

Briefing on the situation in the Sahel region

Briefing on the situation in the Sahel region Date | 31 October 2022

Tomorrow (31 October), African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 1116th session to receive a briefing on the situation in the Sahel region as one of the two agenda items tabled for its consideration.

The session is expected to start with an opening remark by Mohammed Arrouchi, the Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Morocco to the AU and the Chairperson of the PSC for October 2022, followed by a statement from Bankole Adeoye, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security. Mamane Sambo Sidikou, AU High Representative for Mali and the Sahel, as well as the representatives of the G5 Sahel and the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) are also expected to deliver statements. The representatives of Guinea Bissau and Democratic Republic of Congo will make statements as the current chairs of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), respectively. Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, Special Representative of the Secretary-General to the African Union and Head of the United Nations Office to the African Union (UNOAU) is also among the speakers.

The last time the PSC dedicated a stand-alone session on the situation in Sahel was during its 1087th session on 1 June 2022. However, it also considered the political transitions in the countries of the region, namely Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad at its 1106th sessions in September.

The past few years have shown the spike in the intensity and

frequency of terrorist attacks and expansion in the geographic spread of terrorism in the region. The security outlook of the region is even more bleak in 2022 as a recent report by the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) confirms. ACLED's 2022 [mid-year update](#) on Sahel notes that instability in Sahel is 'persisting, expanding, and escalating'. Same update indicates that '2022 is on track to be the deadliest year for both Burkina Faso and Mali' since the onset of the crisis more than a decade ago. Conflict intensity remains highest in Burkina Faso among Sahelian states in the first half of 2022, while Mali takes the lead in terms of the reported fatalities. Recent spike of fatalities in Mali puts the country back to its place as 'the epicentre of the crisis after being surpassed by Burkina Faso in the count of conflict-related deaths in two of the last three years'. However, the situation in Niger seems to be improving in 2022 after registering 129% increase of fatalities in 2021. Worsening security situation is also fuelling political instability in the region as observed in Burkina Faso, which witnessed a coup within a coup this month. The coup came few days after an ambush on a supply convoy on its way to the town of Djibo, capital of the Soum province which remains under blockade for months, reportedly killed 27 soldiers and 10 civilians.

Trends of fatalities

(Source: Jeune Afrique and ACLED)

International security partnerships in the region are facing major setbacks at a time when strong cooperation and coordination is desperately needed. One month after its decision to leave the G5 Sahel Joint Force, on 14 June, Mali's military authorities announced to end the commitment of Malian personnel serving in the western zone (Mali-Mauritania) and central zone (Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger) as of 30 June. Following this step, Mission's headquarters were relocated from Bamako to N'djamena while terminating its operational and

logistics support for the Malian battalions. The security situation in the three-border area worsened as cross-border cooperation decreased, resulting in the spike of civilian casualties. According to the 3 October 2022 UN Secretary-General [report](#) on UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), 'the death toll for just the first half of 2022 represented more than 90 per cent of the annual toll for 2021'. The last French military unit of Barkhane forces also left Mali on 15 August after a fallout between the two countries following the 24 May coup. Relations between Mali's transitional authorities and MINUSMA have become increasingly strained, compromising MINUSMA's ability to discharge its mandate.

Meanwhile, in September, the Independent High-Level Panel led by former President of Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou was launched to undertake an Independent Strategic Assessment of the situation in Sahel. Its findings are expected to be presented to the 36th ordinary session of the AU Assembly in February 2023. Up on its conclusion, the assessment is hoped to offer a deeper understanding of the complex security-governance-development crisis in Sahel and provide guidance on how to effectively address the challenge at a structural level.

On the political front, the region is marked by setbacks in political transitions in Burkina Faso and Chad. In **Burkina Faso**, on 30 September, army Captain Ibrahim Traore deposed military leader President Paul-Henri Damiba who himself came to power on 24 January of this year overthrowing democratically elected President Roch Kabore. New coup leaders announced the dissolution of interim government and transitional national legislative, and suspension of the transitional charter. Both ECOWAS and AU issued statements condemning the military coup, also calling upon the military authorities to ensure strict compliance to the already agreed transition timetable of 24 months with electoral deadlines for the restoration of constitutional order by 1 July 2024. Two

weeks after seizure of power, on 14 October, a national forum of 300 delegates from different groups opened to consider a transition charter and appoint a new interim president in line with a charter. Accordingly, Traore was appointed as transition president until elections are held in July 2024, who in turn named a civilian Prime Minister on 21 October. The forum also adopted part of the charter that prohibits transition president from standing in the upcoming elections. Against this backdrop, two main concerns of ECOWAS and AU on transition timeline and eligibility of interim president in upcoming elections seem to be addressed by the military authorities, which may help the latter to avoid further sanctions from the regional bodies.

In **Mali**, on 11 October, a Constitutional Commission handed over the preliminary draft of a new Constitution to the President of the transition, Colonel Assimi Goita, which is expected to be put to a referendum in March 2023. The draft of a new constitution could be seen as a right step towards laying out a new social contract that presents Mali a fresh opportunity to forge consensus around the nature, aspirations, and principles of the political state. The draft constitution also forms part of series of decisions by Mali's transitional authorities in recent months, including the adoption of a new electoral law and the creation of the Independent Electoral Management Authority, and submission of acceptable transition timetable of 24 months. In light of these progress made, it is to be recalled that ECOWAS lifted the economic and financial sanctions in July although it maintains the suspension and targeted sanctions against individuals and groups. During the 3rd meeting of the Monitoring and Support Group for the Transition in Mali (GST-Mali) in September, Mali requested the lifting of the remaining sanctions imposed by AU and the regional bloc. The PSC in its last session of 19 September 2022 took note of Mali's progress but this did not lead to the lifting of the sanction that Council imposed during its 1001st

meeting of June 2021.

In **Chad**, the transition has backtracked following Chad's Inclusive and Sovereign National Dialogue extended the transition period for additional 24 months and allowed members of the ruling Transitional Military Council (TMC) to run in upcoming elections. Accordingly, on 10 October, Chad's military leader, Mahamat Idriss Deby Itno was sworn in as President of a two-year transitional period, triggering deadly protests on 20 October that left around 50 people dead and hundreds injured. Both the proposed new timeline and participation of members of the TMC in the upcoming elections contradict the list of conditions of transition set out by the Council during its 996th session of May 2021. It is to be recalled that PSC went out of step with its own established norms and practices when it failed to sanction Chad for the April 2021 military takeover of power. Instead, Council, at its 996th session, requested the TMC, among others, to complete the transition within 18 months from 20 April 2021, further stating that 'no form of extension of the transition period prolonging the restoration of constitutional order, would be acceptable to the AU'. It also urged the Chairman and members of the TMC not to run for the upcoming elections. These conditions, reiterated during Council's 1106th meeting convened on 19 September 2022, have now been breached. Given that the PSC withheld the application of Article 7(1)(g) on suspension of a member state upon the occurrence of unconstitutional change of government such as by seizure of power by the military and suspension of constitutional processes as happened in Chad on the premise of these conditions, the breach of these conditions necessitate the revisiting of PSC's decision on applying suspension pursuant to Article 7(1)(g) of the PSC Protocol.

On the humanitarian front, the condition has not showed any improvement since Council's lasting meeting on the situation

in Sahel in June. The rising insecurity, political volatility, climatic and demographic pressures coupled with elevated global prices for agricultural commodities are exacerbating the already dire humanitarian situation in the region. According to the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, forced displacement is at 'an unprecedented high, with over 4 million refugees and internally displaced peoples' across the Sahel in 2022. In Burkina Faso, 'Violent attacks has driven more people to flee between January and July 2022 than during the entire year of 2021', making the country one of the three fastest growing displacement crisis in the world, according to a [latest data](#) provided by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) published on 5 September. Close to 2 million (nearly one in 10 persons) have been displaced in the country. Food insecurity has reached 'alarming levels' in the region. WFP and FAO recent [report](#) highlights that during the June–August 2022 period, around 13 million people were projected to be acutely food insecure, at Crisis level or worse (CH Phase 3 and above), including 1.4 million people in Emergency (CH Phase 4) in the region. This is a nearly 50 percent increase compared to 2021, and over 120 percent higher than the five-year average. With terrorist activity expanding geographically, some sources claim that up to 40 per cent of Burkina Faso's territory is outside state control. Several towns including Djibo are under the blockade of terrorist groups, cutting off population's access to basic goods and services.

The expected outcome of tomorrow's session is a communique. Council is expected to express its grave concern over the expanding and escalating threat of terrorism in the Sahel, as well as its impact on the political stability and humanitarian situation of the region. While Council may stress the importance of coordinated military response against terrorist groups in the region, it may also emphasize the importance of a comprehensive counterterrorism approach that would address the multi-layered structural drivers of the scourge. In this respect, Council is likely to welcome the formal launch of the

Independent High-Level Panel led by Niger's Mahamadou Issoufou and may look forward to its outcome before the 36th ordinary session of the AU Assembly. Given that Mali remains a key theatre for the fight against terrorism in the region and taking G5 Sahel joint Force's critical role in this context, Council may urge countries of the G5 Sahel to engage in dialogue to iron out difference on the presidency of the institution and other underlying contentions. On Mali-Cote d'Ivoire tension over the 46 Ivorian soldiers, Council may echo the call made by ECOWAS summit for their unconditional release. On the political transitions in countries of the region, Council is likely to express its disappointment over transition rollback in Burkina Faso and Chad. In relation to Burkina Faso, Council may reiterate the call of the chairperson of the AU Commission for military authorities to 'ensure strict compliance with electoral deadlines for the restoration of Constitutional order by 1 July 2024, at the latest'. On Chad, the PSC is well placed to revise its earlier decision of not applying suspension if conditions set out for transition were not fulfilled and use its Article 7(1)(g) responsibility for ensuring the credibility of its decision and the relevant norm on unconstitutional changes of government. In addition, Council may condemn the violence that occurred on 20 October against protesters and may further call for a credible investigation into the killings of the protesters.