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<< newsfeature columns. Anger after all is understandable since there is so much pain in the heart of many who love Africa but fail to understand why she is 'so blest'. Even now that the assignment itself is over and the burden is transferred to the book page Keith Richburg is haunted by the visions of the hundreds of bodies he encountered being washed down the slopes of Lake Victoria, nameless or more appropriately, unnameable bodies, linked to himself only by the bonds of a common humanity, a bond long severed with the hatchetmen of rival clans who despatched them on their early watery journeys in gruesome death. And long before he got this far, he had retreated under the safe canopy of self-distancing, even self-retrieval, disowning the continent forever. An aloofness which a Monrovia press photographer (I recall from a different recount) invited to snap a heap of the freshly dead amidst the Liberian crisis could ill-afford; midway through photographing, the man identifies the remains of his own wife who, up till that moment, he had no idea had also been gulped by the turbulence!

Keith holds up the mirror hoping to espy his own true self, his identity in the Africa of his coverage but could simply not bear what emerges. First because, I am convinced, it belonged - was birthed and nurtured - in realms of dream. Diasporic dreams of Africa. Meaning in essence that he assigned the continent the horrible task of matching up to the Africa of his dreams. Consequently the dream died first and the continent falls flat in the face of fact, grisly, mostly self-inflicted facts that poured for three whole years into the notebooks of an exhausted journalist. The penalty are successions of corporal liter-

ary blows delivered across the continent's shoulder-blades. They inflict the hugest lacerations mainly because the bare facts are mostly overloaded with newly invented guilts, even trumped up charges that an already traumatised continent hardly deserves. To take just a few samples -

In the chapter focused on UNSEEN ENEMIES the Aids scourge is given a description that levels up to slander. No reader in Africa will recognise the African continent that is presented in these passages. He says, 'Whenever I picked up a Kenyan newspaper, or any local paper from Lusaka to Lagos, I was always stunned to see the obituary pages and how many young people, in their late twenties and thirties, were prematurely dead "After a long illness", the reports always cryptically said, and I knew what that phrase meant'!!! (pp.123)

He also suggests that even malaria fever reaches their epidemic heights often wiping out populations. He insists on commenting on nearly everything, from local politics to polygamy, ascribing causes that bear no semblance with reality. The narration descends and descends into outright abuses that spared no institution, no townscape or personalities and saw no good in any of the nations he so much as stopped briefly in. It was here that we learnt for the very first time that - 'my yearly bill for dog food and veterinary bills probably exceeded what most African governments spend on health care.' (pp.128)

He trades his 'truths' on two unsullied grounds: his blackness which intended him to be on the African side; the other of having been a journalist on the continent who saw, heard and grasped with his bare hands.

Richburg is however not any more critical or nearly as trenchant as voices within Africa itself decrying the excesses

of governments or the misrunning of economies, for which they are hauled into jails and chased into exile; even so, these stay solidly within the confines of fact - primed against the 'painted masks' of visionless politicians and inept leaderships fanning ethnic embers; illegal appropriations of power, antisocial bureaucracies, poor healthcare. Some not really peculiar to African states but overblown in the face of poor management, clear testaments to African post-coloniality.

The trouble seems to be, Mr. Richburg arrived Africa without first emptying himself of his real American self. Which is why he is ill-equipped to read political phenomena or understand why tribes go up in arms against one another.

The subtext reveals lucidly why things went terribly wrong in Mogadishu. Obviously 'American attitude' here stands in the way of the most rudimentary apprehension of local politics especially as the author himself admits, the most prominent warlord, Mohammed Fara Aideed controlled clandestine radio broadcasts and waged television wars. Yet, knowing that, Richburg goes and apes Aideed derogatorily atop a local Somali hotel before a friend's camera, a recording of which eventually fell into the warlord's very hands. The most apt illustration to Somalis about foreign neutrality!

The wind of change of the early '90s across Africa is likewise interpreted as a direct consequence 'of foreign aid donors going tough'. Keith Richburg was unable to see as far as the Berlin wall.