

Promising intentions of new African Union

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LONDON: The 53 African nations, by changing the name of Organization of African Unity into African Union, have signalled their belief that if "rebranding" works for the corporate world, then it can work for Africa, too.

After all, as far as many Africans are concerned, the OAU conjures up little more than the nauseating image of a useless, do-nothing body that folded its arms while millions of Africans perished in preventable wars.

It is an image that does need rebranding, because no one wants to be reminded of it.

Just take a peep at a random selection from the OAU record. In all of them, there was no effective OAU action:

* Congo Democratic Republic 1960s to date — lingering civil war that started in Mobutu Sese Seko's days and continues today.

* Nigeria 1967-70 — approximately two million killed in Biafran civil war.

* Mali-Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) 1974-75 — thousands killed in a war as senseless as the later Ethiopian-Eritrean one, involving two of the poorest nations on earth.

* Angola civil war between MPLA and UNITA 1975-2002 — at least two million killed in civil war that dragged on until UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi was killed earlier this year.

* Sudan civil war, 1983-2002 — thousands killed in a war that pits Arab against Black African, and which has the potential of deeply dividing the AU into its Arab and African components.

* Liberian civil war, 1989-1990 — a still-smouldering ethnic war that has killed thousands. The West African Economic Community sent in troops.

* Sierra Leone civil war — started in 1989 and worsened progressively until United Nations and British forces intervened in 2000-2001. Again, ECOMOG troops intervened, with OAU blessing.

* Rwanda, 1994 — nearly one million killed in civil war.

* Nigeria-Cameroon 1994-1996 — a dispute over a peninsular reported to contain oil deposits. Dispute currently before International Court of Justice.

* Ethiopia/Eritrea 1999-2001 — thousands killed in a war over a border dispute.

No one can deny that it is such negative images that fill the mind of the ordinary African when the OAU is mentioned. The question, however, is this: can a mere name change transform such a notorious 'do-nothing' body into one that is positive and effective?

Four significant changes have occurred in the African Union's struc-

ture that hold out a promise that it may succeed where its predecessor failed. First, the new AU will have a Peace and Security Council, which will have the power to send troops to troubled areas on the continent.

But providing a mechanism for intervention in trouble spots and being able to intervene effectively when necessary are two different things. The greatest potential difficulty is, of course, how to finance such operations.

The OAU was almost always broke, as many members failed to pay their contributions. If that trend continues, the AU too may find itself in a situation where, having voted to send troops into warring countries, it finds that its resolutions remain on paper.

One of the first acts of the AU, then, will probably be to seek a conference with the rich nations of the world to solicit assistance to establish a permanent fund for peacekeeping

in Africa.

The second innovation of the AU is an African Parliament. If this is constituted properly, so that people's representatives — as against government representatives — can make their voices heard on African issues, a great departure would have been made from the OAU model. At the OAU, heads of state and foreign ministers bored one another to death with their long, repetitive speeches that resulted in little action if any.

A third body that may bring real change to the African political landscape is an African Court of Justice. It is expected that this body will not only adjudicate in inter-state disputes but also in disputes between individuals and governments. This would occur in cases where the local machinery for settling disputes has been exhausted and yet the individual is not satisfied that justice has been done.

Finally, there is to be a Central

Bank of Africa, which will facilitate payments between African states, without resort to strong currencies like the American dollar or the Euro.

Of course, these AU ideals could be as difficult to implement as those that were born with the OAU in 1963. But the political situation today is different from that which prevailed on the continent 39 years ago: The governments of Africa are more representative of their people than before, and are therefore more likely to listen to the voice of the people. And the AU has the mistakes of the OAU to guide it, and therefore need not fall into the same traps as its predecessor.

Indeed, if the AU also fails, it will have absolutely no excuses. And certainly, an attempt at yet another rebranding would bring an agonized cry from across Africa: "Been there! Done that!"—*Dawn/Gemini News Service.*