

Briefing on the Great Lakes and the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for DRC and the Region

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Tomorrow (19 April) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will receive a briefing on the High-Level Meeting of the Regional Oversight Mechanism (ROM) of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF) for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the region signed in Addis Ababa in February 2013. The last time the PSC met on the Great Lakes Region was at its 1005th session under the previous Chairship of Burundi in June 2021.

The session will start with the opening remark of the Willy Nyamitwe, Chairperson of the PSC for the Month of April. The Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, Bankole Adeoye, is expected to give an update to the Council. The Special Representative of the AU Commission Chairperson and the Head of AU Office in DRC, Michelle Ndaye, and the Special Representative of the Secretary General of the UN and the Head of the United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (MONUSCO), Bintou Keita are also expected to deliver briefings. Representative of the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) may also make an intervention.

It was more than three years since the ROM held its meeting in Kampala in October 2018. The tenth high-level meeting of the ROM held in Kinshasa on 24 February 2022 saw the participation

of several regional leaders and guarantor institutions of the PSCF including the UN, the AU, the ICGLR, and the South African Development Community (SADC). During the meeting, Ugandan President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni handed over the rotating chairmanship to DRC President Felix Tshisekedi.

The ROM assessed the political and security situation in the region, including progress and challenges in the implementation of the national, regional and international commitments under the PSCF to consolidate peace and security in eastern DRC and to promote cooperation among countries of the region based on a comprehensive report submitted by its Technical Support Committee covering the period from October 2017 to February 2022. The meeting was concluded with the adoption of a communiqué that reaffirmed the regional leaders' commitment to the full implementation of the PSCF 'as an important vehicle to address the causes and drivers of conflict and instability in the region'.

The ROM meeting took place against the backdrop of positive developments in the Great Lakes region with the rapprochement between and among countries of the region. High level exchanges of visit facilitated the improvement in bilateral relations between DRC and its neighbours in the Great Lakes. The reopening of the Gatuna/Katuna border between Rwanda and Uganda in January was also another welcome development. This followed a visit by Lieutenant General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, the Commander of the Land Forces of the Ugandan Peoples' Defence Forces and President Yoweri Museveni's son, to Kigali, where he met with Rwandan President Paul Kagame. The border had been closed for three years because of strained relations between Rwanda and Uganda. Recently, the US and the EU decided to lift the economic sanctions imposed against Burundi in 2015, when former President Pierre Nkurunziza sought to change the constitution and run for a third term. The decision was said to be an acknowledgment of the reform progress under the leadership of his successor, President Evariste Ndayishimiye.

Another development of significance in advancing regional integration is the admission of the DRC as the 7th member of the East African Community (EAC) on the occasion of the 19th ordinary summit of the EAC on 29th March 2022.

Despite these and other positive developments which the ROM has welcomed in its Communique, the Great Lakes region continues to face persistent security challenges, including the activities of negative forces operating in eastern DRC that pose a major threat to regional peace and stability. The *Coopérative pour le développement du Congo* (CODECO), an armed group active in Ituri province, has intensified its attacks particularly targeting internally displaced persons. The Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), an armed group affiliated with the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/Da'esh) which is implicated in several attacks in eastern DRC and Uganda has also increased its military activities. What is even more worrying lately is the fact that the March 23 (M23) Movement, a rebel group previously operating in North Kivu Province, has resumed its military activities.

In its Communique the ROM expressed its concern that negative forces with networks across the region and beyond, some with affiliations to international terrorist groups, continue to pose a threat to civilians and fuel mistrust and tensions among countries in the region. The ROM particularly condemned the resumption of military activities of some ex-M23 members in eastern DRC. In this regard, it commended the military operations carried out by the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) with the support of the MONUSCO, against negative forces in the eastern parts of the country. The Congolese government has been implementing what it calls the 'state of siege', measures similar to a state of emergency imposed since May 2021 to address security challenges in the Ituri and North Kivu provinces. The ROM also took note of the joint military operations by DRC and Uganda launched in November 2021

targeting the ADF. Despite the implementation of the state of siege and the joint military operations by DRC and Ugandan armed forces, however, the activities of the negative forces have continued unabated.

In this context, one of the issues that Ndaye and Keita are expected to reflect on in their briefings is the recent very concerning resumption of military activities by the M23 movement. The fighting involving the M23 reportedly started on 27 March. Within few days of the resumption of this fighting, it has led to the displacement of 13, 000 people. Deputy Spokesperson of the FARDC blamed the M23 for the shooting down of a MONUSCO helicopter whose crash led to the death of eight Un personnel. With officials of FARDC blaming Rwanda and Rwanda rejecting accusations as baseless, it is feared that this renewed fighting may undermine the rapprochement between and among countries of the region. The AU and UN representatives may shed light on the trajectory of the M23's renewed armed operations and the steps that are being taken to control it and ultimately end it.

In his latest report to the Security Council on the implementation of the PSCF, the UN Secretary-General urged the DRC, Rwanda and Uganda to conclude the repatriation of all remaining former M23 combatants, in accordance with previous decisions of the Regional Oversight Mechanism and in full respect of international human rights and humanitarian law. He stated that his Special Envoy remains ready to support such efforts, in collaboration with MONUSCO and the other guarantor institutions of the PSCF.

These developments once again underscore the need to address the root causes of conflict and instability in the Great Lakes region. This in turn also reaffirms the significance of implementing the PSCF for a comprehensive and holistic solution to the peace and security challenges facing great lakes countries through enhanced regional cooperation. Burundi, the DRC, Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda established

what they called the Contact and Coordination Group and its Operational Cell in Goma (eastern DRC) with the support of the Guarantor institutions to facilitate coordination among them on security matters, including the disarmament and demobilization of former combatants. The launching of this group as part of a comprehensive approach comprising non-military measures to complement ongoing military efforts against negative forces in the region was considered a step in the right direction and very much welcomed by the ROM. Burundi has offered to host the 11th meeting of the ROM in 2023.

Tomorrow's PSC session provides an opportunity to review progress made in the implementation of the PSCF and existing and new challenges facing the Great Lakes region. The AUPSC is expected to encourage countries of the region to build on the positive momentum generated recently to accelerate the implementation of the PSCF and enhance their regional cooperation to address persistent security challenges. The outcome of these deliberations could feed into the United Nations Security Council as it is scheduled to receive its biannual briefing from the UN Special Envoy for the Great Lakes on 27 April 2022.

The expected outcome of the session is a communique. The PSC expected to welcome the outcome of the February 2022 High-Level Meeting of the Regional Oversight Mechanism (ROM) of the PSCF for the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Region and reaffirm the importance of the PSCF for enhancing peace and security in the region. The PSC may welcome the positive developments that took place in the region, including the admission of the DRC into the EAC and commend the contribution of MONUSCO. The PSC may express concern over the continuing presence of negative forces including the ADF and the recent resumption of fighting by the M23. It may call for enhanced dialogue and cooperation in order to curtail the threat posed by the presence of various negative armed groups and the illicit exploitation and trade of natural resources. The PSC

may reiterate its support for the Contact and Coordination Group (CCG) established to implement non-military measures that complement military operations against negative forces in the Great Lakes region. The Council may also underline the importance of political commitment and the strengthening democratic institutions for the effectiveness and sustainability of peace agreements and other political endeavors. The Council may also reiterate its plan to undertake a visit to the DRC and signatories of the PSCF.