

## The negative costs of delaying the African Capacity for Immediate Response to Crises

Ntshembo Marvel Mathye<sup>1</sup>

The African Union (AU) was caught unprepared and highly embarrassed as France, under Operation Serval, managed to stop Jihadi militants from the northern region in their tracks after they launched an offensive bid to take over the running of Mali. France's response to the conflict was a result of the AU and the Economic Community of West African States' (ECOWAS) indecisiveness over a clear response to the ongoing conflict in Mali.

Following this embarrassing episode, and the realisation that the proposed African Standby Force (ASF) was still a long way off from being ready, a decision was made to create a rapid reaction force capable of responding swiftly in situations of serious conflicts on the continent. However, two years after the 20<sup>th</sup> AU Summit of 2013 in Ethiopia, where the idea for the African Capacity for Immediate Responses to Conflict (ACIRC) was proposed, there is still no sign of the force being operational. This despite the fact that the African continent continues to witness ruthless violence against its people in places such the northern parts of Nigeria, where the militant group Boko Haram continues to wreak havoc on a daily basis.

This policy brief seeks to examine the factors behind the delay of launching the ACIRC, a force which could contribute positively to addressing some of the conflicts that are occurring on the continent. Due to this delay, African lives continue to be lost daily. The brief will conclude by suggesting that African leaders must intensify their pursuit of having a continental force that could be deployed in conflict areas and would go some way to addressing security challenges on the continent.

### Background to the ACIRC

During the sitting of the 21<sup>st</sup> Ordinary Session of the AU in May 2013, African leaders proposed establishing a rapid response unit that would be

available for swift deployments to areas besieged with violent conflict. The result was the Summit's adoption of the decision to set up the ACIRC. The ACIRC would serve as a temporary measure until the African Standby Force became operational.

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At the Summit, Ambassador Ramtane Lamamra, the AU Commissioner for Peace and Security, explained the logic behind the establishment of the ACIRC. He stated that the aim was to:

'Provide Africa with a strictly military capacity with high reactivity to respond swiftly to emergency situations upon political decisions to intervene in conflict situations within the continent. The aim is to establish an efficient, robust and credible force which can be deployed very rapidly, and is able to conduct operations of limited duration and objectives or contribute to creating enabling conditions for the deployment of larger AU and/or UN peace operations'.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of a rapid response unit to address some of the violent conflicts on the continent falls within the AU's African Peace Security Architecture (APSA), which is partly based on African leaders wanting to take the lead in addressing security challenges on the continent. Although the larger ASF was mooted as the force to provide responses to crises on the continent, delays in operationalising it and the unpreparedness of the regional brigades mean there is still a challenge in this regard.<sup>2</sup>

## Leaders failing to respond to security challenges

There have been several incidents in the last few years that have exposed the commitment of African leaders to responding to security challenges on the continent. In early 2013, the Malian government came under immense threat from Islamist groups in the northern parts of the country who were marching south towards the capital, in a quest to take over the running of the country. The AU could not deliver an appropriate response to the threat posed by the Islamists. It took the intervention of the French government that ensured that the militant groups did not reach the capital. This was a serious indictment on the AU, with the former chairperson of the AU stating his disappointment in the AU's failure to adequately respond to the crisis. In a ceremony to hand over the chairmanship of the council, the outgoing chairperson was quoted as saying, 'How could it be that, when faced with a danger that threatens its very foundations, Africa, although it had the means to defend itself, continued to wait?'<sup>3</sup> From these words, it is clear that the AU should have ensured that the Islamists were

stopped, and should not have relied on the intervention of a European country.

In Nigeria, the terrorist Islamist group Boko Haram has been causing terror and mayhem in the north-eastern parts of country since 2009. A huge number of civilians have been killed and many more displaced as the group continues its fight against the government of President Goodluck Jonathan. The activities of this terrorist group gained prominence with the abduction of over 200 schoolgirls from their school in Chibok, which is situated in the Borno State of Nigeria.<sup>4</sup> Since that time, there have been further attacks on villages and strategic government institutions. Furthermore, the attacks by Boko Haram are spreading to neighbouring countries, such as Chad and Cameroon. The AU did not prioritise a response to Boko Haram until the violence in Nigeria started spreading to these neighbouring countries. This is why a regional responsive force was tabled at the 24<sup>th</sup> AU Summit, which was held from 23–31 January 2015.

This paper will argue that although the ECOWAS countries have a plan to fight Boko Haram, the situation could have been addressed earlier if African leaders had supported and contributed towards the establishment of the ACIRC when it was first proposed.

## A divided vision

The intervention by French troops to stop the surge by Islamists towards the Capital city of Mali was enough to spark a reaction from African leaders. President Jacob Zuma of the Republic of South Africa was one of the African leaders who advocated for the establishment of the ACIRC and declared full commitment to ensuring its formation. The South African president made an extra effort of bringing forward the motion at the May 2013 AU Summit and encouraging other African leaders to support the initiative.<sup>5</sup> South Africa demonstrated its commitment to and leadership for this initiative by pledging to contribute resources and capacity towards the rapid response force. Since the contribution to the force would be on a voluntary basis, a sizeable number of African heads of states pledged their support to the initiative. Currently, the countries that have dedicated their troops and equipment to the ACIRC initiative include Algeria, Angola, Chad, Liberia, Niger, Senegal, Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.<sup>6</sup>

It was surprising that some of the biggest economies in Africa, such as Nigeria, did not

endorse the formation of the ACIRC. Nigeria was declared the biggest economy in Africa in 2014,<sup>7</sup> so the Nigerian government would have been able to pledge and contribute resources and capacity towards the ACIRC initiative. However, Nigeria was one of the countries that raised concerns about the establishment of this new institution. One of the reasons the Nigerian government gave for this was that the ACIRC would interfere with the ongoing work of operationalising the ASF. Jobson points out that 'the proposal for the new force has been heavily criticised by the regional economic communities of the AU, which feel that their pivotal role in the defence of the continent is being usurped by the union's peace and security department'.<sup>8</sup> It can be argued that Nigeria's subtle competitiveness with South Africa played a part in Nigeria's reluctance to endorse the ACIRC initiative. The fact that the initiative was seen as being driven by South Africa further contributed to countries such as Nigeria not warming to the idea. However, although work is being done to ensure that the ASF becomes operational soon, the reality is that there are numerous Africans who live in violent environments on a daily basis. African leaders cannot sit and do nothing while Africans' lives are threatened and lost through the actions of militant groups such as Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab.

In 2013, the United Nations (UN) was able to put together an intervention brigade as a component of United Nations Organisation Stabilisation Mission (MONUSCO) in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This was a response to the actions of the M23 rebel group who had taken control of the city of Goma in November 2012 and committed numerous human rights violations and brought terror to this part of the country. This deployment, to the eastern DRC, was under the authority of UN Security Council resolution 2098 of 1 April 2013. Velthuisen argues that 'the force had the mandate to conduct aggressive peacekeeping operations to protect civilians and to neutralise armed groups involved in destabilising the region'.<sup>9</sup> South Africa, Malawi and Tanzania took a leading role in contributing troops for this initiative. The troops provided by these three nations were able to give the DRC government troops the necessary support to drive out the M23.<sup>10</sup> The work of the intervention brigade can be regarded as a success to a certain degree, as it was able to drive out the rebels. This clearly demonstrates that, although this initiative was under the auspices of the UN, similar initiatives under the leadership of the AU can achieve some level of success if they are coordinated and managed in an efficient manner.

The experience of such successful initiatives can be of great assistance as African leaders try to carve out a proper response to the numerous security challenges affecting the African continent.

## The consequences

There have been several incidents that have occurred since President Zuma brought forward the motion to create the ACIRC in May of 2013. These incidents reinforced the argument that it is vital to have a rapid response unit which can serve as a temporary force to address conflict situations that continue to affect millions of Africans. Countries such as the Central African Republic (CAR) continue to struggle under the violence and instability caused by armed militants such as the Seleka rebel group. According to UN High Commissioner for Refugees, more than 25% of the population had been internally displaced by December 2013 and around 930 000 people were internally displaced by early 2014.<sup>11</sup> The AU peacekeeping mission that was deployed in the CAR did not have the desired effect of addressing the situation and bringing about stability in that country. In Nigeria, the Boko Haram insurgency, mostly in the northern parts of the country, has affected many civilians. Mustapha states that 'More than 12 000 people have been killed in Boko Haram attacks across northern Nigeria and hundreds of thousands displaced'.<sup>12</sup> Although the group has been kidnapping and killing civilians for a number of years, a response to tackle the group has not been forthcoming from African leaders. It was only after April 2014, when the kidnapping of around 200 Nigerian schoolgirls in a Chibok village captured the attention of the international community, that attempts were made to locate and fight the group.<sup>13</sup> The international attention paid to fighting Boko Haram and freeing the girls from their captors only spurred the group on to commit more acts of terror and perpetuate more violence. According to Human Rights Watch, 'Boko Haram killed at least 2 053 civilians in an estimated 95 attacks during the first half of 2014'.<sup>14</sup> Over the months, Boko Haram's activities have gone beyond the borders of Nigeria into neighbouring countries such as Chad, Cameroon and Niger. Apart from the violence, there are also humanitarian challenges, as many villagers affected by Boko Haram's mutiny have fled to neighbouring countries. According to Onuoha, 'the victims are predominately the most vulnerable of the society – children and women – many of whom

have been orphaned and widowed as a result of the activities of the insurgents'.<sup>15</sup> Since Boko Haram's activities have become somewhat trans-border and are affecting the rest of the region, leaders in the region now want to act effectively. The Boko Haram insurgency is not just seen as a Nigerian challenge, but as a challenge that affects the whole region. This is the reason countries in the ECOWAS region are considering establishing a regional or multinational force that will take on Boko Haram.<sup>16</sup> This is an idea that countries such as Nigeria were against when President Zuma of South Africa tabled the motion at the AU Summit in May 2013.

There have been numerous reports that the Nigerian government is making use of mercenaries to assist in fighting Boko Haram. Although the involvement of these mercenaries seems to have had little positive impact in defeating Boko Haram, there have been several concerns raised by some African governments. There is a number of former South Africa Defence Force members who are plying their trade as mercenaries and have gone to Nigeria to assist with the training and who are also involved in combat.<sup>17</sup> The South African Minister of Defence has been very critical of the involvement of the South African mercenaries, to the extent of threatening to arrest them as soon as they come back into the country. This has the potential of causing tensions among African leaders, which will derail continental efforts to address violence and conflict on the continent. The support of the ACIRC by countries such as Nigeria could have gone a long way to making the force a reality. Furthermore, the force could have played a significant role in reducing the impact of Boko Haram's violence had it been given the necessary support to operationalise it back in 2013.

## Conclusion

The lack of a political will by some of Africa's leaders in supporting the idea of the ACIRC when it was initially proposed has done more damage than good in countries such as Nigeria and Mali. Although there were valid reasons for not lending this support, such as the ACIRC being a duplicate of the ASF, the rapid response unit would have been able to address some of the ongoing violent situations while the ASF was being made operational. Currently, ECOWAS is considering establishing a regional force to fight Boko Haram; however, if another region of the continent is faced with similar challenges, it too may consider

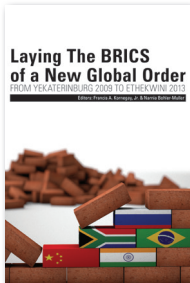
establishing its own regional force to be able to respond to the threats. Given that countries such as Mali, Kenya and Somalia also have terrorist groups operating in their territories, these regional forces are a likely scenario. Therefore, having a continental rapid response force that can be promptly deployed to conflict areas is still essential. Instead of regional blocs working in isolation, a unified solution is the only way the continent of Africa will achieve peace and security. Therefore, the following recommendations can act as a starting point to establishing an effective ACIRC:

1. As the largest economy in Africa and one of the countries affected by a violent insurgency from Boko Haram, Nigeria should reconsider its position and support the ACIRC initiative.
2. Nigeria and its neighbours can urge other countries in ECOWAS which were also reluctant to support the ACIRC initiative, to support it. This would significantly increase the number of countries backing the initiative and increase the financial and capacity contributions towards setting up the force.
3. The suggested deduction of US\$10 from ticket earnings for air travel in Africa, and US\$2 on hotel bookings by tourists should be implemented in order to contribute to the AU Peace Fund and support AU programmes such as the ACIRC. The AU Peace Fund will be responsible for managing these deductions.
4. A consultative summit, similar to the one hosted in November 2013 by President Zuma in Pretoria, should be convened to discuss issues such as funding and how best to operationalise the force.
5. The African continent needs the external support of non-African actors in fighting militant groups such as Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab. There is a need for better coordination and cooperation in order to advance peace and security in Africa.

## Notes and References

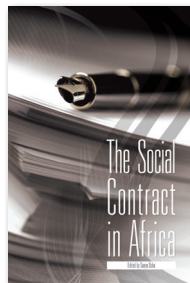
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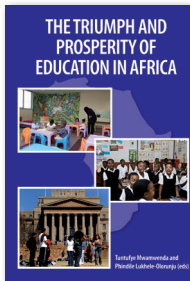
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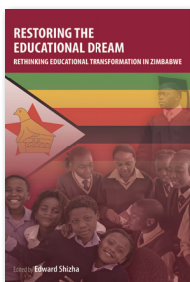
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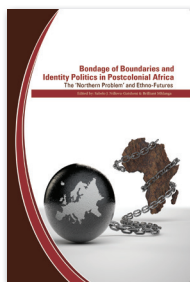
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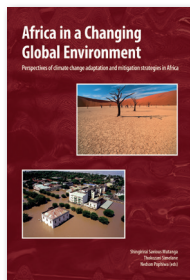
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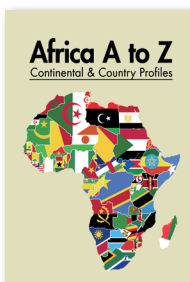
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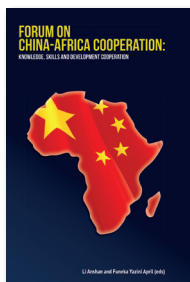
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