

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE UNTIL 7 AUGUST 1995  
AI INDEX : AFR 01/05/95

AFRICA REGION: SADC SUMMIT COULD BE CRUCIAL FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE REGION

Southern Africa could soon see the creation of an independent regional commission to promote, monitor and enforce human rights, and mechanisms to prevent and resolve conflict in ways which protect human rights.

These proposals are on the agenda of the summit of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) being held in South Africa later this month, according to the human rights organization Amnesty International. But Amnesty International fears that the proposals may be in danger of being sidelined because some within SADC have lost confidence in them.

"These proposals were endorsed at last year's SADC summit in Botswana and would be a bold step forward if they were implemented, putting the organization at the forefront of promoting human rights in Africa," Amnesty International said.

The SADC summit should also demonstrate its collective commitment to regional human rights protection by calling upon member states to ratify all international human rights treaties without delay, the organization said.

Amnesty International urged SADC leaders to make a public commitment at their forthcoming summit on 25-28 August in Johannesburg to follow through on human rights proposals, known as the "Windhoek Resolutions", which were the result of an important SADC Workshop in Namibia in July 1994.

The Windhoek Resolutions propose setting up a SADC Human Rights Commission; creating a new "sector" within SADC to cover conflict resolution and political cooperation; and expanding the Committee of Foreign Affairs Ministers' mandate for preventing, mediating and resolving conflicts within Southern Africa.

"The idea of setting up regional mechanisms for protecting human rights and placing human rights at the heart of conflict prevention and conflict resolution came originally from within SADC itself," Amnesty International said. "It would be a big step backwards if the proposals were now to be shelved because some within SADC appear to have cold feet."

Government ministers responsible for foreign affairs, defence, security and the police, along with representatives of political parties and non-governmental organizations, agreed the Windhoek Resolutions and submitted them to last year's SADC summit in Botswana, where they were endorsed.

Amnesty International expressed concern at reports that a number of governments in the region are proposing to establish a separate Association of Southern African States (ASAS) as the political arm of SADC. Some advocates of ASAS reportedly intend it to operate as an informal

"club" of SADC leaders in the mould of the now-defunct Frontline States (FLS) and see it as a means of defeating more far-reaching initiatives on human rights and conflict resolution such as those contained within the Windhoek Resolutions.

"Amnesty International has no view on whether human rights protection and conflict resolution are better dealt with by SADC or by a new and separate organization such as ASAS. But we believe that the 1994 Windhoek Resolutions must not be replaced by other, weaker proposals. We call upon the SADC summit to affirm that this will not happen," the organization said.

Amnesty International also called upon the SADC leaders to demonstrate their commitment to regional human rights protection by passing a resolution at the summit committing all member states to ratify the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights by the end of 1996.

"Such a regional ratification program would be an appropriate way to mark the 10th anniversary of the Charter, which came into force in 1986," the human rights organization said.

ENDS/