

# Open Session on Children in situations of Armed Conflicts in Africa

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Tomorrow (16 April) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will have an open session on children affected by armed conflict in Africa.

During this session, it is expected that Amira Elfadil Mohammed Elfadil, AUC Commissioner of Social Affairs, Benyam Dawit Mezumr member of the African Committee of Experts on the Right and Welfare of the Child and Special Rapporteur on Children and Armed Conflict, will brief the PSC. Assefa Bequele founder of the African Child Policy Forum, UNICEF and Save the Children representatives are also expected to make a statement. The PSC Chair of the month, Ambassador Bankole Adeoye, of Nigeria, who is the Chair of the PSC for April, will make opening remarks.

The 21st Ordinary Executive Council Session held in Addis Ababa in June 2012, adopted Decision EX.CL/Dec.712 (XXI) in which it requested the PSC to take into consideration the rights of the child in its agenda and cooperate actively with the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC). Following this decision, the first PSC open session exclusively focusing on children affected by armed conflicts was held in May 2014 at the 434th meeting. Since then, efforts were made by the PSC and ACERWC in institutionalizing the session on the topic by convening regular PSC open sessions.

According to the 2016 ACERWC 'Continental Study on the Impact of Conflict and Crises on Children in Africa' states that conflict in the continent accounts for a 50 per cent increase

in infant deaths and a 15 per cent increase in under nutrition. Children are twenty-four times more exposed to death in armed conflict due to illness and injury than in peacetime.

Tomorrow's session is taking place within the context of the AU theme for 2019, 'the Year of Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons and Returnees: Towards Durable Solutions to Forced Displacement in Africa' and it also makes linkages to the Silencing the Guns by 2020. The session is expected to take stock of previous PSC decisions and AU's response to protecting children affected by armed conflicts. There have been quite a significant number of PSC outcome documents since 2010 on the impact of armed conflict on children. However there has not been systematic follow up mechanism on items that require implementation and regular review. The session may address the lack or limited implementation of standards and policies and the absence of a robust oversight and coordination capacity through this stock taking exercise on the protection of children in situations of armed conflicts.

One of the major PSC decisions that is yet to be implemented is the appointment of a special envoy on children to draw more attention and action on issues of child rights, education and protection, particularly in the context of conflict. This decision has been a standing item in the PSC outcome documents since 2014 and in the subsequent PSC sessions dedicated to children.

The lack of implementation of this decision and others is not completely surprising. It in part has to do with the lack of clear strategy that guides and informs decisions such as the appointment of a special envoy on children. Additionally, this lack of implementation also reflects the lack of due consideration at the time of making decision to the institutional, legal and resource implications of decisions particularly those involving the establishment of new mechanisms. There is thus a need for the PSC to have a study

that addresses these issues including vis-a-vis the mandate of the AU Special Envoy on Women and Peace and Security and the role of the Children's Committee, which itself has a dedicated rapporteur on the theme of children in armed conflicts.

Indeed, the issue of the impact of conflict on children is also addressed within the framework of the one of the standing themes of the PSC on women peace and security in Africa. The 757th session especially urged for an extraordinary AU summit dedicated to the plight of women and children to mobilize political support and recourses to respond to the needs of women and children. Although this decision did not fully materialize, the 2019 AU theme on humanitarian focus offers an opportunity to highlight the vulnerability of children in conflict and humanitarian situations.

Some of the recent PSC sessions on children have increasingly focused on the impact of conflict on children's access to education. In this context the 706th and 597th PSC sessions held in May 2016 and July 2017 respectively shed light primarily on attacks on schools and on out-of-school children due to protracted conflicts and violence. The military use of schools and presence of troops and weapons inside schools have been highlighted. The 2016 session has particularly indicated that more than 12 million children are denied of education due to attacks on school and violence. Hence the PSC called on member states to endorse the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use During Armed Conflicts, also commonly known as the "Safe Schools Guidelines". Moreover at its 706th session the PSC has called for the establishment of a comprehensive child protection architecture within the AUC to monitor and track the effective implementation of various instruments adopted at continental and international level.

Beyond its aim to take the issues affecting education of children in situations of armed conflict, this session is expected to reflect broadly on the impact of conflicts on

children including killing and maiming, abductions, sexual abuse, recruitment of children as armed combatants, attacks on education and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access. The launch of the recent ACERWC report on children on the move can further generate momentum in underlining the particular needs of children in armed conflicts. Elfadil in her briefing is expected to highlight key issues raised in the report. The report elaborates on the drivers of forced displacement and states that 'no other continent has witnessed armed conflicts that have adverse effects on children like the African continent'. The report further asserts that children constitute 53% of the total 5.4 million refugees in the continent.

The PSC is expected to make reference and follow up on commitments made during the previous sessions. Particularly the PSC may reiterate the primary responsibility of governments to ensure that children are protected and that their rights and welfare are respected by particularly ratifying and implementing all the relevant legal instruments. Significant children specific PSC decisions are related to ratification, domestication and enhancing implementation of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and other international child protection, rights and welfare instruments.

The expected outcome is a press statement.