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No Nato deed goes unpunished

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Diplomats warned chaos and violence would follow a Libya intervention. They were right.



Black smoke billows across the sky when a petrol depot was set ablaze after a rocket assault. The attack, along with the attempted takeover of Tripoli's airport, signifies an increase in the intensity of the fighting.
(Stringer)

As Libya descends into chaos in the worst violence the country has known since the ousting of former leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2011, African diplomats are saying: we told you so.

Jean Ping, the former chairperson of the African Union Commission, told the *Mail & Guardian* this week that the AU strongly opposed the Nato intervention in Libya three years ago because it believed it would cause untold harm in the region and could lead to civil war in the country.

The Nato countries completely ignored Africa's position, including attempts by leaders such as President Jacob Zuma to find a peaceful solution, because of their "sense of superiority", he said.

"I visited all the European capitals, I went to Washington and to Nato to warn against an intervention. We knew Libya could explode and that is what is now happening," Ping, who is also Gabon's former foreign minister, said telephonically from the West African country.

Ping, who has broken away from the ruling party in his country and could oppose President Ali Bongo in upcoming presidential elections, has been speaking about Libya to international media these past few weeks. "We saw this elsewhere, in Somalia, where foreign intervention led to so much collateral damage. We knew what we were talking about," he said.

Attempted airport takeover

Militias fighting for the control of the oil-rich country have intensified their violent clashes since their attempted takeover of the Tripoli airport in mid-July. A huge number of planes were destroyed in the attack and subsequently, on August 2, a fuel depot was hit by a rocket attack and a number of gas tanks were set on fire.

On Monday, a bomb was dropped on the capital, allegedly by forces affiliated to the renegade general Khalifa Haftar, but the origin of the bombardment is still not clear.

According to reports hundreds of people have been victims of the violence – almost as many as in the run-up to the French-led intervention to save lives of those threatened by Gaddafi's army in the eastern city of Benghazi in early 2011. Thousands of people have also fled to neighbouring countries since the start of the violence a month ago.

Ping recalled that the AU had to ask Nato for a periodic cessation of the aerial bombing of Tripoli when Zuma visited the city in May 2011.

The aim was to try to persuade Gaddafi to step down in the wake of the violent protests that were seen as the continuation of the Arab Spring that started in neighbouring Tunisia.

Independent consultant and AU expert Mehari Maru agrees with Ping, saying the AU position was misconstrued as support for Gaddafi. He said it is now time for the organisation to "show real leadership", to try to salvage the situation, together with other actors such as the European Union, the Arab League and the United Nations.

“There are some who say the AU shouldn’t be cleaning up a mess created by others, but the AU has to get over the feeling of being vindicated,” Maru said. “It can play a very important role in Libya.”

But stabilising the situation in Libya is a hugely difficult task, said Maru. The conflict, which poses a real risk to security across North Africa and the Sahel, involves heavily armed groups, well financed in the oil-rich country.

Ideal base for terror groups

Lawlessness and the availability of arms also make Libya an ideal base for terror groups and criminal networks engaged in smuggling in the region. In addition, Europeans are concerned about the passage of illegal immigrants to their shores.

Maru said in Somalia the AU could rely on “pockets of stability” and some legitimate authority by clans in the country to begin a peace process, there are no such pockets in Libya. “Gaddafi undermined all sources of legitimate power,” he said.

The AU has so far been slow to act. On July 30, current AU Commission chairperson Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma expressed her “dismay and concern” about the deteriorating situation and condemned “these acts of violence, which have claimed many lives and led to the senseless and massive destruction of property and infrastructure”, according an AU press release.

The AU has appointed a special envoy, Dileita Mohamed Dileita, from Djibouti, who visited Libya recently and has briefed the 10-member AU Peace and Security Council in Addis Ababa.

Libya expert Riccardo Fabiani from Eurasia, a London-based risk analysis group, said this week that even if the AU as an institution cannot at this stage do anything to intervene, the countries in the region have an important role to play.

The new Libyan Parliament, set up following elections in June, can also play a role to mediate between the two camps, which are largely divided into a pro-Islamist and an anti-Islamist camp.

The former group is represented by the so-called Misrata militia, allegedly supported by the Muslim Brotherhood. They are fighting the Zintan militia, linked to Haftar, reportedly with some backing from the anti-Islamist regime in Egypt.

“The Parliament can be a stabiliser, but it has also taken inflammatory decisions against the Islamists lately,” Fabiani told the *M&G*. The Islamists boycotted the opening of Parliament in the western city of Tobruk on 4 August.

A possible international intervention by UN peacekeepers in the current crisis in Libya has been mooted, but Fabiani thinks this will be premature.

“What is needed is a UN intervention to make sure the two sides first work out a number of issues, like the use of violence in Benghazi and to convince them that there are no short-term

solutions,” he said. “UN peacekeepers would help, but I’m not sure the militias are ready to accept that.”