

Africa: Voices against military Intervention in Libya

African Union at a Loss Over Libya

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CAPE TOWN, Mar 22, 2011 (IPS) – On Saturday, the U.S., France and the UK launched attacks on Libya’s air defences and other targets following U.N. Resolution 1973. The three African members of the Security Council voted for the resolution, but a chorus of criticism has greeted the air strikes.

Before the Mar. 17 resolution establishing a no-fly zone over Libya was passed, the African Union was conspicuous by its silence on the uprising against Muammar Gaddafi which began a month ago. Gaddafi’s forces are accused of indiscriminate attacks on civilians that have claimed hundreds of lives.

But in a statement released Mar. 20, the day after international military action began, the ad-hoc High Level AU Panel on Libya said it opposed any foreign military intervention in Libya.

“Our desire is that Libya’s unity and territorial integrity be respected as well as the rejection of any kind of foreign military intervention,” the panel said following a meeting in the Mauritanian capital, Nouakchott.

The panel was formed at the last meeting of the AU’s Peace and Security Council in Addis Ababa, and includes Mauritania, South Africa, Mali and Congo and Uganda.

“The situation in North Africa demands urgent action so that an African solution can be found,” said Mauritanian president Ould Abdel Azia.

Operation Odyssey

Dubbed Operation Odyssey, the military assault has also drawn criticism from Russia and Turkey and even from the initially supportive Arab League as going beyond the scope of the U.N. resolution to implement a no-fly zone.

Martin Nesirky, spokesperson for the U.N. secretary-general confirmed that the UK, U.S., Italy, France, Canada, Denmark and Qatar had all submitted letters to Ban Ki-moon, stating their intent to attack Gaddafi’s compound as his forces advanced on the rebel stronghold in Benghazi.

Dr Paul-Simon Handy, Director of Research at the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies says the AU criticism “reflects confusion and shows how they are dragging their feet”.

“Sometimes the expectation of the AU is too high,” he says. “The body relies on regional bodies to inform its action.”

Handy says where there is no strong voice from a relevant regional body, it is difficult for the AU to take a firm position. “In the case of Côte d’Ivoire, the body relied on the Economic Community of West African States for decisive action and leadership. We are not hearing that from North Africa.”

Kenyan political analyst and blogger Onyango Oloo is less generous. “The AU is only as good as its membership and for us to expect a progressive response from it is... ambitious,” he told IPS over the phone from Nairobi.

“I am not surprised by the AU but disappointed.”

Oloo says the air strikes are killing and maiming innocent civilians and Africa should be unequivocal in its condemnation of it. “This is an oil-driven invasion.”

He insists there are alternatives to air strikes.

Writing for the online newspaper Modern Ghana, Dr Michael J. Bokor, was also frankly critical of the U.N.-endorsed action. “The AU opposed any military operation by foreign forces in Libya. Unfortunately, however, the AU’s voice was not heard. Libya is now a sad case of a still-born diplomacy,” he wrote.

“The fact that the proponents of this international military operation didn’t respect the AU’s voice or stance on the Libyan crisis leaves a sour taste in the mouth.”

African leadership unclear

Yet South Africa, Gabon and Nigeria all voted in favour of the Mar. 17 resolution, which passed 10-0, with China and Russia notable abstentions.

South African president Jacob Zuma seemed to be backtracking in remarks made Monday. “The Security Council resolution should be implemented in letter and spirit by all members of the U.N. Security Council,” he said.

“Operations aimed at enforcing the no-fly zone and protecting civilians should be limited to just that. They should not harm or endanger the civilians that Resolution 1973 sought to protect.”

Handy is unimpressed. “South Africa’s position is confusing. It cannot complain afterwards about the resolution,” he said.

“The country’s foreign policy has been extremely confusing and erratic. The management of the country’s foreign policy is a concern.”

Bantu Holomisa, leader of a minor opposition party, was also critical of Zuma, saying his call for a ceasefire cannot be taken seriously.

“He should sort out the mess by calling for an urgent United Nations Security Council meeting to table his concerns and he needs to strongly condemn the barbaric behavior of his Western allies in the Security Council.”

Ugandan leader, Yoweri Museveni, also a member of the AU panel on Libya had harsh words for the Libyan rebels, “I would feel embarrassed to be backed by Western war planes, because the quislings of foreign interests have never helped Africa.”

Civil society response

Oloo wants African civil society to stand up and demand action from governments. “We have marches in New York City but none in Africa. We need to be part of the global voice against military action. Innocent civilians are being killed we need to put pressure on our governments.”

The Anti War Coalition in South Africa called for urgent protest against what it termed the “imperialist bombing and invasion of Libya”. It called on South Africans to protest in Cape Town on Mar. 23.

Paul-Simon Handy says he will be keenly watching the high level AU/U.N meeting taking place in Addis Ababa on Friday to see what recommendations emerge.

“What will follow and be the ultimate objective of the military intervention?” asks Handy.(END)

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