

Monitoring the Monitors: UN-ECOMOG Peacekeeping in the Liberian Civil War

BY MILKAH KIHUNAH

Within the context of the United Nations' primary responsibility for matters of international peace and security, providing support for regional and sub-regional initiatives in Africa is both necessary and desirable. Such support is necessary because the UN lacks the capacity, resources, and expertise to address all problems that may arise in Africa. It is desirable because wherever possible the international community should strive to complement rather than supplant African efforts to resolve Africa's problems.

—Kofi Annan, Report to the UN Security Council, April 16, 1998

The response of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to the outbreak of civil war in Liberia in 1989 proved to be a critical test case in the emergence of a more robust role for African organizations in the resolution of African conflicts. The ECOWAS intervention was an unprecedented partnership between a United Nations observer mission and a regional force—"the first peacekeeping mission undertaken by the United Nations in cooperation with a peacekeeping mission set up by another organization."¹ Because of its unique status, the ECOWAS intervention offers possible lessons for future African initiatives.

This effort in collaborative peacekeeping merged two core elements of peace operations in Africa: the participation of regional organiza-

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tions and the support of the UN. At a time of increasing conflict in Africa and diminished UN conflict management resources, collaborative arrangements with regional organizations could help share the political and financial burdens of peacekeeping. But institutional collaboration is a complex matter under the best of circum-

stances. Structural and conceptual problems plagued the efforts of the UN and ECOWAS in Liberia, limiting the operation's efficacy. An assessment of the rationale, mandate, and outcome of this joint peacekeeping arrangement provides valuable insight into the structure of ongoing and future UN collaboration with regional peace operations, particularly in Africa.

**STRUCTURAL AND CONCEPTUAL PROBLEMS
PLAGUED THE EFFORTS OF THE UN AND
ECOWAS IN LIBERIA.**

Regional Organizations and Conflict Resolution in Africa

Since the end of the Cold War, conflict in Africa has played a major role in setting the parameters of the UN's mission and capabilities. The UN's apparent inability to stop mass violence in Somalia and Rwanda provoked a debate over the effectiveness of available instruments for resolving intrastate conflicts. One outcome of this debate has been an increased willingness to allow regional and sub-regional initiatives to contribute to peacekeeping and conflict management efforts on the continent. This idea has become particularly appealing because the United States and other powerful nations have expressed increased reluctance to commit military resources to resolve conflicts deemed outside their strategic interests. This reality, in turn, has compelled African leaders to abandon their long tradition of aversion to collective action in peace and security.

For most of its forty-year existence, the Organization of African Unity, long the region's preeminent inter-governmental organization, has disappointed those who expected it to mobilize Africa's crisis management capacity. Such demands would have been formidable for any organization, especially one as fragile as the OAU, which was originally conceived as a forum for ordered interstate interaction—not as an organization of military command.² Relations between OAU member states have been governed by important provisions of the OAU charter that emphasize principles of state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference. These tenets succeeded in moderating

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conflict between African states and in guaranteeing the stability of established colonial borders, but also inhibited any meaningful collective response to intrastate conflicts.³

Civil conflicts have exploded in Africa over the last fifteen years at a time when the major powers have disengaged from a region no longer considered strategically important. This vacuum pushed regional players and the UN to seek novel solutions to these new crises, including the expansion of conflict resolution capacities through African regional organizations.⁴ At the 1991 UN-OAU Conference on Security, Stability, Development, and Cooperation in Africa, leading voices on the continent sought to re-conceptualize traditional notions of non-intervention on the grounds that order was as important within nations as among them, and that strict state sovereignty could be compromised to alleviate severe human suffering.⁵ Under this new dispensation, sub-regional organizations such as ECOWAS and the Southern African Development Community became important actors in regional peacekeeping. The rebirth of the OAU in 2002 as the African Union is also significant given its new ability to establish conflict resolution mechanisms, such as the Peace and Security Council, and provide the organization with the authority to intervene in member states in the event of grave circumstances, such as genocide and other crimes against humanity.⁶

Meanwhile, the UN, and in particular the Security Council, have increasingly recognized their own limitations and the need for greater reliance on regional organizations. In 1992 the UN secretary general issued "An Agenda for Peace," a report on global conflict resolution that emphasized the need for greater cooperation between regional organizations and the UN, noting that, "regional action as a matter of decentralization, delegation, and cooperation with UN efforts could only lighten the burden of the Council."⁷

The challenge for the UN is to find ways to resolve local conflicts that retain the Security Council's leadership while simultaneously enabling African organizations to play a greater role. Such accommodation also caters to the general unwillingness of Western powers to take on the political and financial commitments of military intervention. These considerations were decisive factors in the structure of the UN's cooperation with a sub-regional initiative aimed at resolving the outbreak of civil war in Liberia in the early 1990s.

Liberia in Crisis

Charles Taylor triggered a civil war in December 1989 when he led a rebel movement, the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), in an attack against the government of then-President Samuel Doe. Within months, the structures of governance were destroyed and civilians became victims in a war prosecuted without respect for convention.⁸ Over time numerous warring factions emerged to contest for power and territory. The ensuing conflict resulted in nearly 200,000 deaths and the displacement of nearly half of the country's population.⁹

On May 30, 1990, the war came under the scrutiny of the thirteenth summit of the ECOWAS heads of state. Nigeria led the push for intervention due to security concerns and the deteriorating humanitarian situation. ECOWAS decided to establish a peacekeeping force, the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Force (ECOMOG), with a mandate to intervene in Liberia to stop further bloodshed.

Analysts disagree on how effective ECOMOG was in Liberia, but there is a general consensus that the mission's capabilities were greatly undermined by a limited commitment of political will and financial resources.¹⁰ In addition to the initial political divisions between Francophone and Anglophone members of ECOWAS over deployment, some members had grave doubts about the mission's legitimacy and mandate.

Though ECOMOG was considered to be a peacekeeping or monitoring force, there was no peace agreement to enforce or monitor in Liberia at the time of deployment. Taylor's rebels attacked ECOMOG forces as soon as they landed in Liberia, and the ECOMOG unit responded as if it had a mandate for enforcement. From then on ECOMOG faced constant opposition. Although ECOMOG was initially able to impose a shaky ceasefire, it faced repeated attacks by the various armed factions. These attacks precipitated an escalation of the conflict, forcing the regional body to undertake heavy military offensive and counter-offensive operations that undermined its position as an impartial peacekeeper. In the eyes of many in Liberia and elsewhere, the force was reduced to the level of a warring faction. Herman Cohen, then U.S. assistant secretary of state for Africa, declared that, "ECOWAS had ceased to be a neutral party, and had become one of the combatants."¹¹

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Despite three years of war and the exacerbation of conflict following ECOMOG's intervention, the UN was still unable to muster the political will to engage meaningfully in resolving the conflict in Liberia. For a long time after ECOMOG's deployment, the UN Security Council neither indicated its position on the African undertaking nor made

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any formal reference to it. Indeed, the Security Council did not issue its first formal statement on the civil war until January 1991, more than a year after the outbreak of the conflict, when the Security Council

president commended regional efforts to resolve the conflict but did not refer to ECOMOG specifically.¹²

The UN's understated attitude toward Liberia was driven as much by the sensitivities of African nations as it was by the reluctance of the major powers to get involved.¹³ African states have generally preferred to keep regional concerns out of the Security Council unless a crisis was too large for regional efforts to address. Having made a heavy political and financial investment in resolving the conflict, Nigeria was particularly determined to retain control over ECOMOG and to keep the issue out of the Security Council. Zaire and Ethiopia, both members of the Security Council at the time, opposed efforts to bring the Liberia issue to the Security Council, partly because of Nigerian pressure and partly over fears of establishing a precedent that could be applied to their own unstable domestic environments.¹⁴

As a result, the Security Council did not formally address the conflict in any significant manner until November 1992, when it passed UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 788 (1992) in response to a request from ECOWAS for an economic embargo on Liberia's warring parties. This was the first significant indication of UN support for the ECOMOG intervention. The UNSCR praised ECOMOG's performance, condemned the continued armed attacks against the peacekeeping force, and endorsed the ECOWAS-brokered peace accords. It also imposed an embargo on all deliveries of weapons and equipment to Liberia, except those destined for ECOMOG.¹⁵

UNSCR 788 is seen by some as the turning point in the UN's policy toward Liberia. Through the appointment of a special representative to the secretary general, the UN became an integral part of the diplo-

matic effort to resolve the conflict and could now directly influence the process. In cooperation with the OAU, the special representative brokered negotiations in Geneva that eventually led to the signing of the Cotonou Peace Accords in Benin in July 1993. The accords were significant for several reasons. They included rebel factions that had been absent from previous agreements, stipulated demobilization as a first step toward national elections, and obliged all warring parties to observe a ceasefire. They established the Liberian National Transitional Government, which included representatives from all warring factions. Finally, in recognition of ECOMOG's increasing credibility gap, the accord sought to share the responsibility for peacekeeping between ECOMOG and a UN observer mission that would monitor and supervise implementation.

Cooperative Peacekeeping

The configuration of the UN mission in the Cotonou Accords was designed to put a UN stamp of approval on the West African intervention. Indeed, the participation of the UN in the implementation of the process may have been the minimum price Charles Taylor would accept given his distrust of the Nigerian-dominated ECOMOG force. After years of neglect, the Security Council finally authorized the establishment of the UN Observer Mission in Liberia (UNOMIL) in September 1993—two months after Cotonou and more than three years after the ECOMOG intervention. The Cotonou Accords delineated distinct tasks for the two entities. ECOMOG was responsible for the implementation of the ceasefire and disarmament while UNOMIL observers were given the role of monitoring ECOMOG's activities, including enforcement actions.

On the basis of an agreement between the UN and ECOWAS, UNOMIL and ECOMOG were set up as separate operations under the authority of two different organizations. Each mission was expected to determine its own method of operations in consultation with the other. ECOMOG was responsible for ensuring the safety of UNOMIL observers and civilian staff. It was understood that if ECOMOG entered into combat operations in a certain area, UNOMIL would temporarily withdraw from that area. If ECOMOG were forced into unplanned self-defensive military action, it would ensure the security of UNOMIL observers and other UN staff in the area.

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This structure carried high expectations. With only a supervisory role, the UN mission was relatively small and thought to be free of substantial financial and personnel commitments. But given the small number of unarmed UN observers deployed, some questioned the power and purpose of the mission. The working relationship between the two forces quickly deteriorated. The larger ECOMOG unit essentially dictated the UN observers' movements, occasionally restricting observers at roadblocks and requiring them to observe civilian nighttime curfews despite an initial agreement that they would enjoy freedom of movement throughout Liberia. The two forces were not always working in tandem, so UNOMIL observers were occasionally deployed independently of an ECOMOG security presence, exposing the observers to rebel attacks and kidnappings and damaging local perceptions of UN competence.

Many of the problems encountered by UNOMIL were rooted in the mission's weak conceptual and practical foundation. Amid the enthusiasm for UN involvement in Liberia, little effort had been put into crafting the mission's purpose and its relationship with ECOMOG. Neither the Cotonou Accords nor the UN-ECOWAS agreement specified how UNOMIL would exercise supervision over a military force that was under a separate command structure and which, by virtue of its size and control on the ground, exercised greater power in the partnership. The ability of UNOMIL and the secretary-

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general's special representative to implement their mandate was heavily dependent on ECOMOG's military support.¹⁶ With separate command structures and no mechanisms for linkage and control, UNOMIL's supervisory capability was severely inhibited.

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At the working level, resentment among ECOMOG troops hampered smooth relations. External supervision implied distrust in ECOMOG's abilities and intentions. ECOMOG, and particularly Nigeria, had invested substantial human and financial capital in resolving the conflict and its troops felt better experienced to handle the situation. ECOMOG perceived the UN as a latecomer to the scene that was incapable of dealing with belligerents. UNOMIL was perceived by many as merely a political tool with little practical purpose except appeasement of Charles Taylor.

The relationship was also hampered by ECOMOG's own institutional shortcomings. The force received little political direction from ECOWAS. There was no functional mechanism by which the force was accountable to ECOWAS's political authority, so force commanders controlled the military and political aspects of the operation. Hence, UN-ECOWAS collaboration at a policy level did not translate into cooperation on the ground. ECOMOG was also logistically handicapped by a lack of funding, equipment, and troops, and had problems disarming and demobilizing the warring factions while simultaneously deploying troops in all areas alongside UNOMIL. This created problems for the UN observers, who depended entirely on the West African force for their security. Inadequate contributions to ECOWAS from its member states put ECOMOG in a precarious financial state. As a result of infrequent rotations and inconsistent payment, troop morale was low and troop discipline suffered. Comparisons with the well-paid and better-equipped UNOMIL observers only led to further resentment.

ECOMOG PERCEIVED THE UN AS INCAPABLE OF DEALING WITH BELLIGERENTS.

Given the repeated breakdowns of ceasefires, intensified fighting, and the inability of ECOMOG to provide security for UNOMIL observers, UNOMIL was unable to carry out many of its mandated activities and was occasionally forced to evacuate its observers from the country. In November 1995 the Security Council reduced the UNOMIL presence to 160 observers and amended the mission's mandate, giving it a lower profile role in support of ECOMOG and the transitional government.¹⁷ By April 1996 the worsening conflict in Monrovia had forced additional evacuations, and UNOMIL's strength was reduced to fewer than twenty observers. Thereafter, UNOMIL's role was uncertain and its presence negligible despite the renewal of its mandate. This continued to be the case until the security situation improved enough for elections to be held in 1997, bringing an end to UNOMIL's mission in Liberia. During this period ECOMOG, by contrast, was an increasingly effective force in enforcing peace and disarmament, helping to create a suitable environment for elections. These improvements can be attributed to several factors, including the arrival of much-needed foreign assistance, increased troop capacity from previously reluctant Francophone states, and a general war-weariness among the armed factions.¹⁸

Implications of the UNOMIL-ECOMOG Operation

Given the disappointing outcome of UNOMIL's mission, how important was the mission as a "pioneering" form of UN intervention? Many scholars have deemed the mission unsuccessful and not a viable model for future practice.¹⁹ Dismissing the venture out of hand overlooks its context and the particular attributes that explain its performance and provide lessons for the future.

UNOMIL needs to be considered in its proper context. Although significant in its novel mandate, the mission itself was actually secondary and limited.²⁰ It was not a peacekeeping force but an observer mission with the unconventional mandate of monitoring and supervising an existing regional peacekeeping force. It was a mission created by a peace agreement and aimed at boosting the credibility of

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an existing peacekeeping framework. In other words, its actual role was to serve as an indicator of UN engagement in the conflict, to end the perception of international neglect, and to appease rebel factions suspicious of

ECOMOG's motives. Seen in this light, UNOMIL may have actually fulfilled at least some of its intended purposes. Its presence helped focus international attention on the conflict in Liberia, resulting in increased assistance to the regional effort while providing ECOMOG with the broader international legitimacy it had lacked.

While UNOMIL must be seen as the product of a unique set of circumstances, it shares the same conceptual basis as any UN effort to collaborate with regional organizations in conflict resolution: the recognition that regional action can reduce the Security Council's burden and be a more effective force in certain circumstances. In this regard, the UN experience in Liberia demonstrates how such collaboration should and, more importantly, should *not* be conducted. The Liberian case underscores the need for the UN to sanction or express support for regional initiatives aimed at ending conflicts in order to provide such efforts with broader legitimacy. The initial absence of clear UN approval and support for the ECOMOG intervention undermined the organization's efforts, and UNOMIL's establishment was indeed nothing more than an attempt to correct the credibility

gap that resulted from this earlier neglect. The importance of UN sanction for regional efforts is most clearly exhibited in the conflict in the former Yugoslavia. There the Security Council expressed full support for European efforts to end the conflict, thus giving legitimacy to the actions of European regional organizations in accordance with Chapter VIII of the UN charter.²¹

The failures of UNOMIL highlight the importance of establishing a clear framework for dividing political authority in joint UN and regional initiatives. In Liberia, the absence of such a framework resulted in a situation where the regional body essentially usurped the UN's authority, hindered the UN's ability to carry out its mandate, and eroded its credibility in the eyes of the parties involved and the local population.²² The troubles encountered by ECOMOG and UNOMIL in Liberia raise important questions about joint UN-regional operations as potential solutions to conflicts in Africa and elsewhere. In particular, the small size and structural weaknesses of the UN observer mission suggest that its creation was primarily meant to relieve the UN Security Council of heavy engagement in an extremely complex and protracted conflict. Despite its failures, this limited approach remained attractive enough to the overstretched UN peacekeeping machinery to apply to the civil war in neighboring Sierra Leone soon after the conflict in Liberia. Sierra Leone's descent into chaos was sparked by the Liberian conflict and followed a similar pattern of factional fighting, ultimately leading to another intervention by an ECOMOG force. Once again the Security Council responded by setting up a UN observer mission (UNOMSIL) to monitor the ECOMOG operation in Sierra Leone. Inevitably, UNOMSIL revealed the same flaws as UNOMIL and proved to be even more ineffectual.²³ After about one year of negligible impact, a large-scale multilateral peacekeeping force replaced UNOMSIL.

There is great merit in the expectation that Africans should turn to homegrown institutions as a first option for managing regional conflicts. The spillover effects from intrastate conflicts can be severe, often with serious economic and political repercussions for the region. The political will to address such crises can be expected to come primarily from within the region where the most geostrategic interests are at stake. Intrastate conflict must always be considered within its regional context.

Accepting this reality, African regional bodies have exhibited an in-

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creased willingness to initiate or participate in regional conflict management. ECOWAS has clearly led the way in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, and in Liberia once again in 2003. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the much-maligned military interventions by Zimbabwe, Namibia, and Angola in support of the

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beleaguered Kabila government were carried out under the auspices of the Southern African Development Community, which has also played a role in bringing stability to Lesotho. Perhaps most promi-

nent, the African Union (AU) has sought a larger role as the region's peacekeeper. The AU mounted its first peacekeeping operation in Burundi in 2003, on the heels of the deployment of a UN peacekeeping mission, and sent troops as ceasefire observers to the Darfur region of western Sudan.

This AU observer mission is the subject of great interest given the gravity of the humanitarian situation in Darfur and the AU's position as the lead actor in managing the crisis. Indeed, the comparison to the Liberian case is striking. In both situations a relatively inexperienced and ill-equipped organization, hampered by limited resources and lacking an enforcement mandate, took the lead in pursuing an agenda of peace in a complex and protracted conflict in the face of broad international reluctance to engage meaningfully. The Liberian experience suggests that staunch UN support is vital for the AU's intervention in Darfur to succeed. Furthermore, although such efforts may appear duplicative, an accompanying UN mission might help fill the credibility gap of an African observer force in a nation that remains torn between its African and Arab identities.

Some observers suggest that these recent African missions are part of an emerging trend of regional and sub-regional bodies increasingly expected to serve as first responders to stabilize emerging crises while the UN prepares a more comprehensive peace-building response.²⁴ When viewed in this manner, operations such as the AU's in Darfur appear to be mere stopgap measures prompted by a delayed and ineffectual response from the UN Security Council. Though regional peacemaking has been endorsed in general terms by provisions in the UN charter, many leaders fear that granting primary peace and security responsibilities to entities that are handicapped by lim-

ited capacity and resources simply delays more robust international initiatives to manage African crises.²⁵

The mantra of “African solutions to African problems” may only further marginalize Africa strategically. If the idea of regional peace-making is to retain its salience, it is imperative that the international community find more effective ways to support such ventures. Programs set up by the United States and other powers to develop African peacekeeping capacity are only a partial answer.²⁶ A deep political and financial commitment to these organizations and their goals is required from both member states and international stakeholders. Only then can regional organizations live up to the ideals they were created to pursue.

There is an evident tension between the duty of the UN to retain a strong, leading role in maintaining peace and security in Africa, and political realities that require regional organizations to play a central role in certain conflicts because there is no international political will for the UN to respond effectively. The greatest challenge for the UN in this regard is to exhibit equal commitment to resolving conflicts wherever they may occur while providing the guidance, oversight, expertise, resources, and credibility that will enable regional organizations to promote peace and security in their corners of the world. ■

NOTES

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