

Africa plans joint defence force

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Africa's defence chiefs have agreed that by 2010 the continent should have a stand-by force that will intervene to prevent genocide.

The force will act in conflicts such as that engulfing Ituri, in north-east Democratic Republic of Congo. An estimated 50,000 people have died there in fighting between the minority Hema ethnic group and the majority Lendu.

The chairperson of the meeting, South African chief of staff General Simpiwe Nyanda, specifically said that was the kind of problem the future force could deal with.

If the timetable is stuck to, the African Union will be ready to get involved in such crises within seven years.

The force will fall under the AU's peace and security council which, when established, will be able to sanction intervention in places where genocide is suspected, without reference to the country involved.

However, the military officials at the meeting recognised that there was a long way to go before such action was likely.

Stand-by brigades

The agreed plan envisages the establishment of regionally based stand-by brigades, where each country initially pledges soldiers and logistical support to the United Nations and later to African Union observer missions.

It is hoped that from these brigades an AU peacekeeping force will be constituted, and thereafter an intervention force will be formed.

AU officials stress that this does not constitute the establishment of an African defence force. The soldiers will remain under the command of their individual countries until such time as the continental body takes charge of a specific mission.

They will eventually return to their countries when that mission is over.

If all goes to plan, this will be the first step towards enabling Africa to

avoid always having to rely on the international community to solve its problems.