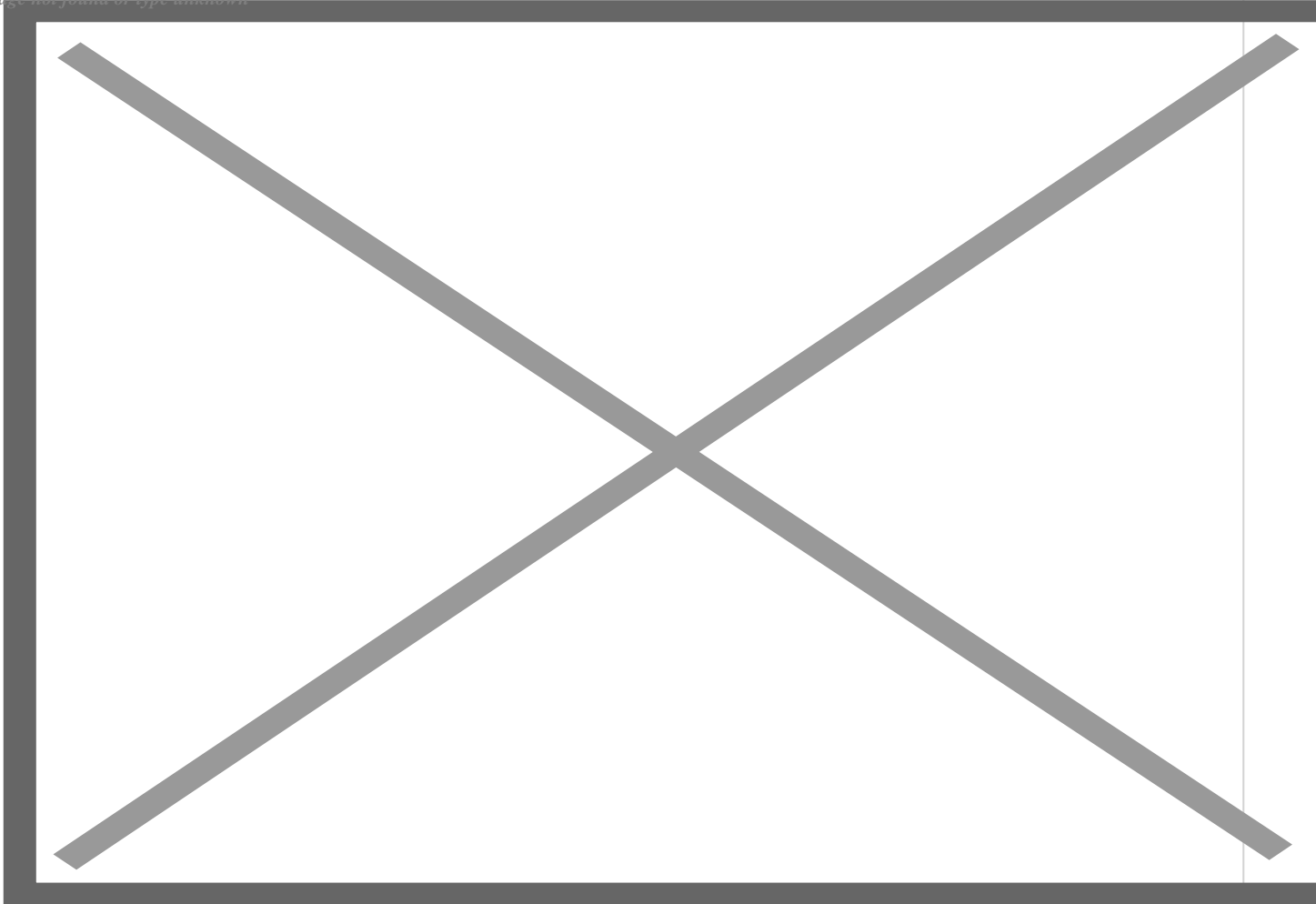


African Union postpones debate on Israel's observer status

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Members of General Industrial Workers Union of South Africa hold up posters against Israeli apartheid

South African workers, civil associations and political parties held a pro-Palestine rally in Sandton, Johannesburg on January 27 [File: Luca Sola/AFP]

Addis Ababa, February 7 (RHC)-- The African Union (AU) has suspended a debate on whether to withdraw Israel's accreditation as an observer to the bloc, avoiding a vote that risked creating an unprecedented rift in the 55-member body.

As the summit opened in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa over the weekend, Palestinian Authority (PA) Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh urged African leaders to withdraw the accreditation, saying Israel should "never be rewarded for its violation and for the apartheid regime it does impose on the Palestinian people."

Speaking to reporters at the end of the two-day summit on Sunday, the AU's newly elected Chairman Macky Sall said there was an agreement to postpone the vote until the next summit in 2023. "This issue can divide us, Africa cannot be divided," he told reporters, saying such a development would result in a fragile institution that may not effectively tackle major issues.

He added that a committee has been set up with the goal of consulting with member states and building a consensus on the matter. "It will be composed of eight heads of state and governments, and will present its recommendations at the next summit," Sall said.

The dispute was set in motion in July last year when Moussa Faki Mahamat, chair of the AU Commission, accepted unilaterally Israel's accreditation to the bloc, triggering protests by a number of member states.

On Sunday, Mahamat defended his decision as legal. "By granting the observer status to Israel, I acted in full compliance with my prerogatives and powers," he said as he briefed reporters with Sall. "[But] I respect the decision of the summit."

Member nations such as South Africa said they had not been properly consulted about the decision, which they said contradicted numerous AU statements – including from Faki himself – in support of Palestinians.

According to diplomats at the summit, the new committee will include South Africa and Algeria, who opposed Faki's move to accredit Israel, as well as Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, who supported it. Cameroon also asked to be on the committee, while South Africa requested the inclusion of Nigeria as well, the diplomats said.

In response to the 55-member bloc's decision, Israel said the African Union "rejected attempts by Algeria and South Africa to revoke the State of Israel's acceptance as an observer in the organization." The Israeli foreign ministry said in a statement its admission will facilitate increased cooperation between Israel and African countries.

"Israel attaches great importance in expanding the dialogue and cooperation with the African Union in line with changes in the Middle East, and views it as an important expression of our shared activities for the continent's next generation," it added.

Meanwhile, the Arab Parliament, the legislative branch of the Arab League, welcomed the decision. "This decision corrected the previous individual position of the African Union Chairperson Moussa Faki, and affirmed that African support for the Palestinian cause and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people will not be drained and will not be affected by any attempts of the Israeli occupation," their statement said.

The Palestinian political party Fatah, which dominates the PA, said the ruling comes in line with the historical positions of the AU in support of the Palestinian cause, and against colonialism and apartheid.



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