

Briefing on the activities of the African First Ladies Peace Mission

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Tomorrow (16 May), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to convene its 1154th session to receive a briefing on the activities of the African First Ladies Peace Mission (AFLPM). The session aims to contribute towards mobilisation of African stakeholders for effective mediation and preventive diplomacy.

Following opening remarks by Rebecca Amuge Otengo, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Uganda and Chairperson of the PSC for the month of May, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye is expected to make a statement. Aisha M. Buhari, First Lady of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and Chairperson of the AFLPM will present tomorrow's briefing to the PSC. Benita Diop, AU Special Envoy for Women, Peace and Security (WPS) may also deliver a statement.

The AFLPM was formally inaugurated in 1997, as an outcome of the commitment made by the First Ladies of Benin, Burundi, Gambia, Lesotho, Nigeria and Uganda at the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing Conference), to undertake peace missions throughout Africa. The mission's central objective is focused around promotion of women's inclusion and active engagement in mediation and preventive diplomacy efforts, with the aim of contributing to the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts in the continent. Despite the complementarity of the mission's mandate to that of the PSC's, tomorrow's session constitutes the first time for the PSC to

be briefed on the activities of the AFLPM. It is however to be recalled that at its 987th session committed to the WPS theme, the PSC underscored the necessity for revitalising the AFLPM 'for the promotion of peace and harmony, as well as their advocacy for advancing women and girls' interests, provision of support to the victims of armed conflict, refugees and displaced people'.

Theoretically, the AFLPM is an initiative that could contribute significantly to the prevention, management and resolution of conflicts through an effective deployment of humanitarian and diplomatic actions. A Plan of Action adopted at the 7th Summit of the AFLPM in 2012 underscores some critical strategies and activities to enable the mission realise its goal in this respect. Centred on the core objective of capacity building of women groups in conflict resolution and peace building, the Plan of Action elucidates the various roles that can be played by African First Ladies in key areas such as promotion of the culture of peace, protection of women and girls in conflict zones and facilitating humanitarian assistance for communities affected by armed conflicts. Within this context, the AFLPM has recorded notable progress, some of which include the provision of relief materials to refugee and IDP communities in Burundi, Central African Republic (CAR), Guinea Bissau, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic, Sierra Leone and South Sudan.

In practice, beyond such ad hoc solidarity activities the AFLPM has very little, if any, visibility nor is it known for engaging in championing peace or resolution of conflicts in relation to specific conflict situations. This session and the apparent effort to bring the AFLPM to the limelight may inject some much-needed energy for it to take active role in peace efforts in relation to specific conflict situations. Having been established as an initiative of First Ladies of few countries, it has been elusive to some whether the mission

operates as a continental non-governmental organisation (NGO) or a project of involved First Ladies. This lack of clarity has barred the mission from attaining the necessary level of support and visibility to realise its goals. By creating better clarity on its legal status and methods of operation as well as by clearly placing itself within the existing continental architecture for the maintenance of peace and security, the AFLPM could work better for advancing peace.

Additionally, despite its establishment in 1997, little is known about its works over the years or its engagement with key AU organs that play a lead role in securing peace and in promoting women's involvement in decision-making processes related to peace and security.

One positive development towards the institutionalization of the AFLPM has been the inauguration of the mission headquarter, in Abuja, Nigeria, alongside the convening of the 10th AFLPM General Assembly held from 8 to 9 May 2023. Another notable development is the recent Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed between the AFLPM and the AU at the 10th AFLPM General Assembly, which marks an important stride.

While these developments including the establishment of the headquarters constitutes significant progress, the effective functioning of the AFLPM takes more than having headquarters. It requires among others clarifying its working methods.

Although it is not clear why the PSC has to convene a session on this body that has been dormant and has no specific history of engaging in peace processes, tomorrow's session beyond affording visibility for AFLPM will also be used for ensuring that it also serves the purposes of the mandate of the PSC with members of the PSC calling on the AFLPM to fully operationalize its role, in coordination with the relevant AU structures, namely Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise) and the AU Special Envoy on

WPS.

If it lives up to its mission, the AFLPM operating with clear working methods can contribute meaningfully to peace and security including by leveraging and working with relevant AU structures. For this it is also critical to address other issues affecting the functioning of the AFLPM. The potential political proximity to power and associated sensitivities and issues related to technical and financial sources of support are among the other issues that may also warrant attention. It is not also farfetched that, despite the (potential) huge influence the members of the AFLPM wield, they face the impacts of deeply entrenched patriarchal norms. Such perceptions inevitably shape national policies and inform decision-making, including on matters related to peace and security, in a non-inclusive manner that fails to take account of women's perspectives and contributions. While a more comprehensive approach is necessary to combat the impacts of patriarchy in Africa, the AFLPM needs to strengthen its lobbying strategies to attain full support of relevant national actors.

It may also interest the PSC to reflect on the opportunities the AFLPM presents in terms of supplementing its works. One example of such opportunities is advancing the WPS agenda and promoting its enhanced implementation at the national level, including through sustained advocacy for the adoption of national action plans (NAPs). Through close collaboration with the Office of the AU Special Envoy for WPS, the AFLPM could make considerable contributions, such as sensitisation of relevant policy actors at the national level, on the significance of WPS for the success of peace processes as well as realisation of development agendas.

Mobilisation of the AFLPM in mediation and preventive diplomacy forms another key area in which the mission could contribute. Lending support to existing AU mechanisms such as the Panel of the Wise, FemWise and Network of African Youth on

Conflict Prevention and Mediation (WiseYouth), the AFLPM could be deployed strategically not only to assist in the conduct of mediation and preventive diplomacy missions, but also through raising necessary funds for the successful undertaking of such operations.

The expected outcome of the session was unknown at the time of developing this insight. The PSC may welcome the objectives for which the AFLPM is established and take note of its potential to contribute to the maintenance of peace and security in Africa. It may take note of the signing of an MoU between the AFLPM and the AU, represented by PAPS Commissioner Bankole Adeoye, and encourage it to take advantage of the opportunities this presents for AFLPM to work with and avail its influence for the effective functioning of relevant AU structures working on conflict prevention, management and resolution, including the Panel of the Wise, FemWise and Special Envoy for WPS. The PSC may also welcome the appointment of the First Lady of Burundi, Angelina Ndayishimiye as the incoming president of the AFLPM and commend the outgoing president, first lady of Nigeria, Aisha Muhammadu Buhari for her role during her presidency of the mission. It may call on all relevant AU actors to work towards strengthening engagement and co-operation with the mission.