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## Africa's Struggles in the Postcolonial Era (sidebar)

For the first half of the 20th century, most of sub-Saharan Africa belonged to vast European political and economic empires that spanned the world. Countries such as France, Belgium, Portugal and Britain had carved up sub-Saharan Africa in large part for its substantial mineral deposits as well as its huge reserves of other valuable natural resources.

But after generations of European oppression, African opposition to colonialism gradually became more heated, reaching a boiling point following World War II (1939-45). Beginning in the early 1950s, many sub-Saharan African territories began to wage independence struggles against the occupying Europeans.

For the most part, the European colonial powers were not interested in relinquishing control over the region. With military might on their side, they worked hard to suppress the burgeoning African resistance movement. But the native peoples of sub-Saharan Africa had power in numbers, coupled with a conviction that they had an inalienable right to self-governance. In many regions, they launched sustained guerrilla warfare campaigns against the occupying Europeans, which gradually proved successful. After years of bloody fighting, most sub-Saharan African territories became sovereign nations between the late 1950s and the late 1960s.

Throwing off the shackles of colonialism came with a steep price, however. Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, many people died or were injured during the independence struggles. In the wake of the wars, the economies of many newly sovereign nations floundered, unemployment rates grew, and health-care and transportation infrastructure--decimated by warfare--fell into a state of extreme disrepair. Nevertheless, the 1960s and early 1970s were heady years in sub-Saharan Africa, as many citizens were optimistic that their newly acquired self-governance would be up to the challenge of solving the problems that surfaced in the immediate wake of the European pullout from Africa.

During the 1970s and 1980s, however, economic and political progress was sporadic in most sub-Saharan African countries. With a handful of notable exceptions, many nations struggled to rebuild war-torn infrastructure and achieve sustained economic growth. Unsuccessful experiments with democratic rule--marked by military coups, rigged elections and corrupt governance--only complicated matters further. In some countries, political infighting even led to the outbreak of prolonged civil wars, which further destabilized the region.

Despite those troubles, sub-Saharan Africa's population steadily increased throughout the late-20th century. While the burgeoning populations of many countries bolstered the size of the region's available workforce, existing educational and health-care institutions became heavily strained, as demand for classroom space and hospital beds often exceeded supply. Consequently, a number of governments, facing budget shortfalls, struggled to provide social services for their citizens. In response to the persistent social and economic problems of sub-Saharan Africa, many foreign countries and multilateral organizations substantially increased financial aid to the region.

Observers say that the ongoing growing pains of many sub-Saharan African nations in the aftermath of colonial rule have been severe. While they concede that international assistance has helped to resolve some regional issues, they warn that post-independence difficulties have the potential to worsen with time. The reason, observers say, is the escalation of health problems--chief among them AIDS--that have plagued the region's population in recent decades.

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