

ECOWAS EFFORTS TO RESOLVE THE CRISIS²⁷

ECOWAS has grown in stature and is gaining dignified salience as a regional organization or (to use the UN Charter terminologies in Chapter VIII) a regional arrangement acting for the Security Council with regard to measures under Chapter VI or VII of the Charter. Côte d'Ivoire could be cited as part of the emerging success record of ECOWAS including also the conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia. Côte d'Ivoire's conflict has been determined by the Security Council as constituting 'a threat to international peace and security in the region.' The role of the United Nations has been axed on the initial intervention of ECOWAS. Although these conflicts are still on-going, ECOWAS deserves credit for 'cutting its teeth' as it were, on these hot experiences and assuming its responsibilities in close cooperation with the UN.²⁸

Peacemaking initiatives

Côte d'Ivoire is an integral member of the Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS. The organisation was founded as a forum to integrate the economies of West African states, but it has, since it first set up a peace-enforcement force (ECOMOG) that intervened in Liberia in 1990, taken on the role of a regional security organization. The reaction of ECOWAS to the events in Côte d'Ivoire was informed by the fact that the violent overthrow of the legitimate Government of President Laurent Gbagbo would have been in gross violation of the basic principles of the African Union, including the Algiers Declaration of July 1999, which established a framework for reaction to unconstitutional change of government. The attempted coup d'état also contravened the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which prohibits the recognition of any government that came to power by the overthrow of a democratically-elected government or by unconstitutional means.

There was also the fear of a possible spill-over of the violence across the borders. Soon after the crisis broke out, Ghana, together with Nigeria and Togo, sent a delegation to Côte d'Ivoire to express solidarity and support for President Gbagbo and to assure him that ECOWAS would do whatever it could to ensure that

democratic and constitutional order prevailed in Côte d'Ivoire. President Gbagbo was also urged to do everything possible to ensure peace, stability and reconciliation in the country.

Consequently, at very short notice, Ghana readily hosted an Extraordinary Summit of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government in Accra on Sunday, 29 September 2002. The Summit decided to create a High Level Contact Group (HLCCG) of Seven Heads of State and Government. They were the Presidents of Ghana, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Togo. The group was to establish contact with the insurgents, prevail upon them to immediately cease all hostilities, restore normalcy to the occupied towns and negotiate a general framework for the resolution of the crisis. The Contact Group began its formal work at Ministerial level in Abidjan on Wednesday, 2 October 2002. The Group held discussions with President Laurent Gbagbo and obtained his commitment to allow the Contact Group to meet with the insurgents in order to engage them in a dialogue with the objective of resolving the crisis. The Contact Group also met with the Ambassador of France to Côte d'Ivoire and obtained French commitment to provide logistical support and security escort for the Group so as to enable the group visit the insurgents in Bouaké. The Contact Group traveled to Bouaké under French escort on Thursday, 3 October 2002, where it held discussions with representatives of the insurgent forces and succeeded in obtaining a commitment, in principle, to a ceasefire.

Following the Ivorian government's subsequent indication that it was willing to sign a Ceasefire Agreement, the Contact Group traveled to Yamoussoukro en-route to Tiebiso for the signing ceremony. At Yamoussoukro, however, it was learnt that the officer who had been designated to sign the Ceasefire Agreement on behalf of the Ivorian government had not received the necessary written authorization. The written mandate was never given and the Contact Group was compelled to abandon its mission and return to Abidjan. Subsequent consultations between the Contact Group, the then Chairman of ECOWAS, President Abdoulaye Wade, and President Gbagbo, and the visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Senegal to Côte d'Ivoire, resulted in a proposal for an agreement for cessation of hostilities; the agreement was signed by the insurgents on 17 October 2002.

The Agreement provided that the insurgents and the government would remain in the areas they were controlling, and for the return of normal administrative life and supplies to the occupied towns. President Gbagbo made a nationwide broadcast accepting the cessation of hostilities and declaring the readiness of the government to dialogue with the insurgents. ECOWAS designated President

Gnassingbe Eyadema as its principal coordinator to facilitate the day to day management of the mediation effort.

Peacekeeping efforts

The Defence and Security Commission, the Mediation and Security Council, and Authority of Heads of State and Government, had played their roles, as required by the Mechanism, in a remarkable show of solidarity. The ECOWAS Defence and Security Commission submitted a proposal to deploy ECOMICI, on 26 October 2002, to the Mediation and Security Council. The following mandate for the force was approved: to monitor the cessation of hostilities; facilitate the return of normal public administrative services and the free movement of goods and services; contribute to the implementation of the peace agreement; and guarantee the safety of the insurgents, observers and humanitarian staff. The authorized strength of ECOMICI was 2,386, with the provisional breakdown of contributions to the force as follows: Benin - 300; The Gambia -135; Ghana - 265; Guinea Bissau - 386; Mali - 250; Niger - 250; Nigeria - 250; Senegal - 250; and Togo - 300.

Ambassador Raph Uwechue of Nigeria was appointed Special Representative of the Executive Secretary to direct peacekeeping operations of the force, and Brigadier General Papa Khalil Fall of Senegal was appointed Force Commander. Unfortunately, there was a faulty appreciation of the gravity of the military situation from the onset. It turned out that the number of troops pledged was far too small to execute the mission, and the deployment of these troops was subject to the approval of the Government of Côte d'Ivoire.²⁹

The limited troop strength was further whittled down because though Mali was one of the most prepared to deploy, its troops did not deploy. This was probably because it was considered that national sentiments towards the large number of Malian immigrants in Côte d' Ivoire would compromise their neutrality. Nigeria, which in the past led other West African intervention efforts, was not able to do so at this point because of its own security considerations. Guinea Bissau's case was different. The country had pledged 386 soldiers, which was the highest number of troops pledged, but it was not allowed to deploy them.³⁰

On the issue of Command and Control, it may be recalled that based on ECOMOG experience, certain problems were identified. The lack of an integrated chain of command structure was a key concern because it sometimes complicated the job of the Force Commander who was the political and military head of the Mission all rolled into one. Experience showed that some

Commanders did not have the appropriate diplomatic skill to deal with sensitive issues and so sometimes complicated accomplishment of the overall peace process.

To address this problem, Articles 32 and 33 of ECOWAS Mechanism stipulated the procedure for appointing the Special Representative of the ECOWAS Executive Secretary and the Force Commander. It also outlined their functions, especially the chain of command with ECOWAS Secretariat. A dogmatic application of Article 33, paragraph 2(d), which stipulates that “the Force Commander is accountable to the Executive Secretary through the Special Representative” was found to impede the lateral and horizontal flow of information. This made coordination ineffective between the Executive Secretariat and the Force Headquarters.

Unfortunately, the Executive Secretariat was also not organizationally prepared to handle the Ivorian crisis. The Deputy Executive Secretary for Political Affairs, Defence and Security charged with the responsibility for assisting the Executive Secretary to implement the Mechanism, assumed duty in April 2001. By September 2002, when the crisis erupted, his professional staff consisted of only two: a Principal Programme Officer, Peacekeeping and a Principal Officer, Political Affairs. This small team worked almost around the clock with the Deputy Executive Secretary (PADS) to implement the mechanism in response to the crisis in Côte d’Ivoire.

The team had to devise ingenious methods of convening meetings, and of planning and coordinating the deployment of ECOMICI. In fact, apart from officers from Member States who were invited to assist, the UNDPKO and United States European Command also sent assistance. Somehow the deficiency of manpower in the ECOWAS Secretariat was converted into a very good way of carrying all stakeholders along. Thus when a meeting of Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) was organized on 6 November 2002, to discuss the deficiencies of equipment, logistics support and funding, major donor partners also attended.

Regrettably, at this late stage, the Force Commander had not been nominated as envisaged in Article 33 of the Protocol on the Mechanism. An advance team was however dispatched to Côte d’Ivoire on 17 November 2002 to undertake preliminary work on operational and logistics issues, pending the appointment of the Force Commander - who was eventually nominated and confirmed on 18 December 2002. Meanwhile, the Chairman of the Defence and Security Commission had pro-actively mobilized resources under his command to assist with logistic support efforts.³¹

At the operational level, the French presence was therefore essential to the implementation of the mandate. By February 2003, there were approximately 3,000 French soldiers and only 500 ECOWAS troops on the ground. While ECOWAS struggled to complete its deployment, the French continued deploying their troops with their high mobility and superior reinforcement capability. The French had deployed five combat teams, when ECOMICI first sent an advance party, to be followed by four combat teams that were deployed from west to east. The Ghana company was first to arrive, travelling by road across the border. It was agreed with Licorne that ECOMICI would not deploy west of the Sassandra river, because this area was extremely volatile. This area was therefore left to the French, who had the strength and the fire power to deal with the situation.

The ECOMICI Force Commander's concept of operations envisaged four phases, as follows:

- Phase 1 involved monitoring of the ceasefire line and the provision of VIP protection. The objective was to create a zone of confidence, stretching from west to east, to the north and south of the ceasefire line;
- Phase 2 would see the disappearance of the ceasefire line and the extension of operations into the wider territory of Côte d'Ivoire, for the purpose of opening up economic and humanitarian corridors;
- Phase 3 encompassed support to the process of DDR; and
- Phase 4 would be the drawdown and withdrawal of ECOMICI forces.

This concept of operations was never completed; it stalled at phase one for two basic reasons: the lack of human, financial and other resources for ECOMICI; and secondly, because of reliance on the French, who were ECOMICI's main backers, while their forces apparently had different plans. However, it was eventually possible to deploy troops north of the ceasefire line - in Bouake, Man, Seguela and Bouna.

The rules of engagement were well understood, and ECOMICI personnel were well trained and well prepared to apply them. However, the most important factor for ECOMICI's success is the permanent liaison the impartial forces had with the belligerents. The quadripartite meetings and the quadripartite operations centre were very efficient means for preventing situations that could lead to an escalation of tensions that may have necessitated the use of force by ECOMICI.

Strengths and weaknesses of ECOMIC¹

ECOMICI gained a lot of strength from the fact that troops shared a common cultural background and had knowledge of the region in general and the host country in particular. All contributing countries were from the West African region, and many members of the force had previously visited Côte d'Ivoire.

Moreover, ECOMICI personnel had an aptitude for dialogue, something which is often overlooked or underplayed. Despite all the ongoing conflicts in Africa, Africans tend to have a gift for dialogue which is not exploited to its fullness. There was also a considerable level of acquaintance between the neutral forces and the protagonists. Members of ECOMICI, Forces nouvelles (who were for the most part former members of the Côte d'Ivoire regular forces) and Licorne often knew each other, which made things much easier. Many officers from all parties had attended the same military schools, and some had met before. This applies equally to the French who have strong ties with many ECOWAS countries, where some of their personnel have even worked and lived.³²

On the negative side, it is apparent that there was a lack of strategic support to deployment of the forces. The problems started with the advance party, which deployed at very short notice, and had to rely on the French for mobility and support. There was also a very long period of waiting before the first troops hit the ground. The Force Commander had to use his own initiative, his own knowledge of the country, and his own acquaintances to get things moving. Even so, it took more than 100 days to set up a basic force headquarters. When the main body of Detachment South deployed to Abidjan in March 2003, it had no vehicles and no place to work. It is mainly through the assistance of the French, the government of Côte d'Ivoire, and through personal contacts of the Force Commander and the efforts of the Chair of the DSC (Lt Gen Obeng of Ghana) that this force was able to build up slowly, to survive, and then succeed.

There was a great deal of financial uncertainty, and there was no integrated logistics plan. The Force Commander did not have any control over the future of his finances; indeed he sometimes had to operate for up to two months without any funds. The lack of integrated logistic support resulted in a laborious build up of the force, which had to be stopped on several occasions to get the communications equipment operational and to wait the arrival of more radios from France. There were also incoherencies in force generation and donor support. For example, ECOMICI had to wait for the contingent from Benin, who were in turn waiting for the Belgians to provide the logistics support they had promised.

One can imagine the incoherence of a logistic “system” in which the French RECAMP provided support to certain countries, Britain provided support to Ghana, and Belgium to Benin. Individual troop contributing countries also provided their own contingent owned equipment, and US equipment was supplied to the force via a private company – Pacific Architects and Engineers (PAE). Though troops were provided overall with adequate logistics support, there was no integration whatsoever - and that is one of the main principles of logistic support.

Summary of lessons: Negative and positive

On the negative side, it is clear that:

- Lack of proper and well integrated logistics was a major hurdle to successful operations;
- ECOWAS could not generate its own resources;
- There were deficiencies in the chain of command;
- More efforts are necessary to reduce the language barrier in ECOWAS military operations (though ECOMICI did well in this respect);
- A force of this strength cannot be deployed and sustained without adequate visibility for its financing and proper integration of the logistics support; and
- Abuja did not have then a proper strategic command structure to give the necessary directives and guidance, and to carry out its responsibilities for mission management.

On the positive side:

- There was total consensus by all ECOWAS heads of state to deploy an intervention force in RCI;
- Donor support was forthcoming, but slow (ECOWAS must build the capacity to resource its force on the onset);
- ECOWAS has the human resources to plan and execute in a professional manner a large scale peacekeeping operation;

- ECOMICI was a credible force which achieved major successes in the peace process;
- There had been prior training of personnel in peace support training centres and other military schools, as well as joint exercises, which were most valuable; and
- ECOWAS has troops that are capable of operating alongside modern, well equipped, and well trained armed forces (indeed, ECOMICI and Licorne complemented one another to achieved success in a “hybrid operation”.

Recommendations

- ECOWAS should generate its own minimum mission planning and management capabilities.
- The Executive Secretariat should continue the build up of an efficient operations centre.
- ECOWAS should have stand by logistics assets (trucks, communications, medical).
- ECOWAS should encourage TCCs to deploy with their own equipment by signing an MOU with scales of equipment and reimbursement rates as per the UN.
- ECOWAS should encourage the further development of joint training at operational and tactical levels.
- Last, but not least, greater transparency is needed – future missions should have one finance cell, including finance officers from ECOWAS and donor countries.