

In 2013, the AU pledged to ‘silence the guns’ by 2020. That date has come but the guns are still booming. What must we do in order to finally put an end to the unholy cacophony of war? Essay by **Ivor Ichikowitz**.

# We can silence the guns

**T**he dawn of the real African century is in closer sight today than it has ever been before, but before it can break, states across the continent must do all they can to rein in conflict so that peace and development can take stronger root.

Seven years ago, African Heads of State celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the OAU, on which occasion they chose to focus on the theme of ‘Silencing the Guns by 2020’. This was in recognition that ongoing conflicts on the continent were a major impediment to the security and socioeconomic development of the countries and peoples of Africa. The year 2020 has arrived, and sadly we have to concede that there are more conflicts today than there were in 2013.

Earlier this year, President Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa took over as Chair of the AU, and immediately

committed himself to the pursuit of two key objectives: the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) and Silencing the Guns.

Both are crucial for the continent’s future stability and prosperity – in fact, we cannot have one without the other – and while nobody is expecting Ramaphosa to achieve the impossible during his term as AU Chair, he has every intention (and deserves every support in this) to lay the foundations upon which others can build in the years ahead.

He singled out Libya and South Sudan for urgent attention, and undertook to work closely with Congolese President Denis Sassou Nguesso, who chairs the AU’s High-Level Committee on Intra-Libyan Conflict to promote a ceasefire and dialogue.

He will also host an Extraordinary Summit in May

**Below: French soldiers involved in Operation Barkhane on patrol with a Malian soldier (l) in Timbamogoye**



2020 to consider the numerous other conflicts, such as “acts of terrorism” in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, in addition to South Sudan, which in 2013 descended into a devastating civil war that has killed many thousands of people.

This comes at a time of rising Afro-optimism in an era of profound global changes, from which Africa is well-suited to benefit, provided the appropriate policies are adopted and implemented. It creates an historical opportunity for the AU to set the continent on a course of peace and prosperity, which the younger generation can build on for the future.

### Asymmetrical warfare

Africans must be allowed to be free from fear, and achieving our destiny requires that we do all in our power to foster an environment where this can be the case. This, however, warrants several things: first, recognising how conflicts have changed since independence; then, creating legitimate means for citizens’ voices to be heard; next, providing governments with the means to protect their citizens; and, finally, fostering a culture that eschews the rule of the gun.

More than half a century ago, African nationalists still struggled under the yoke of colonialism. The wars of liberation then were fundamentally different to the terrorism, extremism and criminal resorts to bloodshed that have become all too commonplace now.

In countries like Libya, where the fighting is often financed and supplied by foreign actors, the nature of the conflict is the same destabilising kind seen elsewhere in the world. In South Sudan, it is the very legitimacy of governance that is at issue.

Armed groups, often with commercial or religious interests, seek to strengthen their position at the negotiating table by putting innocents in the crossfire. Such is the nature of today’s asymmetrical warfare.

The reality is that many of the conflicts that African nations are currently facing are not of Africa’s making at all, and some not entirely of Africa’s making. The case of Libya is complicated because of underlying problems that preceded the conflict; the role of outside interests and military interventions at different stages of the conflict; the continued support of other countries for opposing sides in the current phase; and the lack of serious peace efforts.

This is a major challenge for the continent, as failure to deal with the Libyan civil war will continue to fuel further violence and instability across the Sahel and the Middle East.

President Ramaphosa and the AU negotiating team will require the full support of Africa and other key nations to find a durable solution. This will not be easy, Libya has been a complex story for decades and until the Libyans themselves want to find a lasting solution, none will be found.

This is not the only example of conflicts created by external actors, leaving Africans to deal with the consequences. Sometimes, the conflicts are religious-based, inspired by fundamentalist groups outside the continent; often they are driven by foreign transnational criminal groups that require chaos as a cover for their exploitation; and occasionally, by bands fighting over

natural resources, where such demand is stimulated by foreign interests. Sometimes the conflict relates to age-old tribal issues or livestock theft.

Religious violence has become a widespread phenomenon affecting countries such as Mali, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Kenya and Somalia. Fundamentalist and jihadist groups from outside Africa’s borders are responsible for a large number of conflicts in Africa.

The continent is increasingly being used as a springboard for jihadism against the rest of the world. Although African states are often not responsible for these conflicts, they have to deal with the disruption, threats and violent consequences. Sustainable policies will be in vain unless African governments build on African efforts and African capabilities to deal with these realities. Without this, the long-term development of the continent will be at risk.

Where the popular will is respected, violence cannot thrive. Where laws are obeyed, violence is almost never seen as a viable recourse. To silence the guns, then, more must be done to strengthen democratic governance and build deeper support for fundamental human rights.

Weak and internally-challenged states cannot defend their populations from outbreaks of random or systematic conflict. Constitutionally based governments require the right tools to keep civilians safe.

Under the collective umbrella of the African Union, neighbours can come together and co-operate to achieve the very peace that is in everyone’s interest. Indeed, Ramaphosa’s embrace of ‘Silencing the Guns’ was made at a juncture in which the Ethiopian government and Eritrean separatists made strides to do just that. Because the will was there, resolution was achieved.

President Ramaphosa and his fellow Heads of State have re-set the initiative to silence the guns, and are already embarking on high-level dialogues to explore viable options to deal with a problem that has beset the continent for decades.

### Intertwined destinies

One of the key reasons for the evolution of the OAU into the AU, and the adoption of the Constitutive Act, was precisely to create a more effective continental organisation to better serve the citizens of Africa. The peacemaker is indeed, the harbinger of all of our intertwined destinies. To do the job, he or she must have our full support.

Africa’s answers cannot be imported; we must discover and actualise them ourselves. Only when we are strong enough to protect the weak, and just enough to earn the trust of all stakeholders across the continent, can we irreversibly change our culture.

Despite the worrying number of civil conflicts, it is encouraging to note that the scale of bloodshed is falling. Together, we can make it an anomaly and for that reason, Ramaphosa deserves actions behind his important words.

As we continue to make progress in enforcing a culture of peace, we become ever more ready for the African century we have long deserved. **NA**

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