

African Conflict Prevention Programme

Libya: The AU almost totally marginalized as Libyan crisis turns into near civil war 8 March 2011 (...)

) The African Union (AU) seems completely helpless in preventing the outbreak of a de facto civil war in Libya. One possible scenario being mooted to help end the conflict is the enforcement of a no-fly zone. A no-fly zone would in essence mean banning military flights by government forces through Libyan airspace. Military flights violating the ban would then risk being shot down by international forces. It is, however, not clear how successful such an intervention would be as it is likely to play into Gaddafi's argument that external actors are supporting insurgents. It is also unclear who would impose such a zone with the only likely possibility being the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Such a move would, however, only be permissible if it is passed by a United Nations (UN) resolution. So far the AU has not played a role in discussions on the issue and its relative inactivity risks its marginalization in resolving the Libyan crisis. (...)

(...) What then are the likely implications of the current events in Libya on its relations with Sub-Saharan Africa? Under Qaddafi, Libya sought to geo-strategically align itself with Sub-Saharan Africa. The continued reporting of the involvement of mercenaries from Sub-Saharan countries such as Chad and Liberia in the Libyan crisis is, however, likely to test Libya's ideational ties with Sub-Saharan Africa. Some have argued that with the increase in racism against Black Africans in the Libyan crisis, this polarization is likely to intensify in the event of Qaddafi is removed from power as Libya will feel they were undermined by Sub-Saharan African countries. In such a case, Libya is likely to remain too detached from the continent and continue orientating itself more towards Europe and the Middle East.

Broadly, however, the issue of the use of mercenaries in African conflicts, whether allegations in Libya are true or not, needs to be seriously considered by AU institutions. Clearly past instruments designed to rid Africa of mercenaries have remained inadequate. The very definition of what constitutes mercenary activity is itself highly debatable and needs clarification based on events in Libya. Indeed, there have been reports of Western countries such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands being directly involved on the ground in attempts to influence the direction of the conflict, with reported capture and arrests of their forces as they attempt to either meet with opposition figures or conduct stealth diplomacy. (...)

(...) The Libyan situation, in the absence of a prominent AU's leadership role, is therefore likely to be complicated by foreign powers, who undoubtedly will continue to engage in overt and covert activities to safeguard their interests. (...)

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