

Briefing on the situation in Abyei

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Tomorrow (12 March) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 1204th session on the situation in Abyei.

The session commences with an introductory statement from the PSC Chairperson for March 2024, Emilia Mkusa, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Namibia to the AU. The statement will be followed by a briefing by Ambassador Bankole Adeoye, AU Commissioner of Political Affairs and Peace and Security (PAPS). Representative of the Secretariat of the Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and a representative of the United Nations (UN) are also expected to deliver statements. As a concerned country, South Sudan will also make a statement through its representative. Considering that the other concerned state, Sudan cannot participate in PSC meetings, the PSC envisaged to hold an informal consultation to canvas the views of the representative of Sudan with respect to the situation in Abyei.

During its [1108th session](#) when it last considered the situation in Abyei in 2022, the PSC highlighted the need for the acceleration of the implementation of the Agreement on Temporary Security and Administrative Arrangements for Abyei and the Cooperation Agreement signed in 2012 which includes the actualization of the demarcation of the Safe Demilitarized Border Zone (SDBZ) and the Border Verification and Monitoring Mechanism (JBVMM). Additionally, the PSC requested the AU Commission to nominate a facilitator for the Abyei Joint Oversight Committee (AJOC) to support the implementation of the agreements and decided to conduct a field mission to the

region. Tomorrow's session will provide a chance for the PSC to receive an update on the progress of these issues and developments since the last session.

Despite some positive developments concerning the rival communities in Abyei, during the last part of 2023 and in early 2024, Abyei experienced deadly clashes inducing major displacement. Not only that armed clashes between the two adversary communities of Misseriya and Dinka Ngok in Abyei have diminished, the two communities signed a peace deal in December 2023 to prevent tensions during the annual migration through among others, identifying migration corridors.

Unfortunately, during the past few months, Abyei experienced a deterioration of its security situation. Two factors account for this deteriorating security condition. The first relates to the adverse impact of the war that broke out in Sudan in April 2023. In her briefing to the UN Security Council in November, it is to be recalled that Tetteh warned about the likely adverse consequences of the expansion of the war in Sudan into the border areas of South Sudan including on the fragile social cohesion of Abyei. This development has affected the UN Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) in various ways. First, as the fighting expanded to Sudan's West Kordofan state and the Rapid Support Forces (RPF) captured oilfields there and the resultant worsening security situation, UNISFA evacuated all international UN staff from Kadugli to Entebbe and Abyei town. Second, the UN Secretary-General's report in October also observed that the JBVMM's implementation of its mandate was affected significantly by the closure of Sudanese airspace in connection with the conflict, making aerial patrols impossible for the JBVMM bases in Sudan.

The other source of the deterioration of the security situation in Abyei is the spike in intercommunal clashes. In November 2023, various incidents of attacks were recorded. An attack on 19 November in three villages claimed the lives of

27 people and injured 14 others. In another incident during the same month, violence in Warrap State, South Sudan and Southern Abyei Administrative Area claimed the lives of 75 people. A similar incident in Abyei in early December led to the killing of 10 people. An ambush in Agok claimed the lives of six people including Abyei Deputy Chief Administrator, Deng Nyok. The various incidents involve clashes between armed Twic Dinka youth (also known as Titweng) and the Ngok Dinka of Abyei. Incidents of attacks and clashes involving these groups persisted into January with at least four such incidents.

In one of these deadliest incidents since 2021 that took place on 27 January 2024, UNISFA reported that 52 civilians lost their lives and 64 others were gravely injured in the incident. In this particular incident, the attack also led to the death of two UNISFA peacekeepers, prompting the Secretary-General to issue a statement expressing deep concern over the incident and UNISFA expressing concern by 'continuing inter-communal clashes.' At least two such clashes were reported in February as well. UN Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations Jean-Pierre Lacroix expressed his concern about hate speech and disinformation in Abyei, which according to him, 'can increase tensions and fuel violence'.

In light of these various concerning developments, tomorrow's session should even have come earlier. As such it presents an opportunity for the PSC to consider the increasing fragility of the situation in Abyei and how to mitigate and avoid the danger of the region being overwhelmed by the security pressures from the rising intercommunal clashes and the consequences of the Sudan war.

Beyond the security situation, the humanitarian dimension of the situation would also be of interest to the PSC. Due to the recent intercommunal clashes, people were displaced. UNISFA in late January and early February received for providing protection, more than 2000 of those displaced. The inflow of a large number of refugees and returnees from Sudan further

exacerbates the existing humanitarian situation in Abyei. According to the UNHCR, as of 7 March 2024, some 20,000 people crossed from Sudan to South Sudan through Abyei fleeing the war in Sudan since its outbreak in April 2023.

In the political front, the war in Sudan has completely changed the process for the resolution of the final status of Abyei. Since the PSC's last session, there have been positive developments most notably towards the revival and enhancement of the efforts by the Republic of Sudan and South Sudan to identify a long-lasting solution to the issue of Abyei region. The May 2023 [report](#) of the UN Security-General on UNISFA observed that there was 'high-level engagement between the Sudan and South Sudan aimed at enhancing cooperation on Abyei and border issues, and paving the way for discussion on its final status.' It in particular noted that 'on 24 October 2022, the chairpersons of the national committees established by both South Sudan and the Sudan – Tut Gatluak Manime, Presidential Adviser on National Security Affairs of South Sudan, and Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, Deputy Chairperson of the Sovereign Council of the Sudan and Head of the Rapid Support Forces – met to discuss the final status of Abyei, which resulted in an agreement to enhance cooperation and address outstanding issues.' They held a second meeting in Khartoum with the presence of UNISFA and representatives of the UN, AU and IGAD on 9 and 10 April, only days before the outbreak of the Sudan war. With the war in Sudan raging, further engagement to take these discussions forward was disrupted. The result is that the process for the final settlement of the status of Abyei is unlikely to be back on the agenda of the talks between Sudan and South Sudan in the near future before any progress is made in containing the war in Sudan itself.

In light of these various developments, the role of UNISFA and the JBVMM has acquired particular significance. Thus PSC's 1108th session assertion of 'the need to maintain the presence of UNISFA in order to continue maintaining peace and stability

in the Abyei region' is even more important in the current context than when the PSC held the meeting in September 2022. It is a welcome development in this context that members of the UN Security Council were unanimous in their support of the important role of UNISFA and the JBVMM. On 14 November 2023, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2708, renewing the mandate of UNISFA for another year, until 15 November 2024. The resolution also extended UNISFA's support for the JBVMM for one year.

Tomorrow's session also serves for taking stock of the follow up to the decisions of PSC's 1108th meeting when it last discussed Abyei, in September 2022. Beyond those already highlighted above including the nomination of a facilitator for the AJOC, the PSC in this respect may also consider the role of the AU High-Level Panel on Sudan (AUHIP). It is to be recalled that, following the update by President Thabo Mbeki, Chair of AUHIP during the 1108th session, the PSC expressed its gratitude to AUHIP 'for the sustained efforts over the years, which contributed to the stabilization of the Abyei Area; in this regard, requests the AU Commission to scale up the mobilization of the requisite resources to ensure the success of this undertaking aimed at negotiating solutions to the challenges in Abyei; and looks forward to receiving the comprehensive report of the activities of the AUHIP.'

The expected outcome of the session is a communique. The PSC may condemn the increase in the frequency and impact of intercommunal conflicts in the region and the attack on UNISFA peacekeepers that claimed the lives of two peacekeepers. It may urge South Sudan to enhance its efforts for taking measures that help deescalate the situation, particularly the tension involving the Twic Dinka and Ngok Dinka. Further, the PSC may reaffirm the increasing importance of the role of UNISFA in view of changing dynamics affecting Abyei and welcome the decision by the UN Security Council to extend the mandate of UNISFA and the latter's support to the JBVMM. The

PSC may also highlight the importance of the role of the AU and IGAD including the continuing importance of the role of the AUHIP and in this respect, may express its expectation to receive the report of the AIHIP. It may commend the efforts of UNISFA to protect those affected by recent conflicts including through the provision of shelter to the displaced and encourage the mission to expedite the humanitarian response and call for other humanitarian providers to scale up their contribution for humanitarian assistance to the region. The PSC may welcome a peace deal that the Misseriya and Dinka Ngok signed in December 2023 to prevent tensions during the annual migration and encourage community leaders to sustain such peace efforts. The PSC may call on Sudan and South Sudan to not let the conflict in Sudan waver the commitment of the two parties to the Agreement on Temporary Security and Administrative Arrangements.