

Discussion on Refugees, IDPs and Humanitarian Assistance in Africa

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Tomorrow (19 June), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to convene its 1216th session, at the Ministerial level, to discuss the situation of refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and humanitarian assistance in Africa.

Odongo Jeje Abubakher, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uganda and PSC Chair for the month will deliver opening remarks which will be followed by a statement by Bankole Adeoye, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS). Minata Samate Cessouma, Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development (HHS) is also expected to brief the PSC. Others who will address the PSC are Buti Kale, representative of the United Nations (UN) High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to the AU and the UN Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and Carl Skau, Deputy Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer of the World Food Programme (WFP).

Tomorrow's session is convened within the framework of both PSC's annual indicative programme of work and the commemoration of World Refugee Day on June 20 pursuant to UN General Assembly Resolution [55/76/2001](#). The session serves as an occasion to get updated on trends and dynamics of the humanitarian situation with a focus on the state of displacement and refugee flows in the continent.

The data on displacement and refugee flows of the past few

years shows that the number of displaced people on the continent has continued to increase during the past year as well. For example, in 2023 the number of forcibly displaced people substantially increased from 2022, with new major displacements reported, among others, in the conflicts in Sahel, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and Sudan. Highlighting the scale of the growing humanitarian crises due mostly to conflicts accentuated by climate disasters, the February 2023 AU report on the humanitarian situation in Africa noted that Africa 'continues to carry a disproportionate burden of hosting the largest population of displaced persons and accounted for one in every five refugees globally, as well as one-third of the total IDP population.'

The fact that the number of forcibly displaced people in Africa has surged to [over 40 million](#) by the end of 2023 from a maximum of just over 29 million in 2020 is a testament to the worsening peace and security and humanitarian situation on the continent. This dire, worsening state of displacement in Africa is on account of both the persistence of existing conflicts and in some cases, their further deterioration in regions affected by violence and the eruption of new conflicts. These conditions were obtained in West Africa and Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, Horn of Africa, Great Lakes and Mozambique.

The crises of displacement and refugee flows in 2023 and the past several months are not confined to the situations in the DRC, Sahel and Sudan, as noted earlier. These crises affect all regions of the continent, albeit at varying scales and intensity. **East and Horn of Africa region** is one of the regions bearing one of the highest displacement burdens on the continent, with major surge in scale of displacement during 2023, on account of mostly conflicts and climate-induced disasters affecting Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan. One of the main drivers of the spike in the scale of displacement witnessed during 2023 is the civil war in Sudan

that broke out in April of that year. Considered to be the world's largest displacement crisis, the number of people displaced and forced to flee to neighbouring countries has now surpassed the [10 million](#) mark according to a report by International Organization for Migration (IOM). Of these, more than 2 million fled into neighbouring countries. Central African Republic (CAR), Chad and Ethiopia, countries faced with their own internal security and humanitarian concerns, are also among the countries in the region that are affected by the displacement crisis caused by the war in Sudan.

As the fighting continues to grind with major escalations in some parts of the country, it is feared that the humanitarian situation in Sudan will continue to worsen. In El Fasher, the capital of North Darfur, a new eruption of violence on 10 May 2024 has led to human suffering of the highest magnitude involving alarming [reports](#) of intentional targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure including looting of vital medical supplies from El Fasher South Hospital on 8 June 2024. Having been the only working hospital in North Darfur, the closure of El Fasher South Hospital following the attack clearly entails dire consequences for affected civilians including displaced persons in the region. In other parts of the country that continue to be conflict hotspots including Kordofan, Al Jazirah and Khartoum, famine is a looming threat with 18 million people reportedly facing acute food insecurity. Noting the increasing risks for multiple regions across the country to devolve into catastrophic levels of hunger, WFP has already [remarked](#) that Sudan is 'on the verge of becoming the world's largest hunger crisis'.

Apart from Sudan, insecurity and climate-induced extreme weather events have resulted in displacement in Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and South Sudan. In Ethiopia, at least [4.5 million](#) people have reportedly been displaced within the country as of December 2023, due to conflict, violence, drought, and flooding. In addition, the country is also host

to a refugee population which now exceeds one million. In Kenya, recent heavy rains and flooding have led to mass displacement of populations. Between the beginning of March and the end of May 2024 only, an estimated [293,200](#) people were displaced as a result of the floods and heavy rains. Heavy rains have also displaced over [81,000](#) people in Somalia as of early June 2024. As of the end of December 2023, the total number of IDPs in Somalia had also reached [3.9 million](#). South Sudan, the other country in the region highly affected by displacement has registered a total number of [2.2 million](#) displaced persons as of the end of May 2024. In the course of 2023, seasonal floods were the main factors triggering internal displacement in South Sudan.

In the **Central Africa and Great Lakes regions**, much of the displacement burden comes from the DRC. The total number of displaced people in the DRC has reached around [7.2 million](#) as of March 2024 and over 80% of this displacement is caused due to the ongoing conflict in the eastern part of the country. It is also [estimated](#) that around 1 million DRC citizens are displaced outside of their country and living as refugees in neighbouring countries. In 2023 alone, over [1 million](#) people were newly displaced in the DRC. In a context where humanitarian needs are constantly increasing and food insecurity is affecting millions of people – projections for the months between January and June 2024 alone having indicated 23.4 million people in the DRC to be acutely food insecure –, poor humanitarian access compounds the challenges faced by displaced populations in the DRC. Other countries in the region that experienced displacement include CAR, Cameroon and Chad.

In CAR, [511,803](#) people were internally displaced in the course of 2023. A substantial number of forcibly displaced persons in CAR during the year were displaced due to the war in Sudan. According to [OCHA](#), 31,649 forcibly displaced people from Sudan arrived in CAR, including 25,491 Sudanese refugees and 6,158

Central African returnees, since the outbreak of the Sudan conflict in April 2023. In Cameroon, the number of IDPs reached [1,075,252](#) in 2023. Added to this, the country is also host to nearly half a million refugees and asylum seekers. Chad on its part has been host to over [750,000](#) people who crossed into the country since the onset of the crisis in Sudan. Out of these, 173,124 are Chadian returnees.

The persistent threat of terrorism coupled with complex political transitions in member states in the West Africa and Sahel regions continue to drive up a major humanitarian crisis exacerbated by the effects of climate change. In Burkina Faso, throughout 2023, [707,000](#) new displacements were registered within the country's borders, with hundreds of thousands of people being cut off from aid. Despite being a country with one of the region's largest displacement crises, the policy preoccupation centred on ensuring the speedy restoration of constitutional order and intensifying counterterrorism efforts has overshadowed the country's grave humanitarian crisis. As a result, the humanitarian situation in Burkina Faso is considered to be one of the most neglected crises globally.

Mali and Niger are the other two countries in the Sahel region that continue to experience a high rate of displacement. In Mali, over 72,500 people were displaced in 2023 as a result of conflict. By the end of the year, this brought the number of IDPs in the country to a total of nearly [355,000](#). Niger, faced with an acute and complex humanitarian crisis, is host to a total of 378,868 IDPs and 163,611 returnees [registered](#) by the end of December 2023.

In the Lake Chad Basin, apart from the displacements in Cameroon and Chad noted above, the country with the highest burden of displacement is Nigeria. As of the end of December 2023, Nigeria is host to over [3.3 million](#) IDPs. This figure makes Nigeria one of the 10 countries globally with the highest number of IDPs. In 2023, while armed conflict significantly contributed to the displacement of populations

in Nigeria, nearly three-quarters of the displacement recorded during the year – a total of 291,000 – were perpetrated by criminal and communal violence including herder-farmer clashes. The devastating floods experienced in Nigeria in June and November 2022 have also contributed significantly to the total displacement rate, having triggered over 2.4 million displacements.

Other parts of the continent also face displacement challenges although to a lower degree. In the south, the restive Cabo Delgado region of Mozambique continues to be the source of constant displacement of people. Reports indicate that recurring attacks against civilians that surged since the beginning of this year have left over [582,000](#) people displaced throughout northern Mozambique, as of January 2024.

In discussing the plight of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers, the first issue of concern is ensuring the protection of this category of people. In this respect, it is of paramount importance that conflict actors observe human rights and international humanitarian law rules as well as the principles of the OAU Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention on IDPs including the imperative for respecting non-refoulement and voluntary return, hence desisting from forced return of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers, as noted by the PSC at its [904th session](#). It is also of significance that the physical security of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers is guaranteed and conflict parties, particularly State actors, bear responsibility for creating conditions for ensuring such security.

The other issue that is of particular significance for the PSC during tomorrow's session is the provision of unhindered humanitarian access for humanitarian actors to enable affected people to be provided with humanitarian assistance. For example, prolonged armed violence and high rate of insecurity, movement restrictions, bureaucratic impediments and

interference with humanitarian aid are some of the most common obstacles which hinder the effective delivery of humanitarian assistance to populations in need in the DRC. Similarly, the instrumentalization of administrative control is one of the factors restricting humanitarian access in Sudan. Under these conditions, the need for channelling support to local frontline humanitarian responders cannot be overemphasised. These conditions also underscore the need for the AU to pay particular attention to humanitarian diplomacy and establish it as a key component of its toolkit necessary for both enhanced civilian protection and effective humanitarian action in Africa.

The third issue relates to finding durable solutions to forced displacement. It is of paramount importance in this respect that effective peace-making and conflict resolution efforts are deployed. Durable solutions necessitate the resolution of the weak presence of state institutions and public services in conflict-affected territories, the absence of good governance and democratic inclusion and the perpetration of human rights violations. As conditions of insecurity improve, mechanisms should be created for the safe and voluntary return of IDPs and refugees. There is also a need for designing and implementing programs for the rehabilitation of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers.

Another area of interest in tomorrow's session is the role and contribution of the AU towards addressing the plight of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers. In this respect, the PSC may receive updates on the progress towards the operationalization of the African Humanitarian Agency (AfHA), which, as noted by the PSC at its [921st session](#), contribute towards efforts being made to address the humanitarian challenges. Tomorrow's session may also consider how to activate the role of the Africa Risk Capacity (ARC) that was endorsed by [Assembly/AU/Dec.417\(XIX\)](#). In this respect, one challenge that may receive attention is the treaty on the establishment of

the ARC is yet to enter into force since it hasn't acquired the required level of ratification.

Additionally, the PSC may also review AU's challenges in financing humanitarian assistance and reiterate its previous call on Member States to commit to the implementation of [EX.CL/Dec.567\(XVII\)](#) which decided to increase member States' contribution to the 'Refugees and IDPs Fund' from 2% to 4%. This challenge also relates to the Special Emergency Assistance Fund (SEAF) for Draught and Famine Relief in Africa which can play a supportive role for some of the peoples on the continent facing food insecurity. The PSC may also call on the international community to sustain its support for humanitarian assistance, which is the only avenue for sustaining the lives of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers.

The expected outcome of the session is a communiqué. The PSC is expected to express grave concern over the state of displacement in the continent and the increasing shrinkage of both humanitarian access and funding for humanitarian aid. The PSC may take note of some of the specific countries that are faced with the highest displacement rates including Sudan and DRC and underscore the imperative of finding resolution to the conflicts in these countries. The AU Commission may also be requested to expedite the operationalisation of the AfHA. PSC may also urge member States to discharge their responsibilities in ensuring the creation of conditions for the protection of the physical security of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers and for unhindered humanitarian access. It may also emphasise the need to strengthen collaboration among various AU agencies in order to more effectively avert and respond to humanitarian crises, including forced displacement of populations. The PSC may underscore the importance of adhering to the fundamental principles of international law, including obligations under international humanitarian and international human rights laws to respect and protect forcibly displaced persons. It may further stress the

obligation of all conflicting parties to enable humanitarian access to civilian populations in need. With regard to the increasing plight of displaced people in the continent in the face of funding shortages for humanitarian assistance, the PSC may appeal to all relevant stakeholders to upscale efforts for mobilising the required resources.