

Europe and US approve all-African military force

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The European Union (EU) has joined the United States and the G8 group of industrial nations in endorsing the African Standby Force (ASF). The EU has pledged 250 million euros for the new initiative, which is intended to intervene in conflicts across the continent.

The ASF is portrayed as an African-led initiative, and is answerable to the African Union (AU). But it will rely on Western training and financial backing and be used by the imperialist powers as a means to exploit the resources of the continent.

Officially, the “troubled continent” of Africa is finally “mending its own fences” and “solving its conflicts.” It needs peace, security and democracy to attract investment, and therefore, the ASF will be used to intervene in regional conflicts and to prevent genocide—the force is partly a response to the genocide in Rwanda 10 years ago.

The truth is that the conflicts in question, including the genocide in Rwanda, are the direct result of manoeuvrings by the imperialist powers to secure strategic positions and the resources of the continent.

Nigerian troops sent to Liberia and South African troops sent to Burundi are seen as examples of how the future force may operate. Britain sees its intervention in Sierra Leone as a good model. This has resulted in British control of the top positions in the army, the chief of police and leading civil servants—a de facto recolonisation.

The ASF is to be up and running by 2005 and will initially consist of five brigades of soldiers, policemen and observers, totalling around 15,000 people. The brigades will be based in “reliable” countries such as South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya and Egypt. Because the size of the force is largely restricted by Western donations, it can easily be increased at a later stage, as required.

Soldiers are to be trained at various Western-backed training camps, with communications, intelligence and surveillance training. The newly established Kofi Annan International Peace Training Centre in Ghana, which is backed by the US, Canada, Germany and the UK, will coordinate this.

The imperialist powers are interested in establishing an African military force partly because they do not want to use their own troops on the ground with the attendant risks. The United Nations has reflected this shift in thinking as the number of African troops used in its Peacekeeping Operations has increased dramatically since 1989.

The African Union is the successor to the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), and is a mechanism by which imperialism exploits the resources of the continent as a whole through utilising the services of the continent’s bourgeois governments. It is based in Ethiopia and umbrellas a Peace and Security Council (PSC), which will control the ASF, a 265-member, 45-nation parliament, and a nascent court of human rights. The PSC is modelled on the United Nations Security Council but has no right of veto.

The US war against Iraq poisoned international relations and accelerated the inter-imperialist rivalries that had resurfaced with force following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Sections of the US ruling class concluded

that it was no longer necessary for France and others to retain any imperial role, since the West no longer faces a “Soviet threat.”

During World War II, the US intended to cut France out of the imperialist picture as it planned the post-war map. However, the wave of independence movements and popular unrest that then engulfed the colonial world, and the beginnings of the Cold War, forced the US to reconsider, and France was allowed to keep some influence, particularly in its African colonies. This arrangement, never a happy one, has now changed completely.

A process of recolonisation—a new scramble for Africa—is underway as the imperialists look to gain markets, resources and strategic position at the expense of their rivals. The US is encroaching on areas that are historically a part of France’s sphere of influence. France is resisting, and both powers have provoked situations and conflicts throughout Africa as they fight for control, backing various local factions that promote their interests.

Many of the recent conflicts in Africa are proxy wars between imperialists, most notably France and the US. For example, the US has historically backed the Tutsis and France the Hutus in Burundi’s civil war. This reflects the position in neighbouring Rwanda, and could easily lead to the same tragic consequences.

These factions also operate in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo, where Tutsis from Burundi have been battling the government for control of diamond and gold mines. The Congolese government has been backed by the French through its allies Angola and Zimbabwe, which in turn have fallen foul of the US and its junior partner, Britain.

In the conflict between Chad and the Central African Republic, the former was historically a French ally with French troops based there, whilst the latter was supported by Ugandan Tutsis backed by the US. Chad is part of the pipeline route for the region’s oil, and the US has more recently backed Chad against Algerian-based Islamists.

French President Jacques Chirac hosted an African Summit a year ago, which was attended by almost all Africa’s heads of state and at which Chirac attempted to promote France’s influence in Africa. The conference took the unusual step of adopting a Declaration on the Iraq War, which condemned the US position, though some countries implied that they had been “railroaded” into signing it under pressure from France.

The militarism of the US ruling class is more pronounced than its rivals’, but all the imperialists are preparing for future conflicts. Germany and Japan have both recently altered their post-war constitutions to allow them to dispatch troops overseas. Japan has sent troops to Iraq and has declared that Africa is to be given a greater priority. Of all the imperialists, Japan is most hampered for natural resources, particularly oil.

The US military has for some time openly discussed plans for new military bases in Africa, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea, where large deepwater deposits of oil have recently become viable due to technological advances. For example, a naval base appears likely on São Tomé and Príncipe, a tiny island state off the west coast of Africa, which

potentially shares 11 billion barrels of oil with Nigeria. A military coup in 2003 followed shortly after US Secretary of State Colin Powell's trip to the islands.

US Republican Congressman Ed Royce, chair of the Africa Subcommittee, recently described Africa as "the soft underbelly of the war on terror."

In the past several months, US special troops have been dispatched to the Sahel region of West Africa to provide anti-terrorism training to the militaries of Mauritania, Chad, Mali and Niger, as part of a US-sponsored Pan-Sahel Initiative. Military cooperation with Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco in the Maghreb region directly north has also increased. The Maghreb borders the Mediterranean, which is of strategic geopolitical importance as the main waterway for transporting oil and armies to and from the Middle East.

In March of this year, the US military started training São Tomé's security apparatus whilst voicing concerns about Al Qaeda operating and establishing sanctuaries in West Africa.

The expansion of NATO is also ongoing and largely benefits the US at the expense of its imperialist rivals, primarily Russia. The EU is also aware of the need to have its own military force, though this is a direct threat to NATO unity.

A number of generals from the US military's European Command (which includes all of Africa except the Horn in its remit) have recently made far-from-usual public visits to Africa. These include Commander, Marine General James L. Jones and Deputy Commander, Air Force General Charles Wald.

General Wald issued a rambling justification of the war on terror and described how the threat acted as something of a glue to the population: "People are worried about instability and fundamentalism and that threat of terrorism so I think, in fact, ironically, as bad as terrorism is—it's the worst thing we've had face us at least in my lifetime—that it has an up-side, ironically, and that up-side is this common understanding that there needs to be a certain order in the world, a certain stability and the ability to fight these people that don't have borders."

He went on to say that he is convinced Al Qaeda, perhaps connected to Hezbollah, is involved in the diamond trade, in particular the "blood diamonds" from conflict areas in Africa.

The clear implication is that the US war on terror will be looking to "secure" all the diamond mines it comes across in what are soon to be conflict areas. The war on terror is a convenient tool for unleashing the threat of terrorism wherever one wishes, using the threat to provoke conflicts, and then intervening to secure vital resources.

Ritt Goldstein, writing in *Asia Times*, observes: "Whereas in 2002 the continent offered apparently stable oil field conditions, that assessment was changed almost simultaneously with the level of domestic US pressures to acquire African oil; a substantive Al Qaeda threat materialising proportionate to the need for oil." He points also to a general policy of exaggerating known threats in order to intervene as necessary, especially following the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre.

Since the attack, US corporate and conservative policy groups have been clamouring for interventions, both in the Middle East and outside it, to secure energy resources. Whilst admitting that Africa's oil is free from any major threats, the Bush administration is reportedly determined to "ensure that they remain so."

The British financial magazine, the *Economist*, observed in 2002 that oil "is the only American interest in Africa." The continent is one of America's fastest growing sources of oil and gas and is predicted to represent 25 percent of US imports by 2015. In 2002, Chevron stated that it had invested \$5 billion in Africa over the previous five years, but would invest \$20 billion over the next five years.

Jim Paul, executive director of Global Policy Forum, believes that "[t]he oil industry is all about super-profits. Since everyone is pursuing this, and

the marketplace doesn't effectively regulate it, there's been war, bribery and corruption virtually everywhere the oil industry goes."

Michael Klare, author of *Resource Wars*, claims that the next oil flashpoint post-Iraq might be in Africa.

The drive to recolonise Africa is also reviving old colonial-era regions. For example March saw the rebirth of the East Africa Community, melding Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda into an open market of 94 million people, and reflecting the old British East Africa. Also, the Economic Community of West African States began issuing one passport to 16 member states this year.

Whatever unity these entities appear to show, they offer a means by which the transnational corporations can more easily exploit the labour, markets and resources of a region. Single-currency zones and tax harmonisation are also desired.

The African Union has adopted the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) economic platform, which promotes the *full integration* of Africa into the world economy. It is supported by the G8 powers as a convenient lever to use on behalf of the major corporations in what amounts to a continuous trade war designed to open up the continent's markets.

Countries, including some of the world's poorest, are promised minimal reductions in external debt by the West to force the "reform" of the state sector, including health care, education, utilities and services (i.e. the privatisation of the sector for the benefit of transnational companies).

The Bush administration's much-heralded African AIDS initiative was a cynical ploy in this mould, and sought to promote the interests, as well as enforce the patents, of US-based pharmaceutical companies and other transnationals at the expense of corporate rivals and local competition.

An aspect of NEPAD also welcomed by the imperialists is the "Peer Review" mechanism. States agree to open up their finances, policies and programmes to the scrutiny of their neighbours (and Western banks), so as to demonstrate good governance and democracy and thereby appear more attractive to investors. It is an extension of the so-called "transparency" that the International Monetary Fund and World Bank have been promoting on behalf of the imperialists for some time.

The Western powers have turned to bilateral agreements that benefit them at the expense of developing countries, which are forced to compete with the West's huge subsidies and crippling tariffs.

Aid and debt are used by imperialism, via the World Bank and IMF, to control the economies of the poorest African nations—with debt repayments consistently outweighing new aid. Some \$250 million per day leaves sub-Saharan Africa for Western banks.

In many sub-Saharan countries, external debt is six times higher than national GDP. Some states spend 80 percent of their export earnings to service their debt. Most of these economies rely on one or several commodities whose prices have collapsed over the last period.

The African Standby Force cannot possibly be anything other than a means to control the resources of the continent for imperialism. It will intervene to secure mines, oilfields, water and other resources for the benefit of imperialist nations and transnational corporations. As global capitalism scours the globe for profit, it increasingly resorts to military means. The scramble for resources and strategic positions will inevitably lead to an increase in civil wars and social dislocation, poverty and indebtedness.



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