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EDA Reflection

Rwanda Deploys Drones at Home, South–South Diplomacy Abroad

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H.E. Emmanuel Hategeka

Ambassador of
the Republic of Rwanda
to the United Arab Emirates

Detailing Rwanda's national response, which was built upon regional and international initiatives, this EDA Reflection also points out that COVID-19 has particularly altered the craft of diplomacy and the traditional role of an ambassador in several ways.

The novel Coronavirus or COVID-19 outbreak has spared no country in its spread and the global pandemic has claimed many lives and paralyzed economies for the greater part of the first half of 2020.

On the continent of Africa, the first case of Covid-19 was reported in Egypt on 14 February. Since then, the spread has multiplied severalfold with recorded confirmed cases at 393,232 and 9,880 deaths by the end of June 2020, according to the John Hopkins University and Africa Center for Disease Control.

Rwanda's COVID-19 preparedness and response plan is built around the following key pillars: coordination and finance, community engagement, surveillance and laboratory capacity, case management, infection prevention and control, and logistics. The national strategy is to isolate and treat all cases when found, and to trace all contacts to break the transmission chain.

After the first confirmed case was reported on 14 March, Rwanda become the first African country to implement a total lockdown on 21 March. It started a 14-day mandatory quarantine for returning nationals. The government immediately issued a stay home-work from home directive aimed at curbing the spread of the virus. To date, Rwanda has controlled all clusters of cases, maintained low-level transmission, and is striving towards no transmission.

The interventions have been data driven and implemented at individual and community levels. Efforts to address COVID-19 have also been through accelerating research, knowledge sharing and innovation. Use of technology has been critical. Examples include use of drones for mass communication and awareness and deploying of high-tech robots at health facilities to screen temperature and monitor status of patients to prevent frontline health workers from contracting the virus.

Rwanda's national response is also built upon regional and international initiatives. COVID-19 has particularly altered the craft of diplomacy and the traditional role of an ambassador in several ways. Naturally, it has also impacted the role of foreign ministries in their international outreach during the crisis.

Diplomacy seeks to promote cooperation among countries through bilateral or multilateral platforms. The overarching objective at any given point of time is the advancement of national interests that are governed by the country's foreign policy, but these interests are steered in a manner that result in enhanced trust and mutually beneficial outcomes for meaningful and lasting relations between countries.

One of the very first things that the Rwandan embassy in the United Arab Emirates did as countries started closing their borders and airlines halted passenger flights was to find out how many Rwandan nationals were stranded in the UAE and ensure their safety and wellbeing.

Given the nature of the pandemic, the mission was involved in contact tracing and testing Rwandan nationals before they left the UAE. Those tested positive were placed in isolation to limit the further spread of the virus. Fortunately, all the positive cases of Rwandan nationals that were identified in the UAE were treated and post quarantine, all tested negative for COVID-19.

All this was being done during a period of lockdown in the UAE. This implies that recalibration was required in the way the mission conducted its business. Maintaining open communication channels with the UAE's authorities

and the diaspora were the most important tools used in these uncertain and constantly evolving times.

A case in point is the UAE government's humanitarian act to arrange repatriation flights for stranded nationals wishing to return home. The communication to facilitate this was not through the traditional exchange of notes verbales, but telephone calls, followed by WhatsApp diplomacy.

The mission also observed two other key innovations in diplomatic practice during the pandemic. One of them is the evolution of the role of the ambassador and how diplomats interact with the diaspora. The other is how diplomacy adapted to the new normal of 'work from home' through the use of technology for online interaction.

In the first case, when citizens are stranded for an undefined amount of time, the immediate concern is how to support them. Normally an embassy would have the option of facilitating the safe return of nationals to their home countries, but during the lockdown after the last flight to Kigali, the options were limited.

The mission and its diplomats decided to mobilise the Rwandan community in the UAE to raise funds for the welfare of the stranded. With the help of the Rwandan government, cash transfers were done to help the vulnerable meet their basic requirements. The uncertainty and unprecedented nature of the pandemic meant that the diplomats had to think outside the box and execute plans to ensure that the citizens are safe and healthy until they return home to resume their normal routine.

In the second case, the new normal of 'work from home' forced all diplomats to execute their daily duties from the comfort of their homes, a new practice that sometimes kept us working longer hours than the ordinary. The use of technology to conduct meetings and coordinate with the embassy team and the parent ministry honed our tech skills, making us navigate different applications for online connectivity.

The UAE's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International cooperation also conducted a series of ambassadorial briefing sessions via video conference led by H.E. Reem Al Hashimy, Minister of State for International Cooperation. It goes without saying that digital operations with limited human contact will be the new way of doing business for the foreseeable future. This means foreign ministries need to bridge the digital divide that still exist between countries.

In Rwanda, national and international cooperation and outreach have always been critical and continue to be so during this crisis. The government has received great support from the private sector, civil society organisations and international partners, both bilateral and multilateral.

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While sharing his Africa Day message on 25 May, His Excellency President Paul Kagame said: "The antidote to this COVID-19 pandemic is caring for each other. Every act of solidarity weakens the virus. Stay safe."

As a gesture of solidarity, Rwanda also extended medical equipment support to the Central African Republic (CAR). Rwanda Peacekeeping Contingent Medical Service Chief, Colonel John Paul Bitega, who spearheaded the international cooperation effort said: "We strongly believe in South-South cooperation in Africa. The screening equipment will give CAR national autonomy to manage the COVID-19 pandemic."

The Government of Rwanda has already adopted an economic recovery plan to mitigate the effects of the pandemic to the economy. The country is confident of continuing its path of national progress and international cooperation.