Food security and conflict in Africa

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Tomorrow (9 May), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 1083rd session to deliberate on food security and conflict in Africa. This would be the first partially open session of the Council for the month of May, accessible only to All AU member States and representatives of RECs/RMs.

Following the opening remark by Ambassador Churchill Ewumbue-Monono, Permanent Representative of Cameroon and the Chairperson of the PSC for May, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye is expected to make a statement. Josefa Sacko, the commissioner for Agriculture, Rural Development, Blue Economy, and Sustainable Environment (ARBE) of the AU Commission is scheduled to make a presentation on the theme of the session. Minata Samaté Cessouma, the commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development, will also deliver a briefing. Representatives of the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and the European Union are expected to deliver statements.

Although the PSC has addressed itself to the issue of food insecurity and conflicts, its engagement was largely limited to food insecurity in relation to specific conflict settings and how drought contributes to conflicts and food insecurity in the context of natural disasters and climate change vis-à-vis peace and security. At its 660th session, the PSC expressed its concern specifically 'over the devastating impact of climate change in Africa as manifested through recurrent droughts, *which is one of the major triggers of tensions and*

violence in communities.' The same line of expression was used in the press statement issued following the 708th meeting of the PSC. But as the experience of Africa in relation to conflict situations show, one of the major consequences of conflict and insecurity is the emergence of hunger and starvation.

Tomorrow's meeting marks the first session fully dedicated to food security and conflict in the continent, hence received more extended coverage in this edition of *Insights on the PSC*. This theme is formulated, as envisaged in the program of work for the month, as part and within the framework of the AU theme of the year 2022 'Strengthening Resilience in Nutrition and Food Security on the African Continent: Strengthening Agro-Food Systems, Health and Social Protection Systems for the Acceleration of Human, Social and Economic Capital Development'.

During tomorrow's session, members of the PSC are expected to assess the general food security outlook of the continent, deliberate on the intersection between conflicts and food security, including the factors that drive food insecurity in conflict settings and explore the different measures that need to be taken to address the alarming situation in the continent. The deliberation and outcome of the session may also feed into the upcoming AU Humanitarian Summit and a Pledging Conference, which is scheduled take place on 28 May in Malabo, Equatorial Guinea.

This session comes at a time when the scale of food insecurity on the continent has become alarming. At the end of 2021, the AU, the Food and Agricultural Agency, the UN Economic Commission for Africa reported that while the hunger situation on the continent has been worsening since 2013, it witnessed the most deterioration during 2019 and 2020. According to the three entities, 281.6 million Africans are undernourished in 2020. They warned that the situation will deteriorate further

in 2021. Confirming this warning, early last month, the ICRC announced that the food security crisis in Africa has reached a disaster level that has gone unnoticed. In terms of the magnitude of the problem, the ICRC reported that 346 million people (one in four Africans) are facing severe food insecurity. Indications are that this trend of worsening food insecurity will continue in 2022 as well. Coupled with the fact that Africa is identified one of the two regions in the world that registered the lowest public investment in agriculture, this trend will mean that there is going to be regression in terms of the sustainable development goals target of ending hunger by 2030. According to AU data from the 3rd Comprehensive African Agricultural Development Programme (CAADP) biennial review unveiled despite progress made by one-third of 51 AU member states, only one is on track to achieve the ending hunger target.

It is also worth noting that the tabling of this theme on the agenda of the PSC also comes amid heightening concerns about the impact of the war in Ukraine. FAO food price index indicated that world food prices jumped nearly 13 percent in March to a new record high as the war in Ukraine continues to rage. Given the already difficult food security situation and the dependence of many countries on imports of agricultural products and fertilizer from Russia and Ukraine, Africa is facing to feel the impact of this development disproportionally. Apart from its adverse impact on the already dire food insecurity particularly in conflict settings in Africa, the socio-economic pressure that ensues from rising food prices is feared to create further fertile ground for social tension and instability.

The formulation of tomorrow's session with particular focus on 'food security and conflict' rather than food security in general fits the mandate of the PSC, as a body primarily concerned with peace and security and matters arising in that context. In this regard, it is worth noting that while climate

change and the impact of COVID19 are among the factors that drive food insecurity in Africa, conflict continues to be the major factor that leads to and accelerates food insecurity. Certainly, the relationship between conflict and starvation or hunger is non-linear. However, it is now adequately established that conflict is the main driver of hunger and starvation in conflict affected countries. Conflicts produce hunger and starvation both directly and indirectly.

Often the contribution of conflicts to hunger and starvation is indirect. Such is the case where conflict disrupts food production and/or trading of agricultural produce. The insecurity arising from fighting often means that people could not farm nor source food sources from the market as fighting also disrupts flow of goods from conflict free areas. Conflict also indirectly induces hunger and starvation as fighting limits the distribution of humanitarian assistance.

However, increasingly conflicts also directly cause hunger and starvation due to the actions of conflict parties. Indeed, one of the main causes of hunger and starvation in conflict situations is the direct or indirect restriction that conflict parties impose on humanitarian access including through deliberate targeting of humanitarian actors and/or the blockade of humanitarian access. Such cases were reported in relation to the war in South Sudan during 2013-2015 and in the conflict in northern Ethiopia. Conflict also directly contributes to hunger and starvation where conflict parties deliberately target crops, livestock and other food sources on which the civilian population depend for their survival. Similar conditions also emerge where conflict parties use food as weapon of war not only by deliberately destroying food sources and agricultural infrastructure but also by preventing people from producing food and/or from having access to food.

As the data from various sources shows, much of the most severe conditions of food insecurity in Africa, as in other parts of the world, are in territories affected by conflict.

The report on 'Hunger Hotspots' identifies 'conflict or organized violence' as the 'key drivers of acute food insecurity' in countries/territories on the continent notably CAR, Central Sahel, eastern DRC, northern Ethiopia, northern Nigeria, northern Mozambique, Somalia, the Sudan, and South Sudan. As highlighted in the graph in the concept note prepared for tomorrow's session, out of the 15 countries having populations of more than 1.5 million facing acute food insecurity, all except three are countries experiencing conflict. It is therefore little surprise that there is direct convergence between the conflict map of Africa and the map of 'acute food insecurity hotspots' on the continent.

The role of conflict as major driver of severe food insecurity becomes particularly clear in its relationship with the emergence of famine conditions. The emergence of famine conditions or risks of famine is mainly attributable to conflicts. Thus, during the past decade the places on the continent where the existence of famine conditions has been declared are all in countries experiencing conflicts in parts of their territory. In 2011, the food insecurity in Somalia was considered to have created famine conditions. Similarly, all of the four famines or near famine situations except one (Yemen) that the UN declared in 2017 were in Africa, all of them countries with territories affected by conflict. These were Somalia, South Sudan and north-east Nigeria. According to FAO and WFP, this year as well all of the four countries except one (Yemen) that have the highest alert level and with parts of their populations identified or projected to experience starvation and death are in Africa. In the latest list, Ethiopia, where in its Tigray region UN reported in 2021 the emergence of famine like conditions, is added to two (South Sudan and north-east Nigeria) of the countries identified in the 2017 UN data.

In terms of UN's engagement on the subject of food security and conflicts, the UNSC adopted Resolution 2417 (2018) on the

link between armed conflict and food insecurity, including the threat of famine. Apart from highlighting the link between conflict and hunger and the obligating of conflict parties, the resolution envisages the inclusion of information on the risk of famine and food insecurity in the Secretary-General's regular country-specific reports and for the Secretary-General to report to the Council, by way of early warning, on risks of conflict induced-famine and widespread food insecurity in the context of armed conflict.

In the light of the grim state of food security in Africa in general, one of the issues that the session should consider is on ways and means of ensuring sustainable financing, mobilization of resources commensurate with the food security gaps, and strengthening AU's humanitarian architecture as outlined in African Common Position on Humanitarian Effectiveness. While the upcoming AU extraordinary summit is hoped to play its role towards the operationalization of the African Humanitarian Agency (AUHA) and mobilization of resources, it also remains important to ensure operationalization as well as harnessing in a coordinated form the role of relevant structures such as the Special Emergency Assistance Fund (SEAF), Africa Risk Capacity (ARC) and the PRC Sub-committee on the Special Emergency Assistance Fund for Drought and Famine Relief in Africa. There is also the issue of AU member states implementing commitments under the CAADP. It is to be recalled that African countries pledged to allocate at least 10 percent of their national budget to agriculture and rural development, as well as to achieve agricultural growth rates of at least 6 percent per annum. Also worth applauding is the announcement by the African Development Bank (AfDB) of the establishment of the Africa Emergency Food Production Plan designed to support countries to rapidly produce around 38 million tones of food to mitigate the impact of the Ukraine war on food prices.

The other issue worth highlighting in the session is the

imperative of ensuring compliance by conflict parties with human rights and humanitarian law standards. The use of starvation as a tactic of war and destruction of agricultural inputs, products and infrastructure in some context of armed conflicts is very concerning and is capable of creating the grave circumstances envisaged in Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act of the AU. The Geneva Conventions clearly prohibit starvation of civilians as a method of combat. They further prohibit attacking, destroying, removing, or rendering useless objects indispensable to the survival of civilian population, such as foodstuffs and agricultural areas. Attacking humanitarian actors and blocking or interfering with humanitarian access are also contrary to human rights and humanitarian law standards.

There is also the issue of enhancing AU's role in humanitarian diplomacy as both a tool for preventing the emergence of conditions that lead to starvation and hunger and in mitigating or averting those conditions once they arise. This would include advocating for mobilization of support for people facing food insecurity and the use of diplomatic missions for facilitating unhindered humanitarian access, securing guarantee from conflict parties for safe, free and voluntary passage for civilians in conflict settings to areas where they can access assistance, respect for and full cooperation with humanitarian actors and compliance with human rights and international humanitarian law standards.

The expected outcome of the session is a communique. Council may express its grave concern over the rising level of food insecurity in the continent and the accompanying humanitarian crisis. Council may emphasize the need for implementing AU's CAADP initiative, including by meeting the target of dedicating a minimum of 10% of their budget to agriculture and rural development. PSC may encourage Member States not only to diversity their sources of agricultural imports, but also and most importantly, to increase their agricultural productivity

and enhance intra-continental trade. With respect to exogenous factors such as the impact of the war in Ukraine, Council may call for international cooperation for establishing emergency plans and platforms for financing and facilitating access to agricultural products and inputs. The Council may also welcome the AfDB's $ 1.5 billion Africa Emergency Food Production Plan and call for its global support and effective and timely implementation. In relation to food security and conflict, Council may underscore the role of conflict as the main driver of much of food insecurity in the continent and it being responsible for the most acute forms of food insecurity. In this respect, the PSC could express its concern about attacks on humanitarian actors, the deliberate targeting of agricultural produce and infrastructure and the use of food as an instrument of war. Council could request along the lines of UNSC Resolution 2417 reports on conflict situations on the agenda of the PSC to include analysis on risks of food insecurity and famine. The PSC could also request the AU to include to its existing peace and security tool box as a dedicated tool humanitarian diplomacy and propose as one of the outcomes of the Malabo summit on 28 May the development of strategy for the effective use of humanitarian diplomacy by the AU. The PSC could also stress the need for Member States and all parties to conflict to strictly comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights laws. In light of the magnitude of the problem of food insecurity in the continent and the role of conflict as main driver of such insecurity, Council could decide to have food security and conflicts as a standing thematic agenda of the PSC during which the PSC receives briefings on trends on food security and conflict in Africa.