



international 14/96 UPDATE

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THE OAU AND PEACEKEEPING

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The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) is undergoing dynamic renewal. Ever since the democratisation process in South Africa signalled the achievement of the OAU's primary objective - Africa's liberation struggle from colonial and racial rule - the organisation has been grappling to find a new vision. It has successfully done so by adopting two main objectives for the twenty-first century - economic integration through the African Economic Community and the vigorous pursuit of peace and stability for the African continent through its Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, the so-called Central Organ.

Five years after the Treaty establishing the African Economic Community was signed in June 1991 by 52 African countries in Abuja, the continent is still struggling to come to grips with the complexities of achieving economic integration on a continent as vast and diverse as Africa. On the other hand the OAU has made substantial progress in the area of peace and security, achieving more over the last three years than it did in the preceding 30 years of its existence.

The founding fathers of the OAU understood that stability was a prerequisite for development and progress. The Charter envisaged a Commission of Mediation, Conciliation and Arbitration to be responsible for the peaceful settlement of disputes among Member States. The Commission never functioned as expected and the OAU resorted to various *ad hoc* measures, such as mediation committees and the use of a uniquely African tool, the utilisation of so-called wise men, normally ex-heads of State like Nyerere or Kaunda or other imminent persons, to act as mediators in the conflict management process.

The direction changed in June 1993 when the OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government met in Cairo to establish the Mechanism for Conflict

Prevention, Management and Resolution. The Mechanism institutionalised conflict resolution at the centre of the OAU's focus and established the Central Organ, a committee of member states, to take charge of the process. The Central Organ is not unlike the United Nations Security Council in that it has become the heart of the OAU's decision-making process on security issues, but it differs fundamentally from the Security Council in that it has no permanent membership and no veto powers.

When the Mechanism was established, it was agreed that the emphasis should be on the anticipation and prevention of conflicts. Where conflicts occurred, the Mechanism was tasked to undertake preventive or peace-making initiatives in an effort to resolve the conflicts. Where conflicts deteriorated to the extent that international intervention became necessary the OAU reiterated that the services of the United Nations will be sought under the terms of its Charter, recognising that African countries were all also members of the UN, and that the UN is tasked with global security.

The person who can probably be considered the driving force behind the OAU's focus on conflict management, and thus its new lease on life, is the current Secretary-General of the OAU, Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim. He argued that world events have demonstrated that even though the OAU may wish to focus its efforts on the prevention of conflicts, it cannot exclude itself in some circumstances from undertaking activities of a peacekeeping nature. The OAU Summit in June 1995 in Addis Ababa adopted a decision which for the first time provided for limited peacekeeping operations, under exceptional circumstances, to be conducted by the OAU itself.

Further developing this new mandate, the OAU convened a meeting of Chiefs of Staff of member states of the Central Organ in Addis Ababa in the first week of June 1996. The meeting focused on

two crucial issues, the strengthening of Africa's capacity in the field of peacekeeping under the aegis of the United Nations, and the modalities for limited peacekeeping operations undertaken by the OAU itself.

With regard to the first issue there was general agreement that Africa could further develop its peacekeeping capacity through improved regional co-ordination and the standardisation of training, standard operating procedures, equipment (especially communications), logistics, etc.. It was recognised that some regions like SADC and ECOWAS have already made significant progress in this regard whilst similar developments in other regions have not yet been initiated.

In general, it became clear that whilst Africa is prepared to assume even more responsibility for peacekeeping in Africa, it does not want to erode the principle that the international community, through the United Nations, has collective responsibility for security. In other words, the OAU should not be forced to accept responsibility for peacekeeping in Africa, whilst the UN looks after the rest of the world.

The consideration of modalities for limited peacekeeping operations under the aegis of the OAU, on the other hand, was met with more caution. Whilst countries like Kenya rejected the concept in principle, arguing that the UN should be the only institution responsible for peacekeeping, others questioned the OAU's capacity, especially its lack of financial resources to fund such operations, to conduct peacekeeping operations.

Those who argue that there is a need for the OAU to conduct peacekeeping operations, explain their position as empowering the OAU to react to a crisis situation in Africa which requires military intervention, without having to wait for the Security Council to give the go-ahead. The scenario is one in which the United Nations Security Council is slow to react, or where the Security Council is reluctant to act, whilst the OAU, from an African perspective, believes that intervention is justified.

To take a concrete example, the situation in Burundi may degenerate into Rwanda-style genocide proportions which could result in a decision by the OAU that military intervention is required on humanitarian grounds, and a call to the UN to intervene on these grounds. The UN Security Council, although recognising the severity of the crisis, may be slow to react because none of its members are willing to take the lead. In the meantime the OAU and individual African countries, who are directly affected by the conflict,

feels that they cannot continue to wait for the Security Council to take a decision, decides to unilaterally respond to the crisis by deploying an OAU multinational peacekeeping force. Such a force may then become part of a larger UN force once the UN gets its act together, at which time the OAU mission would be handed over to the UN. In this scenario the OAU, in effect, adopts the behaviour of a regional security body, not unlike NATO in Europe, in that an OAU multinational force can be deployed in similar circumstances, and for similar reasons, than the recent deployment of NATO forces in Bosnia. The major difference, however, is Africa's lack of resources, especially financially, to give it the necessary freedom to unilaterally decide on such operations. If it is unable to fund such an operation itself, it follows that whoever funds it for the OAU will have a large influence on the objectives and operationalisation of the mission.

In essence the debate thus centres around how such operations will be funded. Some were of the view that the UN, as the body responsible for peacekeeping, should be responsible for the funding of peacekeeping operations undertaken by the OAU. Others recognise that the UN could only be expected to fund an operation when the UN Security Council has mandated the OAU to undertake such an operation. It follows that an OAU operation that is conducted without an UN mandate will have to be funded by the OAU. This could mean funding by donor countries or by OAU member states, and should form part of the decision-making process leading to a decision whether it would be feasible to launch a peacekeeping operation or not.

The meeting of the Chiefs of Staff underscored the political directives already defined by the Heads of State, namely that the OAU's focus should be on the prevention and anticipation of conflicts, that the UN is primarily responsible for peacekeeping and that provision has been made for the OAU to conduct limited peacekeeping operations under exceptional circumstances, whilst resubmitting those issues, like funding, back to the OAU Council of Members and Assembly of Heads of State and Government for further clarification. At the same time they agreed on some concrete steps which would contribute to the strengthening of the existing military unit at the OAU, formalising the relationship between the OAU and the UN, improving co-ordination between the OAU and the regions, for instance SADC's new peace and security sector, and on the standardisation of training and proper preparation for standby arrangements and earmarked contingents on a voluntary basis. They also agreed to form a

technical committee to further develop the modalities that would be required to achieve the latter.

As the first ever meeting of Chiefs of Staff of members of the Central Organ the meeting can be considered to have been an important step in developing the OAU's role in conflict management on the continent. As this is basically a self-renewal process, it was healthy for the OAU's Chiefs of Staff to have come to the conclusions it has on its own. To a large degree the meeting was a reality check - it was the first opportunity for the OAU's Conflict Management Division to test their ideas on the role of the military in conflict management with those who would be expected to realise those ideas in practice. The result was a healthy check on the more ambitious ideas and a realistic operationalisation of those ideas that could contribute to an enhanced capacity.

One could argue that the OAU has achieved a degree of political will with regard to its willingness to assume responsibility for conflict management, which few regional groupings has managed to equal in the past. At the same time it is clear that individual countries are extremely cautious when it comes to the modalities and funding of OAU peacekeeping operations. Although some are opposed to the idea of independent OAU peacekeeping operations in principle, most have probably accepted the theoretical reality that a need for such a mandate exists. Peacekeeping operations

are by their very nature costly affairs. They require the movement of heavy equipment and large numbers of people, and costly supply lines to maintain them in hostile circumstances. It remains to be seen how such a mandate will be able to be exercised under the current constraints with regard to the financial and other resources necessary to conduct peacekeeping operations. The underlying reality is that Africa's lack of financial resources will continue to force the OAU to concentrate on preventative diplomacy and conflict prevention, rather than the more ambitious peacekeeping aspect of conflict management. The upside is that the continent's Chiefs of Staff seem to prefer an OAU concentrating on preventing conflicts rather than an OAU pre-occupied with deploying troops.

The unfortunate reality, which the OAU Secretary General is confronted with on a daily basis, is that conflicts such as those in Somalia and Rwanda, and those still unfolding in Liberia and Burundi, cannot be put on ice whilst Africa and the OAU develop its peacekeeping capacity over coming decades. These conflicts are at this very moment causing hundreds of deaths and immense suffering among Africa's peoples. Africa's leadership is under immense pressure to come up with real-time solutions. Whether mandating the OAU to undertake peacekeeping operations on its own will assist us in coming closer to this objective, depends on how the member states of the OAU will apply this new tool in the years to come.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The South African Institute of International Affairs is an independent organisation which aims to promote a wider and more informed understanding of international issues among South Africans.

It seeks also to educate, inform and facilitate contact between people concerned with South Africa's place in an interdependent world, and to contribute to the public debate on foreign policy.