

Portrait of Maman Sambo SIDIKOU



I am going to engage in a delicate balancing act of writing the portrait of the chief, without giving the impression of heaping praises on him or underestimating his talents. Let me start from the beginning, when an announcement appeared on the UN website in which the UN Secretary General said he had appointed Niger diplomat Maman Sambo Sidikou to succeed Martin Kobler of Germany whose mandate was to end on 31st October 2015. The same note further said that the new Head of the United Nations Stabilization Mission in DRC has served as chief of the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) since October 2014.

The man of whom it said he has “two or even three careers” has served in various senior capacities in his country and in the international arena. In Niger, he served as Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1997 to 1999 and chief of staff to the President of the Republic until the election of Mamadou Tandja. He then worked for a number of international organizations including the UNICEF and the World Bank, followed by his first passage through the Great Lakes Region; Maman Sidikou also served as country director for Save the Children in Rwanda and the DRC before being recalled by Mahamadou Issoufou, who appointed him Niger’s Ambassador to Washington in 2011.

Anyway, what kind of education have undergone to be able to do all that you have done? And where?. ***“I studied political sciences in Madrid; journalism in Dakar, Paris and Montréal; and next, I underwent training in communication, followed by a PhD in education in the United-States. But none of this can replace what is learned from life experiences gained in various corners of the planet”.*** You can say that again! Consider for example the several thousand hours we spent in elementary and secondary studying math. I have often wondered what purpose they were meant to serve for us. ? If the aim was to teach us to count, don’t we have fingers for that?

At the Strategic Communications and Public Information Division, what has caught our attention most in your CV is where it says you studied journalism and have served as Director of Niger’s

National Television. All former journalists have this in common: they left journalism! A journalist always shifts into a different career before reaching retirement age – a reality which inspired author Jules Janin to write these words: ***“Journalism leads to everything provided you get out of it!”*** All of us journalists do change our line of work before the end of our career – well, almost all of us. People cannot just spend their whole lives packing and unpacking their suitcases every two days (those who’ve been news reporters know what I am talking about), or spend their entire lives interviewing politicians who tell you the exact opposite of what they think. So, at some point, journalists decide to transition into to new roles, becoming for example communications professional or parliament member or government minister to taste the green grass on the other side of the mike; or they may even become diplomats for, by constantly rubbing elbows with high and mighty of this world, they end up understanding them. That is what happened to our chief. And here is what my immediate supervisor, Charles Antoine Bambara has to say about him: ***“This journalist-turned-diplomat is ultimately more of a diplomat than a journalist, but the important thing is that he has managed to come out unscathed, even if journalism did take him everywhere and even to his total reconversion. Maman Sambo Sidikou has an unfailing determination... We have seen lead the Mission through tough times, going up to the frontline, leading his troops and the Mission by putting himself in front and setting the example. He reads such a vast amount of emails that you wonder how he manages to think logically, moving from one department to another, giving clear and precise instructions to all. And when he returns from a long trip, he barely have time to rest before he embarks on a series of meetings in the context of his good offices or strategic meetings within the Mission or high level meetings with the national and regional authorities.”***

Well, Maman Sidikou, let us pick up from where we left off. So, having gotten multiple professional experiences under your belt, as described above, you arrived in the Democratic Republic of Congo in November 2015. Your very first statement: ***“I have the singular honor to lead this important United Nations Mission in the service of peace and stability in this great country the DRC.”*** Out of curiosity: The United Nations, was it your choice or a happy coincidence? ***“I am a man of conviction. My presence in the United Nations at different positions for many years is more the fruit of an informed choice for life than a happy coincidence as such. My professional career with the UN, the African Union, the other international organizations or the government in my country Niger, was marked by stages that were very difficult, even extremely dangerous: Afghanistan or Somalia are but a few illustrations...However, I feel happier when I am in a position allowing me to work for the advancement of mankind. Serving others is at the heart of the United Nations’ mission; this leitmotiv speaks volume for me.”*** I realize that you do like taking risks, yet you look so calm and

level-headed...it is true we should not be fooled by appearances as the saying goes. As you can see, I look calm like this, but just let no one annoy me, because then...!



M. Sidikou with the former GSUN, Ban Ki-moon

Well, let us go on talking about you SRSG Maman Sidikou; you promised to tell me everything. So I am listening: ***“I am from Niger, at the heart of the Sahel region; a multicultural crossroads country, a junction point between Maghreb and Sub-Saharan Africa. The best legacy from my father is to have immersed me into the culture of every part of our Niger. But a multicultural environment is always an opportunity! It helps us to project ourselves into our common humanity.*** How do you think you are perceived by your colleagues?

“I think I have established cordial relations with most of my immediate staff. My heavy responsibilities have not always allowed me to share more relaxed moments with colleagues. Clearly put, the situation in the country doesn’t actually allow that... So, in my position as Head of Mission, I do my best to ensure a “balanced leadership, between on the one hand, a collaborative approach that leaves some reasonable leeway for my staff to deal with some issues and on the other hand, a more instructive dimension with regard to the more sensitive aspects of the Mission’s work or in the event of a crisis situation. In this last case, in constant consultation with the UN headquarters in New York, I coordinate operations in a more centralized manner. Effectiveness and the sense of duty or responsibility are at the heart of my approach to management.” This is confirmed by David Gressly, his deputy in charge of Operations: ***“Maman Sidikou completes his assignments in January 2018 and the Secretary General is grateful to him for his leadership and dedicated service during his tenure.”***

This is what one of his closest colleagues with whom he worked for the African Union said about him when he left this institution: ***“he will be remembered; he is tough but a righteous man, he gives us instructions 24/7.”*** Another testimony from Niger’s Ambassador to the United Nations, who had worked for the UN Mission, he lavishly praised Maman Sidikou, portraying him as a: ***“a***

man with great listening capacity, discretion, political tact..." I believe it is exactly what we have noticed here too. I confess not having been in permanent contact with you every day, but for the few rare occasions I met with you, in a meeting or in other circumstances, I was mostly touched by your courtesy, both in gesture and substance. That is quite an achievement; our sincere compliment. We however regretted for not having many occasions to meet with you in more convivial circumstances. This is also done!

That said, would you please let me have your views on the overall situation in DRC; *"The situation in DRC is volatile in many respects. The country is, once again, at the crossroads. Within the scope of my responsibilities and with support from all MONUSCO team, in line with the recommendations of the UN Security Council's Resolutions, I daily strive with a view to contributing to the improvement of the overall situation in this country, mainly by supporting the process leading to democratic elections in the shortest possible timeframe, say by end-2018, and also to ensure its long term stability."* Do you think the UN is doing a great job, or not enough...in DRC? *"MONUSCO's task is not easy and the realities of the country, of its immediate external environment and of the international context are not always reassuring factors for the country. Admittedly, the Mission could have done more and better in respect of the protection of civilians. The limitations on our action are realities that give us cause for concern; nonetheless, we are trying our best to do better. Anyway, if we consider where we came from, the situation when I joined this Mission, honestly, we have made a substantial contribution to improve the situation in the country. However, the current context, a very difficult one, can throw us back to the worst moments when the DRC was faced with multi-dimensional crises, twenty years ago."*

Without pretending to know it all, I know that one of your *"major priorities"* is the Gender issue. You give much attention to it in your actions. *"Yes, indeed, one of the greatest satisfactions in my career was to have contributed to a massive return of young Afghan girls to school in a particularly dangerous context, as you are aware, as I was working for UNICEF. This means that I feel strongly concerned by the Gender issue to which I give a special attention wherever I am called to serve."* What else Sir! *"I especially advocate for the respect of the UN guidance on the gender issue at every level of responsibilities. As part of my discretionary prerogatives, I ensure that in my working environment, there are both competent male and female colleagues and encourage a more thriving working environment for all."*

His senior security advisor, Ms. Aminata THIAW, concurs: *"The SRSg Sidikou is truly a gender champion. In a few words, I cannot mention all of his dedicated support to advance gender equality in the MONUSCO as well as in DRC. I just want to mention three points. When I organized the Orange Day, which is dedicated by the United Nations to raise awareness and*

take action to end violence against women and girls, the SRSG was out of the mission. However, he did everything he could to send us a picture of him wearing orange, which is the symbol of the event. Secondly, the SRSG Sidikou is an actor of positive changes. Thanks to his commitments, many jobs and responsibilities which were traditionally held by men have been gradually taken up by highly-qualified women. It is also very encouraging to see that we now have more women in the mission leadership than ever. Finally, through his leadership, he has created a safer work place for all, particularly female personnel."

Let us now relax a bit. do you have other activities aside from your job? **"I try not to remain constantly "obsessed" with work. To be efficient, especially when assuming positions of responsibilities tied with high expectations, it is essential to take a step back and relax from time to time. Between wishful thinking and realities, it is not always easy...I am fond of walking, reading, nice music and evening intense and productive discussions among friends... Unfortunately, my family is not here with me."** I take the opportunity to satisfy my curiosity: married? **"Yes, I am a happy husband of a superb wife, my pillar. She is an experienced career diplomat, great mother and spouse."** And I told you: behind each great woman lies an exceptional man. Or else let us put it plainly: **"each He-General has his She-General!"** Another question from your servant! However, this wonderful wife has a household to run. What about the children...How many children do you have? **"Two: one boy and one girl. All of them are grown up, and successful in their life and career."** What house chore do you like to do most in your spare time, to lend a hand to your wife? I am keen to know the answer. You will



M. Sidikou with the President of the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI)

never guess! ***"I love ironing; believe-me, it makes me feel good..."*** I believe you, I believe you, I wouldn't thanks, I would have backaches!

Once the boubous and shirts are well ironed and put away, do you relax anyway. What are tastes in music and reading? ***"I like listening to Koffi Olomide's First Version. There is not a single music lover that I know who can remain indifferent to the Congolese music. I am still very fond of the musical products from this country, which is unquestionably the African reference. However, I love more the Congolese music of the 80s. I also like Silvio Rodriguez, Myriam Makeba, Sory Kandia Kouyate...all the folk music from my beloved country Niger. In literature, my best authors are Garcia Lorca, René Char, Chimamanda Adichie, Pablo Neruda, Emanuel Dongala, Ide Oumarou, Mamani Abdoulaye. With regard to Essays, I love all the products from my mentor Samir Amin and Michel Rocard."*** Everyone have their own references...for me, it is the dictionary Larousse and Echos de la MONUSCO.

You will soon be leaving the Mission, it is heartbreaking but so is life with the United Nations. What will you remember most of the years you spent in the DRC? ***"I will leave this loving and engaging country, big-hearted, with the sentiment of having tried my best to contribute to keeping the balance or equilibrium that was made so precarious due to socio-political challenges basically caused by accumulated delays in the organization of the elections, the only source for legitimating the power in a democracy. I will remember a people with great sense of hospitality, humanity and incredible resilience; endowed with wonderful creative skills with which, I am convinced, sooner or later, they will amaze the world. In spite of the hardships they are going through, I remain optimistic about the future of the DR Congo. As the saying goes in Lingala: "Ata Ndele! Ekosimba! " (Sooner or later, it will work); DRC will definitely get over all those ordeals and end up stronger and more capable to play its leadership role in Africa."***

Your task was not that easy, DRC is a complex country; are you satisfied with the work you have done? ***"I should humbly say yes; I have made my modest contribution. It is now for the others to judge; I have done everything in my power to discharge one the most difficult missions, whose parameters that were not easy to handle and above all, in a context in which I had to avoid taking a high profile but to focus on the top priorities: Better serve the interests of peace and stability in DRC!"***

Your dream for the DRC? ***"That the electoral process goes off smoothly in the months ahead; that DRC ranks among the emerging powers in the world and serves as the driver to "boost" development in Africa. It is my prayer, it is not a dream; I believe it will take some good will and keen sense of responsibility for this people to achieve it. I urge its leadership at every***

level to meet the expectations of the Congolese people, the Africans and friends of the DR Congo. I consider myself to be part of the categories today."



M. Sidikou during the Season's Greetings 2016 with the staff

The final word has taken from my lips by one of his closest Congolese collaborators, the one who drives him every day. Bienvenu Ilefo said to me that ***"every day he tells me to keep confidence. He tells me that our country, despite its current problems, will recover. For me, more than a friend of the Congo he is a parent, someone I consider to be one of mine. His simplicity and courtesy are the qualities that have struck m most."***

The Democratic Republic of Congo and MONUSCO staff members are touched by the attention they received from you. Your name will go

themselves, mind and soul, like your predecessors, to restore peace, a product so rare, so essential to this big and beautiful country.

By Aissatou Laba Toure

Translated by Alphonse Yulu Kabamba