

National Headquarters:

JAN SMUTS HOUSE
P.O. Box 31596
Braamfontein
(Johannesburg)
2017 Transvaal



BRANCHES:
Cape Town
Witwatersrand
Natal
Eastern Province
Pretoria
Stellenbosch
Border
Transkei
SWA/Namibia

Tel.: (011) 39-2021

BRIEF REPORT NO. 6

ORGANISATION OF AFRICAN UNITY
SUMMIT CONFERENCE
July 1978

The Organisation held their 15th Annual Summit Conference from July 17th to July 22nd, 1978. The meeting, which was attended by 34 African leaders⁺ was marked, as usual, by stormy sessions and displayed the usual polarity between the moderate (chiefly Francophone) states and the so-called radical states.

Seen overall and as a first impression, we should regard the meeting as a victory for the moderates, which marks a change of fortune for that group who, in recent years, has had to contend with an upsurge of radical input into the Organisation's operations.

The second impression from the meeting was that the 'spirit of Addis Ababa' - the great compromise which was responsible for the formation of the Organisation - still seemed prevalent. Indeed, it was thought, according to press reports in London, that the 'spirit of Addis' was renewed by a 'spirit of Khartoum'. Optimism was expressed that the Sudanese President, Jaafar Mohammed Nimeiri, who was elected Chairman of the OAU for the incoming 12 months, could breathe new life into the Organisation. Some commentators also felt that the Organisation would be entering a new, second phase of life under Nimeiri's leadership.

He is the first Arab to head the Organisation, and is a man whose stature as a statesman in Africa is on the upswing. He is, of course, the reconciler of differences within his own state, after bringing the Black south and the Arab north together after the 17-year civil war in that country. His reputation as a reconciler, it is hoped, will help the often bitterly divided Organisation.

The issue of outside military intervention on the continent dominated the proceedings, with the radicals condemning the presence of over 10 000 French troops on the continent. They failed to get the Organisation's support on their stand, and also failed to convince the gathering that there was a distinction between the role of the French and the 50 000 Cubans reported to be on African soil. This attack was spearheaded by the Congolese who attacked French involvement in Chad, Mauritania and Shaba as 'neo-colonialist' manoeuvres. President Neto of Angola said he would ask for more Cubans if that were necessary and admitted, at a press conference, that states party to defence agreements with the French were of course free to call in French troops if they wished to.

A note of caution and understanding, not to mention insight, was provided by the Nigerian Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo, who said that the Cubans and Russians had not colonised Africa and that therefore their presence on the continent should not be automatically condemned. But, he added, their stay on the continent should not be prolonged either. On the Shaba incident, particularly concerning the question of French troops, Obasanjo said, 'Paratroop drops in the 20th Century were no more acceptable to Africans (now) than the use of gunboats in the last century were acceptable to previous generations of Africans.'

⁺ i.e. Heads of State or Government. Other states were represented by Ministers.

He also made the very telling point - in reference to the Cuban/Soviet involvement - that Africa was not about to throw off one colonial yoke for another.

The radical states emerged in disarray and the meeting agreed that every state had the right to call in help from any country. While this seemed a marked change from previous resolutions, a key to an understanding thereof came from President Sekou Toure of Guinea, hardliner of many years' standing, who was making one of his rare appearances at the Summit and who dared to say, 'We Africans are more responsible for our misfortunes than imperialism is.' It is, of course, the very fact of inter-African conflict that has led one or other African country to invite, on no less than 8 occasions, outside help from either the West or the East. The Summit made little progress in trying to end the various wars and border disputes in Africa, but it did agree on a number of initiatives aimed at settling, by negotiation, some of the conflicts which threaten the continent's security.

The Horn: Under Nigerian chairmanship, a committee has been set up to settle the Ethiopian/Somali dispute and to settle the differences between Ethiopia and Sudan. No mention was made of Eritrea, though the conflict there must be seen as the root of the problem in the Horn. (The question of Eritrean secession from Ethiopia remains, of course, one of the most vexing problems in Africa and goes to the heart of the debate on the maintenance of colonial borders. Some commentators have suggested that, given the special circumstances, the OAU at some distant date might agree to accede to the demands that Eritrea be separate from Ethiopia.)

The Western Sahara: Under the chairmanship of President Nimeiri, five wise men have been appointed to avert the potential full scale war between Algeria and Morocco (with its new ally, Mauritania). The committee is to report to an emergency summit of African Heads of State.

Chad-Libya: A mediation committee of five Heads of State is to investigate Chad's allegation that Libyan troops are supporting the Frolinat rebels with the long-term aim of expanding Libyan territory. The committee is also briefed to look into Colonel Qadhafi's counter claims that Chad is using French troops to repress a popular uprising by using genocidal methods.

Angola-Zaire: A committee of four African leaders (Sudan, Nigeria, Cameroun and Rwanda) will encourage the negotiations between Presidents Neto and Mobutu who met during the Summit.

Zimbabwe: The OAU gave full support to the Patriotic Front as the only recognised liberation movement. They also, however, gave full support to the Anglo-American proposal to arrange an all-party conference of Zimbabwe leaders; this includes the parties to the so-called Salisbury Agreement. A strong resolution was passed calling for tougher sanctions against that state and warning the Americans, and other Western powers, of the dangers of weakening the sanctions, or of supporting the internal settlement.

Namibia: Unanimous support was given to the efforts of the Western powers to achieve independence within the UN framework. Dr. Kurt Waldheim, Secretary-General of the UN, obtained promises of co-operation in raising a peacekeeping force and also, interestingly enough, 1 500 administrators to assist in the process towards transition. There was a recognition of the immense problems still in the way of the path to transition. It was also recognised that success in Namibia would have an important impact on the Zimbabwe situation.

How, then, are we to assess the 15th Summit of the OAU?

Firstly, the compromise of that body still operates;

Secondly, we are likely to witness a breath of fresh air through the efforts of President Nimeiri;

Thirdly, on the issues of decolonisation - Zimbabwe and Namibia - we have witnessed a realisation of the complexity of the problems and the need for caution in the coming months. Allied to this, a recognition that the West has played a role in trying to bring a solution to these problems.

Cervenka has just written a new book on the OAU, "*The Unfinished Quest for Unity: Africa and the OAU*". I think the title is apt, for the decolonisation question, which spawned the 'spirit of Addis Ababa', is still the amalgam holding the OAU together. Indeed, the full unity to which the signatories of the Addis Charter gave their pledge in 1963, will not be realised until the decolonisation process is complete.

Peter C.J. Vale
Lecturer, Department of International Relations
University of the Witwatersrand

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Note: This Brief Report is based on a talk given by Mr. Vale to the Institute's monthly meeting on current international events on Monday 21 August, 1978.