

Open Session on the Implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration in the Promotion of Education for the Children Affected by Armed Conflicts in Africa

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Tomorrow (12 March) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council will convene an open session on the Implementation of the Safe Schools Declaration in the Promotion of Education for the Children Affected by Armed Conflicts in Africa. Sarah Anyang-Agbor Commissioner for Human Resources, Science and Technology (HRST) and Admore Kambudzi, Director for Peace and Security Department are expected to deliver opening statements. Ambassador of the Republic of Equatorial Guinea may make a statement as the chair of the month.

Following the opening remarks a panel consisting of the African Committee on the Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) secretariat, CSOs and children affected by armed conflicts will also make a presentation on the topic within the context of Silencing the Guns. A representative from Save the Children, as a partner leading on the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) policy work in the PSC is also expected to make a presentation. The presentations are expected to examine the lessons learned and the way forward.

The deliberate target of schools by belligerent parties has deprived children of attaining their fundamental right to education in many conflict-affected countries in Africa. With the growing threat of terrorism and organized crime education

facilities have been susceptible to these security threats. Although African member states have adopted a number of policy instruments to curb these violations, there is still need for strengthened protection regimes at national levels. Tomorrow's session will focus on one of the global initiatives, which African countries are part of, the SSD.

As noted in the concept note the objective of the open session is to assess progress on the implementation of the SSD in the promotion of education for children affected by armed conflicts in Africa. The SSD, which was adopted in 2015, is a global intergovernmental initiative that aims at advancing the protection of education and limits the use of schools and universities for military purposes. The declaration makes emphasis on the need to collect data on attacks of educational facilities and victims, the need to continue education during conflict and investigate allegation of violations to provide assistance and justice to victims.

Since its adoption in 2015 three international conferences on safe schools have taken place every two years to assess the challenges and best practices across the world. In Africa, so far 28 countries have endorsed the declaration and tomorrow's session may serve as a platform to exchange views on the level of implementation and the kind of impact the declaration has on the actual protection and promotion of the children's rights. There is a wealth of practice and experience, which can be shared from various African countries. The session may also be an opportunity to remind member states that have not endorsed yet to do so and those that have, to strengthen their implementation and reporting mechanisms.

The presentations may also examine to what extent the 'Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict' are observed by members that have endorsed the SSD. The guideline amongst other issues includes the restriction on the use of schools and universities including abandoned ones, to refrain from the

destruction of such facilities and avoid employing fighting forces to provide security to schools and universities.

The PSC has addressed the broader issue of CAAC since 2010 and has tabled it as a standing agenda item since 2014. Hence, while discussing this global commitment it will also be useful to place it within the context of existing policy and legal instruments of the AU. In this regard the presentation by the ACERWC secretariat may be beneficial in reminding member states of their obligations and responsibilities under African legal instruments namely the African Charter on the Right and Welfare of the Child in addressing attacks on schools.

The other speakers and representatives of NGOs may also shed lights on the experiences at the national level. Presenters may share on country level policies and practices on making schools safe through the protection of education from attacks and military use in targeted member states. Cases from Kenya, Somalia, Burkina Faso and Nigeria are expected to feature.

Within the context of this year's theme, Silencing the Guns, the session may further discuss on mechanisms to integrate the issue of CAAC in the peace and security agenda. It may be of interest for presenters and participants to reflect on how existing policy mechanisms can support the review and follow the implementation of provisions related to CAAC and more specifically the protection of educational facilities.

At the AU Commission level, the work on safe schools requires the close collaboration of the HRST and PSD. The HRST Commissioner may also speak on the AU Continental Strategy on Education in Africa (2016-2025) and on mechanisms to integrate the safe schools agenda in the AU policy space. PSD as well may discuss further on how the protection of educational facilities can be ensured in conflict settings.

African member states that have endorsed the SSD and which have started implementation may also make intervention and

share their practices. Other than African countries representatives of Norway and Argentina may also make statements as co-leads of the initiative and to also present an overview of the global endeavors.

Attacks on schools constitute one of the six grave violations against children in conflict situation, which the UNSC has recognized. The inclusion of children's protection in peace processes as well as other various peace and security efforts remains central in order to address the effects of conflict on children. A UNSC presidential statement on Children and Armed Conflicts released on 12 February 2020 called for the integration of child protection provisions into peace negotiations, ceasefire and peace agreements, and in provisions for ceasefire monitoring, as well as the centrality of ensuring that children's views and experiences are captured.

The expected outcome is a press statement. The Council, beyond calling on member states to endorse the SSD, it may urge governments to take practical measures towards the protection of educational facilities. The PSC may further emphasize that children's access to education is their fundamental right and governments have the obligation to keep students and schools safe. The PSC may underline that education is also an enabler for countries to recover from conflicts and crisis as well as the basis for the continent's socio-economic development.