The Darfur crisis immensely tested the African Union’s determination to keep peace and stop the excruciating destruction of human life on the continent. This paper argues that the AU has performed fairly well in Darfur, but the AU member states and donor community need a serious dialogue among themselves. It is argued that peacekeeping is a global responsibility and the lessons from the AU’s experience in Darfur have significant implications for the future of peacekeeping in Africa.

**Nature of African Conflicts**

Africa’s conflicts, as elsewhere, are expansive and devastating. According to the April 2005 peace and conflict ledger authored by Gurr and Marshall (2005), the African continent still remains in a precarious security situation. The continent has 17 ‘red-flagged’ African nations facing the danger of state failure, while another 19 were ‘yellow-flagged’ and are in a serious state of fragility.

Theoretically, the AU was to be the magic bullet for promoting human security and managing African conflicts if the member states failed to do so. Recognising continental security challenges and international insensitivity to the security needs of African nations as experienced in the 1994 Rwandan genocide,
the formation of the AU was seen as a dramatic step by the continent to take charge of its own affairs. In addition to this horrendous genocide, other serious war crimes were committed by various African regimes, while the AU’s predecessor, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), did not intervene.

From OAU to AU

On July 9, 2002, the AU was launched in Durban, South Africa, ushering in a time of deep reflections on the past, and a hopeful outlook to the future of a viable, democratic and peaceful Africa. The Constitutive Act adopted in Lomé in 2000 established and mandated the AU as the continental guardian of peace and stability in Africa. As stipulated in Article 3 of the AU Constitutive Act, maintaining continental peace and security is the principal role of the AU. Importantly, Article 4 lists various principles of the AU, notably the principle of “non-interference”. Although the AU retained the principle of non-interference in any member state’s internal affairs, Article 4 (h) makes a dramatic departure from the OAU’s approach to dealing with internal affairs of the member states asserting “the right of the Union to intervene in a Member State pursuant to a decision of the Assembly in respect of grave circumstances, namely war crimes, genocide and crimes against humanity”.3

Additionally, Article 5 mentions the key organs of the AU, notably the Peace and Security Council (PSC), the AU’s principal decision-making organ for conflict prevention, management and resolution, which was established by the PSC Protocol in 2002 and officially inaugurated in May 2005. Article 7 empowers the PSC’s Commissioner to recommend to the AU Assembly necessary AU interventions and the deployment of peacekeeping missions in member states when acts of genocide and other crimes against humanity are committed.

Furthermore, Article 5 (2) identifies five key bodies to assist the PSC: the African Standby Force (ASF); Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), with planning elements in each of the five African regions; the Panel of the Wise (POW); a Common Africa Defence and Security Policy (CADSP); and the Military Staff Committee (MSC) to formulate integrated continental security and defence policies.

Overview of the Darfur Crisis

To effectively discuss the AU’s lessons in Darfur, an understanding of the Darfur conflict is in order. The Darfur region has a history of resource-based inter-ethnic rivalries between nomadic Arab groups and the farming black African communities of Fur, Massaleet and Zagawa. Emerging in early 2003, the Darfur rebellion led by the two major rebel groups, the Sudan Liberation Movement/Army (SLM/A) and the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), grew out of linked multiple causes within the Sudanese polity. The launch of the conflict was timed to coincide with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) between the government of Sudan and the south Sudan-based Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM) led the late John Garang. Since 2003, 200 000 people have been killed, 200 000 are refugees and 3 million are internally displaced.

Some human rights organisations in the United States have termed the conflict genocide. But the United Nations (UN) and the AU have differed from this label, though they have asserted that war crimes and crimes against humanity have been committed against black populations by the government forces and the Janjaweed militia. In April 2006, the UN Security Council imposed sanction against four individuals for committing war crimes in Darfur. These include a former Chief of the Sudanese Air Force, a leader of the Janjaweed militia and two armed opposition leaders.

The AU’s Experience in Darfur

In addition to humanitarian assistance, two intervention fronts have emerged. First, the AU initiated a peacekeeping mission. Secondly, the then AU Chairman, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, initiated peace talks in Abuja. In May 2006, the government of Sudan and the largest armed group, the SLM/A, signed a peace agreement. In the agreement, the government agreed to disarm the Janjaweed, channel resources to rebuild Darfur, and integrate the armed movements into the national army. The implementation of the peace deal has been rocky.

Initially, the AU established the AU Mission in Sudan (AMIS) with a 120-person Ceasefire Monitoring Commission and more than 5 000 AU peacekeeping forces. The number of AMIS peacekeepers grew to 7 000 in September 2005, and is expected to reach 12 500 before the end of 2006. The AU is also working with North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) to provide logistical support and equipment, and the UN take-over of the mission is currently underway. Somini Sengupta of the New York Times commented that apart from the African nations no country has been willing to send its own troops to Darfur.4

AMIS has also received high-level commendation. In July 2005, Jan Pronk, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Sudan, addressing the UN Security Council, reported, “the AU force has helped to establish more stability. They have done an admirable job, highly professional, with much dedication.”5 Concurring, former the Clinton Administration Africa director, John Prendergast, observed, “The African Union has the chance, in its embryonic state, to demonstrate in a dramatic way that it can make a difference in Africa.”6
After a 2004 visit to Darfur, Jon Corzine, a Democratic senator from New Jersey and Richard Holbrook, a former US Ambassador to the United Nations, commended the AU for the role it played in Darfur: “surprisingly, the strongest efforts to stop the fighting have come from the African Union, which is facing the first test of its viability as an organisation since it replaced the weak and ineffective Organisation of African Unity in 2000.”

Despite the monumental financial, logistical and territorial challenges facing it, AMIS has been credited with providing security and hope to some villages in Darfur. A UN official commenting on the impact of the AU peacekeeping force stated, “the AU has been very effective in decreasing violence in areas where it maintains presence in the Darfur region. It has also prevented some attacks from happening through local negotiations on the ground. However, it has not prevented general insecurity due to its inability to deploy in large numbers.” Around the AU camps in Labado and Khor Abache in South Darfur, life is returning and villagers are slowly trickling in to rebuild their lives. Adam Mynott, a BBC correspondent, assessed, “there is no doubting the effectiveness of African Union peace monitoring troops in the areas where they are operating in Sudan’s war-torn region of Darfur.” The news report also states that of the 12 000 people displaced by the Janjaweed in the area, about 2 000 have returned. A Darfuri lady, Miriam confessed, “I am still scared of being attacked, but while the African Union soldiers are here I feel safe.”

Within its capacity, the AU has shown impressive leadership and pragmatism in confronting the Darfur challenge. But some analysts and diplomats familiar with African conflicts argue that despite African pride and the progress and commitment that the AU has shown in bringing stability to some areas in Darfur, it is still not well seasoned to keep peace in Africa by itself. Susan Rice, a former US diplomat, argued that the international community’s passing of the mantle of military peacekeeping to the AU is not appropriate: “The sum of this policy is to pass the military buck to the African Union. The AU guards this buck jealously and has done its best on the ground in Darfur. But the unfortunate truth is this: the African Union’s best is not yet enough. Where it has deployed, the AU has performed heroically and greatly increased security for civilians. But the AU force is critically undermanned and has an impossibly weak mandate, limited to monitoring rather than enforcing the nonexistent ceasefire and protecting only those people facing an imminent threat within the force’s immediate vicinity.”

Similarly, Hussein Solomon and Gerrie Swart have cautioned the AU against developing overly ambitious structures and plans that it cannot effectively execute within its means. But peacekeeping, as the UN experience has shown, is a Herculean task requiring abundant financial and logistical support. In Africa peacekeeping is not an easy task: the AU is like a proud camel over-loaded with continental conflict. Additionally, it should be noted that utopian visions are at times critical assets in the institutional development processes.

Challenges

The following challenges continue to plague the African Union.

1. Underdeveloped and evolving institutional structures

The various organs of the AU are still evolving and have not yet matured to the level where their effectiveness can be adequately felt. An institution like the PSC is still not yet seasoned enough to plan and execute a large-scale peacekeeping operation. The Darfur crisis prematurely engulfed the AU in a stressful peacekeeping operation, sucking its energy away from institutional development and strengthening.

2. Financial and logistical constraints

Content analysis of documentary sources reveals that financial and logistical problems are major obstacles facing the AU. The inability of the AU to airlift 300 soldiers to Darfur is a strain on the continent. The proposed collaboration with NATO and the UN might help alleviate this problem. But the AU needs to find a local solution to this problem.

The AU lacks the financial capacity to competently carry out its continental mandates. The Union inherited a US$42 million debt from the OAU and cash flow problems have been endemic. One major challenge has been the lack of timely voluntary contributions from member states. As of December 2004, the AU Commission’s budgetary allocations had grown from US$43 million to US$158 million (of which US$75 million is allocated...
to the PSC). It is estimated that the member states will contribute US$63 million, while US$95 million is hoped to be sourced from additional discretionary payments by member states and Western governments.  

Donor assistance has been erratic too. Currently AMIS’s budget is US$252 million annually. On 18 August 2005, an AU official stated that the AU would only be able to run AMIS for the next three months. The official reported that the mission was in financial crisis as only US$79 million had been pledged, leaving a critical shortfall of US$173 million. The official worried: “Everyone knows this mission is important and we think the international community will support us, but they need to do it soon because the money is fast running out. The international community, UN, European Union and NATO can’t ask us to increase our force in Darfur and then not come up with the money.”  

3. Member states’ internal and regional politics rear their ugly heads

The AU is still a captive of the internal politics of member states. Due to a fear of negative reactions from key member states, for instance, the AU leadership has not effectively dealt with the government of Sudan. This has significantly undermined the AU’s response to the crisis in Darfur.

4. Fragmented international assistance and donor rigidity

Documentary evidence shows that there is an abundance of global support for Africa’s peace support capacity building initiatives. These have ranged from the collaborative G8 Joint Africa Plan of Action to programmes such as the European Union’s Africa Peace Facility, France’s Reinforcement of African Peacekeeping, and the US Global Peace Operations Initiative. In the G8 Joint Africa Plan of Action, the G8 leaders agreed to strengthen the capacity of Africa’s peacekeeping support operations (APSOs). However, despite years of international capacity building for African institutions, the continent still has rudimentary structures and the capacity to effectively keep peace is inadequate.

Ramsotham, Bah and Calder (2005) observed, “ten years of western capacity-building programmes in Africa have, to date, had a relatively moderate effect, while African regional organisations’ capacity to undertake and sustain PSOs remains similarly limited”. There are two major problems. First, the international...
capacity building initiatives for APSOs reflect regional affiliations and are an expression of the international actor’s interests rather than sincere concern for Africa’s security priorities. Secondly, it has to do with the fragmentation of international assistance and the rigidity of donor funding mechanisms. The AU needs fast, practical and coordinated donor responses to support its peacekeeping missions.

Lessons Learned and Looking to the Future
In order to strengthen the AU’s future peacekeeping several lessons are relevant from the AMIS experience.

1 Peacekeeping is a global responsibility. Although there is talk of “African solutions to African problems”, the cultivation of strong global political will is a critical resource to effectively keep peace. The AU can play a critical leadership role in bringing together various peace actors from local, regional and international systems.

2 Taming member states’ politics could strengthen AU peacekeeping missions. Member states continue to have an immense influence on the effectiveness of the AU to promote peace. The success of the AU is a factor of the quality of political will it gathers from the member states. The development of pragmatic leadership both within the AU and the continent is needed to win political support from the global community to impartially manage continental crises.

3 Lack of financial and logistical support has a dampening effect on the political will. Financial constraints and logistical difficulties feed on each other and will remain a major obstacle to the AU’s peacekeeping efforts. In my view, as the Darfur challenge has shown, no organisation has the absolute leverage to keep peace in Africa. The focus should be on institutionalisation of collaborative global peacekeeping partnerships with a strengthened regional response capacity. The AU through the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) initiative and the PSC should proactively develop its capacity through a comprehensive continental fundraising plan and diplomatic strategy to marshal the resources from both within and outside the continent.

4 Muscular peacekeeping for the AU: By 2010, the AU plans to have the ASF, a force of 15,000–25,000 military and civilian personnel, fully operational to be deployed within 10 days following an executive order by the AU. To achieve this dream and make the process homegrown, it is imperative to share the continental responsibility to effectively staff and equip the ASF. All the AU member states should in their normal military recruitment,
planning and development, designate a unit or certain personnel as part of the ASF – something like a national taskforce for continental security.

5 Time to reduce international donor assistance fragmentation: The G8 needs to move beyond rhetorical promises and collaboratively support APSOs to better promote peace and stability in Africa. With the creation of the PSC, NEPAD and reinvigorated African leaders’ commitment to managing African conflicts, the G8 leaders should be lobbied and encouraged to intensify their efforts and commitment to building the capacity of APSOs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the future of the AU to keep the peace is promising. However, despite its impressive progress and the experiences in Darfur and other AU peacekeeping missions, the AU is yet to prove itself. The AU needs committed and coordinated harmonised capacity building and positive political support from the member states and the international community that reflect continental needs, not donor countries’ national interests and regional priorities.

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Endnotes


3 Ibid., p. 5.


8 UN official, New York, personal communication with the author, 17 August 2005.


10 Ibid.


