

Consideration of the Situation in the Central African Republic

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Tomorrow (10 July) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is scheduled to have a session on the situation in the Central African Republic (CAR). The session is expected to consider a report on the situation in the CAR through video teleconference meeting.

The AU Commissioner for Peace and Security, Smail Chergui is expected to introduce the report and brief the PSC on the situation in the CAR. The representatives of the CAR and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) are also expected to make statements during the open segment of the session.

One of the issues on which members of the PSC expect to be briefed on is the status of the spread of the novel coronavirus (COVID19) in the CAR and its impact on the peace and security situation in the CAR. The number of confirmed cases, while relatively low, jumped from 301 on 15 May to 1,888 cases in mid June, registering notable spike in less than a month. The COVID19 response measures in the CAR and globally resulted in significant consequences, leading to rise in cost of food items and disruption of distribution of humanitarian assistance to the displaced and those in need of support. PSC members would also be interested to hear about the impact of COVID19 on AU's role in the CAR including on the activities of the AU Office in the Central African Republic.

In terms of the situation in the country, it is of major interest for the PSC to hear from Chergui and the CAR representative on the national elections scheduled for

December 2020 and the preparations being undertaken in this respect. The country has faced political uncertainty due to opposing views between government and opposition parties on the convening of the elections as scheduled. Following a proposal in parliament for extension of the term of office of the President and parliament if the schedule for elections were to be postponed due to COVID19, the Constitutional Court of the CAR held in its ruling of 5 June that the postponement of the schedule for election would be unconstitutional and any change to the electoral calendar should be based on broad consultations and consensus among all the concerned stakeholders.

While there are many political parties in the CAR, two major coalitions have been formed. On 11 February, 14 opposition parties formed the Coalition de l'opposition démocratique with the proclaimed objective of ensuring free, fair, inclusive and timely elections. On 15 May, 34 out of 42 parties associated with the presidential majority launched the "Be Oko" or "Les coeurs unis" (United Hearts) political platform to counterweigh the opposition Coalition de l'opposition démocratique platform. The intention of the United Hearts platform is to rally behind one candidate for the presidential elections and agree on candidates for the legislative elections. While thus far four political leaders announced their candidacy for the presidency, it remains unclear whether the former president of the country François Bozizé will run as president and the impact that this may have for the country.

Given the COVID19 situation and CAR's pre-existing institutional and logistical challenges, one of the major issues for the PSC to address with respect to the preparations for the elections is determining the technical and logistical needs of the CAR and how the AU could contribute, within the framework of its electoral support to member states, towards meetings these technical and logistical needs of the CAR. Some

legislative measures, notably the law on the National Electoral Authority, have is yet to be finalized. Despite remaining legislative and institutional gaps and logistical challenges, there are also encouraging progress in implementing preparatory works. The National Electoral Authority published a revised electoral calendar on 29 April that adhered to constitutional timelines. On 20 May, the Government issued two decrees crucial for the timely holding of the elections. The first set the voter registration period from 22 June to 28 July, with the final voter list released in September. The second specified that the diaspora of the CAR would be allowed to vote.

It is to be recalled that the PSC in the statement of its 884th session 'urged the Central African actors to scrupulously comply with the upcoming dates of the elections to be held in 2020/2021 and to ensure that they are free, fair, credible and peaceful, and rejected any idea relating to a new transition.' Underscoring the importance of the participation of various stakeholders, the PSC further reaffirmed 'the need for all the parties to work in good faith for the organization of the elections,' which the PSC deemed priority in 'consolidating the democratic gains and stability in the country'.

Another major issue for tomorrow's session is the implementation of the February 2019 peace agreement for the CAR. In urging all stakeholders to support the peace agreement, the PSC in the statement of its 884th session stated that the agreement 'remained the sole path for the restoration of a lasting peace in the whole country.' Chergui is expected to inform the members of the PSC not only on the state of implementation of the peace agreement but also the outcome of a joint videoconference he, the Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy held with the President of the CAR on 8 June 2020.

Three issues are of immediate interest to the PSC. The first is the impact of COVID19 on the implementation of the peace agreement. Chergui pointed out in an op ed that implementation of (aspects of) the peace process took a backseat due to COVID19 measures. Apart from the suspension of the formal follow-up mechanisms of the Agreement following the COVID-19 outbreak, other activities affected by the pandemic and the response measures include the implementation of disarmament and demobilization and the establishment of special mixed security units. Despite these COVID19 induced disruptions, with support from AU, ECCAS and UN, the government continued to have high-level engagement with armed group leaders.

The second issue, which has been a major issue of concern when the PSC met on the CAR the last time, is recurring incidents of violations of the peace agreement. In his report of June 2020 to the UN Security Council, the UN Secretary-General observed that 'progress was undermined by a resurgence of violence perpetrated by armed groups, particularly in Birao, Bria, Ndélé and Obo.' Despite the decrease in the number of violations of the peace agreement observed in the UN Secretary-General's report 'from 575 to 504 compared with the previous reporting period', various acts of violence including clashes between armed groups have continued to affect various parts of the country. These acts of violence have mostly affected civilians. According to the Secretary-General's report, '[c]ivilians were the target of more than half of the violations (286). Others affected by the violence and fighting involving armed groups include humanitarian actors and members of the UN mission to the CAR, MINUSCA.' It is to be recalled that the PSC 'stressed the imperative need for all signatories to scrupulously comply with the provisions of the APPR, including the cessation of hostilities throughout the entire territory, warning that 'those who would seek to impede the implementation of the Agreement' ..would be held accountable.'

The third and final issue with respect to the peace process is

the progress made towards its implementation. The UN Secretary General pointed out in his June 2020 report that 'the National Assembly adopted several laws required under the Agreement, including on political parties and the status of the opposition; the creation of the Commission on Truth, Justice, Reparation and Reconciliation; the status of former Heads of State; and the first of a two-part law on local authorities and decentralization.'

The expected outcome of the session is a communiqué. The PSC is expected to express its concern over the impact of COVID19 on the situation in the CAR including in the implementation of the peace process. In this respect, the PSC may reiterate its call for mobilizing support for the CAR not only in addressing COVID19 but also in limiting its impact on the implementation of the peace agreement. The PSC welcoming the progress registered in the preparation for the elections scheduled to take place in December 2020 could reiterate the importance of the elections and the need for sustaining the preparations for holding the elections within the constitutional timelines while upholding the participation of all the stakeholders. The Council could also urge the AU to scale up its electoral support for the CAR including in providing technical support for the national electoral commission and other actors. In terms of the peace process, the PSC, while welcoming the progress made in implementing the various dimensions of the agreement, could underscore the need for achieving cessation of hostilities in the CAR and urge the AU, working with ECCAS, the UN and the European Union, to enhance support for political dialogue and community peace efforts in the CAR. The PSC could also reiterate its earlier call for the convening of the International Contact Groups for the CAR, among others, for mobilizing collective and coordinated support for the electoral process.