

Despotic cloud hangs over summit

The prospect of an unwelcome visit by Zimbabwe's leader is already upsetting preparations for December's EU-Africa summit. Judith Crosbiereports

IT MAY be five months away but already the EU-Africa summit is causing controversy. The possibility of Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe, the EU's pariah, coming to Lisbon for the summit (8-9 December) has begun to grab headlines. Portugal, holder of the EU presidency, is treading a fine line on this delicate issue. On the one hand, the Portuguese government does not want to deny an invitation to the elected leader of Zimbabwe thereby creating anger among other African states and putting the summit in jeopardy, on the other hand, it wants to avoid divisions within the EU.

EU sanctions against Mugabe and senior Zimbabwean government officials mean that they cannot travel to the Union's member states. But exceptions can be made. Zimbabwe's regime is accused of electoral fraud, violence against the political opposition and of crippling the economy through a severe land redistribution programme. Inflation is out of control and the economy is currently taking another hit because of a recent law ordering firms to cut their prices. Hundreds of businesses have been fined for violating the law, which has caused stampedes and panic-buying among impoverished Zimbabweans.

Portugal says it has yet to decide on a format for inviting African leaders. One option, inviting a limited number of leaders representing African regions, could get the presidency out of a sticky situation. But there appears to be a growing consensus among EU

states that no matter how unpalatable Mugabe's presence might be, the more important issue is that the summit takes place. Both continents have had to wait seven years since the last summit took place. A summit scheduled for 2003 never happened precisely because of Mugabe. "We are making sure the summit doesn't get overshadowed by Mugabe," said one diplomat.

The presidency and the European Commission have ambitious designs on the summit, saying that they want to move beyond the "donor-recipient relationship of the past" and onto a "partnership of equals", according to a recent paper by the Commission. The core of the summit's agenda will be a joint EU-Africa strategy focused on energy, migration and climate change.

The impetus for this shift in focus appears obvious. "The relationship between Africa and Europe has changed fundamentally largely because of globalisation. In the past the EU used to be the privileged partner but now Africa has new partners - China, India, Brazil. Because of the huge demand for resources, the way Europe deals with Africa has to change," said one diplomat.

"There is a threat of Europe missing the boat," said John Kotsopoulos, a policy analyst at the European Policy Centre. "We are already seeing evidence of it where other countries are going into Africa with softer money and with none of the conditions or high



principles that the EU comes along with," he added.

Some non-governmental organisations fear that this change in strategy could mean the traditional issues that the EU has focused on in Africa - development aid, boosting health and education - will be ignored.

But Kotsopoulos said that while there were two facets to the EU interests in Africa, it was unfair to say that its principles would be abandoned. "The EU has shown itself as a fairly responsible actor and has to work by consensus. The EU likes soft power," he added.

The EU still has an interest in addressing the broader picture in Africa not least because some of the continent's problems quickly become the EU's. EU troops have been deployed in parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Ivory Coast and Liberia, while Darfur and Somalia are

occupying European diplomats.

One of the ways the EU sees to address these problems - and one of the points that will be stressed at the summit and in the strategy - is through a strengthened African Union. The organisation is in some ways trying to emulate what the EU does and has developed similar institutions: a Commission, a Peace and Security Council and a proposed Court of Justice.

But while these developments are positive, the African Union's ability to solve the continent's problems is a long way off, said Kotsopoulos. "It has very limited resources, it's not a big organisation and is not very well co-ordinated yet... There definitely should be a focus on the African Union but the EU should be wary of expecting too much," he added.

A "grand debate on a union government", which

set out plans for a United States of Africa, was held at last week's African Union summit (1-3 July) in Ghana but failed to set a timetable for integration. This was taken as a signal that many African leaders have far too divergent views to speak with one voice and are not yet willing to surrender sovereignty.

In the end the EU-Africa summit could well get hijacked by an issue far more potent than that of Robert Mugabe. The Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), the trade deals currently being negotiated between the EU and six regions among the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) states, are scheduled to be signed by the end of the year. Some ACP countries fear the consequences of the EPAs, since they will involve liberalisation of markets and reductions in import tariffs. "If I were on the African side I

would see the summit as an excellent time to get final concessions," said an EU diplomat.

"If the EU shows that it can listen and concentrate on issues that matter to Africa and not just its own priorities, the summit will help bind our two continents together. But if this doesn't happen there is a danger it will be overshadowed by disagreements over trade and other external events," said Luis Morago, head of Oxfam International's Brussels office.

But ironically many EU officials see the EPAs as the real way to bring about an equal partnership with Africa. "If the relationship is always about aid and is concentrated in social sectors rather than economic interests we will only have a donor-recipient relationship and there will never be a real partnership," the EU diplomat added.

Previous EU-Africa summits

The first EU-Africa summit took place in Cairo in 2000 and, similar to this year's, was set up in the hope that the two continents could move beyond their post-colonial relationship. Debt relief was high on the agenda for African leaders while EU leaders debated a new package of sanctions against Zimbabwe's government in the weeks leading up to the summit. The next summit was scheduled to take place



in April 2003 but the issue of the attendance of Robert Mugabe (see above) proved too much of a divisive point.

African leaders said that they would stay away unless Mugabe was invited while many EU leaders said that they would not attend the summit if the Zimbabwean president was present.

Just two months before the summit was due to open in Lisbon it was postponed indefinitely.

Mugabe did however travel to Europe in February of that year - as part of a France-Africa summit.

EU sanctions against the Zimbabwean government, which were renewed, did not come into effect until after Mugabe attended the summit, during which then French president Jacques Chirac greeted his Zimbabwean counterpart with a frosty handshake (pictured).

The African Union

The aim of the African Union (AU) is to promote political and economic integration among its 53 member states.

In 2001 it succeeded the Organisation of African Unity, which was disbanded for being ineffective.

Its institutions include: a pan-African parliament; the assembly of the AU, made up of the 53 heads of state; the AU commission, comprising ten commissioners; the executive

council, comprising ministers appointed by governments; a permanent representatives committee, similar to the EU's COREPER; and a peace and security council, modelled on the United Nations Security Council, which can monitor and intervene in conflicts.

There are also a number of specialised committees which examine issues such as agriculture, trade, customs, energy, transport



and education.

An African Court of Justice is to be set up to rule on human rights abuses and is expected to merge with the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Controversial issues include Morocco's non-membership, because of the membership of Western Sahara as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, and human rights abuses in Zimbabwe.