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ADDIS ABABA: Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (right) delivers a speech at the 22nd African Union (AU) summit yesterday. — AFP

AFRICA LEADERS TACKLE CONFLICTS

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC, SOUTH SUDAN HOG AGENDA

ADDIS ABABA: Africa's leaders met yesterday for the final day of a summit dominated by conflict in South Sudan and Central African Republic, with the continental bloc drumming up support for a peacekeeping mission on the ground. Officially focused on agriculture and food security, the 54-member continental bloc has spent much of the time bogged down yet again trying to resolve conflict in member states. Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn, at the summit's opening on Thursday, called for "urgent solutions to rescue these two sisterly countries from falling into the abyss", as he gave his final speech as AU chair. "Failure to do so will have serious implications for peace and security in the region," he added.

AU Peace and Security Council chief Smail Chergui spoke Friday of the need to bolster support to CAR, with a pledging conference due Saturday following the closure of the official AU summit. The unfolding humanitarian disaster in CAR, where the more than 5,000-strong AU force is deployed alongside 1,600 French soldiers, is a key talking point for the leaders, with soldiers underfunded and in dire need of extra support. Chergui said the force had done a "noble job" but despite increasing demands on AU troops, he insisted that they would

not - for now at least - re-hat into a UN peacekeeping mission.

However, diplomats suggested that even when the full 6,000-strong force is deployed, it may struggle to secure vast areas outside CAR's capital Bangui, hinting at a possible future need to increase troop numbers. "Our hearts go to the people of the Central African Republic and South Sudan who face devastating conflicts in their countries and especially to women and children who've become the victims," AU commission chief Nkosazana-Dlamini Zuma said as the summit opened.

CAR descended into chaos 10 months ago after rebels overthrew the government, sparking violence between the Christian majority and Muslim minority that has uprooted a million people out of a population of 4.6 million. "The important thing is to be able to meet the expectations of the people... so that they can have at least by the end of 2015 elections and a return to the constitutional order," Chergui told reporters yesterday.

Ceasefire monitors 'critical'

Talks on South Sudan took place on the sidelines of the main AU summit, as East African leaders met to bolster peace

efforts following the fragile ceasefire they brokered last week. Both UN special envoy Haile Menkerios and US special envoy Donald Booth said it was "critical" monitoring teams be put swiftly in place to report on any violations, including by foreign forces. Teams must be "provided with the necessary political and logistical support as well as unfettered access," Haile said.

Both government and rebels accused each other of violating the deal but insist they are committed to ending a bloodshed in which thousands have been killed and more than 800,000 forced from their homes. Leaders have also focused on "Agenda 2063", a 50-year roadmap for the AU that has been a major preoccupation for Dlamini-Zuma. Written as a message to a hypothetical friend in 2063, Dlamini-Zuma spoke of a "grand reality" where a new Confederation of African States has replaced the AU.

She described Kinshasa as having eclipsed Paris and Milan as fashion capital of the world, and Accra as upstaging Brussels as the home of gourmet chocolate. The one-year rotating chair of the AU also passed from Ethiopia to Mauritania's Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who became the north African country's president in 2009 after leading two coups in four years. — AFP