

Briefing on the situation in eastern DRC and the deployment of the EAC regional force

Briefing on the situation in eastern DRC and the deployment of the EAC regional force Date | 17 February 2023

Tomorrow (17 February), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 1140th session at the Heads of State and Government level to consider the deteriorating security situation in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the deployment of the East African Community (EAC) Regional Force. The session is expected to consider the situation within the framework of the Peace, Security, and Cooperation Framework for DRC and the Region (PSCF Agreement). This month marks the tenth anniversary of the signing of the PSCF which rekindled a sense of hope for ending the recurring cycles of conflict in eastern DRC and its impacts on the stability and development of the Great Lakes region.

Matamela Cyril Ramaphosa, President of the Republic of South Africa and Chairperson of the PSC for the month is expected to deliver opening remarks to be followed with a briefing update by Moussa Faki Mahamat, Chairperson of the AU Commission. Statements are also expected from João Manuel Lourenço, President of the Republic of Angola, AU Champion for Peace and Reconciliation and Chairperson of the International Conference of the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) and Évariste Ndayishimiye, President of the Republic of Burundi and Chairperson of the EAC. The Chairpersons of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and Southern African Development Community (SADC) as well as António Guterres, Secretary-

General of the United Nations (UN) are also expected to make statements. As countries concerned, Félix Antoine Tshisekedi, President of the DRC and Paul Kagame, President of the Republic of Rwanda will also present statements.

The last time the PSC considered the situation in eastern DRC was at its 1103rd session convened on 31 August of the previous year, where it endorsed the deployment of EAC Regional Force to eastern DRC and called on the AU Commission to facilitate coordination among efforts being deployed by the various stakeholders in the region.

Unfortunately, peace continues to elude the eastern DRC and the deterioration of the security situation is once again stoking tensions in the region. DRC happens to be the chair of the regional oversight mechanism (ROM) which is the main body that reviews the progress on the implementation of the national and regional commitments made by signatory countries under the PSC framework. DRC is expected to hand over the chairmanship to Burundi who will host the next meeting of the ROM.

Regional diplomatic efforts under the auspices of the EAC and the ICGLR, otherwise known as the Nairobi and Luanda processes, have been trying to address the growing insecurity in the eastern DRC. However, the security situation has continued to escalate worsening the already dire humanitarian situation in the region. The M23 Movement had reportedly withdrawn from some of the territories it controlled in North Kivu as a result of these regional diplomatic efforts. With the recent resumption of intense fighting with the Congolese armed forces (FARDC) and other armed groups, however, M23 reportedly took control of several villages including a strategic town, Kitshanga, cutting off the road to Goma, the regional capital. In recent days, M23 is said to have moved closer to Sake, a town west of Goma.

The EAC Facilitator of the Peace Process in the eastern DRC,

former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta, expressed deep concern about the deteriorating situation in North Kivu and called for the cessation of all hostilities and adherence to the agreements reached within the framework of the Nairobi and Luanda processes which, among other things, included the withdrawal of M23 from occupied territories, the accelerated implementation of the Demobilisation, Disarmament, Community Recovery and Stabilisation Program (P-DDRCS) and the resumption of consultations between the Congolese government and armed groups.

Although international attention is focused on the military activities of the M23, other armed groups operating in eastern DRC such as the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF), the Coopérative pour le Développement du Congo (CODECO), the FDLR, and the Mai-Mai Group have also continued to cause havoc in the region. The ongoing fighting has resulted in massive displacement of people. The rise of hate speech and incitement to violence targeting minority communities in the eastern DRC is also causing significant alarm.

The escalating security situation has continued to aggravate the already tense relationship between the DRC and Rwanda. On 24 January, Rwanda said that it took defensive measures against a Congolese aircraft that violated its airspace, while DRC denied the accusation and characterized Rwanda's actions as "a deliberate act of aggression". Both Kinshasa and Kigali have ratcheted up the rhetoric and this has heightened fears of direct military confrontation between the two countries. Most recently, on 15 February, Rwanda released a statement accusing DRC soldiers of cross-border shooting. According to the press release, FARDC forces entered ungoverned territory between the two countries and started firing against Rwandan border post.

Clearly there is increasing risk of the situation plunging the two countries into full blown inter-state war with dire consequences including the danger of sacking other countries

from the region into regional conflagration. Not any less worrisome is misinformation, disinformation and propagation of ethnic based hate speech and incitement of violence continues to deepen inter-ethnic and intercommunal tension and heightened risks of mass atrocities.

The EAC Heads of State and Government met in Bujumbura in an extraordinary summit on 4 February 2023 to discuss the deteriorating security situation in the eastern DRC. The Presidents of DRC and Rwanda as well as other regional leaders attended the summit which called for an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of all foreign armed groups. The summit also instructed the EAC chiefs of defense forces to meet and set new timelines for the withdrawal of these forces. The chiefs of defense forces met in Nairobi based on the EAC summit decision to assess the security situation in the eastern DRC and recommend a new course of action. As the M23 continues to advance and control more territories in North Kivu, however, public sentiment in the region is changing with protests against both the EAC regional force. The Congolese government is pushing the regional force to undertake offensive operations against the M23. Kenyatta has called on countries deploying their troops as part of the regional forces to take their positions urgently. In North Kivu, he called on the regional force to interpose itself between the warring parties in areas vacated by the M23.

Kenyatta has expressed his intentions to convene a fourth round of talks as part of the Nairobi process. He also urged all the parties to implement the outcomes of the third round of talks to build the necessary confidence in the process and called for regional and international support to ensure the success of the next round of talks. Angolan President Joao Lourenco and Burundian President Évariste Ndayishimiye, current chair of the EAC, are also reportedly planning to convene a mini-summit on 17 February in Addis Ababa ahead of the PSC Summit, which will bring together Presidents

Tshisekedi and Kagame as well as EAC leaders along with ICGLR to assess the implementation of the decisions made in in the context of the Nairobi and Luanda processes.

The expected outcome of the session is a Communiqué. The PSC meeting is expected to assess developments in the eastern DRC and express serious concerns about the deteriorating security and humanitarian situation in the region. It may express support for the decision of the EAC extraordinary summit for an immediate ceasefire and the withdrawal of foreign armed groups. It may also reiterate support for the EAC regional force and its expedited deployment to carry out its mandate. The PSC may express concern about the increasing tensions between DRC and Rwanda and encourage the two countries to resolve differences through dialogue in the context of the ongoing regional initiatives. The PSC may express support to the EAC and ICGLR and commend the efforts of the Chairperson of ICGLR Angolan President Joao Lourenco and the EAC Chairperson Burundi's President as well as the facilitator for the Nairobi process Former Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta. It may emphasize the need for the scrupulous implementation of decisions taken within the framework of the Nairobi and Luanda processes to de-escalate the situation in the eastern DRC and ease tensions between DRC and Rwanda. The PSC may take the opportunity to reflect on the 10th anniversary of the PSCF and call on the convening of a summit level meeting on the reinvigorating of the various mechanisms of the PSCF and for countries of the region to reaffirm their commitments and the guarantors in this regard. It may also underscore the need to reinvigorate the mechanisms under the PSCF to address the prevailing peace and security challenges and build the necessary trust and confidence between and among countries of the region. The PSC may express concern on the widespread misinformation, disinformation, ethnic based hate speech and incitement of violence and the associated risks of mass atrocities in the region and may request the AU Commission to put in place a mechanism for addressing these grave threats.

It may finally call on the relevant regional economic communities and regional mechanisms (RECS/RMs) to convene a joint summit for ensuring harmonization and coordinated action with a view to avoid any misunderstanding and divergence of policy actions among them.