



# Eight Priorities for the African Union in 2021

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**What's new?** In the first week of February 2021, the African Union will hold its annual heads of state summit virtually due to COVID-19. Africa's leaders are likely to focus heavily on the pandemic but also on the AU Commission elections, which occur every four years.

**Why does it matter?** The elections are an important step for institutional renewal at a time when the AU is undergoing broader reforms. A smooth transition to new leadership will be critical to assuring the continuity of the commission's work on peace and security.

**What should be done?** Once the elections are over, the AU should use the summit to concentrate on urgent crises, including the Central African Republic's recent fighting, Ethiopia's Tigray war, Libya, the Sahel, Somalia, Sudan and climate change's security risk. This briefing sets out eight priorities for the AU in the coming year.

## *Overview*

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In the first week of February 2021, the African Union (AU) will hold its annual heads of state summit without the usual pomp and pageantry. Due to COVID-19 precautions, heads of state and foreign ministers will meet virtually. At the summit, Felix Tshisekedi, the president of the Democratic Republic of Congo, will take over the annual AU chairmanship from South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa. The AU is also expected to hold elections for the chairperson, deputy chairperson and six commissioners of the AU Commission, the organisation's secretariat, which take place every four years.

Looking back on 2020, the AU understandably focused on the global pandemic. Under Ramaphosa's leadership, the AU played a central role in managing continental efforts to limit the health and economic impact of COVID-19, establishing the Africa Task Force for Novel Coronavirus, which, in coordination with the World Health Organization and Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, helped member states ramp up screening and testing for the virus and secure vaccines for use on the continent. The need to contain the pandemic, however, threw off course the AU's work on "Silencing the Guns" – an ambitious goal to end conflicts in Africa by 2020. The organisation has extended this project's deadline by ten years.

The AU's performance on the diplomatic front was mixed. It reacted quickly to the August coup in Mali, suspending the country's membership for three months fol-

lowing the ouster of former President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. It is now part of a monitoring committee tracking the country's transition toward full civilian rule. By contrast, in Sudan, having been instrumental in negotiations to secure a political transition following the military's removal of President Omar al-Bashir, the AU appears less engaged in safeguarding the country's fragile path to a more inclusive civilian-led government. In South Sudan, it has done little to counteract divisions within the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the regional body for the Horn of Africa, which have contributed to the stagnation of that country's peace process. The AU Peace and Security Council has yet to specifically feature on its agenda the increasingly bold attacks by Islamist militants in Mozambique's northern province of Cabo Delgado or the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon that has been simmering since 2017.

As regards institutional change, 2020 saw the expansion of the role of the AU Bureau, a group of five leaders (one from each of the AU's geographical regions) whose tasks were previously administrative and largely limited to facilitation of the AU summit. Under Ramaphosa's leadership, the bureau's duties have now become more political in nature. By regularly convening it to deal with the pandemic, Ramaphosa gave the grouping a continental leadership role. Its legitimacy to intervene on peace and security was established when it mediated a tense dispute among Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) in June. It remains to be seen whether Tshisekedi will maintain and cement this new role for the bureau on continental peace and security during his upcoming term at the organisation's helm.

Looking ahead, 2021 will be an equally critical year for the continent, with the pandemic continuing to rage. Officials hope that the advent of the African Continental Free Trade Area, which began operating on 1 January 2021, will help boost African commerce and offset the economic shock inflicted by COVID-19. The pandemic and commission elections are likely to dominate the summit and are certainly critical issues for the AU. But the organisation should also make time to discuss a number of other urgent peace and security matters. As new leaders take over, eight priorities for 2021 are:

1. Ensuring a successful transition in the AU Commission elections;
2. Limiting the damage from the Central African Republic (CAR)'s electoral chaos;
3. Addressing the fallout from Ethiopia's Tigray conflict;
4. Seizing an opening to engage on Libya;
5. Putting politics first in the Sahel;
6. Supporting Somalia during elections and beyond;
7. Re-engaging to support Sudan's transition; and
8. Drawing attention to climate change's security risks.

This list is not exhaustive, but it highlights situations where the AU can have an important impact over the coming year. The continent is facing huge challenges, even more so due to COVID-19, which has diverted attention from some of its most pressing conflicts and disrupted funding cycles for development and security initiatives. With fewer resources likely to be available, both from member states and external partners, the AU's ability to address some of the above crises, particularly through political means, will be more crucial than ever.

## **1. Ensure a Successful AU Commission Election**

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In 2021, the AU Commission will hold elections for its chairperson, deputy chairperson and six commissioners, the first to take place following institutional reforms that cut the number of commissioners from eight to six, with the merger of four departments into two, combining political affairs with peace and security, and economic affairs with infrastructure and energy. A smooth transition will be key to avoiding interruptions in the commission's work, particularly on peace and security.

Normally, voting is conducted via an in-person secret ballot, but this year, as a result of COVID-19 precautions, it is expected to take place virtually. Some states might be uncomfortable with this unfamiliar process and question the viability of a virtual secret ballot. If the poll is unable to go ahead for any reason, elections may be postponed until the mid-year coordination meeting with regional bodies in June 2021, or indeed until the next summit of heads of state in early 2022. An extension of this length risks prolonging the focus on election campaigning and removing attention from the important peace and security work that the commission is mandated to carry out.

The incumbent chairperson, Moussa Faki Mahamat, is running unopposed for reelection. If successful, he will be the first chair to get a second, and final, term. During his time in office, Faki has focused firmly on conflict prevention and resolution and strengthened the AU's relations with multilateral partners – the UN and European Union. He has also been proactive in coordinating Africa's response to the pandemic. All these matters will be important agenda items for the commission going forward.

Even if the vote for chairperson takes place, there could be delays, depending on the outcome. It is possible that Faki lacks the support to reach the two-thirds majority he needs to win a second term. Member states have been concerned about accusations lodged during his tenure of a culture of sexual harassment, bribery, corruption and bullying within the commission.<sup>1</sup> Faki formed a special committee in 2018 to investigate the allegations of harassment in the commission, and has strongly denied complaints against him of nepotism and corruption.<sup>2</sup> Faki has also sometimes found it difficult to bridge the divide between Anglophone and Francophone caucuses at the AU that developed under his predecessor. Southern African states in particular are wary of what they see as his close relationship with France. Under current rules, if enough states abstain and Faki does not get the necessary votes, the commission will have to postpone the elections until the next summit, leaving the body in limbo for up to twelve months. If elections are delayed, for whatever reason, the AU should avoid a lengthy deferral and work to hold another vote as soon as possible.

The commission has already selected candidates for the elections under new rules, as part of internal reforms. A panel of eminent Africans drafted the list of competencies for each position and produced shortlists of candidates, all of whom were nominated by member states, based on the agreed-upon criteria. But because fewer than a third of the nominees for the six commissioner posts were women, only eight of the 25 shortlisted are female, meaning that for one post there are no female con-

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<sup>1</sup> "African Union hit by sexual harassment claims", BBC, 23 November 2018.

<sup>2</sup> "Communique on the investigation of allegations of harassment within the Commission", African Union, 16 August 2018; "African Union Strongly Denies Allegations of Cronyism, Corruption", VOA, 13 March 2020.

tenders and for two others there is only one.<sup>3</sup> Next time round, AU member states should ensure that they nominate more strong female candidates for the process.

Whoever is selected as commissioner for the new department of political affairs and peace and security will need to give significant attention to managing the merger between the two predecessor departments. The process is expected to take several years and, because it will likely involve significant staff and budget cuts, it could undermine morale. The new commissioner should ensure that hiring is open and transparent, especially at the managerial level, and that staff and budget cuts are communicated clearly and handled with due care and sensitivity. Investment early on by the commissioner in clear departmental frameworks and processes will improve the working environment and allow the new department to reach its full potential.

## **2. Limit the Damage from CAR's Electoral Chaos**

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Fighting between the government and six major armed groups broke out in the Central African Republic just days before the 27 December 2020 presidential and legislative elections. The violence deals a significant blow to a 2019 AU-sponsored peace agreement between the government and fourteen armed groups, which include the six that are involved in the current hostilities. On 4 January, in the midst of the conflict, the national elections body declared the incumbent president, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, the winner. The Constitutional Court confirmed his victory on 18 January. The political opposition has argued for annulling the vote as the renewed battles prevented them from campaigning and blocked over half of registered voters from casting their ballots. The AU and Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), which have both recognised Touadéra's victory, are guarantors of the 2019 accord. They must work to prevent any further undermining of the peace deal, seeking consensus between government and opposition and getting the warring parties back to the table.

CAR has faced instability for decades, and a violent takeover of power in 2013 triggered a drawn-out crisis that endures today. In March 2013, an insurgent coalition known as Seleka ousted then-President Francois Bozizé, who in turn helped create local militias called "anti-Balaka" to fight the rebels. After the war ended in 2014, Seleka and anti-Balaka groups splintered, with different factions pursuing their own diverse interests. In 2019, following a number of failed agreements, the AU brokered a deal which raised hopes of peace. Yet violence has persisted as armed groups and the government haggled over the agreement's implementation, including the slow setup of joint security units that the government and UN see as a first step toward disarmament.<sup>4</sup>

The latest outbreak was fuelled by tensions between the government and the political opposition, which over the last year has become increasingly hostile to Touadéra.<sup>5</sup> On 3 December 2020, the Constitutional Court rejected Bozizé's presidential candi-

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<sup>3</sup> "Briefing Note No. 124 – Election Watch: The Race for African Union Top Posts", European Centre for Development Policy Management, November 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Crisis Group Africa Report N°296, *Réduire les tensions électorales en République centrafricaine*, 10 December 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group Statement, "Saving the Central African Republic's Elections and Averting Another Cycle of Violence", 22 December 2020.

dacy, setting in motion events that finally erupted in armed conflict. When the court ruled, Bozizé was part of the main opposition alliance and was not calling for violence. But as the month went on, it became clear that he was associated with a new coalition of six of the largest armed groups (including both ex-Seleka groups that had in the past fought Bozizé and former anti-Balaka groups), which declared its intent to disrupt the vote. Fighting spread, with armed groups capturing territory as they pushed toward the capital Bangui. Russian and Rwandan troops stepped in alongside the national army and UN peacekeepers to drive rebels out of provincial towns and repel several attacks on Bangui itself. Nevertheless, the government and its allies remain besieged by an elusive enemy that is squeezing supply routes to Bangui, causing food shortages in the capital.

Getting the government and armed groups back to the negotiation table is essential, but with fighting continuing to spread, it will be no easy task. The chaotic election is a blow to the government's hope of consolidating its legitimacy, but Touadéra is likely drawing comfort from the external support he has received and his ability to secure the capital. The armed groups, despite having failed to stop the elections entirely, have demonstrated their disruptive power by halting voting in the provinces and advancing close to the capital. In short, both sides can claim a victory of sorts, making any talks similar to the 2019 negotiations unlikely in the short term.

The AU and ECCAS must be ready to facilitate negotiations between individual armed groups and government officials. They should initiate separate contacts with each of the armed groups' leaders in order to understand their individual motives and interests, including how the government might yet bring them into the joint security units, prise them out of Bozizé's sphere of influence, and help pacify unstable areas in time for second-round run-offs in the legislative elections, slated for the coming weeks.

Building on its contacts with armed group leaders and its experience of mediation in CAR over the last two years, the AU should seek technical and logistical assistance from other partners such as the UN and EU to bolster its efforts. The AU should also try to broker talks between Bozizé and Touadéra, even if at a distance, as their mutual hostility is fuelling tensions between their respective ethnic groups. Further down the line, the AU might usefully convene a meeting of the signatories to the 2019 agreement to reaffirm its main terms. For now, however, the priority for CAR's African partners is to limit the damage from this most recent setback.

### **3. Address the Fallout of Ethiopia's Tigray Conflict**

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The AU, whose headquarters are in Addis Ababa, has rarely commented on Ethiopia's internal affairs, because for the last 30 years the country has been relatively stable. Now, following an increase in tensions along ethno-federal lines, and particularly after the outbreak of conflict in early November in the northern Tigray region, the AU has begun to speak out more strongly. As details of the war in Tigray become more widely known, it is coming under pressure to deepen its involvement in Ethiopia.

The Tigray conflict is arguably one of the continent's most consequential. The fighting has claimed thousands of lives and the humanitarian crisis it has spawned

has left some 4.5 million Tigrayans in need of aid, according to a UN report.<sup>6</sup> Tensions had been building between Addis Ababa and Mekelle, Tigray's capital, since April 2018, when Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed came to power on the back of popular protests, bringing an end to the predominance of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), Tigray's governing party, within the ruling coalition that had held power since 1991. The trigger for the war came when Tigrayan forces violently captured federal military units in the region, following a constitutional dispute over Tigray's right to autonomously hold elections. On 3 November, Abiy ordered the national army to remove the TPLF from power in Tigray.

While federal troops captured Mekelle in late November, and now control most major towns and cities, fighting continues across parts of the region, and most wanted Tigrayan leaders are at large. Access to Tigray remains tightly restricted, with Addis Ababa agreeing to allow aid only into federal government-controlled areas, amid reports from the Tigray interim administration that at least two million people are now displaced in the region. A humanitarian catastrophe is possible if essential food aid continues to be barred.

The AU's top officials have pushed Abiy to consider dialogue. AU Commission Chair Faki issued a statement soon after the federal intervention in Tigray, expressing concern and calling on the parties to engage in talks.<sup>7</sup> Later in November, AU Chairperson Ramaphosa dispatched three high-level envoys – former Presidents Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and Kgalema Motlanthe of South Africa – to Addis Ababa, where they met senior federal officials in an effort to reduce tensions. The federal government did not, however, give the AU emissaries access to Tigray. In a meeting, Abiy rejected their entreaties for talks with the TPLF, criticising international “interference” in what he describes as a “law enforcement operation”.<sup>8</sup> In the meantime, the AU's Peace and Security Council has yet to feature the Tigray crisis on its agenda and is unlikely to do so while Ethiopia holds a council seat, which it will until 2022.

Despite the challenges, the AU envoys' initiative is worthwhile. One area where the envoys could play a positive role is the humanitarian emergency in Tigray. They should support the UN and EU in pushing for unfettered humanitarian access to the whole region, in order to alleviate fears that aid is not reaching millions of people. The AU should back the EU's call for immediate, unconditional and unrestricted access to Tigray for humanitarian workers.<sup>9</sup> Another area that should concern the envoys is the human rights situation in the region. Despite reports of grave violations by different parties, the Ethiopian government has rejected calls for independent investigations. In partnership with the EU, the envoys should press Addis Ababa to allow such probes.

Beyond the urgent situation in Tigray, the AU should press the federal government to adopt conciliatory measures toward opponents in other regions in order to ease crises there, especially in Oromia, Ethiopia's most populous region. While the

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<sup>6</sup> “Ethiopia Access Snapshot – Tigray Region”, OCHA, as of 19 January.

<sup>7</sup> “Statement of the Chairperson of the African Union Commission on the Situation in Ethiopia”, African Union Commission, 9 November 2020.

<sup>8</sup> “Ethiopia's Tigray crisis: Abiy Ahmed ‘rejects international interference’”, BBC, 25 November 2020.

<sup>9</sup> “Tigray conflict: EU increases humanitarian support by €23.7 million in Ethiopia, Sudan and Kenya”, press release, European Commission, 19 December 2020.

AU Commission is already providing support to Ethiopia's ministry of peace to initiate small-scale dialogues to resolve local conflicts across the country, it should do more at a higher level. It could, for example, press Addis Ababa to extend an amnesty to jailed opposition leaders. Broadly speaking, a comprehensive, inclusive national dialogue remains the best bet for resolving the country's bitter and interconnected disputes, some of which relate to its ethno-federal system, which devolves power to ethnically defined regions. The AU, other African leaders and outside powers should be doing what they can to push Prime Minister Abiy toward such a dialogue.

#### **4. Seize an Opening to Engage on Libya**

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Libya's fragile ceasefire, the result of a deal signed by the warring sides on 23 October 2020 in Geneva, is holding, but the deal's broader implementation is lagging. Tensions remain high as UN-mediated negotiations continue over substantial political and economic issues. If the sides do not reach consensus on these issues, the ceasefire will be in jeopardy. The AU rightly sees Libya as critical to the stability of not just North Africa but also the Sahara, the Sahel and beyond. It has long complained about being sidelined in efforts to end the country's conflict. This fresh attempt at national negotiations signals a new phase in the Libyan peace process and a possible opening for an AU role.

Libya has been a source of great contention for many AU officials and African diplomats since a 2011 UN Security Council resolution that took note of AU calls to focus on political dialogue went on to approve a military intervention. Almost immediately after the resolution passed, three of the UN Security Council's permanent members – France, the UK and the U.S. – dropped the diplomatic option promoted by the AU. Instead, they launched a NATO-led military operation, which exceeded its civilian protection mandate by ousting then-Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi. The lack of a common position among the three African Security Council members at the time (Gabon, Nigeria and South Africa), due to AU member states' differing attitudes toward Qadhafi, also undermined the AU's calls for political negotiations.

Since then, the AU has been marginalised in the Libya peace process. One reason are divisions on the continent over which faction to support in the internal war that broke out in 2014, which is tied up with regional politics and competition. Another is the UN's lead role. The world body runs an integrated special political mission, the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), and the Security Council has mandated a succession of UN secretary-general's special envoys to lead peacemaking efforts. The council rejected proposals in 2020 to appoint a joint UN-AU envoy.

Now a window has opened for the AU to support more actively the delicate UN-led political process and maybe also fulfilment of the ceasefire terms. The recent appointment of the well-respected Zimbabwean Rasedon Zenenga as UNSMIL mission coordinator provides a good entry point for the AU. Nonetheless, the AU will face a number of challenges as it prepares to best support the peace process in Libya.

First, the AU must consider where in the Libyan process it can make a difference. On the political front, it could support the existing UN negotiation track by using its leverage to bring Libyans to the table, in particular those who enjoy high-level contacts in African capitals. This option would be preferable to the AU hosting a sepa-

rate reconciliation conference, an idea which has been around for a long time but has gained little traction.

The AU should also look ahead to elections scheduled for 24 December 2021. If the mediation stays on track, the UN will play a leading role in helping organise the vote, and the AU should observe the polls. On ceasefire implementation, the AU should offer to send monitors, even if few in number, to what is likely to be a small team operating under the UN's aegis. The ceasefire agreement also envisages removing foreign fighters from Libya, including an array of armed groups from Sudan and Chad who are employed by the rival military coalitions. In coordination with the UN, African ceasefire monitors should plan now for these groups' demobilisation to ensure they do not become guns for hire in other nearby conflicts or stir up trouble in their home countries.

The AU needs to streamline its own operational activities on Libya. A multiplicity of AU bodies covers the Libya file, including a High-Level Ad Hoc Committee, a special envoy of the AU Commission chairperson, a liaison office and an international contact group created at the February 2020 summit. Although these bodies make important contributions, they also risk duplicating efforts given that some have overlapping mandates. The AU needs to make clear the division of labour among its initiatives and closely coordinate its efforts with the African members of the UN Security Council.

Finally, the AU should ensure that it has sufficient capacity to follow developments and engage fully. At its February 2020 summit, the AU Assembly decided to upgrade the AU liaison office in Libya to the level of mission and to equip it with the requisite political, diplomatic and military capacities. The AU should follow through on this decision swiftly. It should also provide clear and efficient channels back to Addis Ababa to keep its headquarters updated on developments.

## **5. Put Politics First in the Sahel**

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With no end in sight to the turmoil in much of the Sahel, an urgent rethink is needed to stabilise the region. The year 2020 was the Sahel's deadliest in decades, marked by soaring intercommunal violence that has provided jihadists and ethnic militias with more opportunities to wreak havoc.<sup>10</sup> The August 2020 coup in Mali, brought on by popular protests against corruption and insecurity, illustrates the depth of people's anger at their leaders.<sup>11</sup> Despite mounting concerns about governance, the AU's response, like that of Western powers, has recently tilted toward military action. It is developing plans to send an AU force to the Sahel to support the G5 Sahel Joint Force – an ad hoc coalition of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.

On 27 February 2020, AU Peace and Security Commissioner Smail Chergui announced that the AU will deploy 3,000 soldiers to the Sahel. AU sources say the troops will go to the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, where jihadist activity is most heavily concentrated. The details of how the force would

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<sup>10</sup> See Crisis Group Africa Report N°293, *Reversing Central Mali's Descent into Communal Violence*, 9 November 2020; Crisis Group Africa Report N°289, *Sidelining the Islamic State in Niger's Tillabery*, 3 June 2020; and Crisis Group Africa Report N°287, *Burkina Faso: Stopping the Spiral of Violence*, 24 February 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group Statement, "Mali : défaire le coup d'Etat sans revenir en arrière", 21 August 2020.



work, including its funding mechanisms and troop contributors, are not yet final. Its Concept of Operations is still under development.

Finding a funding source for such a force is likely to be challenging. African states' contributions to the AU Peace Fund are being paid at a much slower rate than the AU had hoped, prompting it to extend the deadline for reaching the \$400 million goal from 2021 to 2023.<sup>12</sup> The body will be unlikely to tap into this fund before the threshold is reached. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) might be a source, given its 2019 pledge to provide \$1 billion for counter-terrorism efforts in the Sahel, but it is unlikely to donate quickly, as it has yet to gather the funds itself.<sup>13</sup> Nigeria and Ghana have already criticised what they see as insufficient consultation with ECOWAS during the AU force's development. Potential donors from outside the continent are also sceptical.<sup>14</sup>

Even if the force eventually deploys, it is unlikely to reverse the deterioration of security in a region already crowded with military operations that have so far brought no enduring peace. The added value of inserting more troops into the Sahel is far from clear; in fact, they might have an adverse impact. Abuses committed by national security forces, who have in many cases allied themselves with local vigilante groups and ethnic militias, have spurred intercommunal strife, which today claims more lives than any other form of violence in the Sahel.

Instead of adding to the military "traffic jam" in the region, the AU should develop a political strategy that puts Africa in the lead of the Sahel crisis response and focuses on the root causes of insecurity.<sup>15</sup> It should finalise the stabilisation plan that it is developing for the region and carry out sufficient shuttle diplomacy with the G5 governments to solicit their input into the document. The new strategy should emphasise the need for Sahelian states to re-establish their credibility with rural communities, including through efforts to resolve local conflicts, de-escalate local tensions and better regulate access to local resources. Sahelian states should also open themselves to dialogue with communities that are hostile to authorities, including those suspected of harbouring jihadists. States inevitably have to battle jihadist groups by force, but military operations should be part of the stabilisation plan and not the whole of it.

Meanwhile, efforts to keep Mali's post-coup transition on track will be critical to regional stability. The AU should use its seat on the Monitoring and Support Group for the Transition in Mali, established by ECOWAS, to coordinate international support for Mali's eighteen-month passage to democratic rule. Working with ECOWAS and the UN, it should apply pressure on Bamako authorities to ensure that Mali meets its benchmarks during this period. In particular, the AU and its partners should hold the authorities to their promises to combat corruption, allocate government positions

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<sup>12</sup> Decisions of the AU Assembly at the 33rd AU Summit, Assembly/AU/Dec752(XXXIII), 10 February 2020.

<sup>13</sup> "Final Communiqué of ECOWAS Summit on Terrorism", ECOWAS, 14 September 2019. Crisis Group Africa Briefing N° 149, *The Risk of Jihadist Contagion in West Africa*, 20 December 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group Africa Report N° 297, *How to Spend It: New EU Funding for African Peace and Security*, 14 January 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Crisis Group Africa Report N° 258, *Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force*, 12 December 2017.

equitably, without consolidating the military's power, and move ahead with electoral preparations as scheduled.

The AU should also use its envoy to the region – once appointed – to step up dialogue with various Malian political caucuses and budding political parties that wish to participate in elections. The envoy's seat is empty, following the November 2020 resignation of Pierre Buyoya (who has since died) and it is unlikely to be filled until the next AU chairperson has been elected. As a top priority, the incoming chair should name a new envoy with a sufficiently high standing to engage with Bamako and international partners, and his or her team should be expanded accordingly. If possible, the envoy should be based in Mali.

## **6. Support Somalia during Its Elections and Beyond**

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Somalia is due to hold a contentious presidential election on 8 February, just one day after the AU summit ends, but the polls look increasingly unlikely to take place amid rising fears that campaigning could descend into violence. The country has been on tenterhooks since December, when legislative polls that should have kicked off the electoral season were postponed at the last minute. Relations between Somalia's federal government and some of its regions, or federal member states, which have deteriorated over the last few years due to disputes over power sharing, have soured further due to disagreements over how to conduct the elections. The Islamist militant group Al-Shabaab, which has stepped up attacks in Somalia in recent months, and the Islamic State in Somalia, could both exploit election-related turmoil. If fighting ignites, the AU and its military mission AMISOM will be called upon to douse the flames.

AMISOM is already working to step up cooperation with local forces to help secure designated areas where clan elders and electoral delegates will vote. The AU should be ready to provide support in a mediation capacity should violence occur. It should closely coordinate any involvement in dialogue with the UN Assistance Mission in Somalia to ensure it complements (rather than duplicates) UN efforts already in place.

The AU will also have to consider AMISOM's own future this year. The mission, which has been on the ground since 2007, is under increasing financial pressure as it approaches its mandate renewal on 28 February 2021. EU funding for AMISOM, without which it cannot survive, is due to end in July. With Brussels still putting the final touches on new funding mechanisms for global peace and security operations, Europeans cannot yet say whether they will extend support. AMISOM's troop contingent has already been reduced by 3,000 since 2017 – with the authorised deployment now standing at 19,626 – in preparation for its planned withdrawal in deference to national security forces in 2021, as per the Somalia Transition Plan.<sup>16</sup> The AU is concerned – justifiably so – that national forces do not yet have the capacity to take over and that AMISOM's premature departure could undo hard-won progress in fighting Al-Shabaab. Most international partners share the concern about Soma-

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<sup>16</sup> UN Security Council Resolution 2520 (2020) on Somalia, UNSC S/RES/2520(2020), 29 May 2020.

lia's forces but are reluctant to keep footing the bill for AMISOM's costly operations, estimated at \$1.2 billion per year.<sup>17</sup>

While AMISOM may undergo a possible cut to financing or drawdown as a result of the February mandate renewal, the AU and its partners should put pressure on Mogadishu and the federal member states to develop a coherent, unified timetable for carrying out the Somalia Transition Plan and building up the national security forces, including a greater emphasis on their ability to hold urban centres. This would in turn free up AMISOM to be more active in its pursuit of Al-Shabaab militants. This task will likely have to wait until after the elections, as any new administration will want to put its own stamp on the transition plan, which the AU Peace and Security Council endorsed in April 2018. It is important that the AU push hard for its own policy recommendations to the UN Secretariat and Security Council ahead of the mandate renewal. At the very least, the AU should work to persuade its partners to ask the Security Council to expand AMISOM's role in mentoring the national army, as a means of further developing local capacity and reducing Somalia's reliance on the mission to secure population centres.

Even with additional AMISOM support, however, it is highly unlikely that the national army will have the capacity to take over from the peace support operation by the end of 2021. As a result, Somalia's international partners must prepare themselves to extend AMISOM's mandate and funding beyond 2021. The AU, in turn, should engage partners, including the EU, in determining a reformed mandate for AMISOM, including the possibility of a leaner mission with a stronger counter-terrorism focus and clear time-defined steps to hand over security responsibilities to local forces.

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## **7. Re-engage to Support Sudan's Transition**

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The AU played a central role in brokering the formation of Sudan's civilian-military interim government, following the months of popular protests that ended in a coup ousting former President Omar al-Bashir.<sup>18</sup> It was also a signatory witness of the October 2020 Juba peace agreement between Khartoum and rebel movements from Darfur and the Two Areas (South Kordofan and Blue Nile) that aims to bring an end to years of civil conflict in which hundreds of thousands died and millions fled their homes. To cement progress, the AU must reverse its recent disengagement and resume acting as guarantor and watchdog of the transition, while also helping negotiate the entry into the transitional government of rebel groups that did not sign the Juba agreement.

Sudan's revolution hangs in the balance. The economy is near breaking point, destabilising the fragile accommodation between civilian and military appointees to the country's governing Sovereign Council, which was formed in August 2019.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the public could yet lose faith in the civilian cabinet that they hope will deliver economic and democratic dividends to them following decades of hardship under

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<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group Africa Report N°286, *The Price of Peace: Securing UN Financing for AU Peace Operations*, 31 January 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group Africa Report N°281, *Safeguarding Sudan's Revolution*, 21 October 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°157, *Financing the Revival of Sudan's Troubled Transition*, 22 June 2020.

Bashir. If demonstrators return to the streets to protest the lack of progress, military actors could exploit any instability to grab more power. Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok is therefore under pressure to increase spending on ordinary citizens. The government has to tread a difficult line. It needs to free up money that currently goes to the bloated security services or wasteful projects benefitting powerful figures with connections to former regime elements. At the same time, too much reform could anger those same figures and land the civilian cabinet in hot water.

In addition, important rebel holdouts remain outside the peace process. The most powerful group in the Two Areas, led by Abdel Aziz Al-Hilu, refused to sign the Juba agreement. So did the prominent Darfuri rebel leader Abdel Wahid al-Nur. Abdel Aziz demands greater self-determination rights for the Two Areas and reduced influence for the military. Abdel Wahid asserts that the agreement is just another example of political co-option by central authorities who have failed to tackle the root causes of crisis in Darfur.

Although the AU helped broker the Juba deal, it has stepped back from playing a direct role in broader efforts to stabilise the country. Given the gravity of events in Sudan, as well as the AU's positive track record in steering the country toward the August 2019 agreement, the organisation should return to its more prominent role. It should appoint an envoy to Sudan based in the AU's liaison office in Khartoum, tasked with mediating tensions between parties to the newly expanded transitional government in Sudan and then encouraging them to fulfil the outstanding provisions of the transitional and Juba agreements. These include security sector and economic reforms as well as electoral preparations. The envoy could report issues of concern back to the AU's Peace and Security Council and convene talks to facilitate the entry of Abdel Aziz and Abdel Wahid into the transition.

The ongoing withdrawal this year of the hybrid AU-UN mission in Darfur (UN-AMID) which is likely to leave a security vacuum in a fragile part of the country, is an additional important reason for the AU to step up its political mediation. Darfur is increasingly beset by local communal conflicts over resources, which actors might exploit to help them jostle for power and influence in Khartoum.

## **8. Draw Attention to Climate Change's Security Risks**

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International attention on the climate crisis is increasing ahead of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), now scheduled for November 2021, and with Washington's welcome return to the Paris agreement. Taking advantage of heightened global consciousness, AU member states, which have known for years that climate change threatens populations across the continent, should use the conference to highlight the security risks and craft adaptation policies aimed at reducing the potential for deadly conflict.

Africa's climate future is worrying. As UN scientists have documented, millions of Africans already experience record heat waves, extreme precipitation and rising sea levels – changes that disrupt livelihoods, exacerbate food insecurity, water scarcity and resource competition, and spur migration. The World Bank projects that tens of millions of Africans will soon leave their homes due to climate change, straining the cities and neighbouring countries they will travel to in order to seek better opportu-

nities, and requiring creative policy responses.<sup>20</sup> As populations boom, water for domestic consumption and irrigation will become an even more precious commodity. On the Nile, Egypt and Ethiopia have already traded threats of military action over the GERD, which Cairo sees as an existential threat – that will be aggravated by climate change – to Egypt’s stability and prosperity.<sup>21</sup>

The effects of climate on conflict are not simple or linear, however, and depend heavily on how states are governed. The same climatic changes can produce very different conflict outcomes depending on the political response. In some instances, rising temperatures and uneven rainfall do indeed generate scarcity and conflict. As Crisis Group has shown, droughts in north-western Nigeria have intensified longstanding competition between herders and farmers over dwindling resources.<sup>22</sup> In other instances, it is the government response to climate change that has accelerated conflict. In the central Sahel, for example, adaptation efforts like drilled wells and agricultural programs rolled out with insufficient planning have attracted non-native farmers, stirring tensions with local nomadic herders and native farmers.<sup>23</sup> While drawing attention to climate change’s security risks and raising funding for mitigation initiatives, the AU should also make clear that the relationship between climate change and conflict is not straightforward and that governments on the continent play a critical role in minimising risks.

The AU has an uphill battle in raising sufficient funds for continental climate adaptation efforts. Pledges by Western governments and companies to generate \$100 billion per year, starting in 2020, for climate mitigation and adaptation in developing countries are falling short. Wealthy nations that are likely to donate are more concerned about long-term carbon reduction than the more immediate climate adaptation efforts that can help support Africans today. To that end, the AU needs to step up its global campaign for assistance. In May 2018, the AU Peace and Security Council requested that the AU Commission chairperson appoint a special envoy for climate change and security. This job is still unfilled. With former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry now the U.S. climate envoy and European nations lobbying for a UN special representative on climate and security, there is a ready audience for Africa to lay out its own ideas and priorities.

The AU Commission chairperson should immediately appoint an envoy with sufficient political weight to lobby international actors to support climate-related conflict prevention. The envoy would work to promote the continent’s interests, especially in preparing a clear African common position ahead of COP26. She or he could also develop standards for how to avoid exacerbating local conflict when spending climate adaptation funds.

**Addis Ababa/Nairobi/Dakar/Brussels, 3 February 2021**

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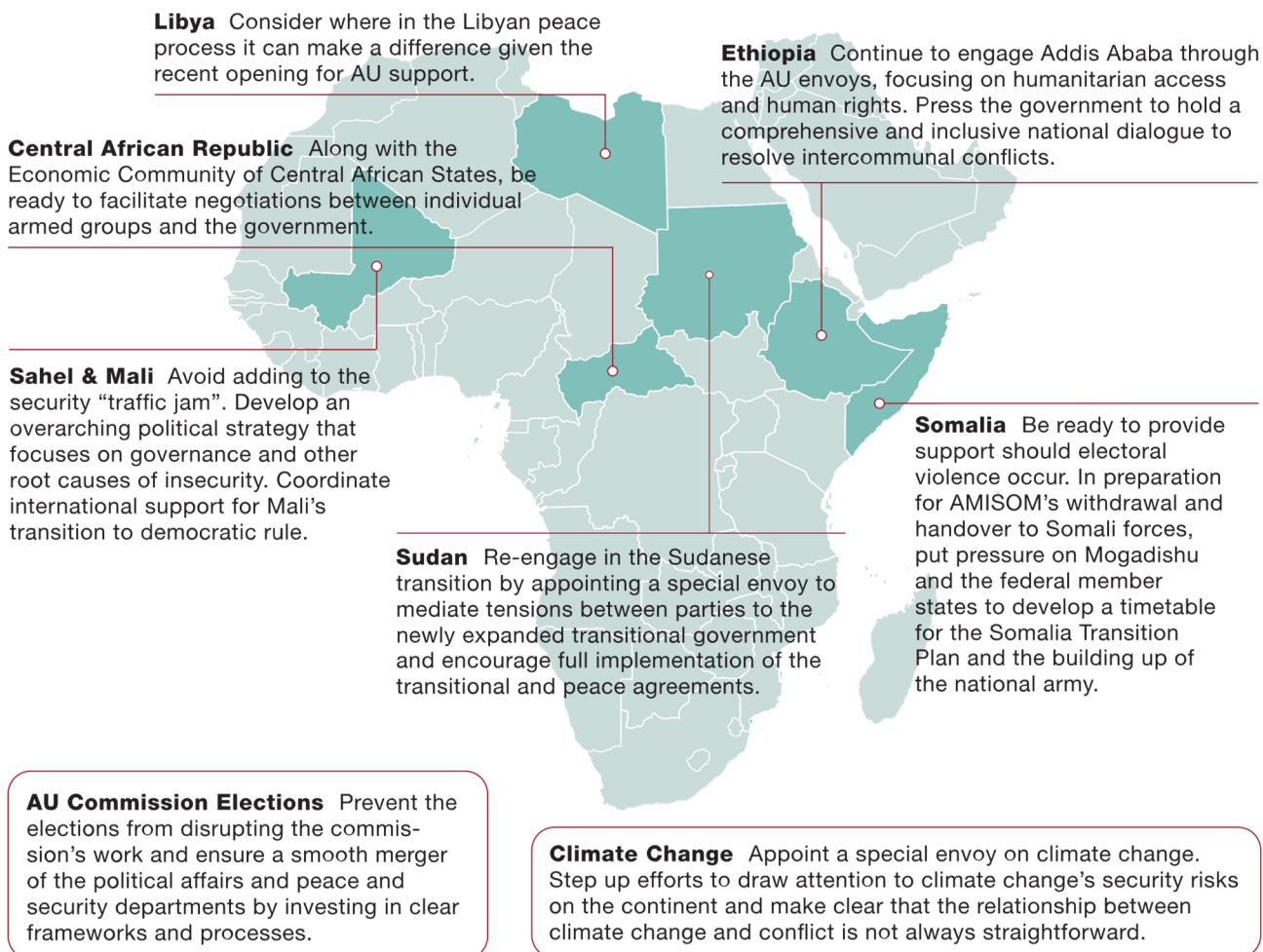
<sup>20</sup> “Groundswell: Preparing for Internal Climate Migration”, World Bank Group, 19 March 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group Africa Report N°271, *Bridging the Gap in the Nile Waters Dispute*, 20 March 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group Africa Report N°288, *Violence in Nigeria’s North West: Rolling Back the Mayhem*, 18 May 2020.

<sup>23</sup> Crisis Group Africa Briefing N°154, *The Central Sahel: Scene of New Climate Wars?*, 24 April 2020.

## Appendix A: The African Union's Priorities in 2021



## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

Crisis Group's President & CEO, Robert Malley, took up the post on 1 January 2018. Malley was formerly Crisis Group's Middle East and North Africa Program Director and most recently was a Special Assistant to former U.S. President Barack Obama as well as Senior Adviser to the President for the Counter-ISIL Campaign, and White House Coordinator for the Middle East, North Africa and the Gulf region. Previously, he served as President Bill Clinton's Special Assistant for Israeli-Palestinian Affairs.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

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