

The Plight of Southern Africa: Drought, Food Insecurity, Violent Unrest, Economic Instability

Southern African Development Community (SADC) Holds Summit Surrounded by Regional Challenges

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A regional summit of the heads-of-state of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) was held in late August in Mbabane, Swaziland. This was the 36th annual gathering of the organization which was founded in 1980.

King Mswati III was elected as the leader of the regional grouping which consists of 15 member-states. South African President Jacob Zuma was chosen as rotating chair and the governments of Tanzania and Angola were also elected to the rotating posts of chair and vice chair, respectively, of the SADC organs of co-operation in the domains of politics, defense and security.

This summit approved measures dealing with greater co-operation in the financial markets sector. Other actions consisted of amendments to article 3 of the protocol on commercial exchange in SADC, the accord on the materialization of the Regional Development Fund, as well as the draft agreement that amends the SADC protocol on gender and development.



Southern Africa is facing numerous difficulties in the present period with the region experiencing the worst drought in several decades. The lack of adequate water resources has resulted in power outages, a shortage of foreign exchange revenue and a decline in agricultural production.

It has been estimated that 27 million people, approximately nine percent of the sub-continental population, are food insecure as a result of the decline in the performance of the 2015-16 farming season. The El Niño-induced drought in the region is the worst in three-and-a-half decades.

The regional drought response team has developed an appeal for international assistance. SADC outgoing chairperson, President Ian Khama of Botswana, initiated the appeal to the tune of \$2.7 billion.

According to the official website of the Southern African grouping, “The SADC region is experiencing a devastating drought episode associated with the 2015/2016 El Niño event which is negatively affecting livelihoods and the quality of lives across the region. Four Member States have already declared national drought emergencies (Lesotho, Malawi, Swaziland and Zimbabwe). South Africa has declared a drought emergency in 7 of the country’s 9 provinces.” (SADC.int)

This same report goes on to note that, “Mozambique declared a 90-day institutional red alert for some southern and central areas. Member States are currently conducting their annual vulnerability assessments and results were expected in early June 2016. These results will provide the effect of drought on food and nutrition security and vulnerability situation as a whole.”

Consequently, the summit was held under the theme, ‘Resource Mobilization for Investment in Sustainable Energy Infrastructure for an Inclusive SADC Industrialization for the Prosperity

of the Region'. Prior to the convening of the heads-of-state summit the Council of Ministers received reports on the progress towards the implementation of the Regional Indicative Strategic Development Plan (RISDP). The report focused specifically on the 2016-2017 Action Plans which reviewed the implementation of decisions agreed upon since March 2016.

Council members heard analyses on the political and economic development in the region, along with the implementation of programs aimed at regional co-operation and integration, continental integration and co-operation, among others issues.

Election of Swazi King Spurs Controversy

With the ascendancy of King Mswati III as the SADC chair, a flurry of criticism was launched over the decision. Swaziland is a monarchy that has been accused of thwarting democratic practice.

The King has denied these allegations saying that the small landlocked state of 1.2 million is a democracy although the prime minister and government are chosen by the monarch.

Opposition parties in neighboring Botswana, whose government relinquished the SADC chair to Swaziland, said this "is a matter of great concern to us," according to Vice President of the Botswana Congress Party Kesitegile Gobotswang who was quoted in the Botswana Guardian stressing, "the country [Swaziland] has thus far refused to embrace the values of democracy. This is an indication that the regional body [SADC] is not committed to democratic values."

"Mswati does not qualify to hold that position at all ... he is a corrupt leader who sees nothing wrong with abusing public resources while people starve," added President of the Botswana People's Party, Motlatsi Malapis. (Swazi Media Commentary, Aug. 17)

Other Regional Problems of Instability

Three other major states in the region have been the focus of economic and political problems over the last several months. In Zimbabwe, a coalition of 18 oppositional political parties known as the National Electoral Reform Agenda (NERA), have called for the resignation of the democratically-elected government of President Robert Mugabe, the First Secretary of the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriot Front (ZANU-PF).

Violent unrest erupted in late August when protesters in the capital of Harare threw stones at police, set fire to police vehicles and looted stores. Zimbabwe has been subjected to over fifteen years of economic sanctions by Britain, the United States, European Union (EU) and other imperialist states. The opposition parties are blaming the current economic crisis exclusively on the ruling ZANU-PF party ignoring the role of sanctions and deliberate destabilization tactics carried out against the government by western countries.

In South Africa, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) is dealing with the most formidable challenge to its rule since the transition to national independence and democracy in 1994. Impacted by the drought and the decline in commodity prices prompting a drop in the values of the rand and investment bonds, the center-right opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) party and the supposed ultra-left Economic Freedom Fighters have teamed up to attack the ANC preventing the ruling organization from securing majorities in several key municipalities including Tshwane, Johannesburg and Nelson

Mandela Bay.

The ANC is also dealing with internal criticism and disaffection as elements within the party are calling for the holding of an elective conference to discuss the possibility replacing President Jacob Zuma and the National Executive Committee (NEC). A demonstration led by the ANC Youth League on September 5 attempted to deliver a memorandum to Secretary General Gwede Mantashe. The small group was prevented from getting near the entrance of Luthuli House by members of the Umkhonto We Sizwe Military Veterans Association (MKMVA) who vowed to defend the Zuma government at all costs.

Eventually Mantashe surrounded by military-clad veterans accepted the memorandum from the demonstrators. Mantashe said the process was reflective of the internal democracy inside the party while other suggested it revealed an organization in crisis.

Also at the recently-held 7th Congress of the ruling MPLA-Workers Party of Angola in Luanda, a wide-ranging discussion on the economic crisis took place. President Eduardo dos Santos was re-elected as party leader while in the aftermath of the gathering, the finance minister was removed from this portfolio within the government.

Quartz news agency said of the current economic situation inside the oil-producing state which won its national independence through a protracted armed struggle and civil war waged against U.S.-backed interests, that “Angola’s president José Eduardo dos Santos has fired the country’s finance minister, according to a statement from the government. Dos Santos gave no explanation for his Sept. 5 replacement of Armando Manuel with Archer Mangureira, the head of Angola’s Capital Markets Commission, according to Reuters.” (Sept. 6)

This publication reported as well saying “Manuel was appointed in 2013, just before the oil price tanked, and since then he has presided over an economy battered by weakened oil exports. Angolan newspapers have reported that Manuel’s replacement is directly linked to the country’s stalled talks with the International Monetary Fund over medium-term emergency funding. Mangureira, also known as Augusto Archer de Sousa Hose, was recently elected to the ruling MPLA’s central committee, bringing him closer into dos Santos’s political inner circle. He is also a familiar face to international investors.”

These developments in Southern Africa point to the necessity of closer regional integration and economic independence from the western industrialized states which have trimmed down considerably their trade in oil and other resources with the 15-member body. Until alternative sources of economic generation and vitality can be developed SADC will be plagued by further uncertainty and political instability.

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