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The African Union

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Introduction

The African Union (AU), formed in 2002 from the vestiges of the Organization for African Unity (OAU), aims to protect the security of the continent, rather than the sovereignty of individual states. Though the AU still is struggling to reform its governing bodies, it plays an increasingly high-profile role in peacekeeping. Most recently, the AU has sent peacekeepers to Somalia and Darfur, the latter in an unprecedented joint peacekeeping operation with the United Nations. Experts say the AU has a long way to go before it is fully functional, and express concerns about the burdens and expectations that have been placed on the body thus far.

What is the history of the African Union?

In 2002, the OAU transformed itself into the African Union (AU). The OAU, founded in 1963 on the principles of state sovereignty and noninterference, drew criticism throughout the 1990s for its lack of intervention as crises unfolded in Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Somalia. Frustration at its ineffectiveness led African leaders, spearheaded by Libyan leader Muammar el-Qaddafi, to launch the African Union, a body with a structure modeled on that of the European Union. Fifty-three countries in Africa are members of the AU (Morocco is the only African country that does not belong), which is headquartered in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

What are the objectives of the African Union?

The African Union seeks to increase development, combat poverty and corruption, and end Africa's many conflicts. "The AU is the world's only regional or international organization that explicitly [recognizes the right to intervene](#) in a member state on humanitarian and human rights grounds," write Roberta Cohen, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and lawyer William G. O'Neill in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. The AU drew these guidelines based on the recommendations of a 2001 report from the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty entitled [The Responsibility to Protect](#). The report asserts that "Sovereign states have a responsibility to protect their own citizens from unavoidable catastrophe—from mass murder and rape, from starvation—but that when they are unwilling or unable to do so, that responsibility must be borne by the broader community of states."

Experts say the AU's implementation of these new goals is still an aspiration, not a reality. Reforming the OAU is a "monumental task," says [Robert O. Collins](#), an Africa expert and professor of history at the University of California, Santa Barbara, "particularly when you have many countries with lots of poverty and domestic problems." But regional bodies take many years to grow into their charters, and many have heralded the African Union's early peacekeeping involvement in countries such as Burundi and Sudan as important steps. Jennifer Cooke, codirector of the Africa program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said in testimony before the Senate's African Affairs subcommittee that the African Union is still at a "fragile stage," but it "has begun to generate some [early promising returns](#)" ([PDF](#)).

What is the African Union's role in Darfur?

A [joint AU/UN peacekeeping force](#) was deployed to Darfur in the beginning of 2008. Much of the force's strength, about [13,500 soldiers](#) as of July 2009, was already present in the region as part of an AU peacekeeping force. It remained in the region and was incorporated into the joint UN/AU force officially deployed in early 2008. That force is still far from its authorized strength of about 20,000 personnel.

The African Union has had a [peacekeeping role in Darfur](#) since 2003, when it helped broker a cease-fire between the government of Sudan and rebel groups. It initially had fewer than one hundred observers in Darfur to monitor the agreement, but gradually increased its presence to include soldiers and police. By 2005, the AU had nearly 7,000 troops in Darfur, and in September 2006, with the Sudanese government refusing to accept a 20,000-strong UN-mandated peacekeeping force, the AU extended its mandate.

Prior to the deployment of the joint peacekeeping force, experts had serious reservations about the ability of the AU peacekeepers to work effectively. "Everyone knows this has been a very undermanned, understaffed, under-trained, and under-resourced force," Cohen said in 2006. Now, with the joint force on the ground, experts say some of the same problems remain. While the force has a more robust mandate than the previous AU force, it still lacks important equipment and a critical mass of troops. The United Nations says its goal is to have 97 percent deployment by the end of 2009. Some experts say even once full deployment is reached, the troops will not be able to end the crisis. "Even if the force consisted of the finest elite troops in the world they could not have resolved the problem," Collins says.

What other interventions has the AU mounted?

The African Union has launched several other interventions, with mixed success. A March 2008 invasion of Anjouan, one of three islands making up the Comoros, resulted in the successful ouster of the island's separatist leader. As World Politics Review notes, however, the mission [attracted little attention](#) outside the continent. The AU's intervention in Burundi in 2003, in which an AU peacekeeping force of some 3,000 troops was deployed as a bridging force until a larger UN force arrived, is widely acknowledged as a success. In June 2004, the AU force was absorbed in a UN force of 5,650. Experts say the AU force was [crucial to maintaining security \(PDF\)](#) during cease-fire negotiations.

However, the deployment of AU peacekeepers to Somalia in 2007 has highlighted the body's limitations. Of the eight thousand troops promised, only 2,700 Ugandans and 2,550 Burundians had been deployed as of August 2009. The current force's mandate expires in January 2010, and the African Union is urging the United Nations to take over. Some members of the UN Security Council have expressed reservations about such a deployment in light of the continued inability of Somalia's transitional federal government to improve security in the country.

Given the short life of the AU and its limited experience with peacekeeping on the continent, most say the international community views Darfur as a "litmus test" for the AU's ability to promote peace in Africa. But "the AU requires extensive political and material support from the international community to deliver on its commitments to peace and security," writes Kristiana Powell, a researcher at The North-South Institute, in a working paper on the AU's [emerging peace and security regime \(PDF\)](#). Slow decision making and the lack of flexible funding from donors such as the EU, G8, and the United States have hindered the AU's peacekeeping efforts.

What barriers prevent the AU from evolving into a stronger institution?

The AU faces tremendous organizational and financial barriers. It took many years for similar regional institutions in Europe, Asia, and Latin America to establish themselves, and the AU faces the additional challenges of endemic poverty and civil conflict among many of its member states. In addition, the AU relies on regional economic communities that are also weakly organized. "None of these states can really produce very much," says Collins, "They look at the bureaucracy and they are less likely to give." As of the 2006 Banjul Summit, only twelve countries had paid their 2006 contributions.

Others say AU reform and peacekeeper deployment is also subject to the will of its strongest leaders, namely Muammar Qaddafi of Libya and President Jacob Zuma of South Africa. Cooke cites Zimbabwe as an example of a state in crisis that the AU has failed to assist. And at Banjul, leaders including Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe blocked the AU from adopting a much-anticipated democracy charter that would have strengthened the electoral process, ended military coups, and stopped constitutional changes to allow presidents to stay in office.

How does the United States support the African Union?

In August 2006, the United States [became the first non-African country](#) to establish a separate diplomatic mission to the African Union. The current U.S. Ambassador to the AU, Michael Battle, [pledged to support \(PDF\)](#) AU efforts to "advance democracy and a free press, strengthen electoral systems, promote peace and security and advance AU efforts to get African leaders and civil society to promote and above all, to 'internalize' universal values of human rights, good governance, and rule of law."

Of the total U.S. aid to Africa in 2008-[an estimated \\$5.2 billion \(PDF\)](#)-no funds were specifically allocated to the African Union; rather, funds were funneled to peacekeeping missions and AU-supported programs such as the Comprehensive Africa Agricultural Development Program and the New Partnership for Africa's Development. "U.S. support to the AU is ad hoc, crisis-driven, vulnerable to raids from other budget lines, and uneven from year-to-year," Cooke reported to the Senate in 2005. The United States does support peacekeeping in Africa, but such aid is allocated on a case-by-case basis. In 2008, \$96.4 million went toward the Global Peace Operations Initiative (GPOI), a portion of which supports the African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance program (ACOTA). According to the U.S. Africa Command, ACOTA is designed "to improve African ability to respond quickly to crises by [providing selected militaries with the training and equipment](#) required to execute humanitarian or peace support operations." The FY2009 budget include a request of \$106.2 million for the GPOI, with an estimated \$80 million going toward African security assistance. Between 2006 and 2008, the United States sent [\\$908 million](#) to the UN/AU peacekeeping force in Darfur (the State Department requested close to \$209 million in the FY2009 budget). The United States has given over \$150 million to the AU peacekeeping mission in Somalia, and in August 2009 U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton vowed [additional assistance](#).

The United States "would very much like to see a robust African Union," says Collins, but the State Department "has never been able to construct a coherent policy on what to do about Africa." Instead, he says, it continues to supply money to individual countries that benefit its interests, rather than giving more substantial funding to a regional body like the AU.

What are the key organs of the African Union?

- **The Assembly**, comprised of heads of state. It meets at least once a year and is the AU's main decision-making body. Assembly members elect an AU chairperson, who holds office for one year. The 2009 chairman is Libya's Muammar Qaddafi.
- **The Executive Council**, comprised of foreign affairs ministers of individual states. The Executive Council is responsible to the Assembly.

- **The Commission**, ten commissioners holding individual portfolios who manage the day-to-day tasks of the AU and implement AU policies. The Commission reports to the Executive Council. The current chairperson is Jean Ping, the former foreign minister of Gabon.
- **The Peace and Security Council (PSC)**, set up in 2004. This body can intervene in conflicts to protect the security of the continent. It has fifteen member states, elected for two or three year terms, with equal voting rights. The PSC is also overseeing the establishment of a permanent African security force, the [AU Standby Force](#). It plans to have five or six brigades of 3,000 to 5,000 troops stationed around Africa by 2010.
- **Pan-African Parliament**, begun in 2004 to "ensure the full participation of African peoples in governance, development, and economic integration of the Continent." This body debates continent-wide issues and advises AU heads of state. It currently has advisory powers only, but there are plans to grant it legislative powers in the future.
- **The Economic, Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC)**. Established in 2005, [ECOSOCC](#) seeks to build partnerships between African governments and civil society. It includes African social groups, professional groups, NGOs, and cultural organizations. The 150-member General Assembly was launched in September 2008, replacing the ECOSOCC's initial interim structure.
- **The Court of Justice**. In 2004, the AU agreed that the regional [African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights](#) would be merged with the Court of Justice. As of August 2009, the merger of the two courts was still in process.
- **The Financial Institutions**. The AU charter names three bodies: the African Central Bank, the African Monetary Fund, and the African Investment Bank. Of these, only the African Investment Bank [has been established \(PDF\)](#), but it is [not yet functional](#). It will be based in Tripoli, Libya.

What is NEPAD?

The [New Partnership for Africa's Development](#) (NEPAD) was developed by the five initial states of the OAU (Algeria, Egypt, Nigeria, Senegal, and South Africa) and formally adopted in July 2001. NEPAD's primary objectives are poverty eradication, sustainable development, and integrating Africa into the global economy. It focuses on establishing partnerships with industrial countries for increased aid, foreign investment, debt relief, and market access. In 2002, NEPAD was placed under the purview of the AU; a committee reports annually to the AU Assembly. In March 2007, NEPAD leaders decided the partnership should be integrated into the structures and processes of the AU.