

Africa Amnesty Month

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PSC session on africa amnesty month:implementation of the au theme of the year 2020: 'silencing the guns: creating conducive conditions for africa's development' within the au flagship project on silencing the guns

Tomorrow (3 September) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to hold its 943rd session. The session is expected to be partially open and will commemorate the Africa Amnesty Month with a focus on the implementation of the AU theme of the year 2020: 'Silencing the Guns: Creating Conducive Conditions for Africa's Development' as part of the AU flagship project on Silencing the Guns.

Representatives of the five geographic regions of the AU, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and Regional Mechanisms (RMs) as well as beneficiary member states of the joint AU and UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) project, which are Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Cote D'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Kenya are expected to participate.

The PSC Chair Ambassador Mohamed Idriss is expected to deliver the opening statement. The Commissioner for Peace and Security Smail Cergui and Commissioner for Political Affairs Minata Samate Cessouma and the representative of the UNODA are expected to deliver presentations. Others who are also expected to address the session are the Regional Centre on Small Arms (RECSA) and the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) are also scheduled to provide briefings.

Tomorrow's session will be the fourth commemorative session since the 2017 Assembly decision Assembly/AU/Dec.645 (XXIX) declared the month of September each year until 2020 as "Africa Amnesty Month". The session affords the opportunity to assess the efforts around surrender and collection of illicit weapons and in curbing the flow of illegal arms. It also aims at taking stocks of ongoing activities and challenges in realizing the objectives of the Amnesty Month.

One aspect of the tomorrow's deliberation will focus on the joint AU and UNODA project implemented in the seven countries. The project was launched in March 2020 in Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic and Kenya, the remaining three countries namely Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire and Ethiopia joined in July 2020.

Countries are expected to share their experiences, best practices and lessons learned in managing and controlling the flow of illicit arms and weapons. The countries represent various regions and are at various stages in peace and security as well as in terms of experiences in managing illicit flow of arms. The joint project implemented in the countries has four major activities planned for the year. The first activity is a campaign and media events to mobilize and sensitize people on the risks of illicit trafficking of small arms. In line with the AU decision and the purpose of the Amnesty month, governments do not prosecute or undertake punitive measures against individuals that voluntarily surrender illegal weapons during the month of September.

The second strand of the project aims at activities related to the collection and safe storage of illicit weapons. The third component aims at destroying the weapons and arms that been collected. The fourth element is community policing training workshops to law enforcement for increased security.

Apart from the national focal points on small arms control, RECSA is an implementing partner of the project, hence its

intervention may further complement the statements that will be made by member states. The contributions from the various stakeholders is also expected to feature in the report of the PSC on Silencing the Guns that will be submitted to the AU Assembly.

In addition to the experience sharing from national institutions, the discussion will also benefit from the intervention of RECs and RMs. The proliferation and flow of illicit arms is trans-boundary in nature and particularly in countries with limited border control it can be a serious security threat that stretches over multiple countries or even regions. Hence the response requires a regional strategy and concerted efforts among member states. In this regard, it is of interest for PSC members to explore how to further enhance and reinforce their coordination at national, regional and continental levels in order to control and monitor the use and movement of arms in the Continent.

UNODA's presentation may broadly shed light on planned activities for the year in the various countries. It may also highlight on the role of youth in realizing the activities under the Amnesty month. In fact, one of the campaigns targeting the youth is the "Your Voice Matters – What is your Slogan for the Africa Amnesty Month" contest that is open to any young person from the six participating countries (with the exception of Ethiopia). The winning slogan will be used in the nation-wide campaign for the Amnesty month.

The AU through its Youth Envoy has also launched a campaign in July 2020 to provide a platform to mobilize and advance the role of the youth in the realization of the Silencing the Guns agenda. It will also be important in linking such kinds of continental initiatives with national projects that are currently being undertaken in the seven countries. Tomorrow's commemoration of the Amnesty month is taking place in the context of the ongoing COVID19 pandemic. The various presentations and interventions may also highlight the impact

of the pandemic on the surrender and collection processes of the illicit weapons.

The extent to which the overstretched capacity and resources of member states can effectively undertake disarmaments efforts is one of the key challenges that might be raised by participants. A recent study by UNODA demonstrated the possible impact of the pandemic on the collection and analysis of data on diversion risks; national ammunition management-related programming; and on international assistance, cooperation, and funding initiatives.

It is known from the experience in various parts of the continent the lack or weakening monopoly of use of force by the state particularly in countries affected by violence leads to the emergence of reliance by individuals and communities on self-organized security provision. Accordingly, effective implementation of the collection and voluntary surrender of arms requires that states implement measures including the boosting of state-based provision of security services.

It is to be recalled that at the margins of the 2019 Amnesty month PSC session, the AU launched a steering committee on security sector reform (SSR). It may be of interest for PSC members to follow up on this mechanism and on its work over the past year. The expected outcome is a statement. The PSC may reiterate its previous decisions for Member States and RECs/Regional Mechanisms to submit reports to Council, through the AUC, on the actions taken in implementing the Africa Amnesty Month. The PSC may also underscore the necessity of monitoring and reporting on the movement of arms within the various regions and across the continent. It may call on the AU Commission to establish in collaboration with RECs and the UN a mechanism for monitoring, reporting on and addressing the illicit flow into Africa and movement within Africa of illicit weapons and arms that have made intercommunal conflicts in places such as the Sahel most destructive and deadly.

In terms of enhancing national capacity, the PSC may call on member states to put in place legislation on the ownership and possession of arms as well as safe keeping of armaments and ammunition depots and develop strategy for enhancing the provision of security services and peaceful conflict resolution mechanisms so that members of the public do not feel the need to resort to acquiring and using arms for defending themselves. The PSC may also welcome the mobilization of the youth in Africa in pursuit of the fight against illicit possession, circulation and use of illegal arms and weapons. Given that Amnesty month requires the contribution of various sectors of society, it may also call for strengthened coordination not only at national, regional, continental and international levels but also across the AU system and with various sectors of the African public including most notably civil society organizations and the media.