

Commemoration of the 23rd Anniversary of UNSC Resolution 1325 on WPS

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Tomorrow (17 November), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to convene an open session in commemoration of the 23rd anniversary of the United Nations (UN) Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS). The session, which will constitute PSC's 1187th meeting, is expected to focus on women's participation in peace processes, drawing specifically on the experiences and contributions of women in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sudan.

Following opening remarks by Abdi Mahamoud Eybe, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Djibouti to the AU and Chairperson of the PSC for the month of November 2023, Bankole Adeoye, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), is expected to deliver a statement. Bineta Diop, Special Envoy of the Chairperson of the AU Commission on WPS is expected to brief the PSC. Maxime Houinato, UN Women Regional Director for East and Southern Africa Region (ESARO) and interim Regional Director for West and Central Africa Region (WCARO) will be making a statement. A representative of the European Union (EU) Delegation to the AU will also be participating in the session. Statements are also expected to be presented by Jeane Rugendabanga Namburo, Coordinator, SOS-Information Juridique Multisectorielle (SOS-IJM), Bukavu, South Kivu, Democratic Republic of Congo; Claudine Tsongo Mbalamy, Coordinator, Dynamique des Femmes Juristes (DFJ), Goma, North Kivu; Ilham Osman, Executive Director of the

Sudanese Organisation for Research and Development (SORD); and Samar Abushama, young peacebuilder, gender equality advocate, and a member of the Peace for Sudan platform.

Since institutionalising WPS as part of its annual agenda item in line with the decision of its 223rd session held in 2010, the PSC has regularized the convening of annual meetings to the commemoration of UNSC resolution 1325. In addition to serving as a platform for following up on the status of implementation of resolution 1325 in Africa, these meetings have served the PSC to reflect on a range of issues that affect women in conflict and crisis settings. At its 1144th meeting which was the last time the PSC met to deliberate on the theme, it underscored the imperative for women's meaningful participation and involvement in peace processes including preventive diplomacy, mediation, conflict management and post-conflict reconstruction and development. Tomorrow's session, with its focus on women's engagement in peace processes, offers the chance for the PSC to be briefed on some of the progressive examples from experiences of some member states as well as challenges being faced in realising women's meaningful involvement in the various stages of conflict management and resolution, in line with resolution 1325.

As UNSC resolution 1325 marks the 23rd year since its adoption in 2000, women continue to experience unique and disproportionate challenges that bar the full realisation of their right to equal participation in matters of relevance to public decision-making and governance. Despite making significant headway in the achievement of the goals of the WPS agenda in Africa including availing women the space to be involved meaningfully in peace processes, the AU, relevant regional economic communities and regional mechanisms (RECs/RMs) as well as member states are yet to attain the desired level of integration of women representatives in various peacekeeping operations, in peace negotiation and

mediation missions and in the appointment of peace envoys.

This year also marks the 20th anniversary of AU's Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol). Maputo Protocol, under Article 10 provides for the right of women to participate in the promotion and maintenance of peace and charges states parties to the Protocol with the responsibility of putting in place all the appropriate measures to enable women's increased participation in decision-making processes including in structures relevant for 'conflict prevention, management and resolution at local, national, regional, continental and international levels'. Tomorrow's session hence also affords the opportunity to reflect on the level of implementation of the Maputo Protocol by states parties, with a specific focus on efforts made towards the full realisation of Article 10.

Notwithstanding the considerable challenges, including the lack of gender inclusive formal avenues that present women the opportunity to actively contribute to peace efforts, women in a number of conflict affected African countries have proven to be critical players in the management and resolution of crises. The mobilisation of women movements in Sudan since the outbreak of conflict on 15 April 2023 between the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) and Rapid Support Forces (RSF) is one of the more recent examples of the important efforts deployed by women's groups.

Tomorrow's session will be significant in not only discussing the current state of the WPS agenda at a normative and policy levels but also importantly to interrogate the WPS agenda in the context of specific conflict settings. In this respect, the fact that the session is envisaged to focus on specific cases of Sudan and DRC and most importantly to have grass root women groups share their perspectives based on their lived experiences from these conflict settings is commendable.

At the grassroots level, women groups and women-led movements

in Sudan are contributing significantly including through documentation of violations and abuses of human rights and through social media and advocacy campaigns that engage hundreds of women advocates and human rights activists. In addition to increasing global awareness about the intensity of the war in Sudan and amplifying the voice of civilians caught in the crossfires, these women-led initiatives are playing a critical role in the area of monitoring and reporting. For instance, initiatives such as the Ceasefire Initiative in Darfur and the Youth Citizen Observers Network have been noteworthy for de-escalation efforts and ceasefire monitoring. With the massive humanitarian crisis resulting from the war, women movements in Sudan such as the South Red Sea Organization Initiative are also substantially contributing towards mitigating of the humanitarian crisis by providing support and basic assistance to displaced people.

Although there have been some efforts by the AU, through the office of the Special Envoy for WPS and the Network of African Women in Conflict Prevention and Mediation (FemWise) to support Sudanese women's engagement in ongoing political dialogues, grassroots level women initiatives in Sudan are to a large extent excluded from important negotiation efforts deployed by prominent actors including the United States and Saudi Arabia. On the part of the AU and the PSC in particular, the approach taken on Sudan's file seems to also have fallen short of actively consulting with and involving women groups that are currently mobilised as first responders, including through invitations to brief the PSC during its dedicated sessions on the situation in Sudan. Regular engagement by the PSC, particularly with a focus on providing the platform for women activists and organizations in particular, would have opened the policy space to Sudanese women and granted the proper recognition to their efforts and contributions to the political process. It would have also enabled the PSC to become the platform for ventilating civilian particularly women voices in addition to enabling it to regularly track

developments through constant engagement with these women groups that have direct or indirect presence on the ground.

In the case of the DRC, various local and partner supported initiatives aim to empower women with the objective of advancing their meaningful participation in peace-related decision-making processes. Since DRC's adoption of a National Action Plan (NAP) for the implementation of UNSC resolution 1325 in 2018, there have also been encouraging progress in the engagement of women in peacebuilding and governance processes. Women-led peace dialogues have in different occasions afforded the stage to promote gender integration and female leadership in politics and to advance active involvement of women in electoral processes.

The AU Special Envoy on WPS also conducted a field peace advocacy mission to the DRC in August 2023, along with the African Women Leaders Network (AWLN) and the FemWise. Focusing on boosting peace efforts and strengthening approaches for resolution of the conflict in eastern DRC and also having regard to the upcoming general elections, the delegation led by the Special Envoy made a call for an inclusive peace process that ensures women's participation and leadership.

In both countries – Sudan and DRC – women and girls constitute a prepondering portion of people affected by the ongoing conflicts. Women and girls that are displaced due to the conflicts in these two countries face not only the ordinary impacts of displacement, but also the added risks of and exposure to sexual abuse and violence. In Sudan, reports indicate that as of 02 November 2023, there have been over 50 incidents of sexual violence linked to ongoing hostilities, impacting at least 105 victims, out of which 86 are women and 18 are children (and one man).

In eastern DRC, the surge in conflict continues to drive up incidences of sexual violence against displaced women and girls. Since the conflict with the March 23 Movement (M23) re-

emerged in 2022, reports have indicated an average of 70 sexual assault victims visiting clinics in displacement camps nearby Goma, on a daily basis. While Sudan and DRC merely exemplify the realities of women in conflict settings, women caught in crisis in other countries across the continent also continue to face similar fate. Yet, despite the more pronounced impacts of conflicts on women, women remain largely excluded from key conflict resolution efforts and peacebuilding initiatives. The consequence of such approach goes far beyond failure to effectively implement UNSC resolution 1325, as it also carries grave implications for the success and sustainability of peace processes.

The expected outcome of tomorrow's session is either a Communiqué or a Press Statement. The PSC is expected to welcome efforts made by the AU Commission, through the office of the Special Envoy for WPS, to advance implementation of UNSC resolution 1325, including through the development of the Continental Results Framework (CRF) and close engagement with member states to adopt and implement NAPs. The PSC may commend the AU Special Envoy for WPS as well as the FemWise and AWLN for the efforts deployed in support of women in Sudan and the DRC. It may further take note of and express concern over the increasing victimisation of women and girls in conflict settings, particularly in Sudan and DRC and urge all conflicting parties to respect human rights, abide by relevant international norms on conduct of hostilities and bring perpetrators of sexual violence and abuses to justice. The PSC is also expected to underscore the importance of women's meaningful participation in peace processes and call on the AU Commission, RECs/RMs and member states to redouble their efforts in this regard. The PSC may commend the women representatives for bringing to the PSC the views and perspectives of women affected by conflict in the specific conflict settings of DRC and Sudan. The PSC may also commend the advocacy work of that the AU Special Envoy and request the Envoy to work on an annual report that documents and provides

analysis on WPS in the various conflict and crises situations, including those the PSC is seized with as critical tool for also putting conflict parties on notice about their actions that are being monitored. The PSC may encourage the various peace efforts by the AU and RECs/RMs to ensure that they have not only women representatives but also, they have regular and dedicated engagement with women groups from the conflict setting for which those peace processes are designed.