

AFRICAN UNION LAUNCHES FIRST BILATERAL MISSION IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

by Larry Luxner

(reprinted from The Washington Diplomat, August 2007)

As the African Union's new envoy in Washington, D.C., Amina Salum Ali speaks for more than fifty countries — fifty-three, to be exact. It would have been fifty-four, had Morocco not formally withdrawn from the African Union's predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), in 1984 to protest the inclusion of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic — which Morocco claims as its own.

“They decided to pull out because we want Saharawi to attain self-determination,” Ambassador Ali explained without further clarification. The African Union's permanent representative here, who carries the title of ambassador, clearly prefers to stress unity over discord, cooperation over controversy. After all, the African Union's self-stated mission is “to build an integrated Africa, a prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens and representing a dynamic force in the international arena.” Eventually, the African Union also hopes to have a single, integrated defense force for all of Africa, as well as a European Union-styled common market and even a single currency. That's a tall order for an impoverished continent of almost nine hundred million people chronically plagued by civil war, malnutrition, corruption, overpopulation and AIDS.

Perhaps nobody's better suited for the job than Ambassador Ali, a lifelong Tanzanian civil servant and politician who was born and raised on the island of Zanzibar and educated in India, where in 1979 she earned a bachelor's degree in economics, and two years later a master's in business administration in marketing. She's also held various titles within the Tanzanian government, most recently as a minister of state for the chief minister's office in Zanzibar. “It is an honor and privilege for me to serve as the African Union's first woman ambassador,” she told The Washington Diplomat. “Being a woman really shows another face of Africa. It illustrates how Africa is committed to promoting women's rights and how sensitive we are on women's and children's issues.”

Ambassador Ali, fifty years of age, joins at least half a dozen other African women currently representing their countries in Washington, D.C., who include: Angola's Josefina Perpetua Pitra Diakite, Congo's Faïda Mitifu, Lesotho's Molelekeng Ernestina Rapolaki, Malawi's Hawa Ndilowe, Niger's Aminata Maïga Djibrilla, and Zambia's Inonge Lewanika. The African Union, with its green-and-white flag and five official languages (English, French, Portuguese, Arabic and Swahili), came into being in July 2002 in Durban, South Africa, as a successor to the old OAU, which was established in 1963.

Likewise, the African Union's Washington mission has been functioning since last October with six employees — and is the international body's first bilateral mission anywhere outside of Africa. Officially inaugurated on July 11th, 2007, the African Union mission is temporarily located at an office building on I Street, although the organization hopes to move into its permanent home soon: a stand-alone embassy fronting Massachusetts Avenue along Embassy Row. “We have identified a property and are now awaiting clearance from the U.S. State Department and Addis Ababa,” said Ambassador Ali, referring to the Ethiopia capital where the African Union is based. Both South Africa and Libya vied to

have the new African Union headquartered in their countries, though in the end Ethiopia won out because it was also the home of the Organization of African Unity.

Asked what the difference is between the African Union and the old Organization of African Unity — which was widely criticized as a “dictator’s club”, that did little to advance the rights and liberties of African citizens — Ambassador Ali launched into a history lesson. “Ethiopia was the only country in Africa which was never colonized, so because of that, in 1963, Emperor Haile Selassie established the Organization of African Unity in Addis Ababa,” she explained. “At that time, the focus was more on liberation. That’s why we had liberation committees, and discussions were all based on how to help other countries attain their independence.

“But by 2000, the thrust of our history had changed. By then, most African countries had successfully achieved independence and the issue now became integration, the removal of poverty, and engaging with the rest of the world. So we thought we should change the organization to reflect that and really steer Africa toward integration.” As the African Union’s envoy here in America, Ambassador Ali interacts on four levels: (a) with Congress, (b) with the White House, (c) with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organization of American States (OAS), and finally (d) with African Embassies. “We’ll be acting like a secretariat to them,” she noted.

In addition to disseminating information about the African Union’s activities, Ambassador Ali said her mission will also consist of “informing American popular opinion about Africa, the African Union and key issues of concern, as well as to counter, when necessary, media distortions of developments and events in Africa.” In its short history, the African Union has held nine annual summits, the most recent one in Ghana last month. It has also intervened militarily in various countries in support of democracy, including Togo, Mauritania, Cote D’Ivoire, the Comoros Islands and Somalia. But the biggest crisis of all, according to Ambassador Ali, is the ongoing Darfur conflict in Sudan, which began in February 2003 and has claimed as many as 450,000 lives, according to the United Nation’s estimates.

“We are really working hard to see that Darfur will have peace and that things will settle down,” said Ambassador Ali, who is careful not to call the current situation in Darfur “genocide” – as have the Bush administration and various other governments around the world. Ambassador Ali said that the African Union currently has 7,000 troops in Sudan, mainly from Rwanda and Nigeria, but that it is expensive to maintain them. “The African Union is an institution backed by member countries. We have our own commission, and this commission has done a lot of good work since its inception,” she said. “What we need is financial and technical support. We need funds for specific peacekeeping operations. You need money to put armies in another country,” she added, declining to say how much in dollars the African Union is seeking because the number is “confidential”.

“We are very much involved in Darfur, but there are problems. Some rebel groups did not sign the [recent peace] agreement,” she said. “Sudan is a member of the African Union, so we have our own system to deal with these issues. We don’t want to blame anybody, and we don’t support sanctions. We believe it’s too early to talk about sanctions. It’s not the right solution. We would like the mechanisms in place to take effect, and for the United Nations to continue its operations.” Asked why

international sanctions were effective in ending South Africa's apartheid regime but wouldn't work in the case of Sudan, Ambassador Ali retorted that "you cannot compare South Africa with Sudan."

First of all, she said, "If you want to sanction Sudan, you have to take several things under consideration. South Africa was a state-sponsored apartheid system that undermined humanity. But in Sudan, it's not only a political problem, it's economic too. Secondly, there's no question of punishing anybody. The government has accepted all of the conditions to have hybrid forces to allow reconnaissance. The situation is not as it used to be. Now, what we need to do is help the United Nations implement the decision to deploy hybrid forces."

Another African hotspot is Zimbabwe — once a prosperous food-exporting nation and now one of the continent's worst economic nightmares. Many accuse Zimbabwe's embattled president, Robert Mugabe, of creating the situation to hold onto absolute power, although here again, Ambassador Ali refuses to blame anyone in particular. "We have supported Mr. Mugabe's stance in terms of negotiating with the opposition," she said. "Just because the U.S. says something doesn't mean that it is correct."

Ambassador Ali said that the African Union is following South African President Thabo Mbeki's lead on this issue, pointing out that the Southern African Development Community (SADC) "wants to create an environment whereby Mbeki could continue to assist the Zimbabwe government in talking with the opposition." Not every country in Africa is in crisis. In 2007, according to Ambassador Ali, the economics of Sub-Saharan African countries as a group will grow around 4.5 percent, with some countries — notably Tanzania, Kenya and Uganda — growing by more than 6 percent. One bright spot, she said, is China's recent investments in African infrastructure and raw materials. "China currently has programs in Ghana, Tanzania and other countries, and they're helping to finance seaports, railroad lines and other projects," she explained. "Let's look to China in terms of trade and investment opportunities. We believe the Chinese are good friends for Africa."

Interestingly, Ambassador Ali said she's not worried at all that China — with its voracious appetite for oil, coal, uranium, timber and precious metals — might be exploiting Africa for cheap labor or access to minerals. "We are not concerned specifically about China exploiting Africa," she said. "You don't have to single out China, but rather the international economic order whereby we're the supplier, but we don't get fair prices for our commodities. That is why we are participating in the WTO [World Trade Organization]. We want to see changes so that African countries can access the world market and get better prices."

Ambassador Ali said she also wants to see changes in the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which was enacted by Congress in 2000 to offer preferential market access for African exports. But as it stands, she said, the legislation doesn't do most African countries much good. "AGOA was a very strategic decision for the American government. It really opens the door to African commodities, but we believe that we need more concessions under AGOA." Specifically, Ambassador Ali complained that agriculture exports such as sugar, cotton and coffee aren't covered by AGOA, which instead stresses non-traditional products like apparel and textiles. "Not many of our countries produce textiles, so not many countries are actually benefiting from AGOA because they don't have the capacity to produce."

Note: Larry Luxner is news editor for The Washington Diplomat