

# Briefing on the AU led peace process for Ethiopia

**Briefing on the AU led peace process for Ethiopia** Date | 21 October 2022

Tomorrow (21 October), African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is set to convene its 1115<sup>th</sup> session for a 'Briefing on the AU led peace process for Ethiopia'. The meeting was not initially included in the monthly programme of work of the Council.

Following opening remarks by Mohammed Arrouchi, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Morocco to the AU and Chairperson of the PSC for the month of October, Bankole Adeoye, Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security is expected to deliver a statement. Olusegun Obasanjo, former President of Nigeria and AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa is also expected to provide update to the PSC. The representatives of Ethiopia and the regional body the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) are also expected to deliver statements as the concerned country and regional economic community, respectively.

It is to be recalled that the PSC held its last meeting on the situation in Ethiopia on 4 August 2022 at its 1097<sup>th</sup> session. Since that time, the situation in the conflict has dramatically changed for worse. Tomorrow's meeting is expected to focus on two issues. The first relate to the current state of the hostilities that resumed on 24 August. The second area of focus of tomorrow's session will be the preparations for the peace talks that the AU has been working to get off the ground.

Tomorrow's session comes in the context of three important developments. The first relate to developments on the battle

front where significant escalation of violence has been witnessed in recent weeks. Ethiopia's federal government announced the capture of three strategic towns in Tigray (Shire in northwest, and Alamata and Korem in South of Tigray) after weeks of fighting in which Eritrean Defense Forces play major part in the hostilities between Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) supported by regional Amhara forces on one side and the Tigray forces on the other.

It is to be recalled that fighting resumed between federal government and Tigray region on 24 August after five months of lull in violence. The resumption of hostilities collapsed the truce that was in force following the 24 March 2022 declaration by the Federal Government declared an 'indefinite humanitarian truce' and its subsequent reciprocation by Tigray forces by expressing willingness to respect the truce and cessation of hostilities on condition that adequate and timely humanitarian assistance are provided. Between March and August, the diplomatic engagements by the AU High-Representative for the Horn of Africa, former Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, along with his US, EU and UN counterparts were hoped to make headways towards the peaceful resolution of the conflict that has taken a heavy human toll since its eruption in November 2020. However, tension began to mount again as diplomatic interventions by the various special envoys failed to build up on and translate the momentum witnessed between March and August into meaningful peace talks towards an agreed cessation of hostilities and comprehensive political settlement. Meanwhile, as diplomatic efforts failed to make headways, concerns have been expressed about the inadequacy and unsustainability of the 'indefinite humanitarian truce', including deepening differences over the flow of humanitarian assistance and the resumption of basic services to Tigray, which has been cut off from electricity, telecom, banking, and other basic utilities. Against the background of military buildup on all sides and the failure of regional and international actors to take these differences

seriously and mobilize stronger efforts to iron them out, attacks and subsequent seizure of territories in the neighboring Amhara region by Tigray forces triggered the resumption of hostilities in various border areas of Tigray.

The second context in which tomorrow's session is held is the proposed convening of UN Security Council's meeting on 21 October on the ongoing hostilities in Tigray. This meeting, being convened on the request of the African 3 (A3) members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), brings the total number of Security Council's meetings on this conflict situation to fifteen since the outbreak of the conflict in November 2020.

The proposed convening of the UNSC meeting comes in the context of growing anxiety about both the scale and gravity of the bloodshed the nature of hostilities are feared and reported to be precipitating and aggravating an already dire situation for civilians who have already endured enormous suffering since the start of the war. Regional and international actors as well as partners have intensified their call for the immediate cessation of hostilities as intensifying fighting continues deeper into Tigray, raising the alarm over worsening humanitarian crisis and the susceptibility of the context of the hostilities for atrocities. The AU, widely perceived as responding inadequately to this situation, was on the lead in calling for an end of the hostilities. In a statement issued on 15 October, the Chairperson of the AU Commission, Moussa Faki Mahamat expressed his 'grave concern' over the 'reports of increased fighting in the Tigray Region' and called for an 'immediate, unconditional ceasefire and the resumption of humanitarian services'. In the same statement, the Chairperson also urged the two parties to 'recommit to dialogue as per their agreement to direct talks to be convened in South Africa by a high-level team led by the AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa and supported by the international community'.

Mahamat was not alone in issuing such statement. On 17

October, United Nations Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, characterized the situation in Ethiopia as 'spiraling out of control' while calling the hostilities in Tigray to end immediately and for 'immediate withdrawal of and disengagement of Eritrean armed forces from Ethiopia'. In his 18 October tweet, Guterres further stressed the need for urgent resumption of talks and expressed UN's readiness to support the AU in that regard. The following day UN Human Rights Chief issued a statement saying that 'Since 31 August we have received numerous reports of civilian casualties and destruction of civilian objects due to airstrikes and artillery strikes in Tigray – disruptions to communication make it particularly difficult to verify reports, but it is clear that the toll on civilians is utterly staggering.' He further held that 'Under international law, indiscriminate attacks or attacks deliberately targeting civilians or civilian objects amount to war crimes', although statements from the Federal Government of Ethiopia expressed that efforts are made for avoiding the targeting of civilians. Others particularly the European Union and the United States issued statements with similar firmness, urging both sides to cease hostilities and recommit to the AU-led peace process.

The third context is AU's new call for the convening of peace talks on 24 October in South Africa. It is to be recalled that on 1 October, the Chairperson of the AU Commission dispatched a letter inviting both parties to the conflict to attend an AU-convened peace talk slated for 8 October in South Africa within the framework of the AU-led peace process for Ethiopia, which was envisaged to deliberate on the 'guiding principles, agenda issues, modalities, format, and timelines for the negotiated settlement'. Regarding the mediation team, in the statement he issued on 6 October, Mahamat stated that 'the peace talks will be conducted through a high level panel of eminent Africans, established purposefully for the Ethiopian peace process. The panel is led by H.E Olusegun Obasanjo, AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa and former

President of Nigeria, along with H.E Uhuru Kenyatta, former President of Kenya, and H.E. Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, former Deputy President of South Africa and Member of the AU Panel of the Wise. The Federal Government of Ethiopia announced the acceptance of the invitation on 5 October. On the same day, the Tigray side responded positively but sought two main clarifications: whether there would be additional actors to be invited to the negotiation and the envisaged role for the international community, and logistical details particularly the travel and security arrangements for its negotiating team. Just a day before the planned negotiation date, former President Kenyatta informed the Chairperson that he would not be able to attend the meeting due to a schedule clash. He also sought clarity from the AU Commission on the 'structure and modalities of the talks, including but not limited to the rule of engagement for all the interlocutors invited' and whether the issue of 'immediate and unconditional cessation of hostilities' would be on the agenda of the meeting. The proposed meeting was eventually postponed, given the lack of clarity around the modalities of the peace talks and tight schedule.

Since then the AU Commission has held wide consultations and been working hard for putting in place the necessary preparations for the commencement of the delayed peace talks. This process, among others, clarified the role of regional and international stakeholders stating that the peace talks will be held with the support of such stakeholders. The statements that AUC Chair issued on 6 October and on 15 October affirmed that the talks will be 'supported by the international community.' It was against this background that the AU Commission sent another letter to the members of the mediation panel and the parties to the conflict inviting them for starting the peace talks on 24 October in South Africa. No official statement has been issued by both sides as of yet, but Redwan Hussien, national security advisor to the Prime Minister of Ethiopia, in his 20 October tweet, confirmed

federal government's participation. There was no response from the forces in Tigray on the new proposed date of the peace talks.

The expected outcome of the session is a communique. The PSC is expected to express its deep concern about the resumption of hostilities and the toll the fighting is having on peoples in the effected territories. The PSC, reiterating that war cannot be a solution to the conflict, may welcome the 15 October statement of the AU Commission Chairperson and his strong call for an immediate, unconditional ceasefire and the resumption of humanitarian services'. The PSC may also call on all third parties to refrain from all acts that may further inflame the situation and may in this regard call on Eritrea to withdraw its troops. The PSC may also express the necessity for the parties to start peace talks and in this respect may welcome the preparations made by the AU Commission and the members of the mediation panel including the invitation sent for the parties for starting talks on 24 October in South Africa. The PSC may welcome the commitments that the parties have been expressing for engaging in AU-led peace talks and urge them to send their delegations for the peace talks. The Council, decrying the attacks that caught civilians and humanitarian actors, may also urge the parties to observe human rights and international humanitarian law rules at all times to ensure the protection of civilians and humanitarian actors. It may also reiterate its encouragement to the parties to the conflict 'to place the supreme interests of Ethiopia and its people above all else and embrace inclusive political dialogue as the only viable approach towards finding a consensual solution to the current situation. The PSC may also reaffirm its 'appreciation to all partners for their continued support and encourages them to scale up their support for the AU-led mediation process' and commends South Africa for its willingness to host the peace talks and urge other member states to intensify their support to the efforts of the mediation panel.