

Briefing on the Security Situation in the Great Lakes Region

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Tomorrow (10 January) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 902nd session to receive a briefing on the security situation in the Great Lakes region. Smail Chergui Commissioner of Peace and Security and Basile Ikouebe the AU Special representatives for the Great Lakes Region may brief the Council. Representatives Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) may also participate to make statement in the partially open segment of the session.

One of the key issues that will be considered in tomorrow's session is the implementation of the Peace and Security Cooperation Framework (PSCF) signed on 24 February 2013 by DRC, Angola, Republic of Congo, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Central African Republic, Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan and Zambia. Moreover, the AUC, United Nations (UN), (SADC) and (ICGLR) also signed the agreement as witnesses/guarantors.

At its 488th session the PSC has requested the AU Commission Chairperson to take the necessary steps to enhance the capacity of the AU Office for the Great Lakes Region, in order to enable the AU to further contribute to the implementation process of the PSC Framework and to support more effectively the efforts of the countries of the region. Accordingly, the Council made a decision to broaden the mandate of the Office, to also monitor the overall situation in the region and to support the implementation process of the various aspects of the PSC Framework.

Towards accelerating the implementation of the agreement, the PSC also decided to undertake a visit in the region and tasked the AUC Chair to submit quarterly reports on the development in the Great Lakes Region and on follow-up of the implementation of relevant decisions. Although this regular briefing has not taken place, tomorrow's session may provide an opportunity to assess the status of the agreement and the political and security developments in the region.

It is to be recalled that on 27 February 2018 a high-level meeting was held marking the fifth anniversary of the signing of the PSCF, which among others reflected on the progress made and the challenges encountered. The outcome of the meeting identified the various security threats including political and electoral crisis and the activities of armed groups operating in the countries of the region by paying particular attention to South Sudan, CAR, DRC and Burundi. The meeting particularly highlighted the importance of neutralizing the negative forces in eastern DRC and complete the repatriation of foreign disarmed fighters.

Although some of the security and political challenges persist, positive developments were also witnessed. The peaceful transfer of power in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, President Tshisekedi's encouraging outreach to his peers and a renewed commitment to regional cooperation and integration, notably by Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Uganda have raised hopes for enhanced regional cooperation.

Other encouraging, albeit fragile developments include the signing of the peace agreement in CAR and the agreement reached among South Sudanese parties to implement the key pre-transitional tasks relating to security arrangements and number of states.

The sustainability and implementation of the peace process in CAR may be one of the issues, which the PSC may consider in

tomorrow's briefing. Particularly the PSC may look into the violations of the provisions of the 6 February agreement signed by the government and 14 armed groups which compromises the gains made so far and may discuss on ways to enhance the political commitment of signatories and to deter the risk of lapse to another cycle of conflict.

Similarly, on South Sudan, the PSC may be briefed on the process leading up to the formation of the transitional government. It may be recalled that after the extension of the pre-transitional period for additional 100 days after the set deadline on November 12, President Salva Kiir and Riek Machar have committed to work for resolving the major issues concerning security arrangements and number of states.

Burundi was not on the agenda of the PSC in 2019. President Pierre Nkurunziza has announced that he will not run for a fourth term in the elections slated for this year. The session may discuss a number of political developments. These most notably include the election in 2020, issues related to participation, the role of the AU human rights monitors and military observers and respect for human rights in the country.

DRC remains a critical actor in the region and for the success of the PSCF's objectives. There are a number of issues, which the PSC is expected to consider on the situation in DRC and the implication it has on the wider region. The activity of the armed groups in the eastern part of the country remains a threat, which also heavily affects neighbouring countries and border security. The groups that operate in this region and continue to pose security challenges include the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR) and the Résistance pour un État de droit au Burundi. Particularly the violence related to access to natural resources by various groups continues to complicate the security situation in the country. In this regard the PSC may also recall the session it held on 13 December 2019, which

addressed the Bamako Declaration on Access to Natural Resources and Conflicts between Communities.

Another key development is the outbreak of the Ebola virus in the most insecure part of the country. The instability and deliberate targeting of the health workers and facilities in the area has severely affected the lifesaving emergency operations. The PSC itself at its 862nd session has authorized the immediate deployment of an AU Mission Against Ebola in DRC (MAEC) to the DRC to support the effort of combating the epidemic. Tomorrow's session may also follow up on this decision and the steps taken in deploying the mission.

Another issue that may feature is the health of inter-state relations in the region, which is one of the major factors for the peace and security challenges facing the region. It is to be recalled that in August 2019, the PSC was briefed by Angola on the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between Rwanda and Uganda, in Luanda. In addition to the bilateral cooperation in the region, the PSC may also discuss on the cross-border illegal activities that affect multiple countries and that continue to hamper regional cooperation and the effective implementation of the framework agreement.

In addition to assessing the developments, it may also be of interest to the PSC to receive update on the outcome of the meetings held by various implementation mechanisms of the framework. Primarily the Regional Oversight Mechanism, the highest oversight body under the Framework agreement which meets annually at heads of state and government level to review progress in the implementation of the agreement. The PSC may also receive a briefing on the outcomes of the ministerial meeting of the Guarantors of the framework, which held its sixth session in February 2019. The meeting assessed the security and developments in the region particularly issues related to neutralization of negative forces, strengthening cooperation among countries in the region and the political developments unfolding in the various countries.

On 3 October 2019 the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region Huang Xia briefed the UN Security Council on the latest report on the implementation of the PSCF, which also provided security, political and humanitarian updates. The report of the Special Envoy called for dialogue and cooperation in order to curtail the threat posed by foreign armed groups and the illicit exploitation and trade of natural resources. The report also underlined the need for further efforts towards exercising of basic political freedoms and human rights in the region.

The expected outcome of the session is unknown during the production of this 'Insight on the PSC'. However, in the outcome document, the PSC may welcome the positive developments that took place in the region and urge member states to enhance their efforts towards implementing the PSCF to ensure stability in the region. The PSC may also underline the importance of political commitment and the strengthening democratic institutions for the effectiveness and sustainability of peace agreements and other political endeavours. The PSC may underline the importance of cooperation among the countries in the region as well as coordination between the multiple RECs, which are present in the region including SADC, ICGLR and East African Community.