

Consideration of the renewal of the mandate of G5 Sahel Joint Force

Automatic Heading TextDate | 6 July, 2021

Tomorrow (06 July) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is set to convene the first session of the month, which will be the 1006th session, to consider the renewal of G5 Sahel Joint Force mandate. The PSC will do so on the basis of the Report of the Chairperson of the AU Commission.

Following the opening remarks of the Chairperson of the PSC for July, Victor Adekunle Adeleke, the AU Commissioner for Political Affairs and Peace and Security, Bankole Adeoye, is expected to introduce the report of the Chairperson of the AU Commission. AU High Representative for Mali and the Sahel, Maman Sidikou, and the representatives of the G5 Sahel Secretariat and member states of the regional mechanism are expected to make statements.

It is to be recalled that the Council, at its 939th meeting held in July last year, renewed the mandate of the G5 Sahel Joint Force for a period of one year until 12 July 2021.

The security situation in the Sahel continues to worsen with spate of terrorist violence in the region, especially in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali. Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and the AL Qaeda-affiliated Jama'at Nusrat Al Islam Wal Muslimin (JNIM) remain major source of violence though they are not the only actors (vigilant self-defense groups are on the rise stirring intercommunal conflicts). Notwithstanding some gains made in the counter-terrorism operations in the region, the threat posed by the armed terrorist groups seems to be extending beyond the Sahel into

the West African coast.

In sign of increasing insecurity, Niger, particularly its Western region of Tillabéri, experienced one of the deadliest attacks in March in which at least 140 people were reportedly killed. In Burkina Faso, the 5 June deadliest attack on the village of Solhan—informal gold mining site close to the border with Niger—left more than 160 people dead. This deadly attack reportedly brought the death toll in that country to about 500 since January. Terrorist groups in Mali also continued targeting both civilians and Malian armies as well as UN forces. In the latest attack, six Malian soldiers were killed while 13 UN peacekeeping forces were injured in separate assault staged in central and northern part of the country.

The latest spike of violence—coupled with rising food insecurity, climate change, and COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant economic shock—has exacerbated the already dire humanitarian situation in the Sahel. According to the June report of UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 14.4 million people in need of humanitarian assistance: Mali (7.1 million), Niger (3.8 million), and Burkina Faso (3.5 million). This has prompted UN agencies to raise the alarm over rising food insecurity, more so in the case of Burkina Faso.

It is also worth noting the impact of the pressing security and humanitarian situation in destabilizing governments of the region. For example, in Burkina Faso where the government has been forced to reshuffle the cabinet as discontent brewing over government's perceived failure to contain the string of civilian attacks. It is to be recalled that Mali, Niger and Chad experienced coup or attempted coup between March and May illustrating the fragility.

A positive development in relation to the operationalization of the Joint Force is the deployment of 1,200 Chadian forces

in the tri-border area in early March pursuant to the G5 Sahel Summit held in N'Djamena in February 2021. This brings the total number of the joint Force troops to 5,534.

The other issue the Council is likely to discuss is the operational and logistical challenges facing the G5 Sahel Joint Force. Though the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the European Union (EU) continue to provide logistical and financial support to the Force, the supports have not been adequate nor predictable. In the latest report on the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel (FC-G5S), dated 10 May, the UN Secretary-General stated that 'while the Force is becoming increasingly operational, it still lacks the necessary financial and logistical means to become autonomous'. It is in this context that the idea of establishing a dedicated UN Office to support the Joint Force gets traction with the view to ensuring predictable and sustainable support to the Force.

The creation of UN Office—similar to the UN Support Office to AU Mission in Somalia—was suggested by the UN Secretary-General June 2020 report on Mali. The G5 Sahel and the AU support and advocate for the UN to make such support package. It is worth recalling that the PSC, during its 939th session, called for the UN Security Council to 'take necessary steps that will guarantee sustainable and predictable funding for the G5 Sahel Force from the UN assessed contribution'. However, dynamics in the UN Security Council suggest that members are divided on whether the idea of a dedicated and separate UN Office to support the G5 Joint Force should be pursued. Some members (particularly the three African members in the UN Security Council (A3) as well as France) are in support of the establishment of the Office while other members (notably US and UK) clearly object to the use of UN funds to establish the Support Office, preferring bilateral support as the right approach.

A positive development on the UN part is Security Council's

unanimous decision (through the adoption of resolution 2584) to renew MINUSMA's mandate until 30 June 2022. While the mission maintains its current strength, the Security Council requested the Secretary-General to provide recommendations on the force levels and ceilings of the mission by mid- July, indicating the possibility of increasing the mission's troop ceiling. A strengthened MINUSMA in a context where the situation in Mali and the wider Sahel is deteriorating would indeed be a positive step in turning the tide against terrorist groups in the region.

In tomorrow's session, the PSC is also likely to discuss the status of 3,000 troops that the AU Assembly requested for the deployment to the Sahel. Despite some progress in developing the technical documents for deployment of the troops, critical issues of force generation, the command-and-control architecture, and the funding for the additional deployment have as yet to be clarified.

The other issue the Council may find worth reflecting on is the need to complement the military response with comprehensive approach that addresses the structural causes of instability notably underdevelopment, governance and climate change. A welcome development in this respect is the announcement of what is dubbed as 'civil surge' by the Heads of State of the G5 Sahel during the N'Djamena Summit last February. The expansion of state administrations and services to the populations, consolidation of rule of law and inclusive governance, and the fight against corruption and impunity are at the heart of the ideal of 'civil surge'.

The expected outcome is a communique. While commending the efforts of the G5 Sahel Joint Force and its Member States in degrading capability of armed terrorist and other armed groups in Sahel, the PSC may reiterate its grave concern over the deterioration of security and humanitarian situation in the region. The Council is likely to note the progress made in the operationalization of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, particularly

the deployment of the Chadian battalion of 1,200 forces as reinforcement to the Joint Force.

On the challenges facing the joint Force, the Council is likely to note the operational, logistical and financial limitations of the Force having detrimental effect to the effectiveness of the force in the fight against terrorism. Commending the efforts of the UN (through MINUSMA) and the EU for providing logistical and financial support, the Council may further call on these partners to continue their support. The Council may particularly reiterate the imperative of providing predictable and adequate resource for G5 Sahel Joint Force and welcome the proposal made by the Secretary-General for the creation of a dedicated UN Support Office. The Council is expected to welcome UN Security Council resolution 2584 of 29 June 2021, extending the mandate of MINUSMA for one year period until 30 June 2022.

The Council is also expected to stress on the need to follow a holistic approach and the need for enhancing non-military efforts that aimed at addressing root causes of the conflict in the region. In this connection, the Council may welcome the initiative of the 'civil surge' by Heads of State of the G5 Sahel during the N'Djamena Summit, and further call on partners to rally behind this initiative in addition to the military support. Finally, as growing security threats of the armed terrorist groups highlight the continued military engagement in the Sahel, the PSC is expected to renew the mandate of the G5 Sahel Joint Force for additional one year period.