

POMP REDUX

AU opening ceremony: Focus on fighting terrorism, free trade, Tigray aftermath

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Opening ceremony of the AU's 42nd Ordinary Session of the Executive Council summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on 15 February 2023 (photo: @igadsecretariat)

The opening ceremony of the 36th African Union Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia began on a high note with the usual pomp and chaos on Wednesday, as leaders looked to discuss combatting terrorism amidst the rising instability across the continent.

While the official theme of the summit in 2023 is “The Year of AfCFTA: Acceleration of the African Continental Free Trade Area Implementation”; the unofficial theme is undoubtedly, “African solutions to African problems” – a slogan echoed by many during this year’s opening to the political summit.

With rising instability across the continent, **the AU will be conferring a number of regions**, including the Lake Chad Basin area, as well as “unconstitutional changes of government” incited by recurrent military coups and ambitions of third-termism as seen in both Senegal and Central African Republic.

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Antonio Pedro, Acting Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), highlighted the economic strain on the continent caused by Covid-19 and the ongoing war in Ukraine.

“Even when Africa appears as a shining light with **economic growth of 3.9% in 2023 and 2024**, higher than many other regions, it isn’t high enough to compensate for the losses experienced in the past three years,” said Pedro.

The ECA hopes that AfCFTA will facilitate “increased intra-Africa trade”, and thereby contribute to a growing concern for African “self-sufficiency” post-pandemic.

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H.E. Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the AU Commission, praised the organisation for following through with its catchphrase “African solutions to African problems” by prioritising health and nutrition across the continent and establishing greater food and medicine production capacities, due to soon be realised as the African Medicines Agency (AMA) in Rwanda.

Will it stick?

A statement by Ethiopia’s Deputy Prime Minister Demeke Mekonnen did not shy away from addressing the country’s ongoing war in the Tigray region, as he celebrated the signing of the Peace Agreement in November 2022.

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Since the signing, President Abiy Ahmed has been seen in Europe, **signing various cooperation agreements** and deals designed to rehabilitate the country following international criticism of his handling of the Tigray war.

Mekonnen added that the government has continued expediting humanitarian aid to the regions most affected by the consequences of the conflict, as humanitarian organisations and western NGOs previously denied entry have now been increasingly permitted into the north of the country.

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While this has been recognised by organisations such as the UN, it is clear a longer-term solution is needed to help the 2.3 million Ethiopians currently displaced within the country. High Commissioner of the UNHCR, Flippo Grande said last week, “much more needs to be done to support the reconstruction and recovery efforts in the Afar, Amhara and Tigray regions.”

“This will be critical to improve their living conditions and **work towards lasting solutions**, including voluntary returns to their communities.”

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“We have been making a plea to the international community to obtain UN resources,” Mahamat echoed this in his speech.

High on the agenda this week should also be the Union’s African Humanitarian Agency (AfHA), a project long in the making, with heads of state expected to ratify which country is set to host the initial headquarters of the organisation.

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