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THE OAU AND AFRICAN DISUNITY

The 19th Summit of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) which was scheduled to meet in Tripoli in early August, failed to convene amidst controversy over a number of divisive issues. This Brief Report prepared by the Research Staff at Jan Smuts House focusses on :

- 1) Background Information and Recent History.
- 2) Controversial issues causing cancellation of the OAU Summit in Tripoli.
- 3) Conclusion.

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND RECENT HISTORY

The decolonization era which changed the map of Africa, also resulted in the formation of the OAU in 1963, and its character stems from that time, when European colonial power had been broken in Africa. At the time of its formation, Africa comprised 32 independent states, and the OAU was seen as a vehicle for strengthening solidarity between these states and, moreover, for the advancement of the anti-colonial struggle still continuing in parts of the continent.

The major issue at that time was whether the new states were forming a "union" as Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana wanted, or merely working towards the goal of "unity", which was the final formula that was adopted. As a first step, the founding meeting agreed to support the liberation movements in areas still under foreign or minority domination. Since then it has become clear that through much of the OAU's history, anti-colonialism has been the greatest binding force, while national sensibilities are too delicate for the Organisation to exercise much influence on events within member countries.

The OAU Charter clearly propounds non-interference in the internal affairs of member states and endorses the principle of territorial integrity and respect for the existing borders created by the colonial powers. Thus, paradoxically, anti-colonial powers were committed to maintaining the entities created by the old colonial powers.

The OAU was empowered to act on inter-African disputes only if the relevant parties consented to such action. In its early days it tried to resolve difficulties between Algeria and Morocco, and between Somalia and Ethiopia, but was unable to do much about the Congo question which was not regarded as an inter-African issue but as an international issue within the jurisdiction of the UN. In internal questions, like the Biafran secession from Nigeria, the Organisation was bound to heed Nigeria's wishes; however, a mediatory group was later formed and some members breached the Charter's principles and recognised Biafra. Nevertheless, the OAU was a positive force in ensuring a collective voice for member states, and it acted as a moderating influence on quarrelling members.

Some of the OAU's recurring problems were evident already at the founding meeting : Togo was not represented due to a mutiny and the new President, Nicolas Granitzky, was not yet accepted by other African leaders, and although the OAU Charter was adopted in Addis Ababa in May 1963, it was signed by Togo only in July of the same year. Furthermore, Morocco was represented by junior government officials because it objected to the presence of Mauritania, whose territory it claimed as its own. Morocco adopted the Charter in September 1963, but until 1968 it had reservations on the question of boundaries and did not recognise Mauritanian independence. Hence from its inception it was apparent that the OAU was to be a loose grouping of African states regardless of their political systems.

Later events bore this out : when Idi Amin overthrew Milton Obote in Uganda, President Nyerere of Tanzania, at the 1971 Summit, raised the matter of criteria for OAU membership, and due to the coup the venue was shifted from Kampala to Addis Ababa. Tanzania could not put the matter formally to the Addis Ababa Summit, for that would have been regarded as interference in Uganda's internal affairs. Nevertheless, Amin boycotted the Summit in protest at the change of venue, and in 1975 the Summit was held in Kampala.

At the 1975 Summit, the character of the OAU as a "winners club" became dramatically apparent. General Yakubu Gowon, the Nigerian President, was seated at the conference table when news arrived of a military coup in Nigeria. He left the hall immediately and the following day made a press statement accepting the change of government in Nigeria. Subsequently Libya and then other African countries recognised the new regime in Lagos.

The OAU has used the good offices of ad hoc groups of African leaders to solve some boundary problems, but African leaders themselves can rarely be totally detached on these questions. Most states are vulnerable to secessionist tendencies, and therefore the sacrosanct principles of territorial integrity and colonial boundaries are applied to avoid fragmentation of independent countries, despite colonial boundaries being artificial and often not clearly defined. This accounts for the phenomenon of territorial and boundary disputes as an intractable problem in Africa. Thus, even prior to Angola's independence, the OAU strongly opposed efforts to split the enclave of Cabinda from the Portuguese colonial territory.

OAU membership is open to each independent sovereign African state whose independence had been agreed with the former colonial power. However, in 1973, the OAU ignored this guideline by admitting Guinea-Bissau which had proclaimed its own independence while contesting sovereignty with the Portuguese, who at that time still maintained a military presence in many parts of the country.

In 1975, Angola's attainment of independence caused conflict in the OAU concerning its admittance. However, because of South Africa's involvement, wavering states supported the MPlA administration in Luanda and in early 1976 the first "Extraordinary Summit" to discuss Angola's situation was held. With an initial deadlock on recognition of the MPlA, the Angolan government was recognised by a simple majority of OAU members.

2 CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES CAUSING CONCESSION OF SUMMIT

The nature of African crises has changed from year to year and there have always been a number of fresh conflicts threatening to destroy the OAU, but it has so far managed to survive the many divisive issues, from brief border disputes to bloody civil wars. However, this year's Summit had the unfortunate distinction of being faced with not one but several major conflicting issues.

The 1981 OAU Summit decision in Nairobi, to hold the following meeting in Tripoli was already an issue causing considerable controversy. Several members threatened to boycott the Summit if held in Libya. But it was the Western Saharan question which was the dominant cause for the collapse of the 19th Summit.

Concerning the venue : First, Libya, as a member of the radical Arab grouping maintains a total diplomatic boycott of Egypt, but as the OAU insists that all its members should be treated equally, Libya suspended its embargo against Egypt to allow it to attend the Tripoli Summit. However, this concession was not regarded as sufficient by the Egyptians, who remained unsatisfied and therefore did not attend.

Secondly, nearly one third of OAU members do not have diplomatic relations with Libya for various reasons, but mainly because of Tripoli's perceived involvement in the domestic affairs of other African countries. Among those who have taken this view are: Egypt, Sudan, Senegal, Gambia, Gabon, Somalia, Mauritania and Uganda.

Thirdly, the head of state of the country hosting the OAU Summit automatically becomes the OAU's chairman for the following year. However, a number of African leaders are unwilling to see Colonel Gaddafi as their spokesman or accord him the deference that would be due to him as such.

The Western Sahara Question : Long before this 19th Summit, Morocco had announced its firm decision to boycott the Tripoli meeting if the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) represented by the Polisario Liberation Movement was allowed to take its seat as the 51st OAU member-state.

The problem of the Western Sahara became an issue in 1975 when Spain agreed to cede it to Morocco and Mauritania, and Spanish troops withdrew from the territory on 26 February 1976. The next day the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic was proclaimed by Polisario, which continued its guerrilla activities from Algeria.

The protagonists in the Saharan conflict were at first the proxy forces of Morocco and Mauritania on the one hand, and Algerian-backed Polisario Nationalist fighters, on the other. The Moroccans claimed that the conflict took on a different complexion when Colonel Gaddafi - who had originally offered his troops to King Hassan of Morocco to help him liberate the Western Sahara from Spain - decided to swing his support behind the Polisario Movement. Libya subsequently provided arms and funds to Polisario for its campaign against Morocco and Mauritania, and finally Mauritania withdrew from the conflict.

More importantly, after the fall of President Moktar Ould Daddah of Mauritania in a coup on 10 July 1979, the new government, in August of that year, withdrew its claim to the southern part of the Western Sahara. The Mauritanian move was the result partly of domestic factors - a power struggle and economic recession. But more significantly, the new leadership was subjected to considerable pressure from Libya and Algeria.

Algeria argues that the problem of the Western Sahara is one of self-determination for the Saharan people, and this view is shared by a number of radical (and moderate) African states, who consequently support the SADR.

Morocco, on the other hand, sees the Western Saharan conflict as a bilateral issue between itself and Algeria, and a number of countries support the Moroccan view. (A successful concerted campaign to win African support was launched by the Moroccan Government between the 18th and 19th OAU Summits).

At the 18th Summit in Nairobi, King Hassan agreed to a proposal for a ceasefire in a "controlled referendum" by the people of Western Sahara to determine the future of the territory. The OAU resolution on the referendum cited the 1974 population census figures (conducted by Spain), to determine the number of eligible voters in the disputed area at 73 500. However, Polisario argues that more than one million refugees in Algerian camps must also be accorded the right to vote. King Hassan contends that they are not natives of Western Sahara, but have

come from the drought-stricken areas of the Sahel. Polisario, meanwhile, maintains that many of the inhabitants fled the Western Sahara when Moroccan forces moved into the territory.

However, the conflict at the OAU came to a head in February 1982 at the Council of Ministers meeting at Addis Ababa, held to discuss the deteriorating finances of the Organisation. The Secretary-General, Edem Kodjo of Togo, in a surprise move admitted the SADR to the meeting as a full member of the OAU. This decision regarded as unilateral and illegal by Morocco, because neither the OAU chairman, President Daniel arap Moi, nor the relevant committees were consulted. As a result, 19 members at the Council of Ministers meeting staged a protest walk-out, thus disrupting the meeting (26 nations voted in favour of SADR's admission and 5, although present, did not vote). Such walk-outs followed at other OAU meetings (between Ministers of Information and Labour) in Zimbabwe and Dakar recently.

The dispute over the SADR membership has brought the OAU to a standstill. The Secretary-General has claimed that it was his right to admit the SADR to the Organisation, since 26 of the 50 member-states had already supported and recognised the SADR. His critics, especially Morocco, have pointed out that only at the OAU Summit Meeting of Heads of States could the final decision be taken. Moreover, King Hassan claimed that according to the Charter a two-thirds majority is required for the admission of a new member, and not (as was the case) a simple majority. The Saharan question is one of the most controversial disputes to have emerged in the Organisation to date, and it is clear that until it is resolved, further walk-outs are likely to occur. The SADR issue is undoubtedly the most important factor leading to the cancellation of the 1982 OAU Summit.

The Chad Civil War was yet another contentious issue plaguing this 19th summit of the OAU. It would not have given enough cause on its own to make the Summit fail, but nevertheless, it was an issue that caused controversy and strained relations between African countries and weakened the OAU. (The civil war in Chad has lasted intermittently for about 20 years). Libyan forces came to the aid of Mr Goukouni Oueddei in 1980, enabling him to defeat Mr Hissen Habré, the former Defence Minister. These troops stayed in Chad for nearly a year and provided the country with a short period of relative stability, but during that period relations between Oueddei and Gaddafi soured because the Chadians rejected Libya's idea of a political union between the two countries. Chad then turned to the OAU and the former colonial power, France, for help in getting the Libyans to leave. Both the OAU and France gave token support to this end, and the OAU put into effect its very first attempt at peace-keeping, using Nigerians, Zairians and Senegalese troops, with French and US logistic support.

Colonel Gaddafi surprised many leaders and observers when the peace-keeping idea was formally presented to him and he agreed to it. Since the departure of the Libyans, Oueddei, as provisional

President was supposed to hold talks with Habré, in order to achieve and produce a government of national reconciliation, but he refused to have any dealings with Habré. Oueddei repeatedly tried to get the OAU peace-keeping forces to help defeat Habré's forces, but they refused on the grounds that that was not their mandate.

For his part, Habré consolidated his base in the east, where he was reportedly getting arms supplies of US origin from Sudan, and then began a concerted drive towards the capital N'Djamena. Colonel Gaddafi was then again approached for help by Oueddei, but he refused to provide Libyan aid to prevent the fall of N'Djamena. Gaddafi's conciliatory stance and statesmanlike image was possibly projected with a view to his assumption of the Chairmanship of the OAU. Oueddei fled to Cameroon and on 7 June N'Djamena fell to Habré's troops. It is significant to note that the OAU failed in its first attempt at peace-keeping. The fact is that the forces were supposed to fill the vacuum caused by the Libyan withdrawal and provide for elections for a new government. The African peace-keeping force, however, failed to halt the military conflict and did nothing to prevent Habré from using the opportunity provided by the Libyans to gain a military victory before an election could be held.

3. CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the SADR question and the venue of the OAU's 19th Summit caused it to fizzle so dismally, because these problems led to poor attendance amongst members and the consequent failure to muster a quorum. Despite frantic negotiations weeks before the Summit, the OAU remained split, only 29 members were present in Tripoli, 5 short of a quorum. For the first time since the founding of the Organisation in 1963, the annual meeting was unable to continue its deliberations officially, despite the attempt by those Heads of State who went to Tripoli to find ways of resolving the crises by holding an unofficial meeting.

The postponement of the OAU Summit is undoubtedly a temporary setback for the Organisation, but it is probable that another "Extraordinary Summit" of the Organisation will be called, as was the case in January 1976, on the question of Angola. That experience rather than weakening the OAU may be said to have strengthened it, so showing its remarkable resilience.

Observers should therefore not write off the OAU prematurely; it should be borne in mind that Africans have an inherent vitality and ability to survive, often in the face of hostile environmental conditions. The OAU no doubt reflects that condition. It has survived two difficult decades, continually trying to solve disputes, but unable to prevent violence across borders.

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