Africa Meeting Summary

African Union Perspectives on Mali and the Sahel

Pierre Buyoya


26 March 2013
The following document provides a summary of a meeting held at Chatham House on 26 March 2013.

Mr Buyoya began his presentation about the Africa-led International Support Mission to Mali’s (AFISMA) role in Mali by noting that he had come to Europe to open a dialogue between the organization and European countries on how they can best support the work of AFISMA.

He explained AFISMA’s role in assisting Mali in the current crisis. He highlighted two main transition tasks: to recover territorial integrity of the north, and to re-establish democratic institutions.

Mr Buyoya noted that the task of recovering northern Mali would entail contact with armed terrorist groups encamped in the region, either through establishing a negotiation process or assuming a defensive policy with armed groups who have not accepted the terms of UN Security Council Resolution 2085 that led to the deployment of AFISMA.

Mr Buyoya emphasized that political processes will help lead to the re-establishment of democratic institutions in Mali. Electoral processes are taking place, with elections due to take place before 31 July 2013. While some heads of state in West Africa have expressed concern with this timetable, Mr Buyoya insisted that partners and politicians in Mali are working hard to achieve this goal. He added that AFISMA’s role in this process is to support political leaders in Mali, including with whatever timetables they develop.

Mr Buyoya stated that moving on from resolving the transition crisis to planning elections is a positive step for Mali. He noted that political transition groups want to be seen to be encouraging democratic transition, and AFISMA supports this aim.

Talks began in Ouagadougou to set up the political process of establishing a dialogue between the government and armed groups. Mr Buyoya mentioned that the Malian government also wants an inter-Malian dialogue set up that would not be exclusive to armed groups.

The Malian government has insisted that armed groups disarm before talks begin, which includes the Tuareg rebels of the Mouvement National de Libération de l’Azawad (MNLA) who have come out in support of the French intervention. Mr Buyoya noted that the disarmament process can only happen through force or dialogue, and that AFISMA hopes the latter can be achieved. AFISMA believes the MNLA needs to be consulted with in order to prevent the possibility of a further destabilization of security and break-down of talks.
He emphasized that France has a key role to play in these discussions and thus he has travelled to Europe in his capacity as head of AFISMA to initiate a dialogue.

My Buyoya stated that a legal framework has been set out to create a reconciliation commission to bring about a national dialogue. According to him, the key to a long-term solution of the Mali crisis is stabilization, which would be aided by the establishment of such a commission.

Plans for securitization shifted after the intervention of France. AFISMA originally deployed 6,300 troops to Mali, yet this number is set to rise to 10,000 in accordance with the next UN resolution, UN Security Council Resolution 2086. My Buyoya noted that AFISMA is present in cities throughout Mali, including Gao and Timbuktu.

My Buyoya responded to media criticism that AFISMA had been slow to deploy troops by pointing out the logistical difficulties and coordination challenges faced by the countries providing troops. Deployment in the north of Mali has not been possible because of a lack of sufficient equipment, but he noted that this is currently being rectified.

Mr Buyoya highlighted the operational challenges on the ground for AFISMA. Logistical problems include the lack of equipment and the transportation of aid. Road travel is impractical because of the large conveyance distances and the threat of mine and improvised explosive devices.

These problems have been delineated in the process of transferring AFISMA’s role to that of a UN operation; a UN mission in Bamako began in March 2013. The African Union has agreed to this transferral on condition of three key considerations:

- That the UN Security Council takes into account the special nature of the Malian situation; troops must have the ability to continue fighting terrorist groups;
- That the role of AFISMA is recognized and cooperation between AFISMA and the UN is prioritized; and
- That the AU and ECOWAS retain a political role in the management of the Malian crisis as they have been doing so far. ECOWAS in particular is keen to impose a return of constitutional order and keep an eye on the regional context of the Sahel.
Mr Buyoya noted that the AU is holding a workshop for Mali’s neighbouring countries to find out how they can best assist Mali and AFISMA’s aim to assert a degree of control over Mali’s borders.

Mr Buyoya concluded by stating that the political process towards securitization in Mali is clear, and that implementation is now needed. He noted that if the AU has not been moving the process forward quickly, it is because in-fighting amongst Malian politicians who do not share a common vision for the country has been holding back progress. However he added that there has been a lot of mobilization to help Mali both regionally and across the continent, and that there is a lot of good will internationally to help Mali.