

African Union urged to give observer status to Somaliland

Agence France Presse

May 23, 2006

NAIROBI

The African Union should name a special envoy to ease tensions between Somalia and the breakaway republic of Somaliland and grant the northern enclave limited recognition, an influential think tank said Tuesday.

The Brussels-based Crisis Group said poor and worsening ties between anarchic Somalia's largely powerless transitional government and Somaliland authorities risked the spread of violence now engulfing Somalia proper.

The dispute "will become an increasing source of friction, and possibly violence, unless the African Union engages in preventive diplomacy," it said in a report.

"This dispute has gone beyond the stage where we can ignore it or wish it away" it said. "The challenge to the AU is not whether it should become engaged, but how."

The Crisis Group called for the pan-African body to appoint a special envoy to look into all "legal, security and political dimensions of the dispute and offer options for solutions within six months."

"Pending final resolution of the dispute, Somaliland should be granted interim observer status at the AU," it said, noting that this would allow Somalilanders a seat at the table in any AU discussions about its future.

A former British protectorate, Somaliland united with the Italian colony in the south in 1960 but it unilaterally broke away from the rest of Somalia in 1991 after the ouster of strongman Mohamed Siad Barre in Mogadishu.

As Somalia proper degenerated into lawlessness of the kind seen in recent deadly battles between Islamic militia and a US-backed warlord alliance in the capital, Somaliland, has remained relatively peaceful.

Although its appeals for international recognition have gone ignored, it has held several elections deemed to have been free and fair and built up many institutions of statehood from its self-declared capital in Hargeisa.

Somaliland, which adopted a provisional constitution in 1997 and ratified its four years later, now boasts its own president, government, parliament, police force, penal code and currency.

Its officials have fiercely rejected any suggestion of re-uniting with Somalia proper and have repeatedly sought legitimacy as a sovereign state.

However, the transitional Somali government is fiercely opposed to any kind of legal or diplomatic recognition for Somaliland and some analysts believe that such a step could further destabilize the shattered Horn of Africa state.