Order Code RS20945
June 21, 2001

The Organization of African Unity

Gordon S. Brown and Nicholas Cook
Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division

Summary

Since the end of the Cold War, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) has increasingly focused its activities on practical measures to deal with the continent's challenges of intra- and inter-state conflict and good governance. The organization will probably be reconstituted in 2002 as the African Union, but its effectiveness will continue to be challenged by chronic budgetary weakness and concern by some member states that its activities could constitute intervention in their internal affairs. It is nonetheless moving slowly to develop a more meaningful role and in particular is building up its capacity to play an expanded role in conflict prevention. U.S. assistance dedicated to the OAU's conflict resolution activities expired in FY1998.

Background

Founded in 1963 during the era of decolonization, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) has as its primary charter objective the promotion of unity and solidarity among African states. The OAU has served over the years as the primary forum for negotiating disputes among its 53 members[1] and for forging common positions on African issues such as decolonization and apartheid. The organization, however, has been widely seen as ineffective in addressing intra- or inter-state conflict among its members. It has often been precluded from playing a more active role in that area because the principles of national sovereignty and non-intervention in member states' affairs, written into its charter, have been strictly interpreted by member governments so as to avoid any interference in disputes they considered internal.

The OAU's supreme organ is the Assembly of Heads of State and Government, which meets annually, taking decisions by consensus. The Assembly's work is supplemented by bi-annual meetings of the Foreign Ministers, plus several standing Commissions, but the organization's day-to-day activities are carried out by a General Secretariat based in Addis Ababa. The Secretary General, currently Salim Ahmed Salim

[1] All African states are members except for Morocco, which withdrew over the organization's stance on the Western Sahara issue. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic is a member.

of Tanzania, (whose current four-year term expires in 2002) is the effective voice of the organization between Assembly meetings, but lacks substantive executive powers.

The OAU's activities are hampered by a perpetual lack of resources. The operating budget has stagnated at about $30 million per year for some time, and a large number of members do not pay their annual assessments on a timely basis, if at all. Even though the voting rights of members have been suspended at times due to non-payment, the organization continues to suffer from budget shortfalls and arrears of almost $50 million.

Objectives and Priorities

Since the end of the Cold War and the elimination of apartheid, the OAU has gradually directed its focus toward its second Charter objective, that of achieving a better life for the peoples of Africa. It has developed a priority agenda which encompasses regional socio-economic cooperation, integration and development, democratization and good governance, and the promotion of human rights and the rule of law. Within that very broad spectrum of possible activities, the organization has chosen to concentrate its limited resources primarily on conflict prevention and resolution, arguing that the socio-economic agenda is not achievable without first reducing the scourge of local conflicts.[2]

Conflict Avoidance and Resolution

The OAU Charter calls for the peaceful settlement of disputes between members. Originally, it provided for a Commission of Mediation, Conciliation and Arbitration. The Commission was never effective; hampered by the principle of non-intervention and ignored by member states, it was eliminated in 1970. The conflict resolution role was assumed, to the extent possible, by the Secretaries General. Facing the same constraints, however, they had to limit their role largely to ad hoc efforts to mediate existing conflicts or provide good offices for resolution. Clear successes were few, mainly on border disputes.[3] Moreover, the failures of its two substantial interventions (an OAU-organized peacekeeping force sent to Chad in 1982 and an underfunded Military Observer Group sent to Rwanda in 1991), to some degree inoculated the organization against an activist role in peacekeeping.

By the 1990s, U.S.-Soviet competition in Africa came to an end, but crippling intra- and inter-state conflict on the continent persisted and even expanded. A consensus began to develop among African leaders that envisaged a more dynamic OAU role in conflict resolution – a goal championed by the then new Secretary General Salim. Salim prepared a report for the 1992 Assembly, in which he proposed the abandonment of the strictly ad hoc approach to conflict management and the establishment of a permanent and proactive body. This body, to be known as the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution, was tasked primarily with conflict prevention. In the following year, and

---

[2] OAU, "Enhancing Peace and Security in Africa: the OAU's Program for Strengthening the Conflict Management Center," Addis Ababa, October 1999.

[3] "An Assessment of the OAU Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution," Monde Muyangwa and Margaret Vogt, International Peace Academy, 2000.

in spite of member states' concerns about its possible impingement on their sovereignty, the Assembly agreed to establish the Mechanism.

The Mechanism. When the Mechanism was established, it was given the primary mission of conflict prevention. This is both because that role was less threatening to the sovereignty of member states and because the organization did not have the managerial or financial capability to undertake peacekeeping operations. The Mechanism was provided with an executive council, called the Central Organ and consisting of 15 member states, which is elected annually and meets regularly at the level of Ambassadors to the OAU. It also has a permanent body, the Conflict Management Center (or CMC), set up within the Political Affairs Division of the Secretariat. The CMC is designed to provide the Secretary General and the Central Organ with early warning information, analysis, and options for action that would allow the OAU to play an active role in conflict prevention, management or even resolution. It is financed through a Special Peace Fund, to which 6% of the OAU's annual budget is dedicated. This fund can also receive voluntary donations from member states and other donors both within and outside of Africa. In setting up the Mechanism, the Assembly provided a capacity for creation of observer missions to areas of conflict but explicitly discouraged OAU engagement in peacekeeping. Instead, it encouraged recourse to the U.N. for such expensive and difficult operations.

The Mechanism and the CMC have now been in operation for over 5 years and have had some limited successes but have suffered from the OAU's lack of resources. Until 2000, the CMC operated with a permanent staff of only 14, scarcely enough to perform its basic function of providing the Secretary General with early warning information about potential conflicts, much less their prevention. Although the permanent staff has since been increased to 23 in an effort to build up its early warning and analysis capability, the CMC is still dependent on outside donors to flesh out its planned roster of almost fifty employees. Cooperation with the U.N. is substantial and growing, with standing liaison arrangements with the U.N. Department of Peacekeeping Operations providing for regular exchanges of information and the U.N. Development Program providing five staff members and other support to the CMC.[4] The European Union also provides assistance.

The CMC's current objective is to build up an early warning capacity that would allow it to provide regular information and meaningful options to the Secretary General for possible OAU interventions in developing conflicts. Although its analytical and institutional capacity is being strengthened, the CMC will still have to base its analyses on open source information or intelligence supplied by its member states – a potential weakness in the event that member states chose not to cooperate. The CMC also plans to develop a capacity to predict areas of potential conflict and to create models for conflict prevention. On a more immediately practical level, it has begun, in cooperation with the African Chiefs of Staff, to develop logistical coordination guidelines and standard operating procedures, including rules of engagement, to guide future field missions.

Recent Conflict Management Activities. The OAU's record, since embarking on its more activist role, has been a mixed one. The Mechanism itself is very much a work in progress; underfunded and understaffed, its specific achievements to date are generally seen as minimal. Two OAU Observer Missions have been deployed under the

---

[4] U.N. D. P. project RAF/997/028

Mechanisms's auspices: a mission to Burundi from 1993-1996 and one to the Comoros in 1997-1999. Both were modest successes and provided the Mechanism with valuable experience for mounting and supporting such missions in the future. Even as the CMC has been building up its institutional capacity, it has provided the Secretary General with staff support for his own activist role. Moreover, the regular meetings of the Central Organ, from which emerge authoritative OAU statements of position on African conflicts, have served to acclimatize the member governments to a more interventionist OAU role.

While gradually building up his institution's capacity to play a systemic role in managing future conflicts, Secretary General Salim has continued to engage the OAU in its traditional ad hoc efforts at mediation. Faced with a plethora of regional conflicts and continued resistance by some member states to what they see as a potentially interventionist OAU role, he has chosen his engagements carefully. For example, the OAU has played no role at all in the Sudan conflict, and has taken a back seat in the Angola and Congo mediation efforts. However, Salim has kept the organization active in the search for solutions in other areas, through well-chosen special OAU fact-finding envoys or mediators (for example to Liberia, Guinea Bissau, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia/Eritrea, and the Comoros). His active liaison with the U.N. Secretariat has facilitated the deployment of blue beret peacekeeping missions once the regional parties have reached agreement, while his coordination with the African sub-regional organizations has ensured that they and the OAU were working in concert on resolving regional conflicts.

However, the only clear conflict management success that the OAU has been able to record was its mediation effort between Ethiopia and Eritrea, led by Algerian President Abdul Aziz Bouteflika, and actively supported by the United States. In the other conflicts on the continent, the major role has been played by existing or ad-hoc sub-regional organizations: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in Liberia and Guinea Bissau,[5] the Inter-governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in Sudan and Somalia, members of the South African Development Committee (SADC) in Lesotho, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and another ad-hoc grouping in Angola. The OAU has welcomed the role and the resources of those organizations in managing or resolving current conflicts, seeking to maintain its own broader policy role. However, the rapid growth of their experience and capacity may, in time, create problems of coordination for the more slowly developing OAU Mechanism.

Humanitarian and Economic Activities

The OAU's mandate in the fields of economic and social development, human rights and democratization, is much larger than its capability, particularly financially. Of necessity, therefore, the organization has tended to draw up documents that affirm the need for common action but leave implementation to members and seek major financing from external sources. A case in point was the Abuja Declaration of April 2001, on the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Such approaches, of course, are not without effect, as witnessed by the 1995 Agenda for Action, which stimulated establishment of the U.N.'s Special Initiative for Africa as a new source of assistance, both to member states and to the OAU.

---

[5] More specifically, the intervention was carried out by the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), set up in 1990.

The OAU has limited institutional capacity to deal with these issues at an operative level. The member states' concern for their sovereignty, coupled with the organization's budgetary problems, have hampered development of strong OAU institutions. An African Economic Community, agreed to in 1994, is still awaiting ratification, as is a 1999 OAU Convention on Prevention and Combating Terrorism. A Convention on Refugees, dealing with treatment of refugees in camps, has been approved, but the Commission on Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons has only monitoring and coordination authority and a small program budget. Similarly, the limited staff of the Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, established in 1986, has focused to date on building a baseline of country studies from country submissions, and the Commission has made few if any recommendations to the Assembly for action on specific human rights abuses.

> *...the new agenda for the resolution of internal conflict must include the fundamentals of governance. For, while classical negotiations can bring an end to internal hostilities, it is only genuine political reform, economic development, and providing greater opportunity for all our people, which will act as insurance against instability and conflict. Building democracy will require building the institutions of democracy to oversee the political process.*
>
> -- Secretary General Salim Salim,

In spite of these weaknesses, the OAU has gradually staked out new grounds for oversight, if not intervention, into its members' internal affairs. The 1995 Plan of Action, for example, dedicated some 29 of its 42 articles to issues of domestic priority-setting or good governance. The OAU has also been active in promoting democratic elections, sponsoring independent election commissions and sending out election observers on over fifty occasions. And in an interesting but still untested new departure, the Assembly took a decision in its 1999 Algiers conference[6] not to recognize any "unconstitutional" changes of government on the continent. Although guidelines and definitions to flesh out the decision remain to be worked out, the OAU has staked out, through that step, a basic position against military coups in Africa, and has accepted the principle of sanctions against non-compliance.

U.S. Policy toward the OAU

Until the 1990s, the U.S. paid minimal attention to the OAU, limiting contacts largely to liaison and information gathering performed by officers at the American Embassy in Addis Ababa. Following the OAU's shift toward a more active approach to conflict management issues, however, it has drawn more favorable attention from the U.S. government, and even, as in its Horn of Africa mediation effort, active U.S. support and collaboration. In 1992, a presidential determination made the organization eligible for American assistance; in 1994, the U.S. began to support the OAU's conflict resolution activities with an allocation of $1.5 million. That same year, the African Conflict Resolution Act (P.L. 103-381) was passed, authorizing $1.5 million in foreign assistance to the OAU annually from FY1995 through 1998, to strengthen the OAU's conflict resolution capability. Although that authority has expired, some Economic Support Fund (ESF) and Peacekeeping (PKO) funds requested for FY2002 would help support the

---

[6] OAU decision AFG/Dec.141 (XXXV) of the 35th Assembly, Algiers, 1999.

OAU's conflict management activities in the Horn and Congo. In a parallel measure, Congress has also authorized PKO funds to support the training of selected African military units for peacekeeping responsibilities, under the African Crisis Response Initiative (ACRI); the FY2002 request for such training is $20 million.

Prospects and Challenges

The OAU will soon be reconstituted into a new organization, to be called the African Union. The change has been pushed by Libya's leader Muammar Qaddhafi, who has focused on Africa over the past few years. A new Constitutive Act [7] for the Union has been approved by OAU members; it provides for new organs including an advisory Pan-African Parliament, and approval in principle to eventually establish institutions such as an African Central Bank and Monetary Fund. Qaddhafi's energetic lobbying for the Union has garnered the number of ratifications necessary for approval and – provided the necessary instruments of ratification are deposited – the Union should be inaugurated officially at the next annual meeting in 2002. While the terms of reference of the new organization continue to enshrine the principle of non-intervention in member states' internal affairs, they also include language that would authorize intervention in the internal affairs of a member when the Assembly finds "grave circumstances," i.e. human rights violations or genocide.

Whether OAU or African Union, the organization will probably continue to suffer from a lack of funding and from the unwillingness of many member states to grant it wider powers. In spite of those constraints, the organization has been making progress in a direction most see as positive. Under an activist Secretary General, it has gradually moved into areas, such as democratization, human rights, and conflict management, previously considered the exclusive domain of the member governments. Although achievements to date have been limited, the focus of the organization has shifted, possibly permanently, toward practical matters and effectiveness.

In the field of conflict management, in which the United States has substantial interest, the OAU has made limited progress. It has begun to develop an institutional capability for early intervention, to develop guidelines for observer and other missions, and at the same time learned to share information and responsibilities with the U.N. and the sub-regional organizations, which have played the prime peacekeeping roles in recent conflicts. Most importantly, the organization's new activist role, linked with actual deployments by the sub-regional organizations, has led to wider acceptance of the idea of international intervention in resolving Africa's internal conflicts. However, the prospect of a permanent, autonomous, African peacekeeping capacity, either under the OAU or in coordination with the sub-regional organizations, remains, in the views of regional experts, only a distant possibility.

---

[7] Text available at www.oau-oua.org/LOME/introductory_note