

Briefing on the situation in the Sahel region

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Tomorrow (01 June), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its first session of the month to receive briefing on the situation in the Sahel region.

Following opening remarks by Daniel Owassa, Permanent Representative of Congo to the AU and Chairperson of the Council for the month of June, Bankole Adeoye, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security is expected to deliver statement. Mamane Sambo Sidikou, AU High Representative for Mali and Head of AU Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL) is expected to make statement. General Oumar Bikimo, G5 Sahel Joint Force Commander is also scheduled to make a presentation. The representative of Ghana as Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Chair and the representatives of the three members of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, namely Chad, Mauritania, and Niger are expected to make statements. In addition, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General to the AU and Head of United Nations Office to the AU (UNOAU), Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, may also deliver statement.

This item is put on the agenda of the PSC by the AU Commission, coming in the context of worrying security, political and humanitarian developments in the Sahel region. The last dedicated session of the Council on the general security situation in the Sahel region was at its 939th session that took place in July 2020. This is apart from PSC sessions dedicated to situations in specific countries of the region including the latest one at its 1076th session in April 2022 where it considered the political transition processes in

Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad, among others.

The data from various sources that document acts of terrorist attacks, including the Global Terrorism Index 2022 published in March 2022, show that there is continuing rise both in the *number of attacks* and of *fatalities* from attacks in the Sahel region. Incidents of terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso increased from 191 in 2020 and to 216 in 2021, pushing the number of fatalities from 657 to 732. With 333 incidents, the attacks from terrorism in Mali increased by 56% in 2021 compared to 2020 and led to more than 100% increase in fatalities, representing the highest number of terrorist attacks and deaths in the last decade in Mali. Although the number of incidents did not increase in Niger, the attacks in the country led to 129% increase in fatalities.

With such spike in attacks and fatalities, the Sahel has now become the region with countries most affected by terrorism in the world. Various factors account for these. These include weak capacity of security forces, absence of state presence in border areas increasingly affected by terrorism, socio-economic and political marginalization of affected territories and climatic and demographic pressures on the lives and livelihoods of communities. Added to these is the expansion in operational capacity and geographic stretch of the two main terrorist groups operating in the region, the Islamic State of the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Al Qaeda-affiliated Jamaat Nusrat Al-Islam Wal Muslimeen (JNIM).

Making matters worse, the Sahel is also experiencing heightened levels of political volatility, partly on account of the worsening security situation. All the three Sahelian countries most affected by terrorism and Chad have experienced attempted military coups. While the coup attempt in Niger failed, those in Mali, Chad and Burkina Faso were successful. Apart from the suspension from the AU and ECOWAS, the disagreement between ECOWAS and Mali over the timelines for the return to constitutional order led ECOWAS to impose

further sanctions on Mali. While it has not as yet led to similar sanctions ECOWAS imposed on Mali, Burkina Faso and ECOWAS also remain unable to agree on a timeline for the transition and return of constitutional order. Apart from the political uncertainties these disagreements have created in both countries, the situation, further aggravated by tensions over the role of international actors, is straining diplomatic relations among ECOWAS countries and impeding mobilization of cohesive regional and continental policy measures.

Dealing further blow to effective policy responses to the growing threat of terrorism is the deepening tension afflicting the international security partnership in the Sahel. Apart from the withdrawal from Mali of Operation Berkane, the diplomatic fallout between Mali and France and the disaffection from the reported deployment of personnel of the Russian private security company, Wagner Group, in Mali in December 2021 have led to the announcement on 17 February by members of the Task Force Takuba of a decision to start the 'coordinated withdrawal of their respective military resources' from Mali within six months.

G5 Sahel joint force is caught in the crossfires of the diplomatic tensions in the Sahel involving both regional and international actors. In his 11 May 2022 report on the G5 Sahel to the UN Security Council, UN Secretary General expressed his deep concern 'by the rapidly deteriorating security situation in the Sahel, as well as by the potentially debilitating effect that the uncertain political situation in Mali, Burkina Faso and beyond will have on efforts to further operationalize the G5 Sahel Joint Force and to address the underlying causes of instability and improve governance.' On 15 May 2022, the transitional authorities of Mali announced the withdrawal of Mali from the G5 Sahel joint force protesting against its exclusion from assuming the rotating presidency of G5 Sahel. Ordinary session was supposed to happen in February in Bamako where Mali was due to take up the

baton of the rotating presidency of the body from Chad. Amid the fallout between Mali and France and the tension over the deployment of the Wagner group, some members of the G5 Sahel opposed Mali's takeover of the presidency of the regional group. Mali pointed its finger on 'a state outside the region for desperately seeking to isolate Mali.'

Mali's withdrawal from the G5 Sahel is not without serious consequences for counter terrorism in the region. The UN mission in Mali has reported worrying levels of spike in insecurity on Mali's border with Burkina Faso and Niger. Highlighting the significance of Mali's continued engagement in G5 Sahel, Niger's President went as far as stating that its withdrawal will mark the end of the alliance.

The rising insecurity, political volatility and tension combined with climatic and demographic pressures on the livelihoods of people in the region are aggravating already dire humanitarian situation in the region. People continue to be displaced. 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. The spate of terrorist attacks in Burkina Faso has already led in record numbers of displaced people, numbering 1.5 million in that country alone. OCHA's 20 May Briefing Highlights reported that food insecurity has reached 'alarming levels' in Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger, where people will experience 'emergency levels of food insecurity during the lean season between June and August.' Despite the deteriorating humanitarian condition, the declining level of funding for humanitarian and stabilization activities, as noted by the UN Secretary-General António Guterres during his recent visit to Niger, remains extremely concerning.

During tomorrow's session one of the issues of concern for the PSC is how to resolve the political uncertainties in the countries affected by military coups. This should include not

only Burkina Faso and Mali but also Chad. Perception of inconsistent treatment opens regional, continental and international policy responses to charges of double standard, severely impeding effectiveness and undermining cohesion. In terms of resolving the diplomatic crisis between ECOWAS and its two member States Burkina Faso and Mali, there is also a need for finding consensual timelines for the transitions that is informed by the urgency of ending the adverse impact of this difference on the security situation in the region.

The other area of concern for the PSC is the uncertainty facing the G5 Sahel joint force following the withdrawal of Mali. Member states may inquire AU's assessment of the situation and how the AU can help to facilitate the resolution of the recent disagreement among countries of the G5 Sahel. This is critical to restore cohesion of members of the G5 Sahel and the effective functioning of the joint force.

In terms of security partnerships in the Sahel, similar issue of concern for the PSC is the impact of the disagreement involving international partners undertaking security operations in the region. It is to be recalled that Council, at its 1006th session convened on 6 July 2021, requested the Chairperson of the Commission to dispatch 'a joint technical assessment mission to the Sahel region' to, among others, assess the possible implications of the exit of Operation Barkhane. Considering more recent withdrawals within the framework of operation Takuba and concerns about deterioration of conditions optimal for the effective operation of MINUSMA, tomorrow's session is expected to examine measures required for addressing both the implications of these developments and the deteriorating security.

In this context, PSC members may also revisit how the AU can revive more forcefully the follow up of the implementation of the decision for the deployment of the 3000 AU force. The need for such force received major boost during the UN Secretary-

General's visit to West Africa. While he was in Niger, he said that the 'operating in circumstances ... call not for a peacekeeping force, but a strong force to enforce peace and fight terrorism.' Elaborating further, the UNSG said the force would need to be 'from the African Union, but with a Chapter Seven Security Council mandate and obligatory financing.'

In terms of the multidimensional challenges facing the Sahel, the other issue of concern for tomorrow's session is ways of giving greater attention in diplomatic, institutional and diplomatic terms to address the underlying conditions and drivers of instability, such as underdevelopment, weak governance and climate change. Indeed, as argued in our [latest special report](#) on the growing threat of terrorism in Africa, there is an urgent need to move beyond military measures and pay due attention to non-military strategies that put politics front and center to address underlying structural conditions including deep poverty, exclusion, and governance deficits. In this context, member states may inquire about the plan for the joint AU-UN strategic assessment of the Sahel. It was announced during the Secretary-General's visit that an independent high – level panel on security and development in the Sahel, chaired by former President of the Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou, will lead the strategic assessment.

In terms of addressing immediate concerns, there is also the pressing need for the PSC, against the backdrop of the AU humanitarian summit, to mobilize more efforts to address the deteriorating humanitarian situation, which is having a toll on civilians.

The expected outcome of tomorrow's session is a communique. Council may express its grave concern over the persistence of terrorist attacks, political crisis, and the accompanying deterioration of the humanitarian situation in the Sahel. It may recognize the multidimensional nature of the instability in the region, and in this respect, Council may re-emphasize the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach that would

address not only the immediate security challenges but also its underlying causes. It may also welcome the joint initiative by the Chairperson of the Commission and the UN Secretary-General on the AU-UN Joint Strategic Assessment on the situation in the Sahel. The PSC may affirm the importance of the role of the G5 Sahel joint force and urge the members of the G5 Sahel countries to initiate dialogue with Mali to retain the cohesion of the Joint Force and reverse the negative impact of Mali's withdrawal on the unity and effectiveness of the Force. The PSC may call for the urgent need for ECOWAS and Mali to reaching at a consensual understanding on the timelines for the transition as a necessary means for focusing the attention of all stakeholders on addressing the growing security challenges. In relation to the disagreement between Mali and ECOWAS, Council may commend Algeria and Togo for taking the initiative to facilitate consultation between Mali and the regional bloc and it may further ask the two countries to coordinate their efforts. Finally, Council, recalling its decision at its 1006th session that requested the Chairperson of the Commission to continue engagement with relevant stakeholders on the deployment of the 3000 troops in the Sahel and report back the Council on the outcome of the engagement, may request the Chairperson of the Commission to submit an updated plan within the framework of the joint strategic assessment of the AU and the UN and the recent support the UN Secretary General expressed for the deployment of an AU force.