THE GAMBIA/SENEGAL

Regional Cooperation Falters

DAKAR, SENEGAL – The confederation of the Senegambia, which rose from the ashes of a failed coup attempt in The Gambia in 1981, has crumbled amid ill-concealed acrimony between the tiny former British colony and the larger, French speaking Senegal.

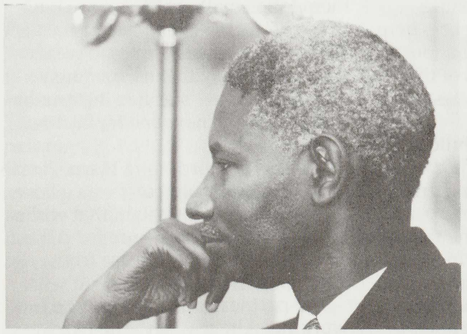
The confederation was officially formed in 1982 after Senegalese troops moved into The Gambia to crush a coup bid against the Banjul government of Alhadji Sir Dawda Jawara. The coup – or uprising as some of its supporters called it – was led by a young Marxist revolutionary, Kukoi Samba Sanyang. Sir Dawda, who was away in London when the strike was made, invoked a defense pact between the two countries. Senegalese officials, horrified by the prospect of a left-wing regime in The Gambia, hastily came to Jawara's support.

The most visible and practical aspect of the confederation was defense cooperation: the Senegalese trained confederal battalions which were based in Banjul and helped to train a Gambian army. Prior to the coup attempt, Gambia had had only a paramilitary 'field force'. Apart from the successful military cooperation, though, the confederation existed more on paper than in practice. Confederal institutions such as a parliament and joint council of ministers met regularly but took few concrete actions.

The prospect of integrating the two countries had been attractive to Senegal officials long before the coup attempt. The small finger of territory that is The Gambia follows the course of the Gambia River and is completely surrounded by Senegal except for a small coastal strip. A story circulating here says that The Gambia's peculiar shape was dictated by the distance a cannon could be fired from gunboats sent up the river by British colonial invaders. The geographical absurdity of the result is seen by the Senegalese as a thorn in their national flesh, particularly as there is widespread smuggling of goods from The Gambia into Senegal which, says Dakar, undermines Senegal's manufacturing base.

Gambian officials were always less keen on merger, even as they relied on Senegal's military strength. Officially English speaking and with their own state institutions, Gambian leaders were always wary of Senegalese intentions.

On the community level, there have seldom been problems between ordinary Gambians and Senegalese, both of whom speak African languages such as Wollof or Dioula and who have always carried on more or less as if the the peculiar border between them were not there. But on the state level, tensions have persisted. The Gambia practices a liberal import policy with low tariff barriers. The Senegalese have relatively high tariffs with the professed aim of protecting local manufacturing plants. The inevitable result of this disparity between neighbors was smuggling from the Gambia into Senegal. Indeed, apart from tourism, economists estimate that The Gambian economy sinks or floats on the proceeds of this lucrative illicit trade.



Tami Hultman/Africa News

Senegal's president Abdou Diouf has faced a number of challenges this year, including tensions with both The Gambia and nothern neighbor Mauritania.

To stem the smuggling and harmonize the two economies, Senegal applied pressure for a joint trade zone between the two states. But the Gambian government, fearing a threat to its jealously-guarded sovereignty, stalled on the point of economic integration. In August, Senegalese frustration at the Gambians unwillingness to make the confederation work on a practical level boiled over when Sir Dawda Jawara wrote to Senegal's President Abdou Diouf complaining that it was unfair for a Senegalese to be permanent president of the confederation while the Gambian leader was permanent vice president. He asked that the confederal presidency be alternated annually.

Although the request might seem logical on the face of it, the Senegalese thought the request amounted to massive ingratitude on the part of Sir Dawda. They argued that not only had they put him back in power after the coup attempt, but they had also paid the lion's share of the cost of confederal institutions and troops and were continuing to lose massive amounts of potential customs revenue as well. For the leader of a tiny country in their midst to ask for equal status with Diouf was seen in Dakar as the height of unreasonableness.

In response, Senegal unilaterally withdrew three hundred soldiers who had been based in Banjul, prompting a complaint by Sir Dawda that he had not been informed of the move. Now, in a stinging speech on the confederation, Diouf has called the institutions of the Senegambia a waste of time and money. Although he proposes 'freezing' the Senegambia experiment, the tone of his remarks leaves little doubt that the death knell of the confederation has been sounded.

Both countries say they will continue their 'privileged' bilateral relations, but no amount of diplomatic language will hide the fact that, once again, the self interest of two small states in a balkanized Africa have triumphed over the wider interests symbolized by regional cooperation.

– Mark Doyle

UGANDA

Lurching Towards Peace

MUKURA, UGANDA – Hundreds of villagers in this tiny railway station community in eastern Uganda stood stony-faced recently, listening to President Yoweri Museveni apologize for the deaths of 69 young people from the area two and a half months ago. Museveni admitted that troops from the National Resistance Army (NRA) had been responsible for the incident while on a mission against anti-government guerrillas in the east African nation. The young people died of suffocation after being herded into closed boxcars on the railway line, which has been unused since guerrillas began attacking the trains more than a year ago.

In a somber speech preceded and followed by dirges, the president reiterated an earlier promise to punish NRA offenders who are being held under arrest.

For many Ugandans, the mid-July killings were one more blow, in a country that has known little peace since the reign of terror began by Idi Amin in 1971. But Museveni's personal appearance in Mukuru is seen as both an attempt to placate bereaved families and to repair his own frayed human rights reputation.

What is already being called the Mukuru massacre is regarded by Western diplomats in Kampala, Uganda's capital, as one of the most disturbing actions by the Ugandan military since it began its three-year campaign against guerrilla opponents.

The conflict stems partly from persistent regional differences, with widespread fears in the north and east of economic and political dominence by southerners. Museveni, whose basis of support is in the south, has been only partly successful at creating an inclusive government. In addition, Uganda still suffers from a general breakdown of order and institutions in the wake of Amin's rule.

The London-based Amnesty International has periodically called attention to what it says are instances of rights abuses. In northern Uganda, stories have surfaced of NRA soldiers locking people in grass thatched huts before setting them on fire and of burning crops in a scorched earth policy designed to deny food to government opponents. There is also criticism of detentions without trial of suspected rebels from the war zone.

Museveni's visit to Mukura was the third time in a month that the killings have received prominent government attention. Twelve days after the incident was reported internationally, Army Commander, Major General Salim Saleh acknowledged the deaths. "It may be criminal negligence or mass murder," said the army chief, who is also the president's younger brother. "Someone will have to die for this."

Subsequently, Museveni summoned Mukura-area representatives of the National Resistance Council, the Ugandan parliament, to a meeting where he placed them at the head of joint civilian/military committees which will be in charge of supervising the drive against rebel forces. And the presidential appearance at Mukuru was part of a larger tour of the northern and eastern regions to dramatize what the government is calling "the end of the rebellion".

But the response of the Mukura villagers is an indication that the government still has some way to go before winning their confidence. According to survivors, some of whom were in the crowd for Museveni's speech, the deaths on June 12 and 13 were a culmination of weeks of harassment by government troops in their dragnet operation against guerrillas.

Samsoni Okurut says peasants in his nearby village of Agirigiroi were rounded up on July 5 and marched to an abandoned primary school where they were beaten before being marched to Makuru. He says other groups of villagers who were forced to converge on the railway center had similar stories. Most said they had been rounded up in the early mornings when they went to cultivate their fields. Finally, the survivors say, they were crammed into the railway cars. When people began to faint and vomit in the hot, airless compartments, older people were removed, but the others, some as young as 12 years old, were left to die.

The Mukuru incident, Museveni told the crowd at the station, did not happen on instructions of the military High Command, which the president chairs. "It was a mistake whose cause will be found," he says.

Alibina Agayo, whose teenage son was one of the victims, was unconvinced. "Is it a mistake," she asked, "to lock people in a windowless thing like that for days?"

Tutska Nagata/World Bank

Ugandan officials are trying to revive economic ventures, such as this tea plantation that have been disrupted by war.

Local people also chaffed at Museveni's sometimes hectoring tone in the speech. "You should stop banditry," he warned, "so that we stop movement of soldiers." And he accused villagers of having an "ambivalent" attitude towards the government's dealings with the rebels – a charge that echoed earlier government complaints that guerrillas are shielded by local supporters.

In practice, villagers often find themselves caught between the warring armies. Depending on the situation, both the rebels and the NRA have acted against local populations for allegedly helping the other side. The result is people who feel helpless to alter their plight.

Although Museveni is advising peasants to leave areas of conflict, those around Mukuru say they have nowhere to go where they can expect to find food and shelter. So, they say, they hope the government's announcements that the rebellion is over turn out to be more than politicians' mouthings.

– Ikebesi Omoding