

Briefing on the situation in Eastern DRC and deployment of the SADC Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC)

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Tomorrow (04 March), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will consider the security situation in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the deployment of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in the DRC (SAMIDRC), as one of the agenda items of its 1203rd session.

Emilia Mkusa, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Namibia to the AU and PSC Chairperson for the month, will deliver opening remarks. Bankole Adeoye, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) is also expected to make a statement. This will be followed with statements by a representative of DRC as well as a representative of the Republic of Zambia, SADC Chair of the Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Affairs. Kula Ishmael Theletsane, Director of SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security Affairs is also expected to brief the PSC. Force Commander of the SAMIDRC may also participate in the session.

In the previous year, the PSC considered the situation in eastern DRC at the Heads of State and Government level, at its 1140th session held in February. It also committed its 1145th session held in March to the consideration of the report of its filed mission to the DRC conducted from 20 to 23 March 2023. Since then, there have been major developments in relation to the situation in the region as well as the

response mechanisms deployed to manage the crisis, including SADC's deployment of SAMIDRC on 08 May 2023. Tomorrow's session offers the opportunity to discuss these developments.

Since October 2023, the security situation in eastern DRC has significantly worsened increasing regional tensions. While much attention has been directed towards the ongoing conflict involving the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) alongside allied militias and the Mouvement du 23 mars (M23), other domestic and foreign armed groups such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Coopérative pour le développement du Congo (CODECO), the Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda (FDLR), Red Tabara, and Mai-Mai also continue to wreak havoc in the region, significantly impacting the civilian population.

There have been ongoing regional initiatives under the auspices of the East African Community (EAC) and the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) known as the Nairobi and Luanda processes to address the situation in eastern DRC. An EAC Regional Force (EACRF) was also deployed in eastern DRC as part of the Nairobi process but EACRF eventually withdrew from the region in December 2023 due to the Congolese government's disappointment over the EACRF's inability to resolve the issue of the M23 and its unwillingness to renew the Status of Force Agreement (SOFA).

Even before EACRF's departure, the Congolese government had already turned its attention towards SADC, which on 8 May decided to deploy SAMIDRC with a mandate to support restoring peace and stability in eastern DRC. On 17 November, SADC signed a SOFA with the DRC to pave the way for the mission's deployment in December 2023. SAMIDRC is comprised of contingents from Malawi, South Africa, and Tanzania which are actively engaged in providing support to the FARDC in the ongoing fight against M23. Tomorrow's session marks the first time when the PSC will discuss the decision of SADC Heads of State and Government on the deployment of troops to the DRC on

08 May 2023.

Following EACRF's departure, the M23 reportedly retook control of the areas that it handed to the force and made advances towards Goma, the capital of North Kivu. The ongoing fighting near Sake, a town 27 kilometres from Goma has exacerbated the humanitarian crisis in the region and the massive displacement of people has heightened international concerns. The situation has also increased regional tensions with escalatory rhetoric and accusations between DRC and its neighbours. For instance, recently, DRC accused Rwanda of targeting a Congolese military aircraft stationed at the Goma airport that reportedly sustained minor damage in a drone attack on 17 February 2023. Rwanda also accused DRC of posing a threat to its security by violating its air space and, announced its decision to adjust its security posture including measures to ensure complete air defense of Rwanda, and to degrade offensive air capabilities. Additionally, Rwanda accused DRC and Burundi of publicly declaring their support for regime change in Rwanda following the 12 February visit of Burundian President Évariste Ndayishimiye to Kinshasa, where he reportedly met with his Congolese counterpart to discuss the security situation in eastern DRC.

Burundi has deployed its forces in eastern DRC under a bilateral agreement with the Congolese government. Tensions between Rwanda and Burundi escalated after Burundi's decision in January to close its borders with Rwanda, citing allegations of Rwandan support for Burundian armed groups—a charge Rwanda denies. Burundi's border closure came in response to a 22 December 2023 attack by Red Tabara, a Burundian armed group operating in eastern DRC, which targeted a village near Burundi's western border with the DRC, resulting in the loss of 20 lives, including 12 children. Another attack by Red Tabara on 26 February reportedly claimed nine lives and left several others injured.

On the margins of the AU Summit, Angolan President and Chair

of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), Joao Lourenço, convened a mini-summit on 16 February which saw the participation of regional leaders and AU Commission Chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat. The mini-summit discussed ways of restoring a cessation of hostilities and facilitating direct talks between the DRC and Rwanda to avoid the further expansion of the conflict into a regional crisis. With the mini-summit ending without any concrete outcome and the two sides descending into heated exchanges, President Lourenço held bilateral meetings with the presidents of the DRC and Rwanda on 17 February. He continued his diplomatic engagement in Luanda meeting with President Felix Tshisekedi on 27 February who reportedly agreed in principle to meet with President Paul Kagame.

During the AU summit, there was also a tripartite meeting of the leaders of Burundi, the DRC, and South Africa in Addis Ababa on 17 February, which focused on the coordination of forces operating in eastern DRC in support of the FARDC. Burundi and South Africa are actively involved in providing support to the Congolese government in its military operations in North Kivu, with Burundi operating within a bilateral arrangement and South Africa participating as part of the SAMIDRC mission. The three leaders met again in Windhoek, during the funeral ceremony of the late Namibian President, to continue the discussion in the tripartite format.

On 14 February, two SAMIDRC troops from South Africa were killed and three others injured in a mortar attack, according to a 15 February [press release](#) of the South African National Defence Force. South Africa reaffirmed its commitment to continue assisting the Congolese people and underscored SAMIDRC's role as a 'bulwark against the expansion of the conflict to the whole country'. However, Rwanda alleged that SAMIDRC 'is not a neutral force in the current crisis', accusing it of supporting the DRC government's 'belligerent posture, which bears the potential for further escalation of

the conflict and increased tensions in the region', according to a letter the country sent to the Security Council.

This came against the backdrop of discussions about possible UN operational and logistical support to SAMIDRC. On 22 November 2023, SADC formally requested UN assistance for SAMIDRC, including the provision of facilities, equipment, air asset services, medical support, and information and intelligence sharing, among other forms of support. In resolution 2717 of 19 December 2023, which most recently renewed the mandate of the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC (MONUSCO), the Security Council expressed its intention to evaluate the conditions under which 'limited logistical and operational support may be provided to an AU-mandated regional force deployed within the area of MONUSCO's deployment, in furtherance of MONUSCO's mandate, and within existing resources'. It also requested the Secretary-General to submit a report in June, which will include his recommendations on this matter.

It is in this context that the PSC is meeting tomorrow to receive a briefing on the deployment of SAMIDRC. Unlike the East African Force which was tied to the political track of the Nairobi process and the inter-state focused Luanda process, there is no indication that SAMIDRC has a political and peace track on which it is anchored. As part of the discussion on possible support from the AU, one of the issues that tomorrow's session may discuss includes whether and how SAMIDRC deployment is tied to and supports the Nairobi and Luanda processes. PSC members are also likely to explore possible AU support to SAMIDRC, including from the Crisis Reserve Facility (CRF) of the AU Peace Fund and to enable the force to airlift donated equipment from the AU Continental Logistics Base in Cameroon, as well as other support from partners such as the UN.

In line with resolution 2717, the only way that SAMIDRC gets the desired support from the UN is if the AU mandates it.

Endorsement by the PSC may not be necessarily the same as mandating the mission and there could be further discussion on this when the issue is considered in New York in due course. Nevertheless, the PSC's decision on the matter is likely to feed into the Secretary-General's June report and recommendations on the provision of limited operational and logistical support through MONUSCO. These recommendations could also be premised on the assumption that MONUSCO stays in DRC beyond December 2024.

MONUSCO is currently implementing a disengagement plan agreed with the Congolese government and endorsed by the Security Council. It is expected to withdraw in April from one of the three provinces—South Kivu—where it is currently operating but the decision to withdraw from the remaining two provinces—North Kivu and Ituri—will be made based on an evaluation of the progress in the disengagement process and the evolving security situation on the ground. It is because of this reason that the Security Council intentionally avoided setting an artificial deadline for the mission's exit, but Kinshasa seems to be of the view that MONUSCO should leave come December 2024. DRC's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Francophonie, Christophe Lutundula said that his government is 'fighting for everything to be done by the end of this year', in a joint press conference with the Special Representative and Head of MONUSCO, Bintou Keita on 13 January. 'As of December 31 of this year, we are at the end of the withdrawal process', he emphasized.

The expected outcome of the session is a communiqué. The PSC may endorse SADC's deployment of SAMIDRC. It may stress the importance of ensuring coordination of efforts deployed in the region and draw attention to the importance of aligning the force's deployment with existing peace and political processes including the Nairobi and Luanda processes and the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF), in order to achieve lasting and sustainable results in the resolution of the

crisis. The PSC is also expected to emphasise concern over the intensification of hostilities in eastern DRC and the reversal of some of the key gains achieved including withdrawal of negative forces from strategic territories in the region. It may express serious concern over the deterioration of the relationship between DRC and Rwanda and urge the leaders of both countries to uphold commitments made under and commit to the Nairobi and Luanda processes. In this respect, the PSC may welcome Angolan president, President Lourenço's recent efforts to facilitate direct talks between the two leaders and urge the two countries to extend full cooperation for the facilitation role of President Lourenço. The PSC may further call on all neighbouring countries of DRC to engage constructively towards averting further escalation of the situation into a regional crisis. On support to SAMIDRC, the PSC may request the AU Commission to work out modalities for using the CRF funds for supporting SAMIDRC.