

ECOWAS AND CHALLENGES TO THE MANAGEMENT OF CONFLICT IN WEST AFRICAN STATES

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the trajectory of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) from an organization originally established in 1975, as a hub of regional economic integration to an emerging Regional Security Community. The paper x-rays the organization's forays into security arrangement such as its intervention in Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire and with greater attention on its effort on Mali crisis. It argues that despite the fact the organization has made tremendous impact in the conflict management of the region, it has been weakened and challenged by institutional, financial and logistical resources which therefore rendered its operation incapacitated in the security arrangement of the region. Therefore, the paper recommends among that ECOWAS should be more proactive in the conflict management of the region by building institutional capacity and muster financial resources within and outside its region without sacrificing and negotiating its security mandate.

Keywords: Conflict, Terrorism, Ecowas, Region.

INTRODUCTION

West Africa is a sub-region of the continent of Africa. It covers an area of 15 million km² and 2006 census figure appropriated it to be about 280 million population (WORLD Bank, 2013) It has 15 countries occupying its territory of which about 12 are coastal countries and its represent about 17% of the territory of Africa continent. The sub-region is labeled 'Bad neighborhood by the other sub-regions in the continent because it is the most political complex area and It is facing

serious challenges related to lack of good governance, continuous instability, poor economic growth and organized crimes ranging from human trafficking, child labour, drug trading and illegal trading in light arms ammunitions and recently a hub for international terrorism. West Africa is widely viewed as the most conflict ridden sub-region in the World, notorious for instability, crises of all sorts and incessant warfare - a "criminal paradise". Pascal (2008) observes, "*West Africa becoming a black hole where any kind of wanted*

person can come and operate or hide ... be they terrorists or other kinds of criminals.... It's a criminal paradise" The geographical location of the sub-region should be a source of great pride for the people and government of the region - located half way between Latin America and Europe and spread from Gulf of Guinea to Pacific Ocean which are rich – in term of natural resources – notably oil and gas and a strategic interest for the super powers nations. But instead, it has become theater of wars, conflict and poverty. Liberia civil War, Sierra Leone Civil War, the Tuareg conflict in Mali, Cote d'Ivoire conflict (2002-2011) and the current Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria just to mention but few.

However, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) was established in 28 May, 1975, to principally address these problems most especially, the economic development of the region through promotion of trade, technical cooperation and self-reliance as a means towards economic integration and development. The unfolding events of 1990's most especially the effects of the demise of cold war made the region vulnerable and prone to conflicts. The region engulfed in series of conflicts which hitherto been covered up by the ideological rivalry between the defunct USSR and USA. Conflict spreads like bush fire during the harmattan. From Sierra Leone to Liberia, Liberia to Guinea Bissau, Guinea Bissau to Guinea, from Guinea to Cote'd Ivoire and currently in Mali. These, apart from other member state that are also going through latent conflict. For instance, Nigeria is facing Boko Haram

insurgency which is posing a serious security threat to the Nigeria territorial entity. ECOWAS assumed the organization charged with conflict management by accident rather than by design and lost its economic focus. It started sluggishly and uncoordinatedly in her response to the conflict management with the experimentation of ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), an unplanned military peace keeping mission in the war-torn Liberia and Sierra Leone. (Musah, 2006:180)

The organization gained international recognition with its efforts on the restoration of peace in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau among others. However, it was very glaring that the organization lacks necessary capacity in financial and logistical resources to tackle this menace adequately and therefore required international support to confront the new trends in the conflict headway. The necessity for this support stems from the inability of the organization to unilaterally prevent crises in the region most especially, the Malian crisis and manage the conflict effectively which later resulted into the division of the country into two - Al-Qaeda in Islamic Magrib (AQIM) holding the Northern part of the country and the Malian government holding a fragile Southern part of the country. In spite of numerous protocols put in place by the organization on conflict management in the sub-region, ECOWAS remain a "toothless bulldog", with her inability to curtail and manage the ranging conflict in the sub-region. With Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia and Cote'd Ivoire engulfed in crises, the politics of Anglophone and Francophone, lack of

political will, Nigerian hegemonistic (interest) among others, crippled the effectiveness and utilization of these protocols.

Therefore, this paper chronicles the conflicts in the region, assesses the effort of the ECOWAS in tackling the Mali menace, also traces the trajectory of the international organization involvement in the conflict and extricates the implications of such partnership on regional security arrangement. The paper is divided into five sections. Section one dwells on Introduction, section two deals with ECOWAS efforts in conflict management of West Africa, while the third section chronicled the Mali crisis. The fourth section discusses the challenges to ECOWAS Regional Security Effort in the region. The fifth section encapsulates the recommendations and conclusion.

AN ANALYSIS OF ECOWAS EFFORTS IN CONFLICT MANAGEMENT OF WEST AFRICA

The regional organization was founded as an economic integration project, ECOWAS assumed security roles by default rather than by design. The conflagration threatening to tear the sub-region apart derailed the organization's economic objectives and therefore necessitated an extension into security organization.

Olanisakin (2006:12) observes:

In considering the extent to which ECOWAS has played a role in responding to conflict, in West Africa, one is often apt to forget that the organization was in its origin meant to foster economic

integration and only got into the field of peace and security by default.

However, from section 1 to 2 sub-section 'a' to 'j' of ECOWAS treaty which form the hub of the aims of the organization, there was nowhere in these sections where security and conflict management was envisaged.

It was not until 1978, when the organization established the first legal instrument to guide the action of the community in peace and security matters, namely the protocol on Non-aggression and subsequently in 1981, the protocol on Mutual Assistance in Defense matters was signed. The former reflected the commitment of member states on the peaceful settlement of disputes between member states, while the 1981 protocol authorized sub-regional intervention in conflict between two or more member states "actively maintained or sustained from outside". Musah (2009:192) observes:

The legal instrument and protocols in the possession of ECOWAS at the time only anticipated inter-state and not 'interference' in the internal affairs of member states in the absence of an enabling legal framework for intervention there was division amongst its leadership, thus, complicating efforts to resolve the conflict in the sub-region.

ECOWAS has experimented with a plethora of conflict management techniques requires to address the trauma of a sub-region that tragically account for the bulk of the Africa continent's war induced deaths, thus, the

creation of committee of mediation and Security Council, Conciliation and Arbitration, the Committee of Wise, ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF). Early Warning system Network (ECOWARN), ECOMOG, ECOMU, the Defense and Security commission among others. In functional terms, the CDS represents an expression of collaboration of ECOWAS with the continental organization, African Union (AU) in an effort to free the region from violence and increase platform for economic emancipation.

Iheme (2006) also rightly observed when he asserted that the situation become more complex in recent times and conflicts has very destabilizing impact on the economic and political development of Africa and indeed West Africa, "conflicts not only disrupt socio-economic life, in some cases they destroy entire economy thereby worsening the prospects of regional integration".

Not yet done with protocols to manage the conflict in the sub-region, the ECOWAS protocol relating to the mechanism on Conflict Prevention, Resolution, Management, Peace-keeping and Security (ECPF) was signed in Lome, Togo on 10th December, 1999. The mechanism represents the most comprehensive and perhaps most ambitious legal framework by any sub-regional organization in African to guide its peace and security operations, which include conflict prevention management resolution, peacekeeping, humanitarian activities and peace building. This protocol represents the first step of the organization to be a supernatural. Musah (2006:189) further stresses:

The transformation of ECOWAS from a secretariat into a commission in 2007 with greater supernatural power (at least on paper) has the potential to boost the regional integration drive at the institutional and programmatic levels, not least in the field of peace and security.

The ECOWAS treaty was revised in Togo 1993 to confer supranational power on the regional body. The composition and operation of this highest and most comprehensive mechanism of the organization notwithstanding, it is observed that between 1999 and 2002, when the mechanism first guided the intervention of the community in Cote 'd Ivoire, the conflict claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and property and also caused untold humanitarian hardship due to displacement of millions of population. At this point therefore, one begins to verify and query the effectiveness of the mechanism.

The Ivorian crisis was a litmus test for the ECOWAS 2001 protocol on conflict management. The Anglophone/Francophone dichotomy partly responsible for the inability of ECOWAS to effectively curtail and management conflict that engulfed one of its most peaceful member states. While the organization prepared from the earliest time both militarily and politically to manage the crises, rivalry among the regional leaders and the refusal of both Cote'd Ivoire political leaders and their colonial master – France, to allow regional hegemon, Nigeria, to lead in both political negotiation and military interference crippled the effectiveness of the conflict

management mechanism. In fact, the role played by France in the unseating of the then Ivorian president Laurent Gbagbo and eventual installation of the acclaimed winner of the presidential election – Al-Hassan Qutarra marked the beginning of the direct International organization in middling of the regional affairs.

AN ASSESSMENT OF ECOWAS EFFORTS IN COLLABORATION WITH FRANCE ON MALI CRISES

The insurgency began in May 2006, when “a group of Tuareg militants attacked military barracks in Kidal region, seizing weapons and demanding greater autonomy and self government for the region. The crises became complex in 21st March, 2012 as a result of coup d’état. Unlike previous conflicts in the region – Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Cote d’Ivoire which were partly caused by leadership, ethnic politics, political alienation. Mali crises portrayed a new trend in West African States conflict. Here, it is pertinent to state that causes of conflicts in the coastal areas of the region are different from the causes of conflict in Sahel or sub-Sahara areas of the region. The sub-Sahara area include Mali, Mauritania, Chad, and Niger and it seems the Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) sees a safe haven of the desert. Apart from the spillover of Libya, where “war Mercenaries” recruited from Tuareg (the desert area people) which their origin spread from Mali, Algeria, Niger, Mauritania and Libya. The Tuareg, who have never been very numerous, historically inhabited one of the remote environments in the world, the Sahara

region of Africa. War ammunitions were also moved freely from Libya, a war torn country, to these countries. Fletcher, (2009:09) observes:

As in similar conflicts in the region over the last two decades, genuine grievances have been adulterated with banditry, terrorism, and trafficking in humans, drugs, and cigarettes to transform the Agadez region and other northern parts of Niger (and also the vast Kidal region of northern Mali) into the most insecure zones in West Africa today.

The UN Security Council has expressed concerns that the sub-region is a significant threat to the regional stability with possible impact on International security. In fact, the sub-Sahara desert – Sahel, is a strategic area for both International illegal arms trafficking drug trafficking and kidnapping. This area lies on the Gulf of Guinea and enroute America and Europe. The northern border problems of the region seem to be, according to some experts, the most worrying. According to senior conflict prevention adviser to the ECOWAS, “sub-Sahel grievances of communities - *have been adulterated with terrorism, trafficking in humans, drugs, and cigarettes to transform the [vast, sparsely populated, and under governed] northern parts of Niger and Mali into the most insecure zones of West Africa*” The crisis in Mali was a very complex one. As at the time army took over the country, the Northern and Southern part of the country were deeply in politics of distrust and the North, mostly inhabited by Tuareg ethnic

groups which are just about 10% of the Malian population has long been struggling for political independence. However, with the central government in turmoil, the Tuareg, ethnic movement, the Ansarudeen and Al-Qaeda quickly united and seized the Northern part of the country. If securing West Africa's territorial waters is a matter of concern, the security challenges along its northern frontiers are even more daunting. The Sahel-Sahara divide that stretches from northwestern Chad through northern Niger and Mali to Mauritania (about 20 degrees north of the equator), epitomizes the rising challenges of complex emergencies in West Africa.

Fletcher, (2009 :12) further observes:

The porous nature of West Africa's northern borders and the proximity of the Sahel-Sahara divide to the troubled Maghreb states of Algeria and Morocco, as well as to the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, make the region most vulnerable to terrorist incursions, arms trafficking, and destabilization, and also to human trafficking and refugee flows from the conflict zones to the east in Sudan and Chad.

It was a twin task for ECOWAS – restoration of Central government and retaking over the Northern part of the country from Tuareg rebellion. While to some extent, ECOWAS achieved the restoration of Central government and sending back the army into the barracks, it became very clear that ECOWAS could not be able to effectively manage the complex situation in Mali. ECOWAS for sometimes

had waited for an unorganized and inexperienced African Union (AU) to muzzle International support via Security Council to authorize its mission in Mali. It is evidently cleared that both ECOWAS and AU failed woefully in the handling of Mali conflict. The admission of failure clearly showed during 2013 AU Head of State meeting in Ethiopia where the President of Benin Republic Boni-Yari who was the outgoing President of the Union openly admitted this position. It was at this meeting, that AU announces donation of \$20m to support the prosecution of military operation in Mali, (Al-Jazeera – 31/01/2013). Also, ECOWAS which have been hitherto regarded as a model-regional security arrangement, began on 31st January, 2013 (Al-Jazeera, 2013), almost a year after the crises, to send troops enroute Niger to Mali. The regional Hegemon-Nigeria which has also been crippled by its internal crises and Francophone and Anglophone dichotomy, sent 300 troops. ECOWAS was helpless in Mali conflicts and this shows the lapses in the organization capacities to muster the required capacity – logistically and financially to confront the new trends in the conflict management trajectories. Accordingly, Badmus, (2009:39) asserts:

Economically the region is poor, characterized by almost all the negative socio-economic features associated with less Developed countries. The socio-economic situations became worst as a result of civil conflict plagued the region with over 50 rebellious movements contesting with the states

governments for the control of the state apparatus.

There were many factors that accounted for this lapse in the effort of ECOWAS in managing conflict in the region such as lack of institutional capacity, logistical problem and financial challenge. Though ECOWAS deserves credit for 'cutting its teeth' as it were, on these hot experiences and assuming its responsibilities in close cooperation with the UN. Olonisakin (2002:12) observes:

In considering the extent to which ECOWAS has played a role in responding to conflict, in West Africa, one is often apt to forget that the Organization was in its origin meant to foster economic integration and only got into the peace and security by default

CHALLENGES TO ECOWAS REGIONAL SECURITY EFFORT

There is no gain saying that ECOWAS lacks required capacity to tackle conflicts in Sub-Saharan desert which clearly manifested in the current Mali conflict. It is observed that ECOWAS assumption of regional security was by accident and confronting these new challenges seems unprepared for by the organization. One, Mali conflict portrayed a new trend in the organization conflict management. Two, the axis sub-Saharan has become a strategic interest in the foreign policy of the 'super powers'. The France, Britain and USA have suddenly found the axes, as a strategic interests and the 'Afghanistan' of Africa has drawn a world attention. Britain sent 350 troops, Japan

donated \$150million, USA - \$90million and also established a drone station in Niger Republic on a Surveillance mission. (Al-Jazeera – 31/01/2013). The romance between USA and France on Mali with USA promised work closely with France is more revealing and suggested that the Gulf of Guinea and not Mali is important, is more important and key interest of the super powers.

On the external dimension and strategic placement of the area, N'Diaye (2006:34) also rightly observes:

That already the United States has become openly involved, in addition to countries closer to the region like Libya and Algeria illustrates the external dimensions conflicts in the sub-region inevitably take.

However, with the successful exercises in Cote'd Ivoire and current success recorded in Mali, France has overtly usurped responsibilities of ECOWAS – in regional security exercise in the region. The implication of this is that ECOWAS will not only be rendered redundant but it will also made to lose its grip on the Economic and Political Cooperation of the region as did the Arab League in the middle-East (inability to curtail Syria and Palestine crises). The organization seems unprepared for this new challenge and probably leaning on France and its allied to confront it. If this situation is not urgently address and redress, the region may be heading for "neo-security colonialization". Oche (2005:24) further observes:

But the current level of involvement in counterterrorism is limited, ECOWAS has not created a dedicated unit within

the office to deal with counterterrorism. Terrorism is at the bottom of the list of priorities for many countries ECOWAS which brought to "no institutional structures or resources devoted specifically to fighting terrorism" and the absence of a sub regional framework on counterterrorism.

Already France has militarily captured all its former colonies through its military and defense pacts and US has established a surveillance station in Niger in the name of terrorism "watch dog". Musah (2009) opines:

Of the two, France has exhibited the more aggressive geopolitical posture, controlling businesses and maintaining military bases in Dakar (Senegal), Bouake (Côte d'Ivoire), and Lomé (Togo).

Former Executive Secretary of the organization, Ambassador Lansana Kouyate express similar fear when he asserts " if we depend 100% on donor all the good ideas mentioned may never be realized". The collaboration that would have been a blessing for ECOWAS if the organization has been allowed to take the lead by the super powers providing the logistic and financial resources may turn to be a canker worn that may render the organization in inactive permanently. N'Diaye (2006:33) observed:

Until West African States and their regional organization figure out fully the internal and external connections of the conflicts and security crises that have bedeviled the sub-region for the

last 15 years, it is unlikely that they will be able to resolve them adequately, and more importantly, prevent their recurrence.

Under UN charter, chapter VIII extensively deals with the role of regional organization on world peace and security.

Article 53 emphatically stated;

The Security Council shall, where appropriate, utilize such regional arrangements or agencies for enforcement action under its authority Until such time as the organization may, on request of the Government concerned, be charged with the responsibility for preventing further aggressive by such a state.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

ECOWAS as an economic organization in the region of West Africa has played tremendous role in the effort of conflict management of the region since 90's when the spill over at the end of cold war has caused serious security challenge to the region, the organization has assumed security role by accident when it become abundantly clear that economic development and cooperation would not be achieved in an unsecured environment. Even though the responses to these challenges were not well coordinated, it should be emphasized that ECOWAS achievement in this regard was relatively low and this has hindered the organization to become a regional model in conflict management. The challenges associated with bringing multi-national forces together are numerous.

ECOWAS has a limited ability to mobilize adequate resources and sustain a high level of operational readiness.

However, the new trends in the conflict of the region, most especially in the sub-Saharan area, where Taureg, which spread across about five countries of the member states, found arm of friendship in ALQIM and other notorious groups pose a very serious challenge to an organization which economically and strategically defective and which also lack the required capacity to respond to new challenge. These factors and others compelled the organization to sought solace in AU, a continental organization which itself uncoordinated and crises ridden and later in UN, an organization which is also dominated by super powers countries – France, Britain, China, USA and Russia and in which their ideological positions have thrown the world into turn-oil. The inability of UN to resolve Syria crises is a good example.

While there is no harm in a regional organization such as ECOWAS to seek UN

and super powers support in terms of funding, mobilization and logistics, it became evident from the current effort or collaboration, that in this kind of arrangement, regional organization is always relegated to the background and thus become more crippled and ineffective in the management of regional conflict .It is worth mentioning here that Arab League inaction in the middle East started with usurpation of regional security role by the super powers and ECOWAS need to be wary of this and re-strategize for current and future challenges. ECOWAS, as a matter of fact, should come back to the drawing board to redesign its strategies and frameworks on how to deal decisively with the conflicts in the sub-region. It should map out effective mechanisms to distinguish between conflicts in the coastal areas and sub-Saharan desert. And in future collaboration with AU, UN and super powers, UN provision on regional security should be effectively utilized.

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