

Briefing on DRC and Burundi

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Tomorrow (19 November) the PSC will hold a briefing session on the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Burundi. Although DRC was the focus of the session when the monthly program of work was issued, Burundi was added following the high level regional visit that the Commissioner for Peace and Security, Smail Chergui, undertook to DRC and Burundi.

It is expected that the Council will receive a briefing from Chergui focusing on his recent visit to the two countries. Basile Ikouebe, AU Special Representative for the Great Lakes Region and Head of AU Liaison Office in Burundi is expected to provide statement.

On Burundi, the briefing is expected to provide updates on the prevailing the political, security, human rights and socioeconomic and humanitarian situation in Burundi. During his visit to Burundi, Chergui met with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Defense and the Interior. He also met, on an informal basis, the First Vice-President of the Republic, Gaston Sindimwo. Chergui was unable to meet with President Pierre Kkurunziza, despite the initial agreement for the meeting.

Since the last PSC meeting held in September 2018, one notable development have been the failure of the 5th round of the EAC led Inter- Burundian dialogue that the facilitator, former Tanzanian President Benjamin Mkapa, scheduled for 25 October 2018. The delegations of the government and the ruling party the National Council for the Defense of Democracy – Forces for the Defense of Democracy (CNDD-FDD) boycotted the talks. Government spokesperson stated that they needed to receive the list of participants and the agenda for the talks, insisting

that no other issues other than the roadmap towards the 2020 elections shall be discussed.

In the past rounds, the government refused to recognize and engage in talks with some of the major opposition groups. In particular, the government rejects the opposition coalition Conseil National pour le respect de l'Accord d'Arusha pour la Paix et de l'État de Droit (CNARED, or National Council for the Respect of the Arusha Agreement and Rule of Law) claiming that they are associated with the May 2015 failed coup.

In the briefing, it would be of interest for the PSC to hear from Chergui on the outcome of the discussions he held in Bujumbura. In the light of the 19 September communiqué of the PSC, other issues on which member states would like Chergui's reflections include the fate of the Inter-Burundian dialogue, the finalization of the long stalling conclusion of the Memorandum of Understanding relating to the operation of the AU human rights observers and military experts deployed to Burundi.

On DRC, it is expected that Chergui's briefing will be accompanied by that of the Special Representative of the Chairperson of the AU Commission and Head of the AU Liaison Office in the DRC, Ambassador Abdou Abarry. During his visit, Chergui met, among others, with the President Joseph Kabila. The visit focused on the political situation in the country focusing in particular on the preparations for the national elections. Other areas addressed include the deteriorating security situation in eastern DRC and the efforts for combating the spread of Ebola.

In the briefing to the PSC, it is expected that much of the focus would be on the preparations for the holding of the general elections scheduled for December 2018. There are two issues that are of major significance in this regard.

The first relates to the need and prospect for holding free

and fair elections. Apart from the logistical and technical preparations that should be put in place, this would entail that

there is an even playing field and that the elections are conducted free from actions or omissions that undermine the credibility of the elections. Despite some of the positive steps notably the announcement that President Joseph Kabila will not stand for the election, concerns abound.

Confidence in the electoral process remains very low. Opposition and civil society raise major concerns about the independence and impartiality of the Electoral Commission. There are also concerns around the integrity of the voter roll. With respect to the voting machines, there are concerns that it is susceptible for tampering, particularly if its reliable use is not adequately tested and independently verified. Major opposition parties as well as civil society organizations urge the Electoral Commission not to use the machines.

Other areas of concern, which would be of interest for the PSC, include reports of restrictions on political and civic freedoms including prohibition of public events and their adverse impact on the electoral process. There are reports of attacks against opposition groups and restriction of and heavy-handed response to protestors. Members of the opposition blame the security forces of using disproportionate force and arbitrary arrest. The resultant tension means that the country continues to witness recurring political instability.

In the light of the various issues surrounding the preparations of the elections, an issue on which PSC members would wish to get updates on the role of election observers. Despite the challenges, there does not seem to be a call for the postponement of the national elections. In an interview to RFI on 16 November, Chergui warned that 'delaying the elections would put us in a lot of uncertainties. It is to be recalled that the elections have already been postponed two times since 2016.

As part of the briefing, Chergui is also expected to update PSC members on the Ebola outbreak in DRC and ongoing efforts for addressing the outbreak. In this context, an issue of particular interest for the PSC is the implication of the dire security situation in eastern DRC both for the effort to address Ebola and for the planned elections.

The expected outcome is a communiqué. While on Burundi the communiqué is likely to reiterate the points raised in the communiqué of the 794th session of the PSC including on the stalling inter-Burundian dialogue and the finalizing the MoU on AU human rights observers and military experts, on DRC it is expected to highlight the need for the holding of the elections as scheduled under conditions that guarantee free and fair elections.