

# Briefing on the situation in Abyei

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Tomorrow (29 September) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene a briefing session on the situation in Abyei.

Following the opening remarks of the Permanent Representative of Ghana to the AU and Chairperson of the PSC for the month, Amma Adomaa Twum-Amoah, the AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, Banole Adeoye or his representative will deliver a statement. The Chairperson of the AU High-Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP), former South African President Thabo Mbeki is expected to provide update briefing to the PSC. The representative of South Sudan, as a country concerned, is also expected to make a statement. It remains unclear if Sudan would be allowed to deliver a statement considering that it is suspended from participation in AU activities. This is important more so because Sudan is also Chair of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and delivered a statement during the last PSC session on Abyei in this capacity. Others expected to address the PSC include the UN Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa, Hannah Tete and the new United Nations (UN) Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) Force Commander, Major General Benjamin Olufemi Sawyerr.

The last time the PSC considered this issue was at its 966th session in November 2020. The communique adopted following this meeting expressed concern over the lack of progress in the discussion on the final status of Abyei. AUPSC appealed to the Governments of the South Sudan and Sudan to agree on the arrangements that can expedite the resolution of this longstanding issue. It also appealed to the two countries to

accelerate the implementation of their Agreement on Temporary Security and Administrative Arrangements for the Abyei Area, signed on 20 June 2011, particularly the finalization of the establishment of the Abyei Area Administration, the Abyei Area Council, and the Abyei Police Service, in order to facilitate the provision of essential services to the Abyei population.

Since then, there has not been any movement on all these issues as both Sudan and South Sudan have been preoccupied by their own internal challenges. The lack of progress seems to have increased frustration among the residents of the area who recently staged a public demonstration to demand autonomy. This is said to be a proposal supported by Francis Deng, a prominent South Sudanese politician and diplomat from Abyei who served as his country's first Ambassador to the UN after its independence in 2011. However, the Chief Administrator of Abyei and some others apparently oppose the proposal which they said entertains the idea of a joint interim arrangement.

Following this development, news about the resumption of talks between Sudan and South Sudan on the final status of Abyei have emerged. Sudan Tribune quoted South Sudan's presidential adviser on security affairs as having said that President Salva Kiir and the head of Sudan's Sovereign Council General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan started talks on the status of Abyei. But the details about these talks remain sketchy at this stage. Over the past decade and more, the AUHIP under the chairmanship of former South African President Thabo Mbeki has been engaged in trying to assist Sudan and South Sudan to find a lasting solution to the issue of Abyei. It is to be recalled that President Mbeki briefed the PSC during its last session at the 966<sup>th</sup> meeting and remains to be the main AU mechanism dedicated to, among others, the situation in Abyei.

On the security front, reports indicate that this year saw a rise in intercommunal violence in Abyei. This led to the loss of lives and displacement of thousands of people. Of

particular concern has been the outbreak of violence between the Ngok Dinka and Twic Dinka communities in the Agok area in February and March, and its spillover towards Abyei town. The situation is said to have been relatively calm in recent months following a traditional leaders peace conference facilitated by UNISFA. The conference took place in Entebbe, Uganda, in May 2022 and it concluded with the Dinka and Misseriya traditional leaders signing a peace accord in support of efforts to find lasting peace for the Abyei area.

Apart from UNISFA, the other mechanisms that play important role for stability in Abyei include the Political and Security Mechanism and the Joint Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism (JBVMM). However, there is not much change in respect to the engagement of these mechanisms.

There have also been major changes with respect to UNISFA since the last PSC meeting. The border tension between Sudan and Ethiopia affected UNISFA when Khartoum openly called for the withdrawal of Ethiopian peacekeepers. Ethiopia was the sole troop contributing country to UNISFA which has been deployed in the area since 2011. The Ethiopian peacekeepers have now left the mission and they have since been replaced by other peacekeepers from Ghana, Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh.

On 15 March 2022, Major General Benjamin Olufemi Sawyerr of Nigeria took over from Ethiopia's Major General Kefyalew Amde Tessema, as the new Force Commander and acting head of UNISFA, to lead the recently reconfigured multinational peacekeeping mission.

UNISFA's mandate is set to expire on 15 November 2022 and the Security Council is expected to renew it possibly for another six months. Ahead of the mandate renewal negotiation, the Security Council will meet on 28 October 2022 to discuss the situation in Abyei based on the latest report of the Secretary-General on UNISFA which is due by 15 October 2022. Tomorrow's PSC meeting would be very timely and relevant in light of the upcoming meeting and negotiation in New York. Its

outcome will likely feed into the discussion at the Security Council and help guide the African members in their participation on the mandate renewal negotiation. The UN mission proves to be critical for promoting stability and law and order as well as supporting efforts for reconciliation and determination of the final status of the area. Yet, its role is impacted by the level of cooperation of Sudan and South Sudan and the scope and nature of its mandate. Apart from the issues of concern from the communique of the 996<sup>th</sup> session that remain unresolved, the PSC may also address itself to these relevant issues relating to the mandate and functioning of UNISFA.

The expected outcome of the session is a communique. The PSC may express concern over and condemn incidents of intercommunal conflicts including killings, shootings, cattle-rustling, violence against women, including rape and migration-related violence witnessed in Abyei since its last session while calling for enhancement of efforts for maintaining peace among various communities. The PSC may also call for the enhancement by the AU through the AUHIP, of the mediation efforts including through possible support to the parties in resuming the meetings of the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee. The PSC may also welcome the reconfiguration of UNISFA and commend the support that the stakeholders and the two countries concerned along with troop contributing countries gave in this respect and urge them to continue their support for finalizing this process. The PSC may reiterate its earlier call for implementation of the outstanding determination of the status of Abyei which is the underlying cause for the various insecurities, including by appealing to the Governments of the South Sudan and Sudan to agree on the arrangements that can expedite resolving the status of Abyei and request the Chairperson of the Commission, working with the AUHIP, to engage the two Heads of State to resolve the status of Abyei on the basis of the AUHIP proposal of 21 September 2012. It may also reiterate the need for

implementation of demarcation of the Safe demilitarized Border Zone (SDBZ) to allow the JBVMM to effectively discharge its mandate.