



[The International Criminal Court prosecutor called for a delay in the Kenyan president's trial, saying there is no longer sufficient evidence to charge him with crimes against humanity. The trial against President Uhuru Kenyatta was scheduled to start in February. Kenyatta is accused of funding a local militia that conducted reprisal attacks during the 2007 post-election violence. He denies the charges. The case has suffered major setbacks in recent months. A key witness is not willing to testify while another one confessed to giving false evidence on a critical event in the case, according to Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda.]

BURUNDI :

RWANDA :

RDC CONGO :

UGANDA :

Uganda to ban short skirts

20/12/2013/ radionz.co.nz

In Uganda, MPs have passed a controversial bill that will ban miniskirts.

The anti-pornography bill, which also outlaws overtly sexual material including music videos, was voted through after a short debate.

When Uganda's ethics and integrity minister, Simon Lokodo, proposed the legislation earlier this year, he said women who wore anything above the knee should be arrested, the BBC reports.

The bill needs to be approved by the president before becoming law.

Uganda is a socially conservative country and is also considering legislation to increase the punishment for homosexual acts, including the death penalty in some cases.

Ugandan national killed in South Sudan violence

Friday 20 December 2013/sudantribune.com

December 19, 2013 (KAMPALA) - The Ugandan government confirmed on Thursday that one of its citizens was killed in violence south Sudan.

The victim was identified as Agu Rashid, from Yumbe district, in north western Uganda, near the border with South Sudan.

“Unfortunately there has so far been confirmation of one Ugandan dead as a result of the crossfire - Agu Rashid from Yumbe district.

The ministry of foreign affairs said Rashid had died as a result of crossfire and it is now assisting the family to arrange for the body to be repatriated to Uganda.

Earlier this week, the South Sudanese government said it had thwarted an alleged coup attempt by former vice-president Riek Machar. Machar has denied he is behind the fighting, which has pitted rival factions within the South Sudan army (SPLA) against each other.

Meanwhile, the Nimule border, which had been closed to traffic on the South Sudan side, has now been reopened, the Ugandan government said, with traffic normalising.

“Buses that had been stopped from vying for business have now been allowed to move, including those to Uganda”, a government spokesperson said.

On Wednesday, 14 buses ferried some 1,689 passengers from the capital, Juba, to Uganda. Of these 1,183 were Ugandans, while the remainder were Kenyans and South Sudanese.

MUSEVENI TO MEDIATE?

The BBC reported on Thursday that Ugandan leader Yoweri Museveni had been contacted by the United Nations to mediate between South Sudan president Salva Kiir and opposing political forces.

Uganda’s minister for international affairs, Henry Okello Oryem, has meanwhile joined a team of foreign affairs ministers from across East Africa, who are currently in Juba to help find a political solution to the crisis.

(ST)

SOUTH AFRICA :

TANZANIA :

KENYA :

ICC prosecutor: Evidence insufficient to try Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta

By Faith Karimi, CNN/December 20, 2013

(CNN) -- The International Criminal Court prosecutor called for a delay in the Kenyan president's trial, saying there is no longer sufficient evidence to charge him with crimes against humanity.

The trial against President Uhuru Kenyatta was scheduled to start in February.

Kenyatta is accused of funding a local militia that conducted reprisal attacks during the 2007 post-election violence. He denies the charges.

The case has suffered major setbacks in recent months.

A key witness is not willing to testify while another one confessed to giving false evidence on a critical event in the case, according to Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda.

"Having carefully considered my evidence and the impact of the two withdrawals, I have come to the conclusion that currently the case against Mr. Kenyatta does not satisfy the high evidentiary standards required at trial," Bensouda said in a statement.

More than 1,000 people died and hundreds of thousands were displaced when ethnic groups loyal to leading candidates battled one another after the election.

Kenyatta's deputy, William Ruto, faces similar charges. His trial started in September.

African leaders have accused the court of targeting their continent, and have demanded charges against sitting leaders be dropped.

Last month, the U.N. Security Council rejected a resolution to suspend the trial.

Adebolajo was arrested in Kenya over attempt to join Somalia militants

20/12/13 /yorkshirepost.co.uk

WOOLWICH killer Michael Adebolajo was arrested by Kenyan authorities three years ago amid fears he was attempting to join an al Qaida-linked militant group.

Shortly after he murdered Fusilier Lee Rigby, it emerged fanatic Adebolajo was arrested with five other men near the border with Somalia.

Adebolajo was preparing to cross into the war-torn country to train and fight with militant group al-

Shabaab – the group behind the attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi that left 67 dead.

Photos showing Adebolajo in court in Kenya surfaced, while his brother-in-law later claimed he was tortured “violently and sexually” after he was arrested.

In court, Adebolajo said he wanted to move to Somalia so he could live in a country that practices “sharia law”.

A Foreign Office spokeswoman confirmed a British national was arrested in Kenya in 2010 and that it provided consular assistance.

A Kenyan government spokesman later said Adebolajo was arrested under a different name and taken to court before being handed to British authorities.

Al-Shabaab means The Youth in Arabic and it emerged as the radical youth wing of Somalia’s now-defunct Union of Islamic Courts in 2006. Numerous reports of foreign jihadists going to Somalia to help al-Shabaab have emerged – including the recently absconded UK terror suspect Mohammed Ahmed Mohamed. It is banned as a terrorist group by both the United States and the UK.

Intelligence and security chiefs have frequently warned that Britons are increasingly heading to the Middle East and Horn of Africa for terrorist training in the wake of the Arab Spring.

ANGOLA :

AU/AFRICA :

Africa News Round Up, December, Friday 20, 2013

December 20, 2013/ by Administrator/independent.co.ug

At the Hague, the prosecutor at the International Criminal Court (ICC) has asked for an adjournment in the trial of Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, the BBC reports.

Fatou Bensouda said the loss of two key witnesses meant the case currently “does not satisfy the high evidentiary standards required”.

The trial was due to begin in February.

Mr Kenyatta denies charges of organising ethnic violence after the 2007 election in which some 1,200 people died.

In a statement, Ms Bensouda said a key witness had recently indicated he was no longer willing to testify and another witness admitted “giving false evidence regarding a critical event in the Prosecution’s case”.

She said she now needed time to “complete efforts to obtain additional evidence, and to consider whether such evidence will enable my Office to fully meet the evidentiary threshold required at

trial”.

Addressing “the people of Kenya”, she said “my decision... was not taken lightly... I have and will continue to do all that I can to realise justice for the victims of the 2007-2008 post-election violence”.

The trial of Mr Kenyatta had been due to begin on 12 November but was put back until February after September’s terror attack on the Westgate shopping centre in Nairobi that left at least 67 people dead.

African leaders had been lobbying for the case to be delayed until Mr Kenyatta is no longer in office, saying the trial would make it impossible for him to run the country.

The African Union has accused the ICC of unfairly targeting the continent’s leaders.

In the Central African Republic Prime Minister Nicolas Tiangaye said a presidential election will be brought forward next year, bowing to pressure from former colonial power France to speed up the transition after a March coup, News24 reports.

The rule of interim president Michel Djotodia, the leader of the Seleka rebels who seized power in March, was originally set to last until 2015, under a deal hammered out with regional African powers.

“The national electoral authority has been put in place and members will be sworn in by the end of this week, or early next,” Tiangaye said after meeting US ambassador to the UN Samantha Powers, who visited Bangui on Thursday.

“They will be in charge of preparation and organisation of the election, which will take place in 2014,” he said.

In South Sudan, Aljazeera reports three Indian peacekeepers have been killed in an attack on a United Nations base in South Sudan.

The UN said attackers from the country’s second-largest ethnic group forced their way into the Akobo base in conflict-wracked Jonglei state on Thursday, pursuing civilians from a rival ethnic group who had taken refuge there.

Contact with the base was lost after the assault and UN deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said the fate of more than 30 ethnic Dinka civilians sheltering at the base was not known.

A statement said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was “appalled” to learn of the attack.

“There are indications that civilians may have been killed and wounded in the attack, but this remains to be verified. Should these reports prove true, those responsible must be held accountable for their crimes,” the statement said.

Meanwhile, Barack Obama, the United States president, called for an immediate end to the fighting in South Sudan on Thursday, warning the country stands at the “precipice” of civil war.

Obama, who earlier announced he had deployed 45 troops to the violence-wracked country on Wednesday to protect US personnel and interests, warned that “recent fighting threatens to plunge South Sudan back into the dark days of its past”.

“Fighting to settle political scores or to destabilise the government must stop immediately. Inflammatory rhetoric and targeted violence must cease,” the US president added in his statement.

“All sides must listen to the wise counsel of their neighbours, commit to dialogue and take immediate steps to urge calm and support reconciliation. South Sudan’s leaders must recognise that compromise with one’s political enemy is difficult; but recovering from unchecked violence and unleashed hatred will prove much harder.”

The attack on Indian peacekeepers on the UN base came after troops loyal to fugitive former vice president Riek Machar seized the town of Bor late on Wednesday, as fighting continued in eastern Jonglei state.

In Uganda, Members of Parliament yesterday passed a controversial bill that will ban miniskirts, the BBC reports.

The anti-pornography bill, which also outlaws overtly sexual material including music videos, was voted through after a short debate.

When Simon Lokodo, Uganda’s ethics and integrity minister, proposed the legislation earlier this year, he said that women who wore “anything above the knee” should be arrested.

The bill needs to be approved by the president before becoming law.

Uganda is a socially conservative country – it is also considering legislation to increase the punishment for homosexual acts, including the death penalty in some cases.

According to Uganda’s private Monitor newspaper, the new legislation will outlaw material which shows parts of the body including breasts, thighs and buttocks, or any erotic behaviour intended to cause sexual excitement.

It will also ban anything that shows indecent acts or behaviour intended to corrupt morals, the paper reports.

The BBC’s Catherine Byaruhanga in the capital, Kampala, says the new rules could affect Uganda’s popular tabloid papers.

UN/AFRICA :

U.N. Ambassador, in Central Africa, Vows Aid and Hears of a Unity Shattered
By SOMINI SENGUPTA/nytimes.com/December 19, 2013

BANGUI, Central African Republic — Samantha Power, the American ambassador to the United Nations, came to this tinderbox of a city on Thursday to pledge American support to end the sectarian strife that has engulfed the country, saying that the international efforts to stem the violence have been essential but not sufficient to restore calm.

The depth of distress here was plain. So, too, was the depth of the distrust sown almost overnight in a society where Muslims and Christians had lived with each other for years.

Far less clear was whether the growing but still limited American role would help put an end to the crisis, or whether a full-fledged United Nations peacekeeping force would have to be deployed to quell a conflict that has gripped the nation for months.

France, the country's former colonial ruler, has sent 1,600 soldiers to aid thousands of African Union-led forces. The United States has contributed \$100 million to transport and equip the African units, but the Obama administration is not considering sending American soldiers, nor has it committed to supporting a large and expensive United Nations peacekeeping operation, as some have called for.

Ms. Power said that her visit demonstrated to her that more needed to be done. There have been improvements, she argued: With soldiers patrolling the streets, residents of the capital, Bangui, were buying rice and yams at the market, barbershops were open, and there were no corpses on the roads, as there had been just two weeks ago.

Even so, those who fled their homes — there are at least 600,000 of them across the country — told her that they were nowhere near ready to return. Gunfire broke out near the airport shortly after her departure on Thursday evening. And she heard stories of unspeakable brutality from priests, imams, widows and wounded civilians, even as they told her of their long tradition of religious harmony.

"I come away from our time in CAR very concerned about the extent of the polarization, the tautness of the society and the temptation that families and communities that have been victimized have to take justice into their own hands," she said later in the evening, after she had left Bangui.

In the morning, a young man told her that with Muslim fighters killing so many friends and relatives of Christians, young people like him could well imagine joining a militia in revenge. Minutes later came four women, all Muslims, grieving, because a mob had killed their husbands.

She heard from Christian clerics about churches that had been looted. At a nearby mosque, a parishioner angrily complained that only Muslim forces were being disarmed by peacekeepers. A woman stood before her and described how her husband was murdered. He was hacked first with a machete, and then a mob poured gasoline on his corpse and watched it burn.

At a news conference at the end of her visit, she warned, "There is a tyranny of the mob that has taken hold here that is horrific in its own right, but also something that can be hard to stop once it's been unleashed."

She said she hoped religious leaders would be able to tap into the country's history of communal harmony and push for reconciliation. The United States, she announced, will contribute \$7 million to the effort.

Her message for civilians was to "stand above" the temptation for revenge. Her message for the politicians she met, she said, was to remind them of their promise to give up power and hold elections by 2015. She called for human rights inquiries that would hold perpetrators of violence accountable. And she announced an additional \$15 million for humanitarian relief.

Her prescriptions come with tough challenges. It is unclear whether the African troops, once they reach their planned strength of 6,000 soldiers, will be able to disarm the many loosely organized militias in a country so vast, and whether donor countries will contribute enough money to keep the African Union force going. Nor is it clear whether her calls for national and international commissions of inquiry to investigate rights abuses will be enough to temper killings.

The United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, has recommended, among other things, deploying an official United Nations peacekeeping force of 6,000 to 9,000 troops. The Security Council has authorized him to start preparing for that option, which is far more expensive than the current arrangement. American officials have been noncommittal about that prospect, insisting that it is more efficient to equip and transport African forces quickly, aided by the deployment of French soldiers.

Ms. Power argues that it remains important to assist the Africans and make sure they get there quickly. The secretary general is expected to present his recommendations about a potential peacekeeping force early next year to the Security Council. Ms. Power will have to make a hard call then.

The visit on Thursday was Ms. Power's first solo trip as the American ambassador to the United Nations; she took office in August. No American official of her rank has visited this country before, officials said, a sign of the limited American economic and strategic interests here. The United States Embassy has been closed intermittently over the last several years.

The Obama administration, though, does have an interest in averting genocide here, particularly Ms. Power, who has built a reputation pushing for global powers to prevent atrocities.

In a small room on Thursday, the young man who alluded to joining a militia told her that he had counted 22 corpses on a small stretch of road after the rebels who overthrew the government and seized power this year — a group known as Seleka that is mostly Muslim — went on a rampage. He said his cousins were among the dead in the countryside, adding that if nothing changed in the next couple of months, he could himself join the Christian militias that have sprung up in defense.

Ms. Power, who had been taking notes, looked up and asked: Does that mean killing people because they are Muslim?

Seleka's rivals, the loosely organized, mostly Christian Balaka militias, have begun to wreak havoc — and Muslims complained to Ms. Power that they were not being disarmed. Muslims were not the only ones terrified about the Balaka. One Christian pastor, the Rev. Nicolas Guerekoyame-Gbangou, said the Balaka had recently abducted three Christian boys from Bangui; he was negotiating with militia leaders to secure their release.

Fear had cast such a pall over the city that next to the airport, an estimated 40,000 people had chosen to sleep outdoors, on nothing but plastic mats, just so they could be close to the French troops guarding the airport. There was not enough water there, no tarpaulin to protect against rain, and no more than a few trenches to serve as an open, communal toilet. People complained of hunger. Sufficient amounts of food aid had not come, even though the camp is perched on the edge of the heavily guarded airport.

On a walk through the camp, residents told Ms. Power that two babies had died overnight. One tent served as the clinic's maternity ward. The Doctors Without Borders team here said it had delivered an average of eight babies a day.

Peacekeepers killed at South Sudan UN base
20 Dec 2013/Al Jazeera and agencies

Official says three Indians killed after attackers pursuing civilians force their way into compound in

Jonglei state.

Three Indian peacekeepers have been killed in an attack on a United Nations base in South Sudan, India's UN envoy said.

The UN said attackers from the country's second-largest ethnic group forced their way into the Akobo base in conflict-wracked Jonglei state on Thursday, pursuing civilians from a rival ethnic group who had taken refuge there.

Contact with the base was lost after the assault and UN deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said the fate of more than 30 ethnic Dinka civilians sheltering at the base was not known.

A statement said UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was "appalled" to learn of the attack.

"There are indications that civilians may have been killed and wounded in the attack, but this remains to be verified. Should these reports prove true, those responsible must be held accountable for their crimes," the statement said.

Ambassador Asoke Mukerji said the three peacekeepers were "targeted and killed" during an attack by ethnic Nuer youths.

Rapidly escalating ethnic violence has raised fears of instability in the world's newest country.

S Sudan at 'precipice' of civil war

Meanwhile, Barack Obama, the United States president, called for an immediate end to the fighting in South Sudan on Thursday, warning the country stands at the "precipice" of civil war.

Obama, who earlier announced he had deployed 45 troops to the violence-wracked country on Wednesday to protect US personnel and interests, warned that "recent fighting threatens to plunge South Sudan back into the dark days of its past".

"Fighting to settle political scores or to destabilise the government must stop immediately. Inflammatory rhetoric and targeted violence must cease," the US president added in his statement.

"All sides must listen to the wise counsel of their neighbours, commit to dialogue and take immediate steps to urge calm and support reconciliation. South Sudan's leaders must recognise that compromise with one's political enemy is difficult; but recovering from unchecked violence and unleashed hatred will prove much harder."

The attack on Indian peacekeepers on the UN base came after troops loyal to fugitive former vice president Riek Machar seized the town of Bor late on Wednesday, as fighting continued in eastern Jonglei state.

President Salva Kiir has blamed the bloodshed on a coup bid by his perennial rival Machar, who says the alleged overthrow was a fabrication to cover up a regime purge.

Machar denies coup

Talking to Al Jazeera's Hannah McNeish, Machar denied that any plot was carried out to coup Kiir.

"My life was in danger; my colleagues were being arrested for no reason. They are not plotters, it was not a coup. Nobody wants that," Machar said, claiming he was "used as a scapegoat" by Kiir to purge the ruling SPLM party of rivals to avoid reforming it.

Kiir coming from the majority Dinka people and Machar from the Nuer.

About 450 people have been killed in the capital, Juba, since battles broke out on Sunday, including around 100 soldiers, army spokesman Philip Aguer said. About 20,000 people have sought refuge at UN facilities in Juba.

Source:

Al Jazeera and agencies

Indian UN peacekeepers killed in S Sudan attack

20 December 2013/bbc.co.uk

Three Indian peacekeepers have died in an attack on a United Nations compound in South Sudan's Jonglei state, India's UN envoy Asoke Mukerji has said.

Rebels from the second-largest ethnic group, the Nuer, stormed the base on Thursday, targeting civilians of the majority Dinka ethnic community.

South Sudan has been in turmoil since President Salva Kiir accused his ex-deputy Riek Machar of mounting a coup.

The unrest, which broke out on Sunday, has killed some 500 people so far.

The conflict first erupted in the capital Juba but has since spread.

Mr Kiir, who is a Dinka, has blamed the violence on a group of soldiers who support Mr Machar, a Nuer.

The president accuses them of trying to take power by force on Sunday night in a coup attempt by Mr Machar - a claim the former vice president denies.

'Growing violence'

Mr Mukerji announced the Indian troops' deaths at a UN peacekeeping meeting in New York.

There were 43 Indian peacekeepers at the UN compound in the town of Akobo where the attack took place.

A UN spokesman said the attackers, mainly youths, had targeted 32 Dinka civilians who had sought refuge at the base.

Security at the compound has been increased.

The UN has expressed worry about a possible civil war between the Dinka and the Nuer.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he was "deeply concerned by reports of growing violence in many parts of South Sudan, human rights abuses and killings fuelled by ethnic tensions".

However, the government insists the clashes are over power and politics, noting that both sides involved in the clashes include leaders from different tribes.

"We condemn in strongest possible terms attempts to depict the coup as ethnic strife," a government

statement said.

The UN is sheltering more than 30,000 civilians in five state capitals, including Juba and Bor.

Early on Thursday, Nuer rebels seized control of Bor. Even before the unrest, the town was seen as one of the most volatile areas of South Sudan.

In an interview with Radio France Internationale, Mr Machar called on the army to remove the president.

"We want him to leave, that's it," he told the station.

Mr Machar was sacked by Mr Kiir in July.

The UN has called for political dialogue to end the crisis, and the Ugandan government says its president has been asked by the UN to mediate between the two sides.

A delegation of East African foreign ministers earlier arrived in Juba to try to mediate in the crisis.

Britain and the US have both sent planes to airlift their nationals out of the country, and a US defence official described the situation as "getting ugly".

South Sudan has struggled to achieve a stable government since becoming independent in 2011.

The oil-rich country remains ethnically and politically divided, with many armed groups active.

Trois Casques bleus tués dans un Soudan du Sud "au bord du précipice"

20.12.2013/rts.ch

Trois Casques bleus ont été tués jeudi au Soudan du Sud lors de l'attaque de leur base dans l'est du pays, alors que le président américain Barack Obama craint une guerre civile.

Une base de l'ONU a été attaquée et trois Casques bleus tués jeudi au Soudan du Sud, un jeune Etat "au bord du précipice" de la guerre civile, selon Barack Obama qui y a déployé 45 soldats.

L'ancien vice-président du Soudan du Sud, Riek Machar, accusé d'avoir initié les combats entre factions de l'armée qui ensanglantent le pays depuis dimanche, a appelé de son côté jeudi au renversement du président Salva Kiir.

Jeudi, trois Casques bleus indiens ont été tués dans l'attaque d'une base de l'ONU d'Akobo dans l'Etat de Jonglei (est du pays), a communiqué l'ambassadeur indien à l'ONU.

"Au bord du précipice"

Le président Barack Obama, qui avait soutenu la création de cet Etat né en juillet 2011 de la partition du Soudan, a affirmé jeudi soir que le pays était "au bord du précipice" de la guerre civile.

Il a annoncé, dans une lettre au Congrès que 45 soldats américains avaient été déployés mercredi dans le pays pour la sécurité des ressortissants américains.

afp/gchi

United Nations condemns attack on South Sudan base

20/12/2013/bbc.co.uk

The United Nations has said it fears casualties, after attackers forced their way into a peacekeeping base in South Sudan's Jonglei state.

Rebels from the country's second-largest ethnic group, the Nuer, attacked the base, targeting civilians of the majority Dinka ethnic community.

UN spokesman Farhan Haq said he condemned the storming of the base "in the strongest terms".

US/AFRICA :

S Sudan on precipice of civil war, Obama warns

20 December 2013/bbc.co.uk

US President Barack Obama has warned that South Sudan is on the "precipice" of a civil war, after clashes in the capital Juba spread around the country.

He said 45 military personnel had been deployed to South Sudan on Wednesday to protect American citizens and property.

At least 500 people are believed to have died since last weekend, when President Salva Kiir accused his ex-deputy Riek Machar of a failed coup.

An estimated 34,000 people have taken refuge at United Nations compounds.

Three Indian peacekeepers were killed on Thursday when a UN base sheltering refugees came under attack near South Sudan's eastern border with Ethiopia.

Sudan suffered a 22-year civil war that left more than a million people dead before the South became independent in 2011.

The recent unrest has pitted gangs from the Nuer ethnic group of Mr Machar against Dinkas - the majority group to which Mr Kiir belongs.

"South Sudan stands at the precipice. Recent fighting threatens to plunge South Sudan back into the dark days of its past," President Obama said in a letter to Congress.

"Inflammatory rhetoric and targeted violence must cease. All sides must listen to the wise counsel of their neighbours, commit to dialogue and take immediate steps to urge calm and support reconciliation."

On Thursday three Indian peacekeepers died in an attack on a UN compound at Akobo, Jonglei state.

Announcing the deaths at a UN meeting in New York, India's UN Ambassador Ashok Mukerjisaid they were "targeted and killed" during Thursday's attack by ethnic Nuer youths on the base.

UN deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said more casualties were feared, and he did not know the fate of more than 30 Dinka civilians sheltering at the base.

Security at the compound has since been increased.

President Kiir has blamed the violence on soldiers who support Mr Machar. Mr Machar, who was sacked by Mr Kiir in July, has denied trying to stage a coup. Mr Machar's whereabouts are unknown.

Despite calls for calm, the rival groups have been fighting fierce gun-battles over the town of Bor, in Jonglei state north of Juba.

African Union spokesman Ateny Wek Ateny said on Thursday that Bor was in the hands of forces loyal to Mr Machar.

"They control the town but government forces are trying to retake it," he said.

In a statement, the UN mission in the country, Unmiss, said conditions for displaced people in Juba and Bor were "challenging".

It said in some of the UN bases, some people had been able "to construct basic shelters with available materials, but many have no or limited access to shelter".

A delegation of East African foreign ministers has travelled to Juba to try to mediate in the crisis.

South Sudan's government insists the clashes are over power and politics, not between ethnic groups.

The oil-rich country has struggled to achieve a stable government since becoming independent.

CANADA/AFRICA :

AUSTRALIA/AFRICA :

EU/AFRICA :

France, long active on Africa's stage, looks to EU to play a bigger role (+video)

By Sara Miller Llana, Staff writer / csmonitor.com/December 19, 2013

France has been a major military actor in Africa since the '60s, most recently intervening in the violence in the Central African Republic. But it wants Europe to pitch in.

Paris

An Italian student asked her French teacher recently if France was at war. She had just read the news about the Dec. 5 French intervention in troubled Central African Republic (CAR).

“War?” the teacher said, taken aback. “No, no,” he explained to his class of foreign pupils. “France intervenes regularly in Africa when there is trouble.”

It was the briefest of history lessons, but it shines light on the assumptions that the average Frenchman and -woman hold about their country's former colonial empire. France has regularly intervened in Africa since the 1960s, sometimes amid controversy and claims that it still sees itself as the "gendarme" of Africa, other times because of a sense of humanitarian duty – and because, quite simply, it's the only willing and capable force on the ground.

This is the case in CAR, where France deployed 1,600 soldiers earlier this month, under a United Nations mandate to help end a conflict that was sparked after Muslim rebels ousted the president in a coup in March. Since then, CAR has rapidly deteriorated into sectarian violence between the Christian majority and Muslims. Some 600 have died in less than two weeks.

But as French soldiers continue their tough task of disarming militias – and already two French soldiers have been killed – French President François Hollande is pushing his European Union partners for more help, beyond the logistics and humanitarian aid it has already provided. France wants fellow boots, both Europeans and capable African forces, working alongside it. It might get what it wants: on Tuesday French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius told the lower house of parliament that other European troops, without saying which, would soon be in CAR.

France's long role in Africa

Requesting more help on this Africa mission – even as it intervened alone, as it did earlier this year in Mali – is part of a renewed push by France to “Europeanize” its Africa policy, which it began over 15 years ago but which had in recent years lost some momentum, says Paul Melly, an expert on EU policy toward Africa at the Chatham House in London. “It is really Hollande that has picked that up again,” he says.

France's colonial expansion in Africa began in the 17th century and lasted until the 1962 independence of Algeria. It intervened militarily in the continent 19 times between 1962 and 1995, says Mr. Melly. But in these decades, it carried baggage summed up in the term “françafrique,” used to describe an often shady tangle of political and business connections in France's interest.

Some claim those interests still persist. But relationships began to evolve markedly in the 1990s, as global attitudes about French “meddling” changed in Africa, France, and the outside world. The Rwanda genocide was also a turning point, leaving France scarred after French troops were accused of failing to prevent it, or worse. French officials began to argue in the 90s for more “normalized” relations with Africa, including a bigger role for the EU.

Today, France remains a dominant player, with 8,500 troops abroad, the vast majority stationed across Africa, according to the latest French Defense Ministry figures. It also maintains a sense of obligation that spans the political spectrum and allows France to maintain global authority in the region. France has intervened four times in Africa since 2011, in Ivory Coast and Libya under Hollande's right-wing predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy and this year under Hollande's own Socialist administration, in Mali and now Central African Republic.

The missions are something that the French public generally accepts, although support for the CAR

intervention has dipped, according to a poll taken just two days after the young soldiers were killed. IFOP released a survey showing support for the French mission had fallen to 44 percent from 51 percent at the start of the campaign, which analysts say reflects both the distance of CAR from Europe as well as deflated expectations, after the government communicated that it would be a quick and easy mission.

Burden-sharing

Aline Leboeuf, a security expert at the French Institute for International Relations, says that France is often the best poised to respond to conflict in Africa because of language, in-country knowledge, and its physical presence. The mission in Mali saw the rapid deployment of 5,000 troops sent to root out Al Qaeda-linked rebels that pose a threat in the region. The decision was hailed across the international community. In CAR, France has maintained a military presence, even if just a few hundred soldiers, for 14 years.

But it now seeks more help from its European partners. In discussing CAR on French radio this weekend, Mr. Fabius called it a "big problem" that France is the only European nation with a strong enough military presence to intervene when conflict arises. This follows the publication of the defense "white book" in April that notes a "particular role for Africa" in national defense, but argues that Africa should be a key interest of the EU too.

Such burden-sharing comes at a time of defense cuts. France "has limited resources but is still capable of using them today, even if the EU is not supporting a mission" like in CAR, says Ms. Leboeuf. "The question is what will happen in ten years?"

The EU Council will also meet today to discuss defense integration in Europe, which France has been a leader in backing. It has called for the creation of an emergency fund for future interventions.

If Hollande is successful, he could get credit for ushering even more change in the French-African relationship.

Hollande is deeply unpopular at home amid economic stagnation and a perception that he fumbles along. But on foreign affairs, he's been viewed as both decisive and consultative – not just "bargaining" into Africa, says Melly, but talking to leaders and getting them on board.

After Mali, Melly says, Hollande opened space for Africa to plead for its help on CAR. "We could well end up with a situation in which [Hollande] comes to be seen as someone whose fundamentally transformed an important dimension of France's international relationship with Africa."

Hurdles to overcome

The contribution of other European soldiers in CAR would set an example for deeper EU defense cooperation, but several realities limit the prospects of such integration.

Defense coordination is, no matter where the conflict lies, a tough sell: Despite the economics, it is hard to get countries to cede control of defense issues to a larger EU body, given widely divergent sensibilities. Germany, for example, has been one of the most cautious players in foreign policy since World War II, both reluctant to send troops to missions and hampered in its legal ability to do so.

On Africa, some in Europe have resented French insistence on participating in certain missions, says Antonin Tisseron, a research fellow with the Thomas More Institute. "Some have the sense that France is seeking to implicate European partners in order to reach French objectives," he says.

And from the vantage of many African nations, their default is often France, says Mr. Tisseron, the country they know best.

“When there is a problem, they look to France,” he says. “The EU is not part of their culture. This is going to take time”

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