

Briefing on the Situation in the Great Lakes Region

Automatic Heading TextDate | 21 June, 2021

Tomorrow (21 June) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is set to convene its 1005th session to receive a briefing on the situation in the Great Lakes Region.

Following the opening remark from the PSC Chairperson of the month, Burundi's Permanent Representative to the AU, Joel Nkurbagaya, the AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, Bankole Adeoye, will make a statement. It is expected that the Special Representative of the Chairperson of the Commission for the Great Lakes Region and Burundi, Basile Ikouebe, will brief the Council. Representative of the Democratic Republic of Congo and H.E. Hanna Tetteh, Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) and Head of the United Nations Office to the African Union (UN0AU) are also expected to deliver statements. The representative of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR) as well as the representative of the East African Community (EAC) will also make statements.

This session is convened, among others, in line with the PSC's request for the AU Commission to provide quarterly briefings to the Council on the situation in the Great Lakes Region during its last dedicated session on the region (974th meeting held on 22 January 2021). In this respect, tomorrow's session will present the Council with the opportunity to take stock of the latest developments in the region since its last session, as well as review progress in the implementation of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework Agreement for the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Region (PSC Framework).

The AU along with other co-guarantors¹ convened virtual meeting on 3 March to assess state of implementation of the Framework. The meeting welcomed the trend that 'dialogue and cooperation' have become 'a central modus operandi' in resolving challenges of the region. The meeting also noted remaining challenges including the persistent activities of negative forces, the unabated illegal exploitation of natural resources, strained relations between 'certain countries' in the region, the existence of large number of refugees and displaced persons, and the continued violation of human rights. In tomorrow's session, the PSC is likely to echo the overall assessment of the co-guarantors.

Apart from the PSC Framework, the briefing is also expected to capture latest political, security and humanitarian developments in the region. In the political front, the region continued to witness an improved bilateral and multilateral diplomatic relations. President Felix Tshisekedi of DRC has continued cementing his ties with countries in the Great Lakes region, the latest being with Kenya in April. Following the state visit by Kenya's President Uhuru Kenyatta to Kinshasa on 20 April, the two countries inked deals to deepen ties in the areas of business and security. Similarly, Rwanda and Burundi are on a path for improved neighbourly relationship as the meeting of the foreign ministers of the two countries attested. Relation between Rwanda and Uganda has not seen major improvement since the Council's last session on the region. At a multilateral level, the ICGLR was able to convene two Mini- Summits of Heads of State and Government between January and April this year to address the political and security situation in the Central African Republic (CAR).

In the security front, negative forces and non-state actors remain active in eastern DRC and CAR. Sources claim that at least 122 armed groups operate in the mineral-rich eastern DRC, of which the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) is assumed to be the deadliest. Eastern DRC continues to experience armed

groups attacks and intercommunal violence, specifically in the provinces of Ituri and North Kivu, leading the government to declare a 'state of siege' in early May for a period of one month. Over the last three months, the Kivu Security Tracker (KST) reported some 362 incidents, resulting in 936 deaths.

On 22 February, an attack on a UN convoy in North Kivu killed three people including Italy's Ambassador to DRC. On 31 May, gun and machete assaults against civilians in displacement camps in the Ituri province killed more than 50 people, one of the deadliest in recent years allegedly perpetrated by the ADF.

The uptick of violence in eastern DRC despite the presence of UN forces (MONUSCO) has angered population, brewing anti-MONUSCO sentiment. In April, violent protest erupted in Beni, North Kivu, over the perceived failure of MONUSCO to prevent the wave of attacks on civilians. This came amid the plan for a 'progressive' and 'phased' drawdown of the mission. It is to be recalled that UN Security Council Resolution 2556(2020), which extended the mandate of the mission until 20 December 2021, endorsed the plan of withdrawal from the Kasai province this month and progressively from Tanganyika in 2022, but consolidating its footprint in the conflict-ridden provinces of Ituri, North Kivu and South Kivu.

Cross-border security incidents showed a significant reduction. There are encouraging signs of increased regional security and military cooperation among countries of the region. These include the signing of security and defence cooperation agreements between DRC and Kenya and DRC-Rwanda. Uganda and DRC also discussed their interest for joint military operations against armed groups in eastern DRC. Similarly, Rwanda and Burundi met in March to address cross-border security incidents.

Beyond the security efforts, a plan of action for a comprehensive approach in tackling the threats of armed groups

has been developed as part of the operationalization of the Contact and Coordination Group (CCG) during a workshop held from 3 to 6 May in Goma, DRC. Supported by the DRC National Oversight Mechanism and the guarantors of the PSC Framework including the AU, the workshop underscoring the imperatives of 'comprehensive approach' and 'complementarity between military efforts and non-military measures', agreed on an Action Plan for the next two years that would be implemented in line with commitments under PSC Framework, respect of human rights and international humanitarian law, among others. They were also able to identify four areas of engagement in the fight against negative forces including to facilitate voluntary disarmament and repatriation process, cut supply sources of the armed groups, address the root causes, and improve the DDR programs.

A related issue likely to be raised at tomorrow's briefing is the need to address illegal exploitation of natural resources, specifically gold and coltan. It has been argued that though minerals are important sources of revenue for governments of the region, the illegal trade and exploitation has been one of the underlying causes of conflict in the region as various actors are illicitly involved in this lucrative business. One possible avenue to address such problem is enhancing natural resource governance through the establishment of effective legal and institutional mechanisms regulating the ownership, extraction, distribution and control of natural resources.

Tomorrow's session may also highlight latest developments particularly in terms of the effort to address political polarization in the DRC. While a new parliamentary majority has been constituted and a 56-member new coalition government under Prime Minister Jean-Michel Sama Lukonde Kyenge has been established in April, the viability of the new majority and DRC's long term political stability largely hinges on the extent to which coalition members of the new majority are able to come around a common political agenda.

The security situation in CAR remains volatile despite the

relative lull in violence in recent months. The political situation shows fragility as manifested from last week's resignation of Prime Minister Firmin Ngrebada along with his entire cabinet. The resignation came following intense week of political wrangling between the government and France, leading to the suspension of financial aid and military cooperation. A welcome development at the level of UN is the adoption of Security Council resolution 2556 in March 2021, which decided to increase the authorized size of its mission (MINUSCA).

Tomorrow's briefing is also expected to highlight the dire humanitarian situation in the region, especially in the DRC and CAR. In DRC, on top of the 5 million internally displaced persons, the eruption of the mount Nyiragongo volcano in Goma, North Kivu, on 22 May unleashed a new wave of displacement with nearly 416, 000 people uprooted from their homes and 31 people killed. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that around 19.6 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance and protection in 2021. On a positive note, the 12th Ebola outbreak in DRC, which started in North Kivu in February, was declared officially over early May. The situation in CAR also remains bleak as well, with glaring humanitarian needs. According to OCHA, 50 % of its population (2.8 million out of its 4.9 million population) rely on humanitarian assistance, while 25 % is displaced either internally or in neighbouring countries.

The situation in Burundi however shows improvement as thousands of refugees have continued to return to their home voluntarily, owing to the improved situations in the country. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees stated in late April that on average, 2,000 people are being assisted to voluntarily return each week from Rwanda, DRC, and Tanzania. While this is an encouraging step, dignified return and reintegration to their communities as well as addressing the needs of returnees is of particular significance.

The expected outcome of the session is a communique. On the

PSC Framework, the Council is expected to express its commitment for its full implementation. In relation to the political and security developments in the region, the PSC is likely to echo the overall assessment of the co-guarantors on the occasion of the 8th anniversary of the PSC Framework where they commended the increased security and economic cooperation while noting the challenges including the persistence of the activities of negative forces, continued illegal exploitation of natural resources, strained relations between 'certain countries' of the region, as well as the worsening humanitarian conditions. The Council may particularly note the robust diplomatic engagement by DRC with its neighbouring countries and its contribution in strengthening regional cooperation by deepening economic and security ties. The Council is however likely to condemn the upsurge of violence in eastern DRC due to increased activities of armed groups and intercommunal conflicts. The Council is expected to stress on the imperative of addressing drivers of conflicts including extreme poverty and illegal exploitation of natural resources. The Council may also welcome the operationalization of the CCG with the aim to oversee the non-military measures and the adoption of action plan that identifies areas of engagement. On the humanitarian front, the PSC is expected to express its concern over the grave humanitarian crisis caused by a combination of manmade and natural elements. In that regard, the Council may call on member states, relevant RECs and international partners to redouble their efforts in addressing not only the immediate humanitarian crisis but also the underlying causes of the crisis. Finally, given the intensity and complexity of developments in this region, the Council may reiterate its decision reached at its 974th session to undertake field mission to the region.

¹ The other guarantors of the PSC Framework are: the United Nations (UN), the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), and the

Southern African Development Community (SADC)