

Africa builds its own peace forces

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*Africa
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as big powers hold back

NEW YORK: Caught in the cross-fire of a raging civil war, residents of Monrovia became increasingly vocal throughout July in appealing to the United States and other major world powers to send peacekeepers to Liberia. To dramatize their plight, they laid out in front of the US embassy more than a dozen bodies of civilians killed by shelling.

By early August three US warships were anchored off the coast, but except for several units sent into the city to protect the US embassy, the 2,300 marines on board did not step ashore. Instead, on August 4, the first contingent of Nigerian troops arrived in Monrovia, the advance guard of a West African peacekeeping force that eventually grew to 3,600.

The Nigerians received a rousing welcome. Some of their officers were hoisted aloft by cheering crowds. Women swept their head wraps along the road in front of the Nigerian troop carriers in a gesture of greeting, while children leaped to touch the hands of the peacekeepers. A man yelled at a US journalist, "Where's the American troops?"

Such scenes in Monrovia reflect the reality of peace efforts in Africa today. In league with the UN or on their own, African mediators, troops

and civil society activists are playing an increasingly active and central role in trying to resolve the numerous conflicts that afflict their continent. They do so out of a growing sense of commitment that Africans must take the lead in resolving their own problems.

At the annual summit meeting of the African Union (AU) in Maputo, Mozambique, in early July, Africa's heads of state expressed their "determination to address the scourge of conflicts in Africa in a collective, comprehensive and decisive manner," through the AU.

"Africa is coming of age in handling its own affairs," comments Prof. Maria Nzomo, head of the University of Nairobi's Institute of Diplomacy and International Studies. "There's a new sense that Africa ought to be refereeing its own disputes."

Yet Africans also are shouldering more of the burden through sheer necessity. The permanent members of the UN Security Council — which have the armies, equipment and financial resources to mount large-scale peacekeeping operations — appear very reluctant to become directly embroiled in African conflicts. Several thousand European and US troops are currently engaged in peace missions in Africa, but for the

most part under their own ad hoc arrangements and for very specific assignments, not as part of comprehensive UN peacekeeping operations.

Meanwhile, the African Union and African sub-regional organizations "can play a variety of important roles" in African peacekeeping, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan last year told representatives of the South Africa-based civil society group, the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD).

However, with severely limited budgets and insufficient training, equipment and transport, Africa cannot quickly develop such capabilities on its own.

As ACCORD Executive Director Vasu Gounden points out, "there is a special need for strategic partnerships to develop between Africa and the international community." In peace and security, as in economic development and other spheres, he notes, this notion of partnership lies at the heart of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), the continental strategy promoted by African leaders.

Since the early 1990s, Africa has been swept by a proliferation of armed conflicts, as many of the continent's established military and one-

party regimes have been undercut by the end of the Cold War, the growth of pro-democracy movements and an eruption of ethnic and other social tensions. From Somalia and Rwanda to Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Burundi, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), hundreds of thousands have been killed outright and millions more have succumbed to war-related epidemics and starvation. All but a fraction of the victims have been civilian.

"Traditional" peacekeeping missions were not well suited to dealing with these kinds of conflicts, since they were generally set up to monitor peace agreements between established armies holding separate territories. Only the 1998-2000 border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea matched that model. Instead, most of Africa's recent conflicts have been civil wars or insurgencies, with multiple armed factions and grievances rooted in poverty and inequality. Even when peace accords have been painstakingly negotiated, not all political and military leaders have been able to fully control their followers. In some countries, local warlords who profited from the chaos of war saw little immediate advantage in laying down their arms.

The difficulties confronting international efforts in Africa were dramatically demonstrated by the losses suffered by US forces in Somalia in 1993, prompting that country's unilateral withdrawal. This seriously weakened the UN peacekeeping mission, which ultimately ended without restoring national political order.

The "Somalia effect" — combined with the preoccupation of the US and other NATO powers with events in the Middle East and the Balkans — led to a marked decline in big-power participation in UN peacekeeping missions generally, but especially in Africa. When the genocide in Rwanda erupted in 1994, the small UN mission already there was far too weak to do anything to stop it.

At the start of 1991, eight of the top 10 contributors to UN peacekeeping missions were developed countries. By the beginning of August 2003, one transitional country (Ukraine) was in the top ten. All the rest were from the developing world, including four African countries (Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa). In the five UN peacekeeping missions then under way in Africa, troops, police and military observers from the Security Council's five permanent members comprised only 2 per cent

of the total personnel.

The US government in recent years has explicitly redefined its global military role in a way that minimizes any direct peacekeeping responsibility. Secretary of State Colin Powell has told the US Congress that "it is often best to use American GIs for the heavy lifting of combat and leave the peacekeeping to others."

Africa's major former colonial powers have remained somewhat more active in the continent, notes Mr Jackie Cilliers, executive director of the Institute for Security Studies in South Africa. However, they "now intervene on their own terms, for limited duration, or where their intervention is uncontroversial, cheap and largely symbolic."

As developed countries have pulled back from multilateral operations, African participation in UN peacekeeping has grown. Up to 1988, only a dozen African countries had ever contributed troops or police to UN missions. Since then, the total number that has provided peacekeepers to at least one UN mission has tripled.

At the beginning of September, 24 African states had nearly 10,000 nationals serving under the UN flag. They constituted 26 per cent of all

UN peacekeepers worldwide. But nine-tenths of them were posted in Africa, where they made up 35 per cent of the five UN peacekeeping operations then under way in the continent (a sixth was subsequently established in Liberia). In the DRC, African troops constituted nearly half of the total.

As this participation in UN peacekeeping reflects, African leaders place a high value on such internationally authorized multilateral missions. They not only bring financial, material and logistical support, but also the political credibility of the UN flag.

In African conflicts where neighbouring countries support or favour one side or another, the UN sometimes is perceived as more non-partisan and therefore better able to bring the belligerents together.

At the same time, African leaders are emphasizing the need to build up the continent's own peace capacities. These include not only the ability to mount peacekeeping missions, but also to mediate political disputes before they erupt into war, broker peace talks in ongoing conflicts and better coordinate support for countries just emerging from war.—
Courtesy: UN Africa Recovery