OAU Assembly XXV

by J. Coleman Kitchen

After six days of agenda-shaping by the Council of (foreign) Ministers, the twenty-fifth annual Assembly of Heads of State of the Organization of African Unity was held July 24-26 at OAU headquarters in Addis Ababa. The 1989 meeting evoked varying assessments of the organization’s relevance and future. *Africa Confidential* (London), noting that fewer heads of state attended this year’s summit than Zaire’s President Mobutu was able to assemble for the Angolan reconciliation meeting he hosted at Gbadolite in June or than came to the fifteenth annual French-African summit held in Casablanca in December 1988, concluded that “even an optimist would be hard pressed to deny that . . . the OAU may not survive the 1990s in its current form.” On the other hand, veteran Africa-watcher Colin Legum began his report of the twenty-fifth Assembly on a decidedly optimistic note: “The [OAU] seems set to regain some of its earlier momentum with the election of a dynamic new secretary-general, Salim Ahmed Salim, the veteran Tanzanian diplomat with a reputation for drive and militancy” (*Third World Reports*, August 16, 1989).

The New Leadership

Egypt’s President Muhammad Hosni Mubarak was elected by consensus as the OAU’s 1989-1990 chairman, succeeding Mali’s President Moussa Traoré. In his opening and closing addresses to the Assembly, Mubarak underscored a feature of the OAU to which he has a strong personal commitment—the countries of the African continent “were the first to establish firm bases of solidarity . . . disregarding ideological, geographical, and language differences.”


Aside from Africa Confidential (which focused on why he would take a job “long regarded as a dead-end for ambitious politicians”), most commentators joined Colin Legum in hailing the election of Tanzania’s Deputy Prime Minister Salim Ahmed Salim as the OAU’s new secretary-general. West Africa’s August 7 report on the summit concluded: “At 47, [Salim] is amply qualified, having held the ministerial posts of foreign affairs, defence, and prime minister, as well as being a candidate seven years ago for the UN secretary-generalship. He is also from a frontline state, which could only enhance his credibility, given the organisation’s present focus on southern Africa. Despite the usually clannish nature of the francophone states within the OAU and their apparent stranglehold on the secretary-generalship, it was enough for Salim Salim to win on the third ballot . . . . He replaces Niger’s Ide Oumarou, who has served his term with a solid rather than sparkling performance.”

Africa’s Continuing Economic Crisis

In his inaugural address, Mubarak noted that the total indebtedness of African nations had surpassed $230 billion at the end of 1988, and represented approximately 24 percent of the total income of all African nations. The burden of servicing the debt in some African countries has come to represent between 200 and 300 percent of their total exports.

In his closing address, Mubarak reiterated the OAU’s call “for an international conference to be held on African debts.” He emphasized that “by convening such a conference we do not aim to enter into a confrontation with anyone; we want this conference to be a channel for dialogue and negotiation and a means for exchanging views in an atmosphere permeated with an awareness of the challenges facing the human community.” (An OAU seminar intended to build pressure for such a conference was scheduled for August 28-30 in Cairo.)

It remains to be seen whether these conciliatory words can overcome the skepticism of some First World economic planners who fear, as the Financial Times (London) noted on July 25, “that a conference would set a precedent for collective bargaining, which heavily indebted Latin American countries, with their greater economic clout, might try to exploit.”

The summit also appealed for a “significant inflow of financial resources to African countries,” approved a report calling for a world commodity price stabilization scheme, and agreed to formulate a program to create an African economic community.

The Conflict Resolution Agenda

Those analysts who view the OAU as “a cup half full rather than half empty” (see, for example, Helen Kitchen, U.S. Interests in Africa [CSIS/Praeger, 1983, pp. 71-74]) believe that the institutional interaction among heads of state and government has been a significant contributing factor to the increasing pace and the style of efforts at conflict resolution now under way in various parts of the continent. Some recent examples of mediation initiatives consistent with the principles of “peaceful settlement of disputes by negotiation, mediation, conciliation or arbitration” affirmed in Article III of the OAU’s 1963 Charter:

Namibia. The December 1988 South Africa-Cuba-Namibia accords, brokered by U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Chester Crocker with the active cooperation of the Soviet Union and a range of African governments, set in motion a process that, if all goes well, will lead to internationally recognized independence for Namibia in April 1990. The Assembly called on the UN to increase its military presence in Namibia to the 7,500 soldiers mentioned in the scenario for the transition to Namibian independence endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 435 of 1978.

Angola. Eighteen African heads of state were present at Gbadolite, Zaire, in June 1989 for Angolan reconciliation talks convened by President Mobutu Sese Seko. Although some differences of opinion have subsequently arisen about exactly what Angola’s President José Eduardo dos Santos and UNITA’s Jonas Savimbi agreed to before they shook hands at this minisummit, it was nonetheless an historic event that has enhanced the prospect of a gradual end to 14 years of destructive civil war in one of Africa’s potentially richest countries.

South Africa. In his closing address, Mubarak announced that the OAU ad hoc committee on southern Africa would meet in Harare, Zimbabwe, on August 21. Eight heads of state, including Mubarak, participated in the minisummit’s deliberations on South Africa, and issued in
the name of the OAU a new 11-page strategy paper drafted by the African National Congress after consultation with OAU leaders and with groups inside South Africa.

Although much of the text of the statement is familiar antiapartheid rhetoric, the tone of both the meeting and the document reflected a changing attitude toward exploration of negotiation options. "We believe," the Statement of Principles section of the strategy paper begins, "that a conjuncture of circumstances exists which, if there is a demonstrable readiness on the part of the Pretoria regime to engage in negotiations genuinely and seriously, could create the possibility to end apartheid through negotiations. Such an eventuality would be an expression of the long-standing preference of the majority of the people of South Africa to arrive at a political settlement."

In opening the meeting, Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe set the tone of the new approach by counselling that, if democracy, peace, and justice could be achieved peacefully, "that should be pursued." Chairman Mubarak spoke of the need for Africa not to remain isolated from the atmosphere of rapprochement which has come to characterize international relations.

Mozambique. Presidents Moi of Kenya and Mugabe of Zimbabwe have taken the initiative in an effort to broker an end to the 13-year guerrilla war that has devastated Mozambique's economy and taken a heavy physical toll. For four days in August 1989, representatives of the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (MNR/Remano) met in Nairobi with church leaders serving as de facto spokesmen for Mozambique's President Joaquim Chissano.

Chad-Libya. Just before the Addis Ababa summit, Mali's President Traoré, the OAU's 1988-1989 chairman, hosted a face-to-face meeting in Bamako between Chad's President Hisséné Habré and Libya's head of state, Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi, in an effort to complete the winding down of one of North Africa's two major conflicts of the past decade. Still unresolved is Libya's controversial historical claim to the disputed Aouzou Strip on Chad's northern border (see "Basis of Libya's Claim to the Aouzou Strip" in CSIS Africa Notes no. 79, December 20, 1987). President Omar Bongo of Gabon, President Chadli Benjedid of Algeria, and Major General Ibrahim Babangida of Nigeria also participated. The meeting resulted in no spectacular breakthrough on the remaining differences between the two governments, which may take their disagreement to the International Court of Justice.

The OAU summit nonetheless voted to continue the peacemaking efforts of the organization's ad hoc committee on the Chadian dispute, which is chaired by Gabon's President Bongo.

Senegal-Mauritania. Both the incoming and outgoing OAU chairmen have been involved in efforts to ease tensions between Senegal and Mauritania in the wake of an April 1989 border incident that sparked ethnic rioting in both countries and the cross-border movement of as many as 100,000 people expelled or fleeing for their lives. The Middle East News Agency (Cairo) reported July 31 that the new OAU chairman would visit both Mauritania and Senegal in late September.

Western Sahara. In the Western Sahara, where the Polisario guerrilla movement has been challenging Moroccan annexation of the former Spanish territory since the 1970s, an agreement in principle on a referendum to decide the region's governance was negotiated by UN Secretary-General Javier Perez de Cuellar in August 1988. Movement toward implementation has been slow. If agreement could be reached on the status of the region, one of the OAU's most serious internal problems (the withdrawal of Morocco from the organization in protest over the disputed procedure by which the office of the secretary-general concluded in 1987 that the Polisario's Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), qualified for full OAU membership) would resolve itself.

Sudan. Even as the 1989 summit was in progress, Chairman Mubarak and Ethiopia's President Mengistu Haile Mariam were involved in efforts to facilitate a meeting in Addis Ababa between representatives of Sudan's new military government and the Sudanese People's Liberation Army led by Colonel John Garang (see "An Interim Report on Sudan's New Regime" by Nabil S. Mikhail in CSIS Africa Notes no. 100, July 30, 1989). More specifically, according to an interview with Egyptian Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Boutros Ghali published in Al-Ittihad (Abu Dhabi) on August 1, "Egypt is not undertaking mediation but is offering its amicable services to the Sudanese government, the Garang movement, and Sudan's neighbors such as Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda to settle this problem within an African framework and far from foreign interference."

An African Defense Force?

In their presummit meetings, the Council of Ministers reexamined and again pigeonholed the recurrent notion of a pan-African military force. According to the OAU-associated Pan-African News Agency, "[s]everal countries, headed by Ethiopia, drew attention to the financial implications of running such an organ [and] Senegal, Rwanda and Nigeria called for further consideration . . . ." The Kenya News Agency tactfully reported that "[t]o satisfy both sides, for and against, the ministers decided to accept the idea for the establishment of the defense force in principle and to have its implications reviewed further."

Kenya’s President Moi, on the other hand, minced no words in denouncing the proposal in a speech given just before the summit: "I would advise my minister to walk out, sunbathe, and take vitamins D or C instead of remaining in the hall while the OAU member countries discuss how Africans should contribute . . . to establish a peace force for Africa. As far as I am concerned, this is a dream. Why? Because before we Kenyans and the Nigerians agreed to send observers and troops, respectively, to Chad, the OAU pledged it would pay; but the result was that the Kenyans and Nigerians had to foot the bill. The OAU did not pay a single cent . . . . It is just like a child who says: When I grow up, I will build a seven-story house, I will buy a car, I will do this and that."
and so on. This is all fantasy. It is not realistic, so let us do what is practical."

Decade of the African Child

Against the background of reports (see, for example, West Africa [August 14]) that some four million children die in Africa from malnutrition and other easily preventable causes each year, the summit voted to declare the 1990s as "the decade for the African child" and to ask each member state to make its own national declaration and implement child-aid programs. Among the goals: (1) immunization of at least 70 percent of all children by 1990 against measles, whooping cough, diphtheria, tuberculosis, polio, and tetanus; (2) implementation of African health ministers' 1987 Bamako Initiative, which calls for the universal availability of self-supporting basic primary health services, especially maternal and child care; (3) education for all children, and in particular all girls.

Prospects

One of the OAU's many unresolved problems is that of member dues. Zimbabwe's Minister of Foreign Affairs Nathan Shamuyarira, this year's chairman of the Council of Ministers' presummit deliberations, made the following plea in the council's concluding session: "One of the leading constraints in our discussion and in our resolutions has always been the shortage of finance. Many pan-African organizations are short of funds, including the OAU itself and its organs, and we urge, very strongly, all member states to make contributions to their own organizations. We underline the fact that our member states do make contributions to other international and regional organizations to which they belong, and we urge that priority be given to the OAU and its sister organizations..."

However vexing the dues issue may be, its impact is debilitating rather than apocalyptic. As far as the OAU's actual survival is concerned, the time of greatest danger may have been in the mid-1980s, a period marked by the controversy over the questionable procedure by which the Polisario/SADR achieved OAU membership—a controversy that resulted in the cancellation of the 1982 summit scheduled for Tripoli, Libya, the subsequent withdrawal of Morocco from the organization, and Zaire's "suspension" of participation. (See "Where Does the OAU Go From Here?" by Helen Kitchen and J. Coleman Kitchen in CSIS Africa Notes no. 3, September 1, 1982.)

Some members now believe that the worst may be over. In 1986, a Zairian delegation reappeared at the organization's annual summit (see "OAU Assembly XXII" by J. Coleman Kitchen in CSIS Africa Notes no. 61, August 28, 1986). And if, as now seems possible, the Saharan conflict is on its way to negotiated resolution, Morocco would logically resume OAU membership.

Indeed, as the 1990s approach, the OAU may be able to achieve something more than minimal survival. The election of an energetic and skilled secretary-general bodes well for the organization's prospects as a relevant force in African affairs, as does the incumbency of a chairman with an impressive foreign-policy track record who clearly intends to make conflict resolution one of the hallmarks of his term in office. As West Africa said in a recent editorial about the Assembly, "Hope may be unfashionable, irrational, and also prove extremely fragile, but at the moment it is not out of order."

J. Coleman Kitchen, Fellow in African Studies at CSIS, is the African Studies Program's research coordinator and text editor. He received his undergraduate degree from St. John's College (Annapolis), and his Ph.D. in mathematical sciences from Johns Hopkins University. His contributions to CSIS Africa Notes have included "Where Does the OAU Go From Here?" (coauthor), issue no. 3, September 1, 1982; "OAU Assembly XXII," issue no. 61, August 28, 1986; "The Enduring French Connection," issue no. 68, January 26, 1987; "Iran and Africa, 1984," issue no. 32, August 15, 1984; "Zaire and Israel," issue no. 10, March 21, 1983; "Sudan's Political History in Brief," in issue no. 100, July 30, 1989; "The Governments of Ghana, 1957-1985," in issue no. 42, May 2, 1985; and "Chad's Political History in Brief" (coauthor), in issue no. 18, August 31, 1983.