

Conflict Prevention and Risk Analysis (CPRA) –Pretoria



CPRA Daily Briefings

Week 23

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The **CPRA Daily Briefings** are held weekday mornings in the CPRA Pretoria's Situation Room and the Briefing Notes are the minutes of this meeting during which each regional expert of the Programme reports on the latest human security developments in his/her region, followed by general discussions around the table. An intern then compiles a summary of the meeting, which is reviewed by the respective researchers, and a senior researcher edits the report and provides quality control before returning it to the intern to prepare it for dispatch to the mailing list to which you have subscribed.

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**Today's Briefings
Compilation**
Ms Refiloe Joala

Summary of Briefings

West Africa:

Mali: Is a military intervention an option?

On Monday, 18 June, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) declared its readiness to consider backing a West African military intervention in Mali, where militant rebel groups (the Tuareg-led National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and the Islamist Ansar Dine and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)) have taken control of the north.

Many countries have raised concerns that the Mali crisis could spread across the region and that the rebel-held territory could become a new terrorist haven. Recent clashes between elements of Ansar Dine and MNLA combatants highlight the precarious situation in the occupied region, while the proliferation of groups might worsen the already dangerous security situation.

The ECOWAS request for UNSC approval of a military option came after the visit to Paris of the African Union's current rotational president Thomas Yayi Boni and Niger's President Mahamadou Issoufou. Both leaders sought to draw the international community's attention to the deteriorating situation in Mali. The impression one gets is that the regional body has been insisting on military intervention as a tool to deal with complex crises. Yet it is essential to stress that within the ECOWAS normative framework, a military option is always seen as an option of last resort.

On two occasions the UNSC expressed reservations about the military option. It argued that it would have to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the ECOWAS plan before making an explicit pronouncement on whether it would grant the regional body a UN mandate for military action. While all key actors are concerned about the security situation in northern Mali, initial resistance to the UNSC's authorising a military operation could be explained by three key factors.

Firstly, it needs to be understood in the context post-UN resolutions 1973 (on Libya) and 1975 (Côte d'Ivoire) and the controversies these caused. As such, permanent and non-permanent members might want to consider carefully a new military venture before endorsing it.

Secondly, the UNSC has indicated that there is a need for more clarity on the mandate, resources, and capacity of the force to be deployed. In other words, permanent and non-permanent members of the UNSC have concerns about the strength of the force.

Thirdly, UNSC members insist on the sequencing of the options available to resolve the crisis, including political and diplomatic efforts.

Military intervention as a conflict resolution mechanism is always controversial and could complicate the situation further. Alone, it might not provide a definite response to the challenges facing Mali. In addition, the terrain in northern Mali should be considered, as most West African soldiers are not familiar with what is now termed 'desert combat'. In a nutshell, any military engagement without proper information gathering, planning, effective logistical support and a clear exit strategy might transform the region into a permanent war zone à la Somalia.

At the same time, influential members of the international community as well as African leaders also need to take into consideration the complexity of the mediation process. It is likely that negotiation will help to resolve some of the issues in Mali, mainly on the political front. It is also

likely that, weakened by its failed attempts at forging an alliance with Ansar Dine, the MNLA might finally accept the idea of a negotiated settlement.

Indications from various preliminary meetings between, on the one hand, MNLA's representatives and ECOWAS mediator Burkina Faso President Blaise Compaoré and, on the other, Ansar Dine representatives and Compaoré, pointed to the possibility of talks. The aim of the dual mediation processes engaged in by Compaoré is to define with both groups some modalities for the negotiation process. Indeed, to be successful, the negotiation process would need two sets of parameters. The first set is related to the coherence of the political transition in Bamako. The second is what is to be negotiated given the fact that the groups involved have very different claims.

From the ECOWAS perspective, Mali's territorial integrity and the secular nature of the state are non-negotiable. While the MNLA might be convinced to accept the idea of 'One Mali' with the possibility of 'increased autonomy' for the northern regions, it is highly unlikely that the same outcome can be expected when it comes to AQIM or Ansar Dine. The key challenge here stems from the competing agendas of the various groups controlling northern Mali. Ansar Dine does not share the MNLA's ideals of independence, while the MNLA resents the Islamist stance of Ansar Dine. Another point of disagreement is the link between Ansar Dine and AQIM.

The preconditions set by the mediators for negotiation are that Ansar Dine drops its claim to impose Sharia law on Mali and breaks away from AQIM. However, the symbiotic relations between Ansar Dine and AQIM make these prerequisites difficult to satisfy. And if even if the ECOWAS mediator succeeds in his efforts to bring the MNLA 'back to the republic', it will be challenging to hold talks with AQIM, the force behind Ansar Dine.

Therefore, ECOWAS's decision to deploy troops should be seen as complementary to the political and diplomatic efforts. It should also be seen as a means to facilitate the protection of state institutions that have become vulnerable since the military coup of 22 March 2012. The mob attacks on interim president Dioncounda Traoré, who is still in Paris for medical treatment, should serve as a reminder of state fragility and a lack of respect for the state authority.

But, more importantly, the ECOWAS/AU/UN mission could help deliver humanitarian assistance to those trapped in the conflict zones and who are subjected to inhumane treatment by rebel groups, mainly those professing Islamic fundamentalism.

As the UNSC considers whether or not a military operation is necessary, regional actors also have to be involved in the overall strategy to restore peace in Mali. The role of Algeria and Mauritania is essential and regional leaders need to motivate both countries to be part of the regional response mechanism.

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