ECOWAS, AU Seal New Pact to Operationalize African Standby Force

The Economic Community of West African States, ECOWAS, has signed a new Memorandum of Understanding, MoU, with the African Union and other regional blocs to operationalize the African Standby Force, ASF, as Africa pushes for faster and better-coordinated responses to conflicts and emergencies. The agreement was signed on October 3, 2026, in New Alamein, Egypt, during the 5th AU Regional Knowledge Exchange High-Level Platform on the ASF, held on the margins of the 8th AU Mid-Year Coordination Meeting. ECOWAS Commission President, General Birame Diop, signed on behalf of the West African bloc. Other signatories are the African Union, the Economic Community of Central African States, ECCAS, the North African Regional Capability, NARC, and the Southern African Development Community, SADC. Together with the Eastern African Standby Force, they make up the five regional components of the continental ASF architecture.

The pact is designed to clarify how the AU and Regional Economic Communities, RECs, and Regional Mechanisms, RMs, will collaborate in preparing, mandating, deploying and managing forces after deployment under the ASF framework. The ASF is not a permanent army in one location. It is a continent-wide arrangement built around multidisciplinary capabilities – military, police and civilian personnel – contributed and maintained by member states and regional organizations for rapid deployment when authorized by the AU Peace and Security Council.



Its legal foundation is the 2002 Protocol establishing the Peace and Security Council, whose Article 13 provides for standby multidisciplinary contingents to enable the Council to undertake peace-support missions and intervention in grave circumstances. The force is mandated to undertake observation and monitoring, peace-support operations, conflict prevention, peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance and intervention in line with AU legal instruments.

Its five pillars are the ECOWAS Standby Force, ECCAS Standby Force, Eastern African Standby Force, NARC Standby Force and SADC Standby Force. The significance of the Egypt agreement lies not in creating a new force, but in setting clearer rules for using existing capabilities and defining responsibilities between Addis Ababa and the regions. AU Commission Chairperson, Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, described the MoU as a major step in strengthening Africa's collective peace and security system, saying it will help formally incorporate deployments undertaken by RECs into the ASF architecture while strengthening subsidiarity, interoperability, African ownership and legitimacy. It also addresses a long-standing gap where regional organizations had developed their own capabilities and undertaken operations without a coherent continental authorization and coordination framework. Under the new arrangement, regional standby forces can be mandated by the AU for peace-support operations and complex emergencies.

The signing follows years of negotiations. In February 2026, the AU Assembly adopted the MoU and directed the Commission to accelerate its signing and operationalization, and endorsed the completion of the ASF Strategic Review focused on readiness, interoperability and sustainable financing. The AU Peace and Security Council has since listed outstanding issues to be resolved, including implementation guidelines, decision-making procedures, financing and reimbursement, strategic airlift, logistics, interoperability and regional readiness. Financing remains the most persistent challenge. The Council and the AU's May 2026 assessment both stressed that having troops pledged is not enough. Operations require transportation, communications, equipment, logistics, command-and-control, sustained funding and political will to deploy. The AU has linked operationalization of the ASF to predictable funding, including through UN Security Council Resolution 2719, which provides a framework for UN assessed contributions to eligible AU-led peace operations.

For ECOWAS, the pact is particularly relevant. The regional body already has a standby force structure and a long history of peace interventions in West Africa. In September 2026, the Chief of Staff of the ECOWAS Standby Force visited Nigeria's Chief of Defence Staff, underscoring ongoing military coordination. For General Diop, who assumed office as ECOWAS Commission President in August 2026 succeeding Omar Alieu Touray, the signing places the new leadership directly within the continent's push for stronger coordination. The urgency behind the push was highlighted at the Egypt platform, where participants pointed to armed conflicts, terrorism, violent extremism, unconstitutional changes of government and climate-related instability that increasingly cross borders. UN Special Representative Parfait Onanga-Anyanga stressed the need for responses that are rapid, politically coherent and strategically coordinated. The AU's strategic review is therefore placing greater emphasis on rapid-deployment capacity, asymmetric threats, technology, force generation and logistics. The signing in New Alamein completes an important political stage, but implementation will determine success. As the AU itself acknowledges, political commitment, adequate financing, properly equipped personnel, harmonized procedures and effective coordination between Addis Ababa and the regional capitals will decide whether the framework delivers the rapid-response capability Africa needs.