

Historicising Nigerian Involvement in Conflict Resolution in West Africa through the ECOMOG Initiative

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Abstract

The search for peace and security has remained a major preoccupation of states. Yet, the attainment of a peaceful and secure international system has remained an elusive ideal. The major reason is that the character of the international system and the behaviour of its inhabitants cannot be easily regulated. While ECOWAS has as its main goal the economic development of West Africa through cooperation and integration of the states, this objective can only be realised in an environment that is peaceful, stable, and secure. The realisation of such a symbiotic relationship between political stability and economic development led to the birth of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), which was birthed as an offspring of contingency and had been relatively successful in restoring peace to the beleaguered states of Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea Bissau in the West African Sub-region. This study investigates the involvement of Nigeria in spearheading the establishment and operation of ECOMOG in West Africa. Though ECOMOG was a sub-regional creation, there is no denying the fact that Nigeria was very instrumental to the success the body recorded in its operations bearing in mind the huge volume of material and human resources it galvanised into the ECOMOG operations. Significantly, the paper contends that if not for the active involvement of Nigeria in the ECOMOG operations, the body would have failed. The Historical method of research based on the use of primary and documentary evidence is used for the study. Nigeria thus intervened in these warring countries under the Umbrella of ECOMOG to bring about peace and stability and to curb the interference of the superpowers in the affairs of the sub-region. The paper therefore lends credence to the

necessity of the hegemonic factor in conflict resolution as long as it does not lead to domination by the bigger nations.

Keywords: Historicising, Involvement, Conflict Resolution, Peace, Hegemonic Factor.

Introduction

Conflicts and wars usually occur when there are contending interests among affected parties which prove difficult to resolve through mediatory diplomacy as a result of the irreconcilable positions of the parties. Conflicts and wars in the international system have become a recurring decimal that has become part of societal processes. Africa and particularly the West African sub-region are no exception to this pattern. This standpoint was corroborated by Galadima thus:

Conflict erupted into ethnic warfare in Central Africa, Zaire, Burundi and Rwanda. There was armed uprising in Northern Uganda, civil war in Sudan and border conflicts between Ethiopia and Eritrea... In West Africa, Liberia was almost a collapsed state, even as rebels embattled Sierra Leone and Guinea Bissau. While Cote d'Ivoire experiences armed rebellion, Sudan is encountering humanitarian catastrophe arising from a bitter intra-state conflict...¹

The quantum of untold sufferings and hardships these various conflicts have brought on the affected people cannot be over-emphasized.

When conflict occurs, it is natural to look for ways to resolve it by tapping into the concerted efforts of all affected parties.

However, hegemonic tendencies are becoming increasingly relevant in conflict resolution in Africa as evidenced by the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) operations in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea-Bissau in which Nigeria as a nation took active lead and participation; which accounted for a great deal for the degree of success the body recorded in the areas. The paper therefore stresses the relevance of hegemonic power in ensuring successful peace-keeping in West Africa using ECOMOG as a case study.

Conceptual Clarification

Conflict is a phenomenon product of a clash of interests between one or two parties. It arises from an incompatibility of goals and actions. According to Francis, conflict can be defined as an intrinsic and inevitable part of human existence; though violent conflict is not inevitable and is an anomaly.² This implies that conflict is an inevitable aspect of human interactions, and as long as people and nations pursue different and conflicting interests, there will always be disagreements, disputes, and conflicts. According to Coser, conflict is a struggle over values or claims to status, power, and scarce resources, in which the aims of the conflicting parties are not only to gain the desired values but also to neutralise, injure or eliminate their rivals.³ North in his submission declares that a conflict emerges whenever two or more persons (or groups) seek to possess the same objects, occupy the same space or the same exclusive position, play incompatible roles, maintain incompatible goals, or undertake mutually incompatible means for achieving their purposes.⁴

The import of these definitions corroborates the fact that conflict arises mainly as a result of a state of irreconcilable differences between and among groups struggling for limited resources, opportunities, and recognition. In other words, conflict will always arise between groups of men and between states as long as people think differently and have different values, interests, and principles; and not only because conflict is an inevitable aspect of

human interaction. Conflict resolution, on the other hand, has been defined by Miller, “as variety of approaches aimed at terminating conflict through the constructive solving of problems”.⁵ According to Stone, conflict resolution involves the processes of removing tensions between states or maintaining them at levels consistent with the continued peaceful pursuit by states of their goals (individual or collective).⁶ Best posits that conflict resolution is “a sense of finality, where the parties to a conflict are mutually satisfied with the outcome of a settlement and the conflict is resolved in a true sense”.⁷ This perspective presents the fact that conflict resolution refers to the totality of attempts undertaken to address grievances among feuding parties with the aim of ensuring an enduring and permanent solution to the conflict by bringing about the best relationship among the contending parties and addressing issues that led to such conflicts.

The final concept to be clarified here is that of hegemony. The *Longman English Dictionary* defines hegemony as “a situation in which one state or country controls others”. For Harris, it is the indirect political control which often replaced the need for constant and direct military or political domination exercised by states over rivals.⁸ In essence then, according to Akinbi and Akinola, hegemony gives expression to indirect influence that is maintained by privileged nations over the less privileged ones, and it recognises the power of influence that is at the disposal of nations with preponderant human, materials and financial resources.⁹

This paper investigates the roles of the Nigerian Military in peacekeeping operations in the West African sub-region through the agency of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG).

Troubled Spots in West Africa and the Imperative of the ECOMOG Initiative

The searchlight under this section shall revolve around the troubled spots in West Africa, especially Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea Bissau, and the urgent need for the ECOMOG mechanism to address the

imbroglio. Liberia, along with Ethiopia is the only African state, which did not experience colonialism. President Tolbert replaced President Tubman as President of Liberia, from 1971-1980. He continued Tubman's policies of maintaining friendly relations with the US and seeking a prominent role in African affairs. However, his efforts were thwarted by bad economic management and corruption.¹⁰ Settlers (descendants of American and West Indian settlers and those Freed from the slave trade of the early 19th century) commonly referred to as Americo-Liberians dominated the politico-socio-economic life of the country and waged several wars against the indigenous people of Liberia in the attempt to subjugate them to their rules and authority. Americo-liberians represent only 5% of Liberians but their control of the country was total. In the political sphere, for example, of the nation's 19 presidents before the coup of April 12, 1980, none was an indigenous Liberian and of these number, eleven were actually born in the USA. Not surprisingly, therefore, they were insensitive to the indigenous people. Zacarias reported that there were divisions between the two groups with the Americo-Liberian having economic and political dominance.¹¹ Hence, the root or remote cause of the Liberian crisis could be traced to this factor.

One of the immediate factors leading to the Liberian crisis was the denial by the ruling True Wig Party (TWP) of citizens to form other political parties until 1975, despite the fact that the Liberian constitution makes provision for citizens numbering three hundred or more to establish a political party and compete for political power. Also, the TWP's reluctance to reform and accommodate "non-conformists" into its fold was more glaring under the Tolbert administration and led to the collapse of the First Republic in April 1980.

Again, economic problems caused by the decreasing production of Rice, the country's staple food, and the increase in price from US \$22 to US \$30 per bag worsened the situation, coupled with insensitivity to the plight of the masses and attempts to clamp down opposition parties. This degenerated scenario

brought in the military through a mutiny led by Master Sergeant Doe who seized power to become Head of State in April 1980. Tolbert was killed and 12 very senior officers in his government were hastily and publicly executed. From 1980-1986, Liberia was under military rule. Despite his promise of building a new society based on justice and human dignity, it soon became clear that Doe's style was not better than the Tubman and Tolbert eras. The immediate seed of the Liberian conflict was sown by the failure of the late President Doe to address the fundamental issues that brought him to power. These include the domestic social and economic inequalities between the Americo-Liberians and the indigenous population, the basic issue of human rights, the decreasing militarization of the political process, social discontent, economic dislocation, liquidation of the opposition and inability to manage the economy, which incapacitated the government, all the above plagued the country into internecine civil wars.¹²

ECOWAS intervened in the Liberian crisis after other efforts at resolving the crisis through the Inter-Faith Mediation Committee (IFMC) failed and the crisis got worse instead of improving and against the background of the continuing intransigence on the part of the various factions and the worsening plight of the Liberians.¹³ The war gained the attention of the 16-member nations of ECOWAS, of which Liberia is also a member, during the 13th Annual Summit of the Authority of Heads of State and Government, between 28-30 May 1990. It was there that former President of Nigeria, President Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida proposed the setting up of a community standing mediation committee. The community, in accepting the proposal stated that it was convinced that "regional security and stability, as well as peace, and concord are necessary conditions for effective sub-regional cooperation and integration".¹⁴

From the foregoing, it was very clear that the formation of ECOMOG was of Nigerian initiative, as it was the then President of Nigeria, General Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida who proposed the establishment

of a five-nation mediation committee that would thenceforth resolve political conflicts in the sub-region at the 18th Summit of ECOWAS in Bamako and the acceptance of this proposal led to the formation of ECOMOG.¹⁵

Still, consultations continued with warring factions and ECOWAS Heads of State and their foreign ministers in an effort to find a peaceful and equitable resolution to the military and political stalemate the country was in. This did not yield any positive fruits, since by the end of August 1990, it was obvious that more direct and forceful involvement was required to physically separate the warring factions and to create a situation conducive to peace.

Thus, the decision to set up ECOMOG arose out of this, taken at the first session of the standing mediation committee held between 6-7 August 1990, at the Kairaba Conference Centre in Banjul, Gambia. The military observer group (ECOMOG), also known as "White Helmets"¹⁶ was established to keep the peace, restore law and order, and ensure that the cease-fire is respected. Its purpose was to create the necessary conditions for normal life to resume to the benefit of all Liberians, by separating the warring factions, resettling displaced civilians, and allowing humanitarian help to reach those in dire need.

Thus, the ECOMOG establishment was mainly stimulated by the Liberian crisis that began in late 1989. Though, at the onset, the war was seen as an internal problem of a sovereign nation. But it soon assumed an international dimension and escalated into a regional issue/problem as other countries began to witness a massive inflow of refugees which constituted a great threat to peace and economic well-being of the region and more so, as variants of the crisis started to show off in Sierra Leone, Guinea Bissau, and later Cote d'Ivoire.

While the UNO and OAU were tottering in their efforts at resolving the crisis, it became expedient for ECOWAS to confront the problem headlong in view of the precarious situation it may plunge the sub-region into, if not urgently addressed.¹⁷ It is noteworthy that

by the time ECOWAS was taking up this responsibility, it lacked any institutional instrument to engage in peacekeeping or mediation processes. ECOMOG, therefore, was a pioneering effort in this direction. Thus, goaded by the urgency of the situation and the inevitability of intervening in the Liberian crisis, ECOWAS instituted a Mediation Committee which comprised the representatives of Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, Mali, and Togo. The committee recommended the establishment of ECOMOG to act as an intervention force among other recommendations.

However, this was not well-pleasing to some ECOWAS members who saw it as a breach of the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of a sovereign state as enshrined in the Charter of OAU to which all members of ECOWAS subscribed.¹⁸ Eventually, ECOMOG arrived in Liberia with 3,000 soldiers donated by Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, the Gambia, and Guinea on August 24, 1990. The efforts of this force led to the resolution of the crisis, which resulted in the conduct of an internationally supervised election in 1997.

The civil war in Sierra Leone which occurred two years after the outbreak of the Liberian crisis, was the next challenge that confronted ECOMOG. It was mainly instigated by the Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF). The ECOMOG with the later support of OAU and UNO successfully brought about a peace agreement that was signed in Lome in 2001 between the RUF and the government; which was followed by the conduct of a parliamentary and presidential election that was held in May 2002.

The Third major challenge that faced ECOMOG was that of Guinea-Bissau. The conflict started on the 6th of June, 1998, when Joao Bernado, the President of Guinea-Bissau, dismissed Brigadier Ausumane Mane, the Chief of Army Staff, over an allegation of illegal trafficking in arms with the Forces Democratiques de Casamance (MFDC), which had been described as a secessionist

force. To the credit of, and at the instance of, ECOMOG, interest groups in the conflicts were brought together to negotiate a constitutional government which resulted in the conduct of parliamentary elections in the country in March 2004.¹⁹

ECOMOG's success in resolving the above crises and restoring relative peace without compromising national sovereignty pointed to the relevance and justification of the viability of effective regional response to the handling of regional crises. It also showed that the ECOMOG initiative was a welcome development. Though ECOMOG operations were received with suspicion at the onset by some nations, the success of its operations had elicited popular acceptance by its initial critics. For instance, Charles Taylor, a strong antagonist of the body at the onset and President of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) benefitted much from the operation of ECOMOG, as he was enthroned as the President of Liberia in 1997. The outstanding success of ECOMOG operations was vividly captured by Galadima thus:

ECOMOG was outstanding in Africa especially with its performance in West Africa. At no time, ever, has a regional or sub-regional economic organization executed peace keeping and peace enforcement mission as ECOMOG... ECOMOG appears to have highlighted the debate on approaches to African security and conflict management. It has become Africa's flagship in peace making and peace enforcement.²⁰

Nigeria and ECOMOG Operations and Management of Hegemonic Tendencies

As the major financier of ECOMOG and by contributing the largest number of soldiers to the force, more than that of all other countries put together,²¹ one cannot but wonder what Nigeria's foreign policy objectives are in ECOMOG. In addition, according to Akinbi and Akinola, Nigeria has

also been the provider of the commander of the Force of ECOMOG, apart from the first level force commander who was from Ghana, in the person of Lt. Gen. Arnold Quainoo. The succeeding commanders, the first being Brigadier Joshua Dongoyaro, who took over barely two months to ECOMOG operations in Liberia, hailed from Nigeria, and from that point on, the operations and personnel of ECOMOG had the full stamp of Nigeria's Control.²²

Important in Nigeria's Foreign and security policies calculus is the West African sub-region, which Nigerian foreign policymakers view as the third concentric circle of Nigeria's foreign and defense policies. Nigeria being the most industrialised and the largest market in the sub-region, acknowledges that any disorder and instability in one country can have a spill-over effect on the entire sub-region. Such a situation would be harmful to the objectives of ECOWAS of which Nigeria is a towering figure. Besides, the issue of the economy, the security imperative is also paramount. Nigerian foreign policy makers were quite aware that any protracted conflict within the sub-region as the Liberian civil war showed would attract foreign military presence to the theatre of conflict from where other states in the sub-region could be destabilized by the foreign interventionist.

It should be noted that the Nigerian government has two major concerns for spearheading the establishment and operations of ECOMOG in Liberia. One if ECOMOG had not intervened on time, the war would have spread to the neighbouring states much earlier, as it later happened when it spread to Sierra Leone and much later to the border of Cote d'Ivoire. Two, if ECOMOG had not intervened on time, other foreign interests could have come in. France, Britain, Russia, and the United States would probably have been drawn in to support and arm different factions through their proxies, thereby escalating the war as they did in Angola, Mozambique, Sudan, Somalia, South Africa, and Zaire during the Cold War era.²³ Besides the security reasons mentioned

above, ECOMOG provided Nigeria a good chance to operationalise its “vision of systemic security” which encompassed the whole West African sub-region and offered Nigeria the opportunity to actualise its claims as the leader of the sub-region.

The Nigerian military comprising the Infantry, Navy, and Air force is well equipped with corresponding manpower and technical know-how that is second to none in the West African sub-region. This has endeared Nigeria as the superpower of the sub-region and one of the contending military powers in Africa. Thus, the domination of sub-regional peacekeeping organisations like the ECOMOG.

The foregoing buttresses the fact that Nigeria qualifies to assume a hegemonic position within ECOWAS. Its immense mineral endowments and huge population estimated at about 250 million people cannot be matched by other supposedly major players in the sub-region such as Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Senegal. The Nigerian army has also been described as the most equipped in men and materials compared to those of other countries in the sub-region; while the testimony of an ECOMOG soldier affirmed that only the Nigerian army provided jets for the Liberian operation.²⁴

It has been argued that the initial failure ECOMOG recorded in Guinea Bissau due to operational setbacks in personnel and material mobilization was because the military units of Niger, Benin, Mali, Togo, and the Gambia that mobilised force for the mission were only able to muster 600 out of the expected 1500 soldiers required for the mission and partly because Nigeria initially was not involved (then).²⁵

Considering that Nigeria has a comparative advantage of size, population, and resources over many African countries, particularly within the sub-region, the country is bound to extend the hand of friendship to other less-endowed states. Thus, Nigeria endeavours to play a leadership but not imperial role.²⁶ However, Nigeria has not interpreted this concept of legal equality of

states to also mean equal capacity of states for duties and responsibilities in the international system. This perhaps explains why it was willing and able to spend much of its resources to finance its participation in ECOMOG.

Nigeria is considered a prime mover and suspect by other countries in the West African sub-region. Ogundare, indicated that some countries notably Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire have expressed reservations about Nigeria's growing influence and role in the sub-region out of fear of her domination.²⁷ Itheme also noted the concern of Nigeria's hegemonic interest by other West African countries and believed that this partly made these countries reluctant to release their personnel and materials in the expected volume for the various operations of ECOMOG.²⁸

Despite the above fear of domination by Nigeria, nursed by some West African states, the scenario painted above corroborates the fact that Nigeria has all it takes to assume hegemony in West Africa while its involvement in the operations of ECOMOG, had not presented it as a bully. To a large extent, Nigeria had conducted itself responsibly towards other members of the ECOWAS in the course of executing ECOMOG activities; though, its national-centered interests were well at stake, as far as ECOMOG operations were concerned, it did not allow that to make it arrogant in its approach to ECOMOG operations.²⁹

Nigeria's involvement in peacekeeping in West Africa through the ECOMOG mechanism has not added to the nation's socio-economic well-being in any way. Rather, it has caused untold hardship to the nation economically in terms of the loss of men, money, and materials. Nigeria expended without the possibility of any reimbursement by any international organisation or country. Nevertheless, foreign policy objectives are in two categories. Tangible and intangible. Nigeria may not have attained any tangible (especially materials) objectives, but its intangible objectives either as abstract or inspirational goals were met. This is so since

Africa has always been at the center of its foreign policy pursuits.³⁰ Its participation in ECOMOG by maintaining some semblance of peace and not allowing the state of insecurity to persist or exacerbate further than it did, helped to keep the system of the West African subregion in equilibrium, though imperfect. The point being made is that the system would have been in complete and total disequilibrium had Nigeria-led ECOMOG not intervened in those troubled spots of West Africa.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has examined, in a historical perspective, the roles of the Nigerian military in peace-keeping operations in the West African sub-region under the auspices of the ECOWAS Ceasefire Monitoring Group (ECOMOG). Specifically, the paper explored the ECOMOG operations in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea Bissau in which Nigeria's hegemonic factor or influence was evident. Nigeria's decisive involvement in these operations through the deployment of its vast human and material resources, coupled with able military capability that is second to none in the sub-region and its track record of international influence, ensured the success of ECOMOG.

Though some countries had apprehension of Nigeria's growing influence in the subregion and fear of its domination, the disposition to act of collective responsibility made the hegemony threat attributable to Nigeria in ECOMOG operations, to be tolerable to other countries in West Africa. Nigerian involvement in the operation of ECOMOG had not presented it as a bully and it has conducted itself responsibly toward other countries in the sub-region. In other words, its actions in ECOMOG operations were devoid of over-lording tendencies.

The paper argues that the ECOMOG operations would have ended in outright failure at the onset, if not for the hegemony exhibited by Nigeria. The Guinea Bissau expedition in which Nigeria was not actively involved failed at the initial stage. A

hegemonic influence displayed by Nigeria would be instrumental in pursuing to a logical conclusion conflict resolution process already put on the ground.

In light of the above submissions, and as has been indicated by other scholars, notably Akinbi and Akinola³¹, it is being recommended that the hegemony power base should be recognised and encouraged by regional, continental, and world bodies as regards facilitating their capacity to play stabilising force in the regions.

Furthermore, recognised hegemonic power should always act responsibly in the area of conflict resolution, through the mother organisations and organised bodies at the various levels, so as to confer legitimacy on their activities and remove the fear of domination by other stakeholder.

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