

African Conflict Prevention Programme (ACPP) –Pretoria



ACPP Daily Briefings

Week 09

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Summary of Briefings

West Africa:

Cote d'Ivoire: AU at the crossroads - Will the AU meeting finally resolve the Ivorian political standoff?

This week, African leaders convened in Addis Ababa for the African Union's Peace and Security Council meeting on Cote d'Ivoire. The meeting that took place on March 9-10 discussed the proposals for the binding resolutions of the AU, in its attempts to craft a final solution to the post-electoral debacle in the former beacon of stability in West Africa. The AU verdict is straightforward and has remained consistent with its original position that recognized Alassane Dramane Ouattara as the duly elected president of Cote d'Ivoire.

In the communiqué released at the end of the meeting, the Pan-African organization endorsed the 28 November run-off results as proclaimed by the electoral commission and certified by the United Nations. The organization then called on the Constitutional Council to swear in Alassane Dramane Ouattara as the legitimate president of the country. Ouattara's responsibility is to form a government of national unity and take initiatives to promote national reconciliation. The AU went further with two additional and equally important proposals: the initiative to appoint a High Representative to oversee the implementation of the resolutions; and a timeframe of two weeks for parties to work out its modalities.

These resolutions have two major implications for the ongoing crisis in Cote d'Ivoire. The first is that they vindicate the electoral process and its outcomes – as an essential departing point to preserve the will of the majority of Ivorian people. Secondly, the Panel has certainly taken into consideration the need to preserve the credibility of the AU and that of the Panel itself that were both at stake. This is significant if one considers the contention that emerged around the composition of the Panel and its delay in making known its resolutions within the prescribed timeframe. Indeed, critics have dubbed the Panel as a 'paper tiger operation' suggesting yet another unproductive diplomatic effort by the AU. The one-month extension of the mandate of the Panel has been seen as prolonging the agony of the citizens, in light of the alarming deterioration of the security situation in the country.

President Zuma's implicit but deafening deviation from AU/ECOWAS collective resolutions; President Kikwete's unequivocal call for Gbagbo's immediate resignation; Chad's President Deby's anti imperial rhetoric sympathetic to Gbagbo - all pointed to a perceived lack of common ground on the task at hand. This is notwithstanding a clear mandate from the AU that they formulate their proposals on the basis of prevailing AU and ECOWAS declarations as well as UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's five principles that should guide the Panel's work. Notably, these principles include "the imperative to focus on the peaceful and honourable exit of Laurent Gbagbo; the formation of a national unity government by the UN-certified winner of the 28 November Ivorian presidential polls; and concrete action to lift the siege on the Golf Hotel where Ouattara is being blockaded by the Gbagbo forces".

Yet, the AU meeting is the last major peaceful opportunity to finally resolve the Ivorian crisis and needs to be taken seriously by all parties. The significance of the work of the Panel and the group of experts is absolutely paramount. It now consolidates the continental initial consensus around the electoral results. It will certainly further isolate Laurent Gbagbo diplomatically. The threat by Laurent Gbagbo's representative Pascal Affi Nguessan, to hold the AU responsible for the outbreak of civil war in the event that AU endorses Ouattara, is a strategy to avoid honouring and abiding by the AU's resolutions. Undoubtedly, it is precisely the breach of previous official agreements and commitments that have drawn Cote d'Ivoire into the current and prolonged

post-electoral impasse. So, how the AU reacts to the intransigence of the key actors to implement its resolutions will be determined by subsequent efforts to convince Laurent Gbagbo on the perils in engaging in challenging the authority of the Pan-African organization.

Although it is argued that Laurent Gbagbo's personal security concerns influenced his decision to send one of his hardliners, Pascal Affi-Nguessan, the current chair of the ruling party, the *Front Populaire Ivoirien* (FPI) to the meeting, his snubbing of the AU meeting could be diversely interpreted. It was probably a decision to avoid being confronted by African leaders and be succumbed to the force of their findings - that effectively would challenge his own interpretation. On the other hands, African leaders could have seen this as a disregard to their authority and a negative signal that their resolutions would be met with indifference if not rejection - should they go against his regime.

In fact, Gbagbo has claimed that he could still rely of 7 of the 53 members of the AU including Angola, Uganda, South Africa, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, Equatorial Guinea, and Ghana. The implications of this could mean that the outgoing government was expecting some solidarity from the African leaders. This is notwithstanding the glaring truth - albeit inconvenient to Gbagbo proponents, that the logic of violence of his regime cannot be supported, especially that it has become a major source of instability to the region and an impediment to the quick resolution of the conflict. The decision by Gbagbo to deny UN forces the right to use the country's air space could also have the double objective of undermining UN peace operations in the country and preventing Ouattara from returning to Cote d'Ivoire.

The question now is how to short-circuit Laurent Gbagbo's grip on power in a way that averts a civil war. Three scenarios emerge from the AU resolutions. The first is a perpetuation of the status quo with all the risks that it entails, while the AU High Representative for the implementation of the political solution continues the dialogue and mediation endeavour. There is a risk that it may be similar to the prevailing impasse in Madagascar where, the coup leader Andry Rajoelina remains firm on his position not to concede to his opponents, forcing SADC and the AU to continue working on a controversial "consensus" that excludes the former president Marc Ravalomana from the political process. Therefore, the longer it takes to reach a definite resolve in Cote d'Ivoire, the more entrenched the Gbagbo regime becomes, making its repressive pursuit, a fait accompli.

The Second scenario albeit mildly unlikely is that Laurent Gbagbo will step down having realized that his options to remain in power are exhausted. As the AU Peace and Security Commissioner Ramtane Lamamra told reporters, the AU "will not take no for an answer". This could be seen as the AU determination to not only uphold the UN-certified electoral result but also to enforce the resolutions of the meetings no matter what.

The third scenario is the outbreak of a civil war that would nullify the guarantees currently been discussed for Laurent Gbagbo's honourable exit from power. The AU has called on the development partners to uplift the sanctions imposed on Gbagbo and his close allies and has communicated this decision to the UN Security Council and other international actors.

In all, the post-electoral crisis in Cote d'Ivoire will be remembered as one of the most complex, divisive crises and an intricate case of peace building exercise in Africa since the end of Cold War. If it is resolved, there should be some lessons to ponder regarding leverage and opportunity in conflict resolution; how to enforce commitment and compliance to peace agreements; and the use of requisite mechanisms to complement existing conflict prevention approaches. Should the AU's decisions be ignored, the AU and ECOWAS would have no choice but to rethink their approach to Cote d'Ivoire.

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