

Briefing on the state of humanitarian actions in Africa

Automatic Heading TextDate | 4 May 2022

Tomorrow (04 May), the African Union (AU) Peace Security Council (PSC) is expected to receive a briefing on the state of humanitarian actions in Africa, as one of the agenda items of its 1081st session. The briefing takes place ahead of the AU Humanitarian Summit and Pledging Conference scheduled to take place within the month, in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea.

Following opening remarks by Churchill Ewumbue-Monono, Permanent Representative of Cameroon to the AU and the Chairperson of the PSC for the month of May, Bankole Adeoye, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), is expected to make a statement. AU Commission for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development, Minata Samate Cessouma is also expected to make a presentation. President of the International Community of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Representative of the United Nations (UN) High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) are also expected to deliver statements at tomorrow's briefing.

The briefing by Minata Samate Cessouma is expected to present an overview of the humanitarian situation in the continent. It is also expected that the Commissioner will provide an update on the progress around the operationalization of the African Humanitarian Agency (AUHA). The briefing will also present an update on the preparations undertaken towards the convening of the AU Humanitarian Summit. The Summit and Pledging Conference is taking place in line with the Executive Council Decision EX.CL/Dec.1076(XXXVI) which forms part of the various deliberations by the Council on the AU theme of 2019 and

humanitarian situation in Africa.

Across various regions of the continent, challenges to humanitarian action are increasingly becoming more and more complex with the need for humanitarian assistance rapidly increasing as capacity and access to aid show significant decline. In all of these regions, protracted and violent conflicts, drastic impacts of climate change, high food insecurity and extreme poverty as well as lack of good governance are some of the shared features characterising factors underlying the dire humanitarian crises. Moreover, as emphasised by Council at its previous session on the theme – the 1044th meeting – civilians continue to be overwhelmingly impacted by the challenging context under which humanitarian action is availed in the continent. Tomorrow's briefing is expected to draw Council's attention to these challenges and provide key recommendations in addressing them.

According to data provided by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), over 61 million people in west and central Africa will require humanitarian assistance and protection in 2022. In the Sahel region, about 14 million people are facing acute food insecurity with a 30% increase in displacement rate noted in the region throughout 2020 and 2021. In conflict affected countries of the central African region, particularly Central African Republic (CAR) and Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), civilians are facing extreme protection crisis with high numbers of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) being reported.

In east Africa, OCHA has recorded 9.6 million internally displaced people (IDPs) and 4.7 million refugees and asylum seekers as of 2021. In the region, over 33.8 million people are estimated to be severely food insecure, while 12.8 million children are projected to be acutely malnourished. Ethiopia and South Sudan are particularly facing major food insecurity, with more than 400,000 people in Ethiopia and 100,000 people

in South Sudan and experiencing catastrophic food insecurity. SGBV and the use of rape as a weapon of war also remain major concerns in both countries.

Although relatively better, north and southern Africa also face considerable humanitarian challenges. In southern Africa, Tropical Storm Chalane (December 2020), Tropical Cyclone Eloise (January 2021), and Tropical Cyclone Emnati (February 2022) have affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. Some parts of the region are further affected by severe draught leaving thousands of people faced with catastrophic food insecurity. Moreover, in the restive Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique, violent attacks continue to affect civilians fuelling the displacement crisis. According to Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) database, 34 violent events were reported in the province during February 2022, resulting in 77 reported fatalities and spiking the displacement rate.

In north Africa, Libya continues to be the country most affected by humanitarian challenges. Despite some notable decrease in the rate of displaced persons and success obtained in returning some of the IDPs to their areas of origin, access to essential goods and services is still an issue the populations continue to struggle with. In addition, the country continues to host over 500,000 migrants according to data recorded by IOM, a significant number of which are held in detention centres and living under dire circumstances. In that regard, it is worth recalling Council's call at its 997th session addressing the situation in Libya, for Libyan authorities to ensure all detention centres/camps in the country are dismantled in order to mitigate vulnerabilities of refugees and migrants.

As the continent struggles with an acutely rising humanitarian crisis, national, regional and international response has unfortunately been constrained over the past couple of years,

due to the negative socio-economic impacts of Covid-19 pandemic. In African countries where resilience of populations has already been frustrated due to conflicts, economic shocks, natural disasters and weak national public health infrastructure and collapsing social services, the Covid-19 pandemic not only exacerbated the existing humanitarian crisis, but also became an impediment to the provision of humanitarian assistance. For instance, studies conducted on in-camp and urban-based refugees in Kenya demonstrate that measures taken to control the spread of the pandemic have had disproportionately negative impacts on employment rates of these refugees, particularly refugee women. With respect to that, Council's note at its 921st session on the importance of ensuring part of the AU Covid-19 Response Fund is directed towards assisting refugees, IDPs, undocumented migrants and other vulnerable parts of society has been significant.

Another worrying trend in the continent that has been causing much concern among humanitarian actors is the diminishing commitment of belligerents to ensure humanitarian access for conflict affected civilian populations. At the 1022nd session of the PSC where Council was briefed by the ICRC, this issue formed part of the key concerns addressed and Council took note of the limited cooperation by national authorities to ensure access to populations in need of humanitarian assistance. Since that session, not much seems to have improved with civilian populations in various conflict affected countries remaining cut from accessing basic humanitarian assistance including food, medicine and lifesaving healthcare. In addition to reiterating the issue of limited humanitarian access, ICRC's President, Peter Maurer is expected to highlight in his briefing, the growing trend of attacks on medical personnel and facilities by parties to conflicts, either as a deliberate military strategy or due to lack of understanding of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) norms. It is also to be recalled that the PSC dedicated its

1044th session to the specific issue of “protection of medical facilities and personnel in armed conflict”, where it took note of and condemned the increasing pattern of stigmatization and attacks against medical personnel and healthcare facilities in situations of armed conflict.

The use of unconventional means and methods of warfare, particularly the increasing use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) has also been a major threat to civilians and their livestock, not only claiming thousands of civilian casualties, but also disrupting the main means of sustaining their livelihoods. Furthermore, the use of IEDs poses a specific challenge to humanitarian workers in the discharge of their duties and becomes a hindrance for the provision of much needed humanitarian services to populations in need.

Worse still, humanitarian response in the continent is likely to show further decline in the near future if the Russia-Ukraine war continues to escalate. Africa being heavily reliant on both of these countries for the import of essential food items including basic cereals and oil, the price shocks and disruptions to supply chains are already being felt. As African governments struggle to meet development and humanitarian needs under such circumstances, they may face further challenges due to cuts in humanitarian and development aids coming from funding partners such as the European Union (EU), who may be cornered towards re-prioritising and pulling humanitarian finances from other crises in order to meet growing needs in Ukraine.

Tomorrow’s briefing serves the Council to reflect on these and other humanitarian challenges in the continent and to discuss ways forward for ensuring effective response and sustainable solutions to Africa’s growing humanitarian needs, despite the existing difficulties. It also presents the opportunity to highlight some of the key areas of action and planning that need to be addressed at the coming AU Humanitarian Summit and

Pledging Conference.

The expected outcome of the session is a Communiqué. Council may express deep concern over the escalating rate of humanitarian need in the continent as compared to the constraints and decline in humanitarian action. It may particularly take note of the increasingly limited space for delivering humanitarian assistance to people in need in the context of armed conflicts and urge warring parties to respect their IHL obligations by refraining from imposing sieges against civilian populations. It may emphasise the need for member States as well as the AU through its Continental Early Warning System (CEWS), to anticipate and take preventive measures in order to avert violent conflicts which culminate in dire humanitarian crises. It may also underscore the need for member States to resolve underlying root-causes of humanitarian crises including poor-governance, human rights abuses and poverty.

Council may also appeal to international partners to remain committed and to continue their humanitarian support to affected communities across the continent. Having regard to the increasing threat IEDs pose on civilians, Council may reiterate the call made at its 1072nd session, for the AU Commission to finalize the AU Mine Action and Counter-IED Strategies and submit to Council for consideration. It may also emphasise the importance of AU agency in coordinating and facilitating humanitarian aid in affected member States and accordingly, reiterate its call for the full operationalisation of the AUHA. It may further reiterate the call made at its 1025th session for the AU Commission to ensure regional presence of the AUHA once operationalised, through the formation of “Regional Humanitarian Centres in the five geographical Regions of the AU, to enable close cooperation with AU Member States and RECs/RMs at National and Regional Level”.