

REGIONAL AFFAIRS

Africa

New Union and New Convention

On 9 July, 53 Heads of State, meeting in Durban, South Africa, initiated the African Union (AU) together with a Peace and Security Council, launched in the hope that it can assist in averting war, reducing poverty and strengthening the continent's new democracies.

The Union takes the place of the discredited Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and is modelled on the European Union. Like the EU, it plans to have a series of institutions such as a pan-African parliament, a court of justice, an African bank and at some future point, a single currency. The Council will also give African countries the authority to intervene in national conflicts. By choosing the EU as a model, the States say that for the first time African countries promise to adhere to the principles of democracy, the rule of law, transparent and accountable government and respect for human rights.

Thabo Mbeki, South Africa's President and the AU's first Chairman, said that 'the people of our continent have made the ultimate statement that Africa must unite for a better life for all of the peoples of our continent.' Some delegates drew comparisons between a devastated post-war Europe and its progress since then. However, the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan cautioned optimistic delegates 'to be careful not to mistake hope for achievement'. He noted that Africa, compared to post-1945 Europe, faces a more difficult and longer path to real unity. The enormity of some of these problems is dealt with in the article on the African Environment Outlook, discussed on the following page.

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Similar to the fate of the Organisation itself, the OAU's hallmark environmental agreement, the 1968 African Convention on the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources, also known as the Algiers Convention, is also to be revamped. Assisted by legal experts from the International Union for

the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the OAU Secretariat prepared a draft revised text of the Convention which takes into account the developments in environment and treaty law of the past thirty years. The draft was considered, amended and approved by a Meeting of Governmental Experts convened by the OAU in Nairobi in January 2002. It was hoped that it could be signed by AU Member States as a side event of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held at Johannesburg, 26 August – 6 September 2002.

The draft was forwarded in June 2002 by the OAU to the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN) for consideration at its Ninth Session, in Kampala, Uganda (4-5 July 2002). The meeting requested the AU to conclude the process of international negotiations, to take place as soon as possible, while also requesting Parties who had not yet provided comments to do so in order to enrich and expedite the process. Confident that the remaining points could be ironed out speedily, AMCEN requested "the African Union to report on the steps being taken to update the Convention at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg."

Following this, the OAU Council of Ministers who met immediately prior to the constitutive meeting of the African Union in Durban (28 June -6 July 2002) endorsed the revision and recommended that the text be forwarded to the Assembly of Heads of State and Government for adoption. Yet, because of the remaining uncertainties, the subject was not tabled for the agenda of the Meeting of Heads of State and Government. Thus, opening the revised African Convention for signature in Johannesburg became impossible, and formal adoption of the revised Convention can, at the earliest, take place at the next AU Summit which is tentatively scheduled for June 2003. 