



Institute for Security Studies
Institut d'Études de Sécurité

Knowledge empowers Africa • Le savoir émancipe l'Afrique

DON'T HOLD THE AFRICAN CRISIS RESPONSE FORCE HOSTAGE TO UNREALISTIC DEMANDS

Rocky Williams,

** Director of Defence Policy, Defence Secretariat, Department of Defence*

Occasional Paper No 20 -April 1997

INTRODUCTION

The death of 18 US Army Rangers in Somalia in 1992 and the spectacle of a dead US soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu signalled a watershed in America's thinking on peacekeeping in Africa. Notwithstanding a long history of involvement in African conflict resolution, ranging from Katanga in the early 1960s through to the Namibian independence in 1989, the exigencies of future US involvement in African crises were deemed too costly in both political and financial terms. Since the US withdrawal from Somalia, US proposals regarding involvement in African peacemaking efforts have ranged from financial assistance for various African initiatives (the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution) to proposals for the establishment of an African peacekeeping force commanded and staffed by Africans.

1996 saw these proposals assuming a more concrete form with the visit to Africa of Warren Christopher to popularise and gain acceptance for the concept of an African Crisis Reaction Force (ACRF). This initiative was largely the product of three inter related factors. The first was the appalling demographic displacement and ethnic conflict that were occurring in the Great Lakes region of Central Africa and the concomitant calls for an African military response to the crisis. The second was the Clinton Administration's commitment to pursue an African approach in resolving African conflicts – largely a product of domestic sensibilities regarding US involvement in peacekeeping initiatives in general. The third was the imminence of the American presidential elections in November 1996. Notwithstanding the disappointment of Warren Christopher over the lukewarm and cautious approach adopted towards the idea by many African states visited during his African tour, the idea of an ACRF is certainly not dead. It is reasonably certain that the new Secretary for State, Madeleine Albright, will continue championing the idea both in the US and among Africans, while present levels of 'Afro-pessimism' will greatly empower her in this process.

Although reaction to the concept ranged from reasonably positive (Mali and Ghana) to cautious (South Africa, Kenya and Botswana), no country disputed the necessity of organising an African response to its own crises in which Africans would be the primary but by no means the sole players in the resolution of these conflicts. The experience of the West Africans in Liberia, the role of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) in defusing the Lesotho crisis in 1994, the role of the Inter-Governmental Agency on Drought and Desertification (IGADD) in mediating the Sudanese civil war, and the role played by Tanzania in the Great Lakes crisis are recent examples of this growing trend. The institution of a standing African force tasked with a peacekeeping responsibility, however, should be assessed in a sober and dispassionate manner and is, for political and practical reasons, more a medium to long term matter than it is an immediate knee-jerk solution. Few African countries would dispute the necessity of such a response capability which, as part of a

broader series of political and diplomatic initiatives on the continent, could play an important role both in peacekeeping and humanitarian operations in the long term. They would, however, contest some of the central assumptions and principles underpinning the US proposal. It is these principles and assumptions that need to be queried if, as is to be expected, the US will continue to vigorously champion the concept of an ACRF in the future. Furthermore, the question of an ACRF (or African Crisis Response Initiative as it is now dubbed) should be seen within the broader context of determining a common African (and Southern African) perspective on the policy, doctrine and likely structural permutations underpinning a proposed response capability.

FLAWS IN THE US CONCEPT

The idea of an ACRF-type force partially accords with UN policy to devolve responsibility for peace operations to those regional bodies which are situated within the affected area concerned (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in Europe and the OAU in Africa for instance). The idea of an all-African Reaction Force, staffed and commanded almost exclusively by Africans, also trades on the growing sentiment among many African armed forces (particularly those with extensive experience in peace operations) that they are not afforded the necessary seniority and responsibility in the conduct of international peace support operations commensurate with their operational experience – particularly when they are conducted on African soil.

Accepting the probability of such a force emerging in the future should not be equated with the commitment of either Africans or Southern Africans to both the process as envisaged by the US or, indeed, much of its practical content. A number of cautionary remarks are pertinent in this regard and apply as much to the US proposal as it would to other non-USA initiatives.

The US proposal sees the force as being an all-African force at all levels of its hierarchy – command, staff, support and combat. An exceedingly small number of non African personnel will provide specialist support in certain specified logistical areas. At face value this appears to be a commendable development – a recognition of African capabilities within their sphere of influence.

While the creation of an all-African force may exonerate non-African players from involvement in an increasingly messy and seemingly intractable series of conflicts on the African continent, they run the risk of ghettoising and even racialising the very nature of peace support operations themselves. Peace support operations are international endeavours, endorsed by the UN, and in accordance with the internationalist ethos of the UN Charter. The spirit and practise of this tradition need to be maintained for both practical reasons (securing a wide skills base for such operations) and political reasons (avoiding the marginalisation of such forces from international attention and support – ECOMOG being a prime example in this regard).

While the composition of an ACRF may be largely African, non-African countries can and must play a meaningful role at all levels of its proposed organisation. The UN principle of delegating as much authority over the conduct of peace support operations to regional bodies as possible, is not tantamount to stating that only countries in that region should commit personnel to such operations. The ghettoising of peace support operations in this manner could lead to the bizarre scenario of only African forces performing peace support operations in Africa, European troops operating only in Europe and Indian troops operating only in Asia for instance!

The short term rationale for the creation of the ACRF has been linked to the unfolding scenarios in Burundi and Rwanda, and more recently, the Zairian scenario. Yet, justifying the creation of the ACRF in terms of existing and immanent short term operational scenarios constitutes possibly its most fundamental weakness for two inter-related reasons – time and legitimacy.

Hastily cobbling together an ACRF which still has to determine its political *raison d'être*, command characteristics, doctrine, financial support, composition and, most importantly, its operating procedures, is an exercise fraught with dangers. The deployment of an ill-prepared

and divided force in an immensely complex conflict, runs the risk of discrediting the force on its very first operation – as the Somalia experience vividly demonstrated.

Even if adequate time frames are provided for the preparation of the ACRF, using either Burundi or Zaire as the testing ground for the institution of an ACRF could run the risk of discrediting the concept in its entirety. Clearly some form of international peacekeeping response will be required if either the Great Lakes region or any other African conflict area deteriorates any further. However, the rationale behind the institution of an ACRF should be long term, a force capable of responding to a variety of crises both now and in the future. To be given a credible chance of success, the ACRF needs to choose its initial deployments wisely and determine its entry and exit criteria in a manner conducive to its long term survival.

The US proposal, even though it does not state this explicitly, sees South Africa as being the key player and dominant partner in the ACRF. Apart from its evident logistical abilities, South Africa is expected to provide key command and control skills for the establishment of the ACRF – a possible euphemism for its command of much of the force in general. South Africa, for its part, has valid reasons to be cautious about the process of creating an ACRF.

Firstly, notwithstanding South Africa's clear monopoly over military-technical, logistical and managerial skills in the subcontinent, its technocratic abilities in this regard do not translate mechanistically into leadership qualities. Leadership, particularly within the context of Southern Africa, is earned and not granted. South Africa, as a regional power, operates via SADC in a shared leadership grid, and any attempt to assume a leadership role without consultation would be unduly divisive.

Secondly, South Africa has limited experience in international peace support operations. Countries already consulted on the creation of an ACRF such as Senegal, Botswana and Ghana, have impressive and highly professional experience in peace support operations. Any assumption by South Africa of the leadership mantle within such a force would not only be politically divisive (and arrogant), but would undermine the considerable command, staff and operational experience which such countries could bring to an ACRF.

A final cautionary comment is warranted with regard to proposed timeframes. The US's initial proposal to create a force within a six month time period that is credible enough to deal with some of the seemingly intractable problems faced by Africans, is naive in the extreme. Apart from underestimating the sheer practical and logistical realities of such a process, it shows a scant understanding of the nature of the African decision-making process. Unlike regional blocs where a high level of political, economic and military heterogeneity pertain (Europe for example), African decision-making processes are heterogeneous and dispersed. The concept of an ACRF will undoubtedly have to traffic through the OAU policy loop and subregional bodies such as ECOWAS and SADC if it is to retain any legitimacy. It is highly unlikely that it will be able to do so within the six month period initially proposed by the US or even any new time frames which the US, or other countries, may propose. The alternative is to institute an ACRF consisting of well-disposed African countries who are prepared to accede to the US's proposal – an option invariably designed to cause division among the very countries the ACRF will be possibly assisting.

STRUCTURE FOLLOWS STRATEGY: DETERMINING A COMMON AFRICAN APPROACH TO PEACE SUPPORT OPERATIONS

The concerns raised above, however, do not militate against preparing for the creation of an ACRF or similar structure. Indeed, recent developments indicate that this should be addressed as a matter of urgency. For South Africa this has very definite implications.

An integrated African (OAU) and Southern African (SADC) policy on peace support operations in general within which an ACRF-type response capability could be configured if required, should be determined. The formulation of such a policy should define, as its point of departure, a number of principles.

- What will the generic objectives governing our involvement in peace support operations be? Aspects that could be considered, for instance, could include the extent to which individual peace support operations contribute to the strengthening of

democratic practises in the area concerned, strengthen regional security arrangements, contribute to stability in the region concerned, and constitute an advancement of African regional and subregional interests.

- In what kind of peace support operations will such a force be prepared to engage? Will it include all forms of peace support operations – peacekeeping, peace restoration and peace enforcement – or will it be compelled in terms of political and financial realities to confine itself to the more 'traditional' forms of peacekeeping – humanitarian assistance, peace monitoring and peacekeeping?
- In what niches should African troop contributing countries specialise? Should it be at the level of ground forces, logistical support or command and control, and what will the nature of non-African troop contributions to such endeavours be? In short, what will the role of non-African countries be within this proposed force and how will its composition reflect the international character of all UN-sponsored initiatives?
- How will the financial arrangements for the peace support operations in question be determined (critical if one considers the cumbersome nature of the UN bureaucracy, its present budget deficit and the experience of African countries in this regard)?
- How will African entry and exit criteria be determined and who are the key role players in setting these parameters? This is possibly one of the most important, and seemingly intractable problems of peace support operations and requires careful deliberation by both the OAU and Africa's subregional bodies.
- Finally, a range of eminently practical questions also need to be considered in relation to African involvement in an ACRF – interoperability of equipment, formulation and common doctrines; allocation of responsibilities to different participating states; command responsibilities within combined forces, etc.

In the short term, while such a policy is being formulated, a range of interim measures can be adopted with regard to existing and emerging crises. Indeed most international peace support operations are conducted on a case-by-case basis and the manner in which African countries in general and Southern African countries in particular have dealt with the Great Lakes crisis is a prime example in this regard. However, whatever the nature of the response provided by Africa to the creation of an ACRF, two critical variables require consideration before a commitment is made. The first is the salient reality that our present, and most probably our future policy on peace support operations is not something that can be decided upon by a single African country or a group of African countries alone. Any decision to deploy has to be cleared with the OAU, the UN and the subregional organisations, and requires considerable preparatory ground work in the fields of policy, strategy and doctrine in particular.

The concept of an ACRF should not be held ransom to the short term perspectives of an immediate political and/or operational crisis. African approaches to conflict resolution have existed for decades and the concept of an ACRF-type structure has been debated among Africans for a number of years. Africans will develop a response capability of some form in the future. However, if such a force is to have a reasonable chance of success it needs to be disengaged from questionable assumptions, unrealistic time frames, hasty deployment and the exigencies of American electoral politics. These factors could well undermine the development of an African capacity in this regard.

Dr (Col) Rocky Williams writes in his personal capacity.