts
d) is not a member of the armed forces of a party to the conflicts
e) is not sent by a state other than a party to the conflict on official mission as a member of the armed forces of the said state.

Mercenaries can imply both re-cycled combatants who are non-nationals nor resident in the territory of a state party to a conflict but engages in direct hostility on behalf of a state or non- state actor group within the core or periphery of the territory of conflict (Addo,2024).

Mercenaries or private military and security personnel involved in armed conflicts are nationals of third states not involved in armed conflict. The contracts they enter into often do not contain any provisions for on the actual nature of work involving participation in hostilities, further constraining their access to obtain medical care and compensation in the event of injury or death (Skuratovaetal 2020).

Conceptualizing Stability

Societal stability refers to the condition in which society functions effectively without significant disruption, conflict or upheaval. It encompasses the balance between various social, political and economic forces that contribute to a cohesive and orderly community (AP US government, ND). It is the degree to which a society and its institutions remain predictable and reliable (Spacey, 2024). Societal stability refers to the capacity of a community or nation to maintain functional order and adaptability over time allowing inhabitants to live securely (Sustainability Directory,2025).

It entails a condition of societal harmony and order whereby institutions and societal structures function optimally to maintain peace and predictability.

Mercenaries' involvement in internal armed conflict in Africa

Mercenaries have been involved in a number of conflicts and attempts at constitutional change of government in different parts of Africa including west, south and central Africa. These mercenary activities

date back from the post-colonial era to the current 21st century (Kuffuor, 2000). Mercenaries have been recruited either by established governments trying to hold on to their authority or by rebel movements committed either to overthrowing the government. For example, during the 1960s in Kinshasha in the Congo, Moise Tshombe the prime minister at the time relied on services of mercenaries for military support. Mercenaries have also played roles in the abortive invasions of guinea in 1970 and Benin in 1977. Attempts were made by mercenaries to over throw the government of Seychelles in 1981 (Kuffuor,2000).

Notorious mercenaries like Bob Benard fought in various parts of Africa mounting a coup in Benin in 1967 with only 60 paratroopers "Mad mike" Hoare also gained a reputation for his mercenary activities in the Seychelles in 1977 and 1982. In the post-cold war era, mercenaries have acquired an executive, or corporate identity. They package themselves neatly as defenders of legitimate regimes and claim to ensure peace and stability (Musah and Fayomi, 2000). In post-cold war Africa, former soldiers from south African's security forces claim that their operations in two of Africa's brutal wars Angola and Sierra Leone were aimed at restoring law and order (Obiukwu, 2013).

The need for mercenaries in most African Civil War situations has arisen from the lack of certain military skills among the combatants and the belief that mercenaries are equipped to supply these skills (Warhistory.org/@msw/a, 2024). Mercenaries have become increasingly influential as states across Africa find their armies unable to limit the widening reach of armed groups (Durmaz and Abdullahi, 2022). The private military outfits provide a range of services in African states including training, logistical support and even undertaking combat (Durmaz et al, 2022).

Private military companies (PMCS) like Executive Outcomes (EO) were contracted by the governments in Angola 1993 and Sierra Leone in 1995 to fight in civil wars against rebel groups. In march 2004, 64 alleged mercenaries supposedly transiting Zimbabwe to Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) had their aircraft compounded by the Zimbabwean police.

These men have subsequently been associated with coup against-president Teodoro Obiang Nguema of oil-rich Equatorial Guinea (Addo,2024) SandlineInternational (SI), Branch Energy (BE) and the Gurkha Security Guard (GSG) had at some points played mercenary roles in Africa (Achonwa, 2025).

Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Cote D'Ivoire among others have experienced civil wars fought by a mix of combatants who are either nationals or non-nationals. These combatants are seen in different conflicts especially in the Mano River Basin (MRB) (including Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea) and Cote D'Ivoire and have participated in on-going disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme of those countries (Addo, 2024).

The UN Special Rapporteur made the first mention of private companies providing military services in armed conflict in 1994. It was noted that former soldiers were recruited by the South African Executive Outcome company to participate in hostilities in Angola supporting UNITA rebels. This was in contravention of Angola's legislation at the time. Private companies were often involved in armed conflicts both by the Governments and by non-state armed groups. For example,"Sandline International" contracted by the Government of Papua New Guinea gathered intelligence, conducted military offensives in Bougainville, supplied arms, ammunition and military equipment to the scene of hostilities. At the same time, the Defence Forces were placed under the command of the company's personnel (Skuratova et al, 2020).

The countries of Libya and Burkina Faso have been fingered as the backers of the Liberia-organized Movement for Justice and Peace (MPJ) and Ivorien popular Movement for the Great west (MPIGO) (Ado,2024). Some mercenaries were also believed to have transited from Ghana into Cote d'Ivoire from south Africa to help the Gbagbo government contain the rebel insurgency in the country (Tuma, 2002). Names like Felix Doh, Sackie Aloysius and Sumo William are taken to have recruited and deployed Liberians and Sierra Leoneans in Cote d'Ivoire for armed attack on Aaname, Man and Touleplean (Global Witness Report, 2003).

The Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) witnessed the use of white mercenaries on both sides. Three kinds of mercenaries were used; pilots on the Federal side, pilots and soldiers on the Biafran side and relief pilots employed by the humanitarian relief organizations assisting Biafra.French mercenaries led a Biafran Force in a failed attempt of December 1967 to recapture Calabar. In the Nigerian civil war, British mercenaries fought for the federal side against French mercenaries on Biafran side to perpetuate existing Anglo-French rivalries in Africa. The French government supported the use of its mercenaries in Biafra since it saw potential political advantage to itself if the largest Anglophone country on the continent should be splintered (Warhistory.org/@msw/a, 2024).

Most of the combatants who fought civil wars in the Mano River Basin (MRB) for over a decade and participated in disarmament and demobilizationprogrammes in the Mano River Basin. These mercenaries fought those wars mainly for the economic gains derived from such activities and are usually attracted to regions blessed with mineral resources such as diamonds, timber and oil which provided the financial and material basis for the sustenance of their activities (Addo, 2024). Sierra Leone offers a different variant of engagement. In Sierra Leone, private military companies such as GSG, Executive Outcome (EO), SI, BE, HOG and DIN were contracted by the late Captain Valentine Strasser (1995) and President Ahmed Tejan Kabba's government to guard and protect the diamond mines, ward-off and train local militias and members of the Sierra Leonean Army to fight the RUF insurgency in exchange for financial and material gains (Musah, 2002). Behind some of these companies are names like Tony Buckingham and Tony Spicer who helped Sierra Leone government backed the Kamajor Militia some of whom are believed to be based in Guinea to contain the RUF insurgency and protect sensitive installations in the country for material and other gains (Addo, 2024).

In the chaos of the Republic of the Congo (1960-66) mercenaries were labelled "Les Affreux". In Katanga under Tshombe, they were used to stiffen the local gendarmerie; later they were organized in battalions in their own, numbering one to six commandos as a fighting force to maintain Tshombe's secession. There were originally 400 European mercenaries in Katanga during the secession. This number rose to 1500 during the Simba revolt which affected much of the Congo. These mercenaries came from a range of backgrounds. They include British colonials, ex-Indian Army, combat experienced French soldiers from Algeria, World War II RAF pilots from Rhodesia and South Africa and Belgian paratroopers (Warhistory.org/@msw/a, 2024).

Mercenariesand Stability in Africa

The lack of success of Executive Outcomes (EO) not only in Sierra Leone but also in Angola and of Sandline International in Sierra Leone undermines the assumption that such actors can provide stability. SandlineInternaional failed to defeat the rebel forces in Sierra Leone (Obiukwu, 2013). Killing of citizens in Mali by mercenaries raise concerns about their disregard for human rights norms during operation. Brutal and indiscriminate use of force has resulted in significant civilian casualties in countries where mercenaries operate particularly Mali and CAR (Soumahoro, 2023).

Mercenaries in Africa by their brutal behaviour and racism have done great damage to the white cause on the continent. They have proved less than able soldiers. They have often quit when their own lives were in danger rather than do the job for which they had been paid (Warhistory.org/@mswla, 2024).

In 1987, the UN Commission on Human Rights appointed a Special Rapporteur on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of people to self-determination with a mandate to study among others the methods of recruiting mercenaries to take part in armed conflict. In 2005, the mandate expired. Upon analysing the state of practice of African States, the Special Rapporteur concluded that Governments allow the recruitment of mercenaries enlisted via private military companies. He also noted that the notion of mercenaries was developing, transforming and could often hide behind the façade of private military companies providing assistance and expertise. The key ideas of the UN Special Rapporteur on the activities of mercenaries in Africa include:

- Upholding peace is an inherent obligation that a state cannot delegate.

- As they progress and develop, private military companies may create a real threat to the governments.
- Outsourcing state functions to private companies will not limit state sovereignty.

As a result of the study, the Special Rapporteur suggested that such companies be prohibited as they encourage mercenary activities (Skuratova et al, 2020).

Ero (cited in Obiukwu 2013) noted that the use of mercenaries in conflict handling in Africa is counter-productive. Mercenaries are lawless and further destabilize or fuel conflicts in regions that are already volatile. Kimberling (2025) notes that the presence of mercenaries tends to increase state fragility, perpetuate exploitation and undermine sovereignty while yielding limited security gains for the authoritarian regime.

Former Liberian president Charles Taylor has always been blamed for plunging the Mano River Basin (MRB) into conflicts by recruiting professional and experienced combatants who have fought in different civil wars in the MRB. The blame stem from the open declaration by the warlord that he would make Sierra Leone and by extension Guinea pay for lending support to anti-National Patriotic Front of Liberia NPFL) elements in the Liberian Civil War in his attempt to take over power from the Doe regime (Addo, 2024). A 2003 Global witness Report bluntly accused the former president of Liberia, Charles Taylor of being behind the instability witnessed in the Mano River areas and Cote d'Ivoire and for having recruited most of the combatants in the region. The former warlord Charles Taylor allegedly remained a financier for the training of militia and import illegal arms and ammunitions. Charles Taylor invited Cote d'Ivoire with armed mercenaries and planned to destabilize Sierra Leone with elements of former Revolutionary Unit Front (RUF).

Conclusion

The use of mercenaries has become a conflict management approach within the continent of Africa. Private military and security companies, re-cycled combatants from other countries offer themselves as willing tools and have been hired by state and non-state actors for the management of internal armed conflict in Africa. The activities of such mercenaries however have not produced the much-expected result as they end up further polarizing and establishing the entity they are required to stabilize.

The stability of countries of Africa will remain at the threshold as long as mercenaries who are majorly driven by economic motive are drafted to manage conflicts in such countries.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made:

- African countries should go extra mile in using peace-keeping (negotiation, mediation, conciliation) to resolve internal conflicts before such degenerate into armed conflicts.
- The use of mercenaries should not be considered as an option by African countries even in the face of full blown internal armed conflict.
- Peace-keeping instruments like ECOMOG, African Standby Force should be re-modelled and strengthened for effectual conflict handling roles in Africa.

References

Addo, P (2024). Mercenaries in West Africa: A threat to Ghana's democracy? Retrieved on the 12th of November 2025 from www.kaiptc.org>uploads>2017/03.

AP US Government, (ND) Societal Stability. Retrieved on the 13th of November 2025 from fiveable-me/key.terms/a

Ayers, W. (2000). A world flying apart? Violent nationalist conflict and the end of the cold war. Journal of Peace Research 37 (1) 105-117.

Cambridge Dictionary (2025). Conflict. Retrieved on the 6th of November 2025 from dictionary.cambridge.org.

Durmaz, M and Abdullahi, M (2022) White hands: The rise of private armies in African Conflict. Retrieved on the 15th of November 2025 from aljazeera.com/features/

Geneva Academy (ND) Today's armed conflicts. The Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights. Retrieved on the 6th of November 2025 from Geneva-academy-ch/gal.

Global Witness Report (2003). The usual suspect. Retrieved on the 7th of November 2025 from www.globalwitness.org

Gluhbegovic, R (2016). Types of Conflict in Africa. EIJA Occasional Paper AP8. Retrieved on the 15th of October 2025 from www.eisa.org>storage>2023/05

Haye, E (2009). Towards a workable definition of internal armed conflicts. Retrieved on the 20th of November 2025 from Cambridge.org/core/boc.

Herbert, S (2017). Conflict Analysis. Retrieved on the 11th of November 2025 from gsdre.org/topic-guides/…

Imperial War Museum (2025) Timeline of 20th and 21st century wars. Retrieved on the 22nd of November 2025 from iwm.org.uk/history/time.

Kimberling, J. (2025) The business of war: The resurgence of mercenaries and the shaping of modern African states. Retrieved on the 15th of November 2025 from researchgate.net/public.

Kufuor, K (2000) The OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenaries and Civil Conflicts in Musah A & Fayemi K (eds) Mercenaries: African Security Dilemma. London: Pluto Press

Mercenaries in Africa. Retrieved on the 12th of November 2025 from warhistory.org/@mswla.

Musah, A & Fayemi, K (eds) (2000). Mercenaries: An African Security Dilemma. London: Pluto Press

Musah, A (2002) A country under siege: State Decay and Corporate Military Invention in Sierra Leone in Musah A & Fayemi K (eds) Mercenaries: An African Security Dilemma. London: Pluto Press.

Obiukwu, A (2013) Democratizing ECOWAS with mercenaries (1990-2013). Unpublished.

Opara, A (2001). History of Social thought (From Pre-classical epoch to Romanticism). Owerri: Cel-Bez Publishing Company.

Ramesh, S (2025) War and Conflict: The Last 3000 years of human history. Retrieved on the 20th of November 2025 from researchgate.net/public…

Skuratova, A, Koroikova, E (2020) Private military and security companies in international law. Retrieved on the 16th of November 2025 from researchgate.net/public.

Sociology. Institute, (2022). Talcott Parson and Robert K Merton: Pillars of Sociological Functionalism. Retrieved on the 26th of December 2025 from sociology.institute>talcott>Parsons-rober…

Soumahoro, M (2024) The AU takes aim at Africa's new brand of mercenaries. Institute For Security Studies. Retrieved on the 11th of November 2025 from issafrica.org>isstoday>the-au-takes-al.

Spacey, J (2024). Examples of Societal Stability. Retrieved on the 10th of November 2025 from simplecable.com/society.

State of Minnesota Department of Administration (ND). Understanding Conflict. Retrieved on the 5th of November 2025 from beyond intractability.org/.

Sustainability Directory (2025). Societal stability. Retrieved on the 15th of November 2025 from suatainability-directory.com

Tuma, J (2002) Mercenaries on the loose again in Africa. The Tehran Times, September 9.

United Nations (ND) Armed conflicts and their consequences- the United Nations. Retrieved on the 15th of November 2025 from www.un.org>15armed conflict.

Wickert, C. (2025). Talcott Parson – the Social System (1951). SozTheo. Retrieved on the 26th of December 2025 from Soztheo.com/sociology.