

Chapter 5

The Organisation of African Unity

Richard Cornwell

Introduction

Of all the regional organisations representing what used to be called the Third World, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) is the largest in terms of its membership. For all its much-publicised shortcomings, it has also been acknowledged by some experts as the most effective of those bodies.¹ It has, for instance, provided an important bridge between the Arab North and the Black South, between francophone, anglophone and lusophone, and between governments of all ideological persuasions.²

In the years since its establishment it has undergone many vicissitudes and experienced many changes. The competing ideals that led to the OAU's foundation still echo in its debates today, as it struggles with the fundamental difficulty of presenting a diplomatic forum for, and of, the world's poorest continent. The focus of its activities has altered over time, as the Organisation has attempted to adjust to the changing position of an Africa increasingly marginalised in global terms. Thus, the original preoccupation with the complete liberation of Africa from alien political domination was augmented and eventually superseded by the quest for economic strength through unity, as envisioned in the Lagos Plan of Action of 1980.³ By 1990 the end of the Cold War had ushered in a new set of priorities: those concerned with the proliferation of violent conflict in the continent and efforts at its prevention. The OAU has redefined its principal mission and redesigned parts of its structure accordingly. Whether it has done enough, or is capable of doing so, is a matter for conjecture. There is also room for discussion about whether it has accurately identified the causes of conflict, direct or contributory. One of the concerns addressed in this volume is that a significant phenomenon contributing to the creation of a culture of violence in the political arena is the proliferation of light weapons, of illicit or even legal provenance, and the cross-border traffic in these. Only lately has this begun to be recognised and, it is to be noted that, following the moderate success of the campaign against landmines, some

concerned statesmen and citizens are now giving greater attention to the need to exercise control over the spread of lethal hand-held weapons. It stands to reason that the flow of weapons, whether to insurgent groups or to governments, tends to make the parties to a conflict less amenable to the resolution of their differences by non-violent means. To the truth of this commonplace statement, the recent history of Africa bears eloquent witness.

This chapter will attempt to establish the extent to which the OAU's institutional and political history, and its recent identification of the economically and socially ruinous effects of conflict, allow it to incorporate in its own conflict-prevention strategies some means of monitoring the flow of small arms.

The Origins and Structure of the OAU

When the UN was established in 1945, there were only four sovereign independent states in Africa: Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia and South Africa. The remainder of the continent consisted of eight mandated or trust territories, and the colonial possessions of France, Britain, Belgium, Portugal and Spain. Some fifteen years later most of Africa consisted either of independent states or colonies on the verge of achieving sovereignty.

For the political classes of sub-Saharan Africa the late 1950s and early 1960s were years of great optimism and excitement. New leaders emerged to take their places controlling their new states and set about the business of national development and nation-building. The expectation was that Africa, freed from the shackles of a largely indifferent colonial rule, would now experience a period of progress that might even serve as an example to other parts of the under-developed world. Almost throughout the continent, fledgling governments declared war upon disease, illiteracy and the other effects of mass poverty. As sovereign states, the new African countries found themselves courted by the principal players in the Cold War, and many were seduced by offers of assistance in various forms, not all of them useful. It was against this background of extravagant hopes, expectations and images that the representatives of thirty-one African states came together in Addis Ababa in 1963 to establish the OAU.⁴

The aims of the OAU, as stated in Article II of the Charter, were as follows:

- to promote the unity and solidarity of the African states;
- to co-ordinate and intensify their co-operation and efforts to achieve a better life for the peoples of Africa;
- to defend their sovereignty, their territorial integrity and independence;
- to eradicate all forms of colonialism from Africa; and
- to promote international co-operation, having due regard to the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.⁵

The signatories of the OAU Charter agreed to co-ordinate and harmonise their general policies in the fields of political and diplomatic co-operation; economic co-operation, including transport and communications; health, educational and cultural co-operation; scientific and technical co-operation; and co-operation for defence and security. All members were required to adhere to the following principles:

- the sovereign equality of all member states;
- non-interference in the internal affairs of states;
- respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of each state and for its inalienable right to independent existence;
- peaceful settlement of disputes by negotiation, mediation, conciliation or arbitration;
- condemnation of political assassination and of subversive activities on the part of neighbouring states or any other state;
- dedication to the total emancipation of existing colonial territories; and
- affirmation of a policy of non-alignment with regard to all blocs.

The OAU Charter established a number of political and administrative institutions:

- the Assembly of Heads of State and of Government, which is the supreme organ of the OAU and meets at least once a year;
- the Council of Ministers, which meets at least twice a year;
- the General Secretariat, with an Administrative Secretary-General and a number of Assistant Secretaries-General; and
- a Commission of Mediation, Conciliation and Arbitration.

The Assembly was also to establish a number of specialised commissions, including:

- The Economic and Social Commission;
- The Health, Sanitation and Nutrition Commission;
- The Defence Commission;
- The Scientific, Technical and Research Commission.

Since its foundation, additional specialised agencies have been established, including:

- The African Accounting Council. Established in 1979 and based in Kinshasa, this is intended to provide assistance to institutions in member countries on the standardisation of accounting. It promotes education and further training and research on accountancy and related fields of study.
- The African Bureau for Educational Sciences. Established in 1978 and based in Kinshasa, it conducts educational research and issues three regular publications.
- The African Civil Aviation Commission. Established in 1969 and based in Dakar, it aims to encourage co-operation in all civil aviation matters. It promotes the co-ordination and better utilisation of African air transport systems and the standardisation of aircraft, flight equipment and training programmes for pilots and mechanics. Its activities include the organisation of working groups and the publication of statistics.
- Pan-African News Agency (PANA). Established in Dakar and beginning operations in 1983, PANA also has regional headquarters in Khartoum, Lusaka, Kinshasa, Lagos and Tripoli. It receives news from national news agencies and distributes this in English and French. Financial problems have prompted a restructuring of the agency and the issue of shares to the private sector.
- Pan-African Postal Union (PAPU). Established in Arusha in 1980, its purpose is to extend members' co-operation in the provision of postal services.
- Pan-African Railways Union. Established in 1972 to standardise, expand, co-ordinate and improve members' railway services, its ultimate aim is to link all major systems.
- Pan-African Telecommunications Union. Established in 1977 in Kinshasa, its purpose is to co-ordinate the development of telecommunications networks and services in Africa.
- The Supreme Council for Sports in Africa. This body is based in Yaounde.

There are also representational offices maintained in New York, Geneva, Brussels and Cairo; scientific offices in Lagos, Nairobi and Yaounde; and the African Commission on Human and Peoples Rights in Banjul.

The establishment of the OAU as a loose association of states represented a defeat for radicals, such as Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah who sought a stronger form of unity to resist the effects of neo-colonialism, though with hindsight it is difficult to see how else the Organisation might have developed. Indeed, until very recently, it is on the very issues where some surrender or waiving of sovereignty has been called for, such as the field of defence, that the OAU has proved least able to act. The acceptance of the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other African states was key to the Organisation's survival through its first three decades. The price extracted, however, was the implicit acceptance by the OAU of whatever regime exercised effective power in a country, regardless of how it came to power. By extension it also signified acceptance of any domestic policy imposed by those regimes.⁶ Only in recent years, under the pressure of the economic and political crises besetting Africa, has there been any questioning of these assumptions.

Promise Postponed

The heady optimism of the first years of independence could not be sustained. The new states that emerged in the sub-Saharan Africa of the early 1960s had gained their freedom at relatively little cost, and this gave them a false sense of their own capacity and potential. On the economic front it soon became apparent to all but the incurably optimistic that many African countries were poor simply by virtue of their modest natural resource bases and their reliance on the vagaries of an unkind climate. Some had inherited from the colonial period an overdependence on a narrow range of primary commodities for export and foreign exchange earnings, which rendered them excessively vulnerable to fluctuations in commodity prices. More particularly, the post-independence boom in commodity prices proved deceptive and of short duration. Disease and the want of adequate infrastructure and educated or skilled work-forces added to the daunting problems facing most of the new states.⁷

Basil Davidson, by no means an unsympathetic observer, sums up the paradoxes of the first years of the OAU as follows:

“Heads of state or their deputies met periodically for policy reviews. These meetings soon declined into verbal futility and presidential bombast, while the very real differences of policy that now existed between groups of these states made it hard or impossible to get things done. Yet there evolved a principle of common attitude, and sometimes even of common action, never conceivable before. The OAU secured a wide agreement on certain basic issues concerned with organic cooperation, with the further decolonisation of the continent, and with the settlement of inter-state disputes. Even by 1970 the list of frontier conflicts resolved by OAU mediation was a useful one. Such settlements were seldom definitive because they could not be; the states and their international attachments saw to that. But they oiled the wheels of an abrasive post-colonial diplomacy, reduced warfare, won time for more fruitful approaches.”⁸

The OAU’s record on preventing or containing conflict has certainly been disappointing when measured against the high tone of the Charter. Occasionally it has played a significant diplomatic role – for example in achieving a temporary peace in the Sudan in 1972. But it failed to prevent some member states from breaking ranks to support secessionist Biafra in the 1960s. The OAU’s peacekeeping operation in Chad in 1981-82 also collapsed, nearly taking the Organisation with it.⁹ Nor could the OAU persuade all African states to desist from engaging in dialogue with white-ruled South Africa, or to support sanctions against that regime.

Changing Direction

If the economic crisis of the 1980s compelled the OAU to direct more of its attention and deliberations towards that area, then the transformation in global relationships wrought by the end of the Cold War exacerbated the challenges facing the continent across an even broader spectrum, and forced the OAU to recognise conflict as a prime hindrance to economic growth and development.

It is certainly no coincidence that the unrest and instability attending Africa’s ‘second liberation’ and democratisation took place in an environment in which the major powers no longer needed to compete so

ferociously for Africa’s international support. In the early 1990s, for the first time since independence, African rulers discovered that domestic support might have become more important than foreign patrons, and this forced them to confront the inherent weaknesses of their regimes and to consider sharing power with others. The 1990s, a time of deep and structural economic crisis, have proved uncomfortable for many of Africa’s rulers and their clients.

The driving force behind Africa’s second experiment with democracy came both from ideological conviction and the growing impatience of an ever-bolder public consciousness, and from the related matter of the continent’s prevailing economic woes. On the one hand, the politically-conscious, urbanised, professional and student bodies began to rail against the continued failure of their rulers to match rhetoric and promises to economic progress, for much of Africa had experienced a steady decline in living standards through the 1970s and 1980s. The political ferment accompanying the challenge to authoritarian rule in Africa has seldom been contained within strictly constitutional limits.

The weakness of the centre has helped revive the old, unresolved tensions between ethno-politics and the demands of the nation-state. Some African states have more or less disintegrated now that the end of Cold War competition means that the major international players no longer feel any pressing need to sustain largely fictitious entities as diplomatic or juridical units.

Increasingly, the men with the guns – and Africa is awash with them after the conflicts of the 1980s – have become important players in the political arena. The reduction in ideological conflict has reduced the political and military incentives for outside powers to intervene on the continent and, contrary to some expectations, an Africa omitted from the calculations of external rivals has not become a more peaceful place. Now that local disputes are less globalised, outside powers have less influence on the conduct, termination and outcome of these conflicts. Local rivalries and antagonisms are given freer rein, being more remote from world centres of power and insignificant in terms of the global system. African states are therefore less able to rely on outside assistance to end local wars that are no threat to vital foreign interests.

Since the end of the Cold War regional power blocs and organisations have become increasingly significant actors on the world stage. Within Africa, the OAU is pre-eminent among these, though subcontinental organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), SADC and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) have also moved beyond their original economic focus to accept broader responsibilities and tasks.

The Effects of Armed Conflict on Development

As has been said above, for many years the principle of non-intervention in the sovereign affairs of other states prevented the OAU from taking the lead in local conflict resolution. Conflict management tended to be dominated by foreign, principally European, concerns. By the early 1990s, however, it had become clear that internal conflicts were creating flows of displaced persons and refugees, were encouraging the proliferation of arms to fuel conflict and spread violent crime and were destroying the economic base of the region. Once internal wars were shown to have serious external consequences, the earlier concerns about national sovereignty were relegated in importance.

There can surely be little argument about the role of armed conflict as one of the greatest scourges of modern Africa. Quite apart from the loss of life as a direct result of military action, it wrecks the physical infrastructure, from hydro-electric schemes at one end of the scale to village wells at the other. Roads and bridges may be destroyed or fall into disrepair or be obstructed by the fighting. Transport capacity and fuel supplies are redirected to military use.

War and the preparation for war divert scarce resources and energy. Trained and skilled manpower is redirected from the economy and administration. Many skilled professionals have, to all intents and purposes, fled Africa for employment elsewhere or, having completed courses overseas, simply never return. This leaves us with the prospect of the Haitianisation of Africa, as those with the ability to run modern states abandon the field to local varieties of the *ton ton macoute*.

Warfare destroys food supplies and livestock, either directly or by their being pillaged or requisitioned by armed men whom civilian populations

are unable to resist. From the vital agricultural sector, which provides the livelihoods of most African families, manpower is conscripted, press-ganged off the land or forced into flight. The social and gender relations so important to the survival of communities with small margins are disturbed. Veterinary services and control measures prove impossible to maintain, resulting in the rapid spread of animal disease and massive losses of stock. Because of its social and ritual importance, the loss of livestock involves more than economic damage, however, disrupting the entire fabric of social life.

The delicate network of trade between peasant communities is disrupted and even destroyed, as is that between the towns and the countryside. Small traders, the essential links between peasant producers and the urban market, who provide farmers with access to vital agricultural inputs, are driven out of business, either because their stores are destroyed or because hostilities prevent them from selling in needy areas and they therefore refrain from purchasing surplus crops even when these are available. Social welfare services are disrupted, schools and clinics closed, ransacked or destroyed, immunisation programmes are discontinued and hospitals placed under immense strain. The often wanton destruction of life and property and the military use of terror undermine the sense of value and of the dignity of humanity. War wrecks religious and other value systems and may cause whole societies to slump into fatalism.

War also causes massive disturbances in the settlement of entire communities, displacing them internally or externally, most often into marginal areas in the countryside or vast squatter settlements on the edge of towns, where they aggravate local demand for water, food, fuel and rudimentary services and may distort local development plans. Such settlements of displaced persons are also the recruiting grounds for combatants to fuel the war. Refugee camps and settlements highlight the relationship between conflict and environmental stress and degradation, though they are by no means the only links in this chain.

Most authors agree that political conflict and environmental degradation are closely interrelated, though the causal link is by no means clear cut or uniform, and cause and effect are difficult to separate. Environmental degradation and socio-political conflict are part of the same vicious spiral.

A more detailed analysis could provide valuable insights into issues influencing security for nations and for individuals. What kinds of environmental problems lead to political imbalance and conflict? And what kinds of political conflicts lead to environmental degradation? A government fighting for its life tends to accord a low priority to tree-planting, terracing and environmentally sound agricultural practices.

Then there is the matter of military expenditure. Phil O’Keefe of Earthscan is quoted as saying some years ago that “*the only early warning system you need of famine is lists of which governments are spending disproportionate amounts of the GNP on military activities*”.¹⁰ Arms purchases not only increase foreign debt, they require the growing of more export/cash crops, often at the expense of food crops, to earn the necessary foreign exchange. At times weapons shipments have even been paid for by the direct transfer of internationally provided, emergency food-aid shipments.

Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution

At the 26th Ordinary Session in Addis Ababa, 9-11 July 1990, delegates were presented with the *Report of the Secretary-General on the Fundamental Changes Taking Place in the World and their Implications for Africa: Proposals for an African Response*. This led to the adoption of a declaration on Africa’s political and economic situation in which the heads of state and government committed themselves to transform Africa in order to lay the foundations for self-reliant, human-centred and sustainable development. Essential to this transformation were popular participation, guarantees of human rights and observance of the rule of law. The leaders committed themselves to the further democratisation of their societies and institutions, though the principle of sovereignty was still reaffirmed in the caveat that such transformation had to take into account socio-cultural values, the realities of each country and the need to ensure development and satisfy the basic needs of the people.¹¹

For Bakwesegha, later Head of the OAU Conflict Management Division, this meeting and the declaration emanating from it represented a watershed. In his view the OAU had now moved beyond its preoccupation with liberation and decolonisation to view as a whole the issues of economic integration and development, conflict prevention, management and

reduction.¹² In its final communique, the 1991 Summit of Heads of State and Government acknowledged publically that “... *there is a link between security, stability, development and co-operation in Africa*” and that insecurity and instability had impaired the OAU’s capacity to achieve continental co-operation.¹³

In March 1992 the OAU established a Division of Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution as part of the Political Department, following a proposal in this regard by the Secretary-General.¹⁴ Its line of authority stretches from the Secretary-General, through the Assistant Secretary-General in charge of Political Affairs, to the Director of the Political Department to the Head of the division. Since its formation, the Conflict Management division has been expanded and arranged in two sections: one dealing with Conflict Resolution, Defence and Security and the other with Conflict Prevention and Research.¹⁵

At the 28th OAU Annual Summit in Dakar in June 1992, Africa’s leaders agreed in principle to the establishment of a “*mechanism for preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts in Africa*”, and requested the Secretary-General to devise a plan for creating such an operational mechanism. Further discussion followed at the Council of Ministers meeting, in Addis Ababa in February 1993, and at the 29th OAU Summit, in Cairo on 30 June, the Mechanism was endorsed.¹⁶

The OAU resolution establishing the Mechanism signalled the OAU’s recognition that, partly as a consequence of ‘conflict fatigue’ on the part of external actors, Africa must now take primary responsibility for managing conflicts in the region. There was also an understandable degree of annoyance at having been an apparently helpless and dependent bystander in the past.¹⁷ As Salim Ahmed Salim, the OAU Secretary General, was later to remark:

*“The establishment of the Mechanism was an act of historical significance and self-empowerment. What Africa said to the world is that yes, we may continue to need outside help in dealing with our problems, but we will be centrally involved and provide leadership in any efforts at conflict resolution [W]e can no longer fold our hands and wait for the foreigners to come and resolve our problems.”*¹⁸

At least as important, however, was the deviation from established OAU doctrine, which had previously enshrined the principle of non-interference in sovereign affairs as a cardinal element in regional cohesion. Though the 1993 resolution on the Mechanism strongly reaffirmed the non-interference principle, it also made clear that the intervention of an international body could be justified in “*internal crises which threaten regional stability, particularly in Africa*”.¹⁹

Equally important was that even acceptance of the idea of the Mechanism gave the Secretary-General the power to act whenever he anticipated an emerging conflict, without having to await the instructions of the OAU Chairman or an invitation from another African head of state.²⁰ Another significant effect of the decision was the implicit pressure it brought to bear on African leaders to admit the validity of OAU intervention. The same holds true for insurgent and armed opposition groups, who now find it difficult to refuse to attend OAU mediation and conflict management efforts, even when tactically at a disadvantage.²¹ As Cohen has also pointed out, this has another significance too. Whereas before the inauguration of the Mechanism the assumption in OAU circles was generally that in the case of internal conflict the sole legitimate party was the incumbent government, a view that effectively precluded the OAU from playing an effective mediating role, a more even-handed approach is now possible.²²

The day-to-day operations of the Mechanism were placed under the control of the OAU Central Organ, a committee of member states. In some respects the Central Organ is analogous to the Security Council of the UN in that it is at the heart of the Organisation’s decision-making process on security issues. It differs, however, in some important respects from the Security Council in that it has no permanent membership nor do any of its members enjoy the power of veto.²³

The Mechanism also starts from the premise that it is better to anticipate and prevent conflicts than to have to resolve them once they are under way. At that stage the UN would be called upon, seeing that African countries were also entitled to expect UN intervention in matters of global security.²⁴ In paragraph 6 of the Declaration establishing the Mechanism, Africa’s leaders provided the specific caveat: “... *in the event that conflicts degenerate to the extent of requiring collective international intervention and policing, the*

assistance or where appropriate the services of the United Nations will be sought under the general terms of its Charter”.²⁵

The Central Organ is a body of member states providing the political direction and supervision for the Mechanism. It also provides operational advice and legal authority to the OAU Secretary General. Its responsibilities include:

- overall direction and co-ordination of the Mechanism;
- the anticipation and prevention of conflicts – as primary objective
- peacemaking and peace building functions where conflicts have occurred;
- organisation and deployment of civil and military observation and monitoring missions;
- the establishment of general guidelines for the Mechanism.

The Central Organ consists of members of the Bureau of the OAU Assembly of Heads of State and Government, who are elected annually in terms of the OAU’s principles of equitable regional representation and rotation. The Chair of the OAU is also Chair of the Organ, assisted by his immediate predecessor and successor. The Secretary General and the Conflict Management Division operate as the Central Organ’s operational arm. All member states are entitled to attend Central Organ meetings and to participate as observers. Decisions are taken on a consensus basis. Any OAU member may request the Secretary General to convene an urgent Central Organ meeting. No doubt the operations of the body will continue to be refined as experience dictates.

The Central Organ functions at three levels: heads of state and government, ministers and ambassadors. It is supposed to meet at least once a year at the first level; twice a year at ministerial level; and at least monthly at ambassadorial level. This arrangement is currently being reviewed because the Organ appears to be functioning very effectively at ambassadorial level.

The establishment of the Mechanism in 1993 led to a number of related initiatives which fundamentally altered the *modus operandi* of the OAU, and the role it is seen to play. One of these initiatives was the use of observers from the OAU to monitor elections and referenda in Africa. This work has been undertaken on the assumption that the conduct of free and

transparent elections makes an important contribution to the prevention of conflict. In addition, by having observers in place, the OAU is ready to assume a mediating or facilitating role should this become necessary.²⁶

The capacity of the Conflict Management Division is expected to be much enhanced once the Conflict Management Centre in Addis Ababa has become fully operational.²⁷ This is a very ambitious undertaking, involving the establishment of a continent-wide Early Warning Network and a data base covering all member states.²⁸ Progress in this regard has been slower than anticipated, however, following problems with computer and communications links. The Early Warning Network has also taken longer to design than expected, partly as a consequence of methodological difficulties in designing satisfactory matrices with which to predict incipient conflict situations. Dr Bakwesegha, former Head of the OAU Conflict Management Division, made the following observations in 1997 about the shortcomings of the Mechanism:

“The first shortcoming is OAU’s inadequacy to fully operationalise the Mechanism in the area of preventive diplomacy and peacemaking, due to lack of speedy exchange of information on conflict situations obtaining within Member States, as well as shortage of resources.

Quite often, the Secretary General has sought information on new developments relating to conflict situations within Member States, only to discover that it is not possible to obtain such information that should enable him to take the necessary political action. Additionally, OAU has experienced serious difficulties and constraints in managing its Missions on the field or consulting with African leaders in the various national capitals and the civil society including the intellectuals at universities and research centers about conflict situations obtaining in different parts of Africa, due to communication problems.”²⁹

Problems of adequate funding for the OAU’s operations in this field have also been noted, despite the fairly modest scale of the conflict management effort thus far. The OAU Peace Fund is supported by a five per cent annual contribution from the OAU budget, by voluntary contributions from member states and by sources outside Africa.³⁰ Yet a budget in the region

of US \$ 8 million will hardly go very far in terms of operations; maintaining sixty-four military observers in Burundi cost the OAU some US \$300 000 a month.³¹

Acting in Concert with the UN

Hampered as it is by a shortage of funds on the poorest continent in the world, the OAU’s effectiveness seems to rest largely on its ability to draw funding from the UN to perform functions on behalf of that body. Relations between the UN and regional organisations are governed by Chapter VIII of the UN Charter ‘Regional Arrangements’. This provides for regional arrangements to maintain international peace and security, subject to these arrangements being consistent with the purposes and principles of the UN. It provides too for the use of such arrangements to deal with disputes at a regional level before referring them to the UN Security Council. Chapter VIII mandates the UN Security Council to use such regional arrangements for enforcement, though only after such action has been authorised by the Security Council.³²

There are several reasons why the UN is now making increasing reference to Chapter VIII. As has been seen, the end of the Cold War has removed some of the external constraints restricting local conflicts. Under these circumstances, the UN, whose activities were hampered by the paralysis imposed upon many of its activities by the Cold War, now finds itself confronting the danger of institutional overload. Accordingly, if the UN is to survive as an effective institution at the global level, it has to devolve a number of its functions to responsible regional organisations. It also looks to these organisations to assist it in joint undertakings.

There are, of course, a number of problems in the relationship between the UN and regional organisations. First the association between the UN and regional organisations is less well structured than might be expected. Among the reasons for this is the preoccupation of regional organisations with local concerns, and a distrust of the Security Council’s permanent members and the predominance of their national preoccupations in their decision-making.

The UN has not been very effective in engaging regional organisations in any real sense, beyond the exchange of reports and representation at

meetings. There has been little co-ordination of activities or initiatives. Though the UN has sometimes abdicated responsibility to a country, as in the case of the USA in Haiti, Somalia and Iraq, it has not really made much progress in terms of co-ordinated use of the regional concept.

In the case of Burundi and the Arusha initiatives a regional organisation took the lead, though there was little co-ordination with the UN, and some of the Security Council members also took a different line on the crisis.

The Security Council may also view the abilities of regional organisations such as the OAU with scepticism, perhaps as a result of underestimating the steps taken by the UN to improve its capacity in recent years and also out of ignorance of the contributions made by the OAU to conflict prevention and resolution, despite its constrained resources. Although the UN may welcome local initiatives that help relieve the burden of conflict resolution and peacekeeping in remote and difficult situations, it is also aware that the devolution of responsibility for action tends to undermine UN guidance and control, as the operations of ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) in West Africa have demonstrated. On the other hand, there is also a danger to the regional organisation, that an operation might be saddled with an incomplete or imprecise mandate, or with insufficient authority to employ force.

Modest Aims, Significant Results

From what has been said above, the scope and ambition of the OAU in the realm of conflict prevention and resolution are clear. Yet the demands posed by multilateral action in this sphere, both political, organisational and financial, are daunting, to say the least. One could argue that effective steps in the right direction could be taken at less expense and with more success. One such area is that of monitoring the flow of small arms.

The monitoring of the traffic in small arms should be a function already carried out by Africa's security forces. Its co-ordination, therefore, should not prove too expensive, or beyond the capacity of a fairly modest section of the OAU's conflict prevention team. Certainly it would constitute one of the most cost-effective ways of anticipating conflict and identifying those involved in its promotion on the continent.

Of course, it has to be borne in mind that the OAU is no stronger than the sum of its parts, and that, at its apex, it constitutes a club of heads of state and government. There is an unspoken assumption that the role of the state is a benign one, its actions guided by concern for the welfare of its citizens. Across much of Africa, nothing could be further from reality. Some of Africa's rulers, or their lieutenants, are themselves financially or politically interested in the continued flow of light weapons throughout the region. That said, should the OAU accept the point that there is a connection between the illicit traffic in small arms and the continuation and proliferation of deadly conflict in Africa, then this in and of itself could be useful. It might also provide the spur for other agencies to co-operate in stamping out a commerce as debilitating to the African continent as the slave trade of past centuries.

Endnotes

- 1 C Clapham, *Third World Politics: An Introduction*, Croom Helm, London, 1985, p. 131.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 P Cammack, D Pool & W Tordoff, *Third World Politics: A Comparative Introduction*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1988, p. 222.
- 4 M Meredith, *The First Dance of Freedom: Black Africa in the Postwar Era*, Sphere Books, London, 1985, p. 118.
- 5 *Africa South of the Sahara*, 1998, Europa Publications, London, 1997, p. 124.
- 6 Clapham, *op. cit.*, p. 132; Cammack, *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 221.
- 7 Meredith, *op. cit.*, p. 118.
- 8 B Davidson, *Africa in Modern History: The Search for a New Society*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978, pp. 288-289.
- 9 N Chazan, R Mortimer, J Ravenhill & D Rothchild, *Politics and Society in Contemporary Africa*, Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2nd ed., 1992, pp. 13; 371-373.
- 10 Quoted in L Timberlake, *Africa in Crisis: The Cures of Environmental Bankruptcy*, Earthscan, London, 1988, p. 164.
- 11 CJ Bakwesegha, *The Role of the Organization of African Unity in Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution in the Context of the Political Evolution of Africa*, *African Journal on Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution*, 1(1), 1996, p. 7.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- 13 J Cilliers, *The OAU and Stability in Africa*, *South African Yearbook of International Affairs*, 1996, Johannesburg, 1996, p. 128.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 128; Bakwesegha, *op. cit.*, p. 8.
- 15 C de Coning, *The Role of the OAU in Conflict Management in Africa*, in M Malan (ed.), *Conflict Management, Peacekeeping and Peacebuilding: Lessons for Africa from a Seminar Past*, Institute for Security Studies, Halfway House, Monograph Series No. 10, April 1997, pp. 17-18.

- 16 HJ Cohen, *African Capabilities for Managing Conflict: The Role of the United States*, in DR Smock & CA Crocker (eds), African Conflict Resolution: The US Role in Peacemaking, United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington DC, 1995, p. 78; Bakwesegha, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-11; De Coning, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15; Cilliers, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-129, W Nhara *The OAU and the Potential Role of Regional and Sub-Regional Organizations*, in J Cilliers & G Mills (eds), Peacekeeping in Africa, Vol. 2, Institute for Defence Policy & South African Institute for International Affairs, Halfway House and Braamfontein, 1995, p. 104.
- 17 Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
- 18 Quoted in Cilliers, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
- 19 Cohen, *op. cit.*, p. 78; Bakwesegha, *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- 20 Cohen makes this point, contrasting the inability of the OAU Secretary General to intervene in Liberia in 1990 without prior invitation with his ability to take the initiative in Burundi in 1992, *op. cit.*, pp. 78, 136.
- 21 Cohen, *op. cit.*, pp. 78-79.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 79.
- 23 De Coning, *op.cit.*, pp. 4-15.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 25 Quoted in Bakwesegha, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
- 26 De Coning, *op. cit.*, p. 19; Cilliers, *op. cit.*, p. 129; Nhara, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
- 27 De Coning, *op. cit.*, p. 19.
- 28 Cilliers, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-130.
- 29 Bakwesegha, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
- 30 De Coning, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-25.
- 31 Baweshegha, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17; De Coning, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
- 32 De Coning, *op. cit.*, p. 12.