



PEOPLE BUILDING TRUST

A tireless African peacemaker

Seen here at Kofi Annan's shoulder, Algerian diplomat Mohamed Sahnoun has spent 30 years resolving conflicts. Andrew Stallybrass finds out how... and why.

It's a striking photograph. It was taken two years ago in Darfur: Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, is on his knees, under a tree, in a patch of shade, talking with tribal elders. At his shoulder (3rd from left) is Mohamed Sahnoun, a senior Algerian international civil servant and diplomat, with

'When people have been so deeply wounded, the healing of memory becomes very important'

a lifetime's experience of Africa. They went 'to find out from the victims themselves,' says Sahnoun. 'I was very affected, and the Secretary-General was, too. Even if you've seen such traumas before, you are marked again – people driven from their homes, rape, violence.'

Sahnoun has seen so many such situations at first hand over the years. He has been involved with Sudan for over 30 years – he was involved in negotiations in 1972, under the auspices of the Organization of African Unity (OAU, now the African Union) and the Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie. 'There are so many ethnic and regional differences to play on,' he says. 'When people have been so deeply wounded, the healing of memory becomes very important. But it is shocking to see such things in the 21st century – the total breakdown of the state,' he

says, speaking of Somalia, another crisis spot which he knows well.

The Somali disaster, according to the NGO Human Rights Watch, has 'drawn attention to the negligence of the international community, notably the United Nations, in failing to prevent a foreseeable tragedy... UN diplomatic and humanitarian interventions were late, inept, and done more with an eye to publicity than to resolving the problems. The exception was Ambassador Mohamed Sahnoun, special envoy of UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, who displayed extraordinary diplomatic skills and a refreshing willingness to criticize his own organization, but who was forced to resign, precisely because his honesty had offended his superiors in New York.'

So many problems are woven together, Sahnoun believes, in conflicts like Darfur. Climate change, environmental breakdown, drought, desertification, erosion all lead to competition for limited water and grazing. It's the millennia-old struggle between nomads and settled farmers. 'Some countries are centuries behind in development,' he fears. Eighty per cent of the green cover of the Horn of Africa has been destroyed over the last 50 years.

Why, after decades of wrestling such challenges, does he continue? What is the driving source of his passion and compassion? 'I honestly don't know,' he admits, slightly puzzled by the question. His ten years with the OAU took him all over the African →





continent, dealing with border conflicts caused by lines drawn on the map by colonial powers – a terrible first-hand experience of man's inhumanity to man. So is humanity and compassion also a basic human instinct? To what extent was he shaped by his parents and his childhood, his experiences of the Algerian War, and the struggle for independence?

Sahnoun's early years were spent in a village, where his father, something of a Sufi mystic, was the village schoolmaster. He died when Mohamed was only ten years old, 'but I know he had an impact on me,' Sahnoun says. His mother brought up him and his two surviving sisters in a spirit of equality and with a great stress on education: one sister is now a doctor and the other a university professor of literature. Their mother worked hard as a seamstress, making clothes to pay for her children's studies. While still at secondary school, he started to get involved in the nationalist struggle. He was deeply influenced by the example of Mahatma Gandhi, through reading Romain Rolland's classic biography. 'It was my bedside book, and Gandhi was my hero.' His studies at university in France were interrupted by a student strike, so he returned to Algeria and plunged into social work, working with French people who were trying to build bridges, working in poor areas.

'We must either learn to live as decent human beings, or we are a virus for our planet and for each other'

He recalls meeting young people from International Voluntary Service, helping to re-build Algerian villages after an earthquake. After their evening meal, they would sit round the fire and have a time of silent meditation, of 'prayer in silence, each in our own faith, and then we would discuss the day's work'. This work had started between the two world wars, to try to bring young people from Germany and France together – and Sahnoun notes the parallels with the spirit of Caux, the international IofC centre in Switzerland. Sahnoun's aim was to raise awareness, to educate his people, always in a non-violent spirit. But he was arrested and tortured for two months by the French army.

Did this change his attitude? There's a long silence. 'It is tragic to see how human beings can be so violent, so inhuman. I couldn't believe it,' he says sadly. Others suffered far more, he stresses. It was a trauma, and one that raised a great question mark: 'What is the meaning of this?' The fact that some Europeans and French also suffered and showed great courage

alongside the Algerians helped to maintain hope. After he was freed from prison, he was protected and hidden by French people, spending some time hidden in an abbey in France, before making his way to Switzerland. In March 2007, Sahnoun will be bringing out an autobiographical novel about his experiences – which he hopes will play a part in healing the difficult relationship between France and Algeria.

From 1 January 2007, Sahnoun becomes the new President of IofC–International, replacing outgoing President Cornelio Sommaruga. At a Geneva reception to introduce his successor, Sommaruga invoked the Almighty's protection on Sahnoun and on IofC, saluting his 'outstanding diplomatic skills, his courage and his commitment to the Caux philosophy'. Sahnoun said, 'We change ourselves so that we can create an environment of peace,' and went on to stress the importance of taking time to listen to each other.

Until the end of 2006, Mohamed Sahnoun was UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Special Adviser on developments in the Horn of Africa region. He has had a distinguished diplomatic career that included Deputy Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and Deputy Secretary-General of the League of Arab States in charge of the Africa-Arab dialogue. He served as Algeria's Ambassador to Germany, France, the United States and Morocco, as well as the United Nations. He was Co-Chair of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty and was a member of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission), which produced the report *Our Common Future*. He lives in Geneva; his three children are all grown up and out in the world. His daughter works for the World Bank.

'We talk a lot about globalization,' Sahnoun says, 'but now most of our problems are globalized.' There are fears of a global clash of cultures or civilizations, 'but I see it more as a clash between the "haves" and the "have nots",' he says, those who have all the material needs for their lives 'and those who live in uncertainty and despair. Of course, it's not a simple struggle between East and West or North and South, it's far more complex,' within countries and communities. 'What can we do to help people to listen to each other rather than judging?' he asks. The problems of the past, of memory, or suspicions – these things can only be cured by talking to each other, he believes. 'We need to look at ourselves,' he continues. 'We all do wrong things, but we need to see it, to recognize it, and admit it. It can be liberating.'

Sahnoun tells a story of two lonely planets meeting somewhere in the universe, politely asking how the other one's feeling. 'Not too well,' replies one, 'I'm all itchy, rashes, nasty skin problems. It's a virus called "homo sapiens".' 'We must either learn to live as decent human beings, or we are a virus for our planet and for each other,' Sahnoun concludes.