

Briefing on Disarmament and Control of Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons in Africa

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Tomorrow (18 May) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will hold its 1085th session on “Disarmament and control of Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons in Africa.”

Following the opening remark by Ambassador Churchill Ewumbue-Monon, Permanent Representative of Cameroon and the Chairperson of the PSC for May, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye is expected to make a statement.

Representatives from the different Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs) as well as representatives from the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) and the Secretariat of the Arms Trade Treaty and Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Centre (KAIPTC) are also expected to participate at the session.

This theme for tomorrow’s session is specifically referenced in the preamble to the PSC Protocol. Most specifically, the Protocol expressed the concern ‘about the impact of the illicit proliferation, circulation and trafficking of small arms and light weapons in threatening peace and security in Africa’. Similarly, the 2004 Solemn Declaration on African Common Defense and Security Policy identifies as one of the factors that engender insecurity in Africa. Addressing the scourge of SALW also forms part of the AU Agenda of Silencing the Guns and is one of the pillars of the Master Roadmap on Silencing the Guns in Africa. In terms of specific instruments, on a continental level, the AU Assembly adopted

the 2013 AU Strategy on the Control of Illicit Proliferation, Circulation and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons, as well as a corresponding Action Plan. At the sub-national level, there is the example of the Nairobi Protocol on the Prevention, Control and Reduction of SALW applicable in 15 countries in the Great Lakes region, the Horn of Africa and bordering states.

The proliferation of and easy access to Illicit arms and weapons continues to be a major factor in fueling conflicts and making inter-communal clashes increasingly deadly. It remains to be a single critical instrument that enables terrorist groups, armed militias, criminal bandits and vigilante groups in various conflict and crisis settings on the continent. Indeed, this is one of the factors that has made the increase in the number of conflicts and the expansion of the geographic spread of such conflicts, particularly those involving armed terrorist groups. Tomorrow's session thus provides an opportunity for the PSC to receive updates on patterns and trends in arms and ammunition inflows, illicit circulation and trafficking and gaps in control measures.

The last time the PSC convened a session on illicit proliferation and trafficking of SALW was at its 860th meeting held on 18 July 2019. During the session, the PSC welcomed the findings of the joint mapping study conducted by the Commission and the Small Arms Survey which was launched in July 2019. The study, published under the title "Weapons Compass: Mapping Illicit Small Arms Flows in Africa," was the first-ever continental study that under the AU sought to map the problem of illicit proliferation of SALW. At the time the study was conducted, it was reported that there were forty-million of such weapons were in possession of civilians. This figure, according to the study, accounted for 80% of arms on the continent. There is little indication to show that this level of circulation of illicit weapons among the civilian population has come down.

In the context of the eruption of new conflicts and the expansion and persistence of existing conflicts as well as inter-communal violence in various parts of the continent, it is logical that the number of illicit weapons circulating on the continent has also increased. According to the 2021 Small Arms Survey research, there is an increase in smuggling and trafficking activities due to growing local demand for illicit goods and firearms. The local demand is fueled by banditry, communities' need for self-defence, and the reliance in firearms of artisanal and small-scale gold mining operators. As a case in point, the survey specifically assessed the tri-border region, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, and Mali.

The other factor for the proliferation and trafficking of illicit SALW is the challenges surrounding the availability of reliable data on stockpiles of member states and the safe keeping of those stockpiles. As the PSC noted in its 860th session the diversion of small arms and light weapons from national stockpiles is a significant factor contributing to the proliferation of SALW. There is thus the issue of auditing of stockpiles in member states and enhancing capacities for the safekeeping of stockpiles. Related to these are contingent owned equipment (COE) that are deployed for use in peace support operations. These weapons diversions are largely due to battlefield loss, mismanagement, theft, and corruption. According to reports, COE loss has occurred in at least 20 peace operations in 18 African countries. Lethal materiel lost in the past 10 years alone has included many millions of rounds of ammunition, thousands of small arms and light weapons, and likely hundreds of heavy weapons systems. Nonlethal materiel, such as unarmed vehicles and motorcycles, uniforms, communications equipment, and fuel, have also consistently been a target.

It is clear that stockpiles become a source of illicit circulation and trafficking in at least two ways. First, the lack of complete data and statistics by member states and the

corruption in the armed forces mean that traffickers and armed groups pay for accessing weapons kept in such stockpiles. Second, nonstate armed groups have regularly targeted and overrun peacekeepers and national armed forces to seize lethal and nonlethal materiel. This has also become a significant source of armaments for Africa's militant groups, fueling instability on the continent.

Illicit circulation of weapons also arises in the context of implementation of disarmament processes. Here a challenge worth mentioning is the lack of effective and complete demobilization, disarmament and reintegration (DDR), noted in the AU Solemn Declaration on Common African Defense and Security Policy. In cases where no effective framework and resources for undertaking DDR as part of peace agreements for settling conflicts are provided for, weapons in the hands of armed groups ends up being traded. Similarly, the poor implementation of DDR including the proper accounting of weapons and arms in the hands of various armed groups in the DDR process would mean that such weapons and arms remain outside of the control of formal institutions.

Furthermore, for widely differing reasons non-African states appear set to increase their supply of lethal materiel to African governments. The PSC in its several communiques including on its 1029th commemorating the 2021 Africa Amnesty Month session condemned non-African states sponsoring and promote the influx of arms into Africa, including in cases of existing armed embargoes, leading to the further escalation of existing conflicts. Indeed, unless COE control measures are strengthened, these arms flows could contribute to greater instability.

Tomorrow's session also serves as an opportunity for follow up on previous decisions of the PSC. It is to be recalled that the PSC in its 1040th session convened on 22 October 2021, requested the Commission, working closely with Member States

and RECs/RMs, to conduct a second phase of the Mapping Study on Small Arms and Light Weapons. The council also requested the RECs/ RMs to continue to submit reports through the AU commission, on the actions taken in line with Africa Amnesty month.

In the current global context, one aspect of the war in Ukraine that may warrant Council's attention is also the rising risk of the use of foreign fighter and mobilisation of large number of weapons and arms finding their way in the hands of traffickers and ending up in conflict settings in Africa. In the absence of proper tracing and regulation mechanism, the large-scale mobilisation of weapons and arms in the context of this war can have an adverse impact as had been witnessed with the case of spread of weapons and foreign fighters post-Libyan conflict. It is therefore imperative for the AU to take advance note of and imagine preventive measures on how the mobilisation of such weapons and arms in Ukraine without an effective tracing mechanism in place could impact Africa by boosting illicit transfer of arms from the war in Ukraine.

The expected outcome of tomorrow's session is a communique. The council may express deep concern over the growing Illicit flow of Small Arms and Light Weapons in Africa. The PSC may call for the AU to work with member states to launch a process for auditing of stockpiles with a view to enable states to have up to date data on the quantity and type of weapons and arms in their possession as a basis for ensuring the monitoring and safekeeping of stockpiles. The PSC may also call on member states to undertake measures that enhance the safe keeping and protection of stockpiles important measure for preventing leakages through corruption and vulnerabilities of stockpiles for attacks from armed groups. The PSC may also call for an African Strategy on the implementation of the Armed Trade Treaty at the continental levels as a means of controlling flows of weapons and arms into the continent and

the trading of such weapons and arms within the continent. It also might call upon member State and the RECs to enhance cross border security and strengthening their monitoring and controlling mechanisms. Council may also urge member states to implement regional and international instrument to curb illicit flow of SALW. Further the council may reiterate its request to conduct second phase of the Mapping Study on Small Arms and Light Weapons in Africa. The PSC may also urge for effective integration of DDR programs in peace agreements and the proper implementation of such programs.