

Commemoration of the 2021 Africa Amnesty Month

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Tomorrow (8 September) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to convene its 1029th session to commemorate the Africa Amnesty Month. Representatives of all AU Member States, Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs), and the international community in Addis Ababa are expected to participate in this open session.

The PSC Chair for the month and Permanent Representative of Chad to the AU, Mahamat Ali Hassan will be delivering opening remarks. The Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye, as well as the representatives of the United Nations (UN) and the Regional Centre on Small Arms in the Great Lakes Region, the Horn of Africa and Bordering States (RECSA) are expected to make presentations.

The PSC has been convening annual sessions to commemorate Amnesty Month since 2017, following the decision of the Assembly during its 29th Ordinary Session to declare the month of September of each year, until 2020, as 'Africa Amnesty Month for the surrender and collection of illicit small arms and light weapons'. It is initiated as an occasion for drawing attention to the challenge of small arms and weapons as major drivers of conflicts on the continent and for promoting the surrender and control of illicit arms and weapons. The 14th Extra Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly held on 6 December 2020 on Silencing the Guns extended the commemoration and conduct of Amnesty Month until 2030. As Commissioner Bankole stated in his statement for the launch of the Africa Amnesty Month 2021, 'this September is yet another golden opportunity

for anyone who owns an illegal gun to surrender it to their national authorities’.

One of the focuses of tomorrow’s session is expected to be the consideration of the compendium developed by the Commission, which highlights best practices and challenges in the implementation of the African Amnesty Month. This is in line with PSC’s request of the Commission, at its 943rd session, to conduct a lessons-learned study and submit to the Council in the course of 2020 for its consideration.

Beyond commemoration, tomorrow’s session is also an opportunity to take stock of the implementation of the Amnesty Month initiative and remaining challenges, and reflect on how to move the initiative forward in the next 10 years. The occasion is largely symbolic. But tomorrow’s session can also examine the need for and the ways for addressing the challenge of illicit arms and weapons, among others, drawing on the compendium on ‘African Union Member States’ Experiences in Voluntary Surrender of Civilian Firearms’. The session can also consider how to follow up the recommendation of the 2019 mapping study on the illicit small arms flows in Africa.

It is also to be recalled that the Amnesty Month initiative led to the joint project initiated by the AU and the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) last year. As an implementing partner of the project, the presentation by RECSA is expected to shed light on the supports provided to interested member states in sensitization and awareness campaigns and collection and destruction of illicit SALW, as well as training of law enforcement officials. One aspect the presentation is expected to highlight is the growing number of member states joining the project since last year. In 2020, the project succeeded in bringing seven member states on board, namely Burkina Faso, Cameroon, CAR, DRC, Ethiopia, Kenya and Cote d’Ivoire. More member states have expressed interest this year including Madagascar, Niger, The Gambia, and Uganda. Furthermore, the project reportedly supported the collection of some 3,500 SALW

in 2020, though this is only a fraction of the staggering 40 million illicit arms/weapons circulating in the hands of civilians in Africa.

Disarmament programmes yet remain the most effective means for Amnesty programmes to deliver better results in collecting illicit arms and weapons. There are encouraging steps in this regard including the most recent one in Nigeria where Boko Haram and Islamic State of West Africa Province terrorists started to surrender en masse last month. The controversy that sparked following the amnesty for 'repentant' terrorists also highlighted the delicate tightrope between ending conflicts and justice for victims.

There are plethora of regional and global legal instruments relating to SALW, but AU is yet to develop a consolidated and binding legal instrument on the area that responds to the unique contexts and realities of Africa. One of the issues the Council is expected to take practical steps in the years ahead is developing a comprehensive continental legal framework on illicit flow of arms and weapons.

The Amnesty Month initiative also contributed to support measures to strengthening institutional and human capacities of member states in the areas of stockpile management, record keeping and tracing, and the destruction of illicit firearms. Diversions from national stockpiles remain a big challenge for many African countries. As highlighted in the mapping study on illicit small arms flows in Africa, the massive national stockpile diversion due to the crises in Libya, Mali and CAR not only intensified armed conflicts in these countries and beyond but also became significant source of material for terrorist groups. The other big challenge is illicit inflow of firearms into the continent. The study reveals in this regard the 'robust trend' in the involvement of Middle Eastern states in illicit arms transfers to Africa. But most of all, trafficking across the borders of Africa remains the main source of illicit arms on the continent, further exacerbated

by the porous nature of African borders. These challenges not only require strengthened national law enforcement agencies but also highlights the need to promote the greater use of AU mechanisms such as the AU Mechanism for Police Cooperation (AFRIPOL) and Committee of Intelligence and Security Service (CISSA).

The expected outcome is a press statement. Among others, the Council may welcome the contributions of the African Amnesty Month initiative over the past few years and may stress on sustaining the gains and redouble efforts towards the significant reduction of illicit SALW circulating in hands of non-state actors in Africa. The Council may reiterate Commissioner Bankole's statement issued for this year commemoration which appealed to 'all the citizens of the African Union Member States who are in possession of illicit firearms' to surrender them to national authorities. The Council may further reiterate its call at its 716th, 793rd, and 943rd sessions for the Commission to effectively engage African civil society including the youth and women, non-governmental organizations, think tanks, faith-based organizations to actively participate and contribute to the surrender of arms during the Amnesty Month. The Council may particularly appeal to the media to actively engage in the advocacy of the need for surrendering of firearms in the hands of civilians, reiterating Bankole's statement on the launch of this year Amnesty Month. The Council may also echo its 832nd session in encouraging the Commission to closely work with the RECs/RMs in popularizing the Amnesty Month to bring about tangible results in the collection of illegal firearms. On challenges relating to illicit flow of arms, the Council is likely to reiterate its previous call for member states to strengthen their national legal and institutional frameworks that would enhance stockpile management, arms marking and record keeping, as well as border security. In light of the worrying trend of illicit inflow of arms into Africa, the Council may particularly reiterate its decision to 'name and

shame suppliers, brokers and recipients of illicit arms/weapons in Africa'. Taking this further, the PSC could mandate the AU Commission to develop a legal framework with a monitoring and enforcement mechanism for the control of the importation and circulation of illicit arms in Africa. The PSC may finally underscore the importance of addressing the root causes driving illicit firearms by non-state actors and explore ways in which AU's existing Peace and Security as well as Governance Architectures can be utilized in this context.