

Consideration of the Renewal of the Mandate of MNJTF

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Tomorrow (14 January), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 1057th session to consider the renewal of the mandate of the Multi-National Joint Task Force (MNJTF).

Permanent Representative of Ghana, Amma A. Twum-Amoah, is expected to make opening statement as the Chair of the PSC for the month of January. The Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye, is expected to introduce the report of the Chairperson of the Commission on the Multinational Joint Task Force (MNJTF) against the Boko Haram terrorist group. The new Force Commander of the MNJTF, Maj.-Gen. Abdul-Khalifah Ibrahim, who assumed the position in August 2021 is scheduled to deliver a presentation. The representatives of Ghana and Gabon are also expected to make statements as the chair of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), respectively.

This session is convened in light of the impending expiry of MNJTF's mandate at the end of January—PSC last renewed MNJTF's mandate on January 2021 during its 973rd session. Apart from mandate renewal, this session affords the Council the opportunity to receive update on the activities of the MNJTF pursuant to the relevant provisions of the Communiqué PSC/AHG/COMM.2 (CDLXXXIV) of 29 January 2015. Among others, the update is expected to highlight the achievements and challenges of MNJTF since its last mandate renewal.

On the achievements, the MNJTF has made progress in discharging its mandate against Boko Haram and its offshoot,

the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP). One notable success over the last one year is the 'spate of insurgents surrender' as a result of MNJTF's kinetic and non-kinetic measures. Some 3,600 militants reportedly surrendered between August and October of last year. Military operations by the Taskforce also eliminated several jihadist militants and seized weapons and equipment. In the recent operation code-named 'Sharan Fague', which was carried out last December in Malam Fatori of Borno State of Nigeria, around 22 Boko Haram terrorists were neutralized, according to a statement by the Spokesperson of the Task force. According to the report of the Chairperson of the Commission on MNJTF, 'over 160 Boko Haram terrorist fighters were neutralized while about 130 others were arrested'. Another notable success highlighted by the report is MNJTF's success in dislodging the terrorist group from all population centers, which are now contained in their enclaves within the Lake Chad Islands (Tumbuns).

MNJTF's military operations have improved security situation in some of the affected areas in the Lake Chad Basin, paving the way for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees to return home. This was the case in the town of Baroua, Diffa region of Southeast Niger, where close to 6,000 IDPs who fled Boko Haram violence years ago reportedly returned home last June. In August 2021, same number of IDPs of Cross kauwa, Baga and Doron Baga of Borno State, Nigeria, also returned to their homes.

A bitter infight between Boko Haram and ISWAP inflicted considerable loss to both of them in 2021. Boko Haram's longtime leader, Abubakar Shekau, was reported dead in May 2021 after his base in Sambisa forest was overrun by its splinter group, ISWAP. This triggered defections to the government forces and in some cases to the ISWAP faction. In October of the same year, Nigerian army also announced the death of ISWAP leader Abu Musab al-Barnawi. It is believed that the deadly rivalry between the two factions creates

window of opportunity for the Taskforce to intensify its military engagement against the terrorist groups and degrade their operational capacity.

Despite MNJTF's success, both Boko Haram and ISWAP are still potent threat that showed resilience despite the setback they sustained. According to the latest report of the Chairperson of the AU Commission on 'continental efforts in the prevention and combating of terrorism in Africa', Boko Haram staged 33 attacks leading to 175 deaths during the first half of 2021. Though this marks a reduction as compared to 2020 (59 attacks and 375 deaths), Boko Haram remained the most lethal terrorist group in Africa with an average of 5.3 deaths per attack.

Tomorrow's session is also expected to discuss some of the challenges that the MNJTF is currently facing. One major challenge likely to be highlighted in this regard is the increasing use of technologies such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) by Boko Haram (PSC flagged this particular concern during its 816th and 973rd sessions). The use of drone by the terrorist group was first reported in November 2018 when Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari announced the development during a meeting of troop contributing countries to the MNJTF. The influx of affiliated foreign terrorist fighters who bring with them technical skills in customizing the widely available commercial drones (hobby drones) helped Boko Haram and other non-state actors in Africa to include drones in their repertoires. Currently, Boko Haram' use of this technology is limited to surveillance and reconnaissance operations. But, as the Chairperson of the Commission cautioned in his latest report on terrorism in Africa, 'it is only a question of time before these [terrorist] groups adopt weaponized-drones into their Modus Operandi'. Against this context, it is imperative that the MNJTF and countries in the Lake Chad Basin have a strategy to counter the emerging threat.

The other challenge is the capability gaps within the MNJTF.

In the previous session on the MNJTF, the Council requested the AU Commission to mobilise support, particularly through the provision for 'Counter Improvised Explosive Devices (C-IED) equipment, Amphibious Equipment, counter drone equipment, force protection vehicles, surveillance equipment, and Intelligence, Surveillance Reconnaissance (ISR) services'. The presentations from Bankole and the force commander Ibrahim may highlight developments in this regard including the provision of Air Mobility assets, Command-Control-Communication and Information System (C3IS), and boats to enhance amphibious capability. Bankole may also speak about the financial support provided by the European Union (EU) to the Task force through the AU. The report of the Chairperson indicates that EU availed 18.9 million Euros for 2021. The EU increased the amount for this year to 20 million Euros. In light of the growing number of terrorist surrenders, Bankole may also highlight the Commission's support to the MNJTF in ensuring compliance to regional and international human rights and humanitarian law.

Member states of the Lake Chad Basin are also facing mounting security challenges other than from Boko Haram/ISWAP. The rising herder-farmer conflict and armed bandit attacks (the latest attack this month claimed over 200 lives) in Nigeria; growing jihadist insurgency in Niger along its borders with Mali and Burkina Faso; the incursion of mercenaries and foreign fighters from Libya into Chad are cases in point. Unless more resource is channeled to support the MNJTF's counter terrorism operations, national governments of the region may have to shift attention towards addressing other security threats.

Lack of coordination in the area of joint planning and information sharing between different sectors of the MNJTF, limited LCBC's political control over the Force, as well as lack of sustainable funding remain the other challenges affecting the effectiveness of the MNJTF.

The expected outcome of tomorrow's session is a communique. The PSC is expected to commend the gains made by the MNJTF over Boko Haram. However, the Council may express its concern over the continued security threat posed by the terrorist groups and some of the worrying trends such as Boko Haram's use of drones for surveillance and reconnaissance operations. The Council is also expected to take note of the challenges that the MNJTF is currently facing. In this regard, it may urge member states of the LCBC plus Benin and international partners to redouble efforts in addressing capability gaps and funding constraint, as well as issues related to effective coordination in the areas of operation planning and information sharing. The Council may follow up on its previous request of the Commission to renew the 'Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) and Support Implementation Agreement (SIA) between AU, LCBC and MNJTF TCCs in support of MNJTF operations'. Furthermore, on account of the transboundary nature of Boko Haram's threat, the Council may call on the two regional blocs ECOWAS and ECCAS to enhance horizontal cooperation and coordination. In light of the prevailing security situation in the Lake Chad Basin, the Council is expected to renew MNJTF's mandate for another one year effective 1 February 2022.