

Open Session on Sexual Violence in Armed conflicts in Africa

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Tomorrow (23 July) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to hold the second open session of the month. on sexual violence in armed conflicts in Africa. During the session, The Special Envoy of the AU Commission Chairperson on Women, Peace and Security Bineta Diop and the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (SRSG-SVC) Pramila Patten are expected to deliver their presentations.

It is expected that the briefings will highlight the current state of and patterns of acts of sexual violence in armed conflicts in Africa. Also of interest in the briefing by Diop would be the impact of sexual violence on women and girls as principal targets of such violence and on affected families and communities in general. As the issue of 'conflict related sexual violence' has been a standing agenda of the UN Security Council (UNSC) since 2010, the SRSG, Patten, may additionally share the experience of the UN in dealing with sexual violence following its elevation on the UNSC's agenda to a threat to security and an impediment to the restoration of peace through resolution 1820. The presentation may also address the AU-UN collaboration on response to conflict-related sexual violence that was formally established following the 2014 Framework of Cooperation between the AU and the Office of the SRSG-SVC.

It is to be recalled that women and peace and security has been a standing agenda of the PSC since March 2010 when PSC held its first session dedicated to women and children in conflict in Africa. At its 223rd session the PSC made a

decision to devote an annual open session, to the theme of women and children and other vulnerable groups in armed conflicts.

Since 2010 the PSC has passed a number of decisions on violence against women in conflict however there is still a need for a systematic follow up mechanism. Cognizant of this and in an effort of ensuring the implementation of existing decisions, the PSC at its 757th open session held in 2018 made a request to the 'AU Commission to prepare evaluation reports on the implementation of its previous decisions on women and children in armed conflicts to enable Council to determine further steps to address any challenges'. The PSC further agreed to dedicate that the subsequent open session on women and children in violent conflict situations taking place in 2019 to 'be devoted to consideration of the report of the Chairperson of the Commission on the status of implementation of its previous decisions on the plight of women and children in violent conflict situations', although this did not materialize this year.

During the same session the Council has also 'recommended the convening of an extraordinary AU Summit dedicated to the plight of women and children in armed conflicts, in order to give it the highest level of political attention that it deserves'. Despite the lack of implementation of the very decision that provides steps for strengthened follow up mechanisms; there are also opportunities in taking these commitments forward. The AU has declared 2020 as the year of silencing the guns and it also marks the final year of the AU Decade for Women. The year provides an opportunity to assess and reflect on the decade and to mobilize political support in elevating the issue at the highest level including by targeting the annual open session.

While the agenda on women and peace and security has been a standing agenda of the PSC since 2010, it is for the first time that the PSC focuses on sexual violence in armed

conflicts. Such a focus will allow the PSC to adopt appropriate mechanisms for monitoring and responding to the serious violations inflicted on targets of sexual violence.

As documented in the annual reports of the UN Secretary-General on the subject, despite major progress made in terms of norm development and the level of attention given to the issue, sexual violence in armed conflicts remains to be prevalent in a wide range of conflict settings. The 2018 report of the Secretary-General pointed out that the rise or resurgence of conflict and violent extremism, with the ensuing proliferation of arms, mass displacement and collapse of the rule of law, has also triggered patterns of sexual violence. This has been evident in Africa in various conflict settings including in the context of the spread of insecurity to new regions of the Central African Republic, the surge in violence in Ituri, the three Kasai provinces, North and South Kivu and Tanganyika in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and in continuing incidents of conflicts in South Sudan in 2017.

Sexual violence is not committed merely as an isolated act of individual combatants. In many of the conflict settings, it is also employed as a tactic of war, terrorism, torture and repression. As documented in the report of the AU Commission of Inquiry for South Sudan, women's body was made the battle ground for the rival armed groups in the South Sudan civil war. In those cases, to varying degrees, the strategic nature of sexual violence was evident in the selective targeting of victims from specific ethnic, religious or political groups, mirroring the fault lines of the wider conflict or crisis.

Instead of being a mere reflection of the situation of conflict, sexual violence rather manifests existing patterns of gender relations in the society and hence mirrors the political, socio-cultural and economic position of women and girls in society. It is thus pointed out in the AUCISS report that sexual violence was also a result of existing discriminatory practices affecting women and girls including

in particular harmful customary practices such as patriarchy, child marriages, abduction of girls, bride wealth, polygamy and wife inheritance.

The pervasive nature of sexual violence in armed conflicts in Africa, its strategic use by conflict parties and the grave consequences it entails on targets of such violence and their families require that the AU adopts strategies for the prevention and monitoring of sexual violence in conflicts and for taking remedial measures to cater for victims of violence including the provision of medical and psycho-social services and access to justice for holding perpetrators accountable. Also critical is the participation of women in peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction and development programmes, which remains utterly inadequate.

The session may also address the role of peacekeeping troops in preventing and responding to sexual violence as part of their role in protection of civilians. Particularly it may look into member states and Troop Contributing Countries (TCCs) accountability and adherence to the AU Policy on Conduct and Discipline for AU Peace Support Operations (PSOs) and the AU Policy on Prevention and Response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse for PSOs adopted in December 2018 by the PSC.

The UN has addressed the issue of sexual violence in conflict through the Secretary General annual reports to the UNSC. The 2019 report observes the continued instrumentalization of sexual violence as strategy of conflict targeting women and girls. It is widely used as a tool of repression, control, terror, forced displacement as well as to seize land and other resources. Sexual violence also features prominently in political or election-related violence. The report also makes reference to the concerning linkage between sexual violence, trafficking and terrorism and how sexual violence has been utilized in advancing extremist ideology. Of particular concern noted in the report, which is of interest in the

context of the trend of expansion of terrorism and violent extremism in Africa, is how radicalization and violent extremism have increasingly contributed to the expansion of discriminatory gender norms that further weaken already vulnerable status of women and girls.

Most recently the UN Security Council has passed resolution 2467 on combatting sexual violence in conflict in April 2019. The UNSC recognized the need for a survivor-centered approach in preventing and responding to sexual violence in conflict and post-conflict situations.

As indicated in the concept note the expected outcome of the session is a joint communiqué, although in practice open sessions are followed by press statements. The PSC may task the AU Commission to submit a report on sexual violence in Africa with specific recommendations on the strategies for prevention, monitoring and remedying sexual violence, including its due consideration in the conflict prevention, management, resolution and post-conflict rebuilding initiatives. It may call on member states in conflict situations as well as those emerging from conflict to put in place measures that ensure that security forces do not perpetrate sexual violence and that they are held accountable when found responsible for such violence. It may also urge TCCs and PSOs to adhere to existing policies and normative frameworks in protection of civilians particularly from sexual violence.