

Minister Rises To Defend SADC Organ

I AM hearing through the media, misleading sounds of the fury of a passing storm which really signifies nothing. The newly inaugurated SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security has been turned into a monster that it is not and is not intended to be.

The Organ is not in essence a product of the 1994 Windhoek Workshop organised by the SADC Executive Secretariat. Nor is it an instantaneous reaction to any imaginary threat from somewhere. What I have heard, constitutes outright distortion of the truth. I thought I should clarify the matter and set the record straight before the truth is completely drowned out by the proliferating and pre-mediated falsehoods.

To properly understand the future vision and the stated objectives of the SADC Organ, one would require knowledge of its background as well as the prevailing realities of the ongoing community formations and capacity-building in southern Africa.

First, the place to start is the Frontline States (comprising initially only Tanzania and Zambia and progressively augmented over the years with the achievement of independence by successive countries in the region) served as partners in the struggle against colonialism and apartheid and for freedom and independence in southern Africa. They, in consultation with the National Liberation Movements

concerned, pursued specific objectives amongst themselves:

1. To serve as a collective back-up system for the National Liberation Movements in the prosecution of the struggle;

2. To participate, together with the Liberation Movements, in galvanising public opinion in favour of the international solidarity and all-round support for the Southern African Freedom Fighters;

3. To permit Liberation Movements and their members to set up exile centres for education, health and social services as well as self-help schemes in their territories;

4. To set aside places in their schools, institutions of higher learning as well as vocational and technical facilities for members of Liberation Movements;

5. To strengthen the efforts of those Liberation Movements engaged in constitutional negotiations through legal advice and joint strategic planning; and

6. To conscientise their own citizens in the spirit of Pan-Africanism and African unity towards embracing the struggle in the region as a common cause for all Africans everywhere.

These objectives did not altogether die when colonialism and apartheid were defeated. Instead they constituted the basis for re-thinking and stock-taking among the leaders of the region, following the inauguration of President Mandela on

10 May 1994.

In the past, not all SADC members belonged to the Frontline States. Thus 1994 was a year of transition and consolidation in more ways than one. This transformation in southern Africa is going to have to evolve a balanced interaction involving government, the private sector and the civil society alike.

Second, in June 1994, Frontline States' leaders held a meeting in Harare both for celebration and re-dedication. The work of the Frontline States was successfully completed: Namibia was decolonised in 1990 and finally in 1994, apartheid was buried. It was at that meeting that the leaders instructed their Foreign Ministers:

a. to do a post-mortem on the achievements and heritage of the Frontline States;

b. to short-list what could be preserved and enriched; and

c. to make a proposal on a possible successor body to the Frontline States, minus the previous preoccupation with liberation and decolonisation which were fully achieved. That was the Foreign Ministers' brief from the Heads of State.

The Ministers, pursuant to this brief, met in July 1994 in Windhoek. After extensive consultations and deliberations, they adopted a proposal which called for the creation of an Association of Southern African States (ASAS). The



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SADC Organ is merely an updated and more refined version of ASAS.

I have a strong suspicion that most of the circulating misrepresentations in the media concerning the SADC Organ are based on hearsay. If the disinformers could only carefully read the principles and objectives of the Organ, the future vision and the present challenges facing the states and peoples of southern Africa, they would be better informed.

Among the stated top principles is the "observance of human rights, democracy and the rule of law". This is a firm commitment and not a lip-service to what is apparently being demanded. What's the sound and fury all about?

Part of the confusion, I

believe, arises from the fact that the Ministerial meeting was forgotten in the verbal fracas and only the Windhoek Workshop is remembered. In any event, the SADC Summit, later the same year (1994) endorsed all the recommendations both of the Ministers and the Workshop. They are on the agenda for implementation in the fullness of time. This includes the Human Rights Commission and the Bill of Rights. The idea of a "sector" was found not feasible and dropped. But let's not put the carriage before the horse.

Third, for the purpose of illustration, let us look at the European Union. Institution building preceded regional cohesion and unification. The European Parliament in Strassbourg is such a nec-

essary institution. It can now and does indeed legislate for the entire community and its rulings are binding. SADC is not there yet. But we are steadily going forward.

There must be a functional relationship between the forthcoming SADC Parliamentary Forum and the envisaged Human Rights Commission and the Bill of Rights. I am convinced this is the correct way to proceed. Let us first allow this Forum to gain ground and mature. Other things can then be added onto it and other SADC structures.

Fourth, SADC is still in the process of institution formation and capacity-building as well as re-thinking better ways and means of doing things in the interest of all the people in southern Africa.

Although at the present time, there is no appropriate forum, women in the sub-region have taken a commendable leadership role during the preparations of the Beijing 1995 Conference on Women and Development. They are networking everywhere all the time and mobilising the civil societies.

Similarly, academics, constitutional experts, researchers, students as well as sport and cultural groups are already regularly interacting and consulting.

The process that finally led to the inauguration of the SADC Organ on 28 June 1996 in Gaborone, was public, transparent and should

have been well-known through the media. It was the culmination of a two-year process and not its commencement. In line with the Frontline States' tradition, informality and prompt action were stressed without burdensome bureaucracy in decision-making.

Fifth, civil societies have an important role to play in nation building and democracy. This is taken for granted in Namibia. The power of the ballot box, public opinion and the media can hardly be taken for granted. But civil societies should not fail to realise that in pursuit of interstate relations, including in the field of defence and security, only governments have the competence to do certain things that may have political or legal implications.

Lastly, politics govern all aspects of society; defence and security deal with other vital issues in socio-economic and technical fields and not only with military threats and potential or real external or domestic aggression. This is the context in which the SADC Organ must be understood.

Now is the time for a dialogue on what is to be done. Peace is not only the absence of war, but a necessary condition that assures stability, well-being and prosperity in a country or region.

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