

VTC Briefing on the Impact of COVID-19 on the Security and Welfare of Children in Africa

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Tomorrow (12 May) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will hold a briefing session on the impact of the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) on the security and welfare of children in Africa.

Benyam Dawit Mezmur, Special Rapporteur on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts (CAAC) of the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) is expected to brief the Council. Representatives from the Department of Social Affairs and the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) are also expected to brief the PSC.

The format of the meeting on this topic has usually been an open session. However due to the new working arrangements of the PSC, tomorrow's meeting will be a closed session that will be conducted via VTC.

In the context of the mandate of the PSC and indeed the ordinary focus of this annual thematic session, a question that arises in respect to tomorrow's session is whether the discussion will be confined to the situation of children in relation to COVID19 in the context of conflicts. It is envisaged that the briefing of the Special Rapporteur of ACERWC will have two objectives. The first is to provide the Council with an overview on the status of child protection during COVID19 and the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic on the protection and wellbeing of children. Second, the briefing is expected to present a Guiding Note for Children's Rights in response to COVID-19 for PSC's endorsement.

Of concern for PSC members is to address critical issues on child protection, more particularly in the context of conflicts.

In conflict situations, a major challenge in terms of protecting children from COVID19 is the possibility of implementation of the social distancing measures and access to water and sanitation, which are the frontline prevention measures. The congestion and poor sanitation of internally displaced persons camps or refugee camps mean that children, who constitute a significant percentage of the population in these camps lack the means for observing the COVID19 prevention measures and face a higher risk of exposure. The enforcement of COVID19 response measures such as lockdowns or curfews in countries affected by conflict or hosting refugees also exposes children to various threats including abuses, sexual and gender-based violence to the girl child.

The current heightened attention to contain the COVID-19 and the response measures can also create conditions that exacerbates the vulnerable conditions of children. Fighting forces wishing to score military advantages may, as witnessed in the conflicts in the Sahel, increase fighting endangering the security and life of children in affected areas. The COVID19 may also be used by fighting forces for recruiting children in an attempt to infuse their forces with new energy. The COVID19 response measures including travel restrictions and curfews, which highly constrain the work of humanitarian operations, have the effect of limiting the provision of services, including the ability of children to receive the appropriate vaccination, which are time sensitive.

COVID19 measures also affect children and increases the risk of their exposure to violence and violation of their rights due to the limitations on the operations of not only humanitarian actors but also civil society and media. It in particular undermines monitoring, investigation, reporting and protection work of various actors, thereby creating conditions

that expose children to increased attacks and violations with impunity.

The suspension of school has direct impact on children that depend on school feeding and it also takes away the protection the school environment offers to children, including in the context of IDP or refugee camps. Moreover, distance learning options, which are introduced in some countries may not necessarily be feasible to many children that do not have access to internet connection and technological equipment. There are indeed fears that this would not only deepen the digital divide but also importantly the exclusion of children without access to online education, with dire consequences to their future opportunities. Children in areas affected by conflict would be affected the most from such shifts in delivery of classes.

The closure of schools has particularly affected girls not only in terms of increased burdens for domestic responsibilities in conflict affected settings but also harmful practices including female genital mutilation and forced marriage, which are reported to be on the rise during the pandemic. Low-income households use early and forced marriages as coping mechanisms. In this regard the briefing may also elaborate on the specific needs of the girl child in conflict situation.

The other adverse effect of closure of schools is the risk of military occupation of education facilities, with very serious consequences not only for the right to education of children but also to the safety and security of schools and hence children.

Another challenge that has emerged in the context of COVID19 and the response of states to the pandemic is the exclusion of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers, putting the health and lives of the most vulnerable in these communities notably children in danger. The preventive efforts including testing

and the provision of health and sanitation services need to take in consideration the special needs of children, particularly those in communities affected by conflicts including refugee camps.

One of the major protection issues that may be raised in tomorrow's briefing is the impact of lockdowns, state of emergency laws and their enforcement on the safety and wellbeing of children. The expanded role of the state in this extraordinary situation needs to be examined to also prevent the use of excessive force that may lead to harming children, their parents or custodians.

The presentation may also make reference to the call of the Chairperson of the Commission, Moussa Faki Mahammat and the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres for ceasefire of hostilities and urge belligerent parties to comply with this call including by preventing attacks and violence against children. Highlighting the devastating impacts of armed conflict on children and other vulnerable populations, the Secretary-General noted that these groups are also at the highest risk of suffering devastating losses from COVID-19. In the context of the upsurge in fighting in Libya involving the deliberate targeting of civilian areas leading to civilian casualties including children, Faki issued a statement on 10 May calling for 'an immediate and unconditional ceasefire in order to allow the delivery of humanitarian aid relating to the fight against COVID19.' It will be essential to reiterate this call by the Special Rapporteur to put children's right at the centre of all the global, regional and national efforts.

The expected outcome is a communiqué. The PSC may take note of the wide range of risks and vulnerabilities experienced by children during COVID19 in the context of conflicts. It may reiterate the global call of Faki and Guterres for all fighting groups to cease all their hostilities in order to create the conditions for fighting COVID19. Considering the particular needs and rights of children in their response to

the pandemic, the PSC may call on states to take due cognizance of the impact of COVID19 measures on children, particularly in areas affected by conflict. It may call on member states to strengthen their efforts in continuing the delivery of basic health services in addition to those related to COVID19. The PSC may also urge fighting forces and national authorities to allow the delivery of life saving humanitarian assistance by humanitarian actors to conflict affected populations including people in IDP camps or refugee camps. It may also call on states to ensure that protection measures cover IDPs, refugees, and asylum seekers in order to safeguard children in these communities from the morbidity and mortality risks associated with contracting of COVID19.