

Open Session on the Plight of Refugees, IDPs and Forced Displacement in Africa

Automatic Heading TextDate | 08 June, 2021

Tomorrow (08 June) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 1002nd session. This virtual open session will be held under the theme 'plight of refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and forced displacement in Africa'. Convened as one of the regular thematic agenda of the PSC, this session comes ahead of the commemoration of the World Refugee Day, which is observed on 20 June under the theme 'Together we heal, learn and shine'.

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. As a subject that also relates to her portfolio, Commissioner for Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development, Amira Elfadil Mohammed Elfadil, is also expected to brief the PSC. Pursuant to the practice of the PSC, the PSC will also receive briefings from representatives of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and World Food Programme (WFP). The chairperson of the Permanent Representatives Committee Sub-Committee on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons is also expected to deliver a statement.

Tomorrow's session is expected to discuss recent trends about forced displacement leading to the persistence and increase in the scale of IDPs and flow of refugees. With a third of the world's forcibly displaced persons in Africa, including 7.8 million refugees and asylum-seekers and 19.2 million IDPs, Africa continues to experience alarming trends of

displacement. While natural disasters continue to induce forced displacement on the continent, much of the displacements on the continent are due to violence and conflicts.

With more than 21 million forcibly displaced by violence, Africa has experienced the highest number of conflict related displacement in record in 2020. This is on account of both the persistence of existing conflicts, and in some cases, their further deterioration in regions affected by violence and the eruption of new conflicts in previously less affected regions. It is worth noting that the conflict trends leading to forced displacement on the continent include political and electoral violence in politically tense and conflict affected countries, upsurge of violence, including inter-communal violence in countries with protracted conflicts, and the spike in terrorist violence in particular the Lake Chad Basin, the Sahel, Horn of Africa and Northern Mozambique.

All parts of the continent are affected by conflict related displacement, although with notable variations of intensity. In East Africa alone, existing and new conflicts have resulted in 8.3 million IDPs and 4.6 million refugees. In West Africa and the Sahel, over 2.9 million people are displaced due to the ongoing crisis in the Sahel region. The rate of internal displacement has particularly been most alarming in Burkina Faso, where by 2021, more than 1 million people have been internally displaced, showing a four-fold increase from the previous year. In the Lake Chad Basin, over 3.2 million people were reported to have been forcefully displaced by the end of 2020. In Central Africa, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where over 2 million people are already displaced due to widespread violence, was most recently hit by a volcanic eruption which is estimated to displace about 400,000 people. The relatively recent conflict in Mozambique has also resulted in a serious displacement crisis, with the number of displaced people getting to the one million mark. In North Africa, apart

from being host to one of the most protracted refugee situation in Tindouf, Algeria, the intensification of the conflict in Libya displaced about 40,000 people in 2020.

Apart from the foregoing, tomorrow's session is also expected to examine the humanitarian situation of IDPs and refugees and asylum seekers. Of particular concern in this respect is the rise in food insecurity in Africa over the past couple of years. Coupled with on-going and new conflicts, food insecurity is feared to produce dramatic upsurge of displacement. On top of creating new wave of displacement, the existing food insecurity also directly impacts displaced populations already living under dire circumstances. Such is, particularly the case, in regions with pre-existing conditions of food insecurity.

In addition to food insecurity and climate induced displacement, the COVID-19 pandemic has also highly compounded the humanitarian situation of refugee and IDPs across Africa. The inevitable interruption to humanitarian aid in some cases has imposed a major challenge to displaced communities whose survival depends on the timely delivery of assistance. Due to the COVID-19 response measures, there has also been significant drop in opportunities for resettlement.

In discussing the plight of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers, the first issue of concern is ensuring the protection of these category of people. In this respect, it is of paramount importance that conflict actors observe human rights and international humanitarian law rules as well as the principles of OAU Refugee Convention and the Kampala Convention on IDPS including on the imperative for respecting non-refoulement and voluntary return, hence desisting from forced return of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers, as noted by the PSC at its 904th session. It is also of significance that the physical security of IDPs and refugees and asylum seekers is guaranteed and conflict parties, particularly State actors, bear responsibility for creating conditions for ensuring such

security. Also of particular importance is the provision of unhindered humanitarian access for humanitarian actors to enable affected people to be provided with humanitarian assistance.

The second issue relate to finding durable solutions to forced displacement. It is of paramount importance in this respect that effective peace making and conflict resolution efforts are deployed. Durable solutions necessitate the resolution of the weak presence of state institutions and public services in conflict affected territories, absence of good governance and democratic inclusion and the perpetration of human rights violations. As conditions of insecurity improve, mechanisms should be created for the safe and voluntary return of IDPs and refugees. There is also a need for designing and implementing programs for the rehabilitation of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers.

Another area of interest in tomorrow's session is the role and contribution of the AU towards addressing the plight of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers. In this respect, the PSC may receive update on the progress towards the operationalization of the African Humanitarian Agency (AHA), which, as noted by the PSC at its 921st session, contribute towards efforts being made to address the humanitarian challenges. Tomorrow's session may also consider how to activate the role of the Africa Risk Capacity (ARC) that was endorsed by Assembly/AU/Dec.417(XIX). In this respect, one challenge that may receive attention is the treaty on the establishment of the ARC is yet to enter into force since it hasn't acquired the required level of ratification.

Additionally, the PSC may also review AU's challenges in financing humanitarian assistance and reiterate its previous call on member States to commit to the implementation of EX.CL/Dec.567(XVII) which decided to increase member States' contribution to the 'Refugees and IDPs Fund' from 2% to 4%. This challenge also relates to the Special Emergency

Assistance Fund (SEAF) for Draught and Famine Relief in Africa which can play supportive role for some of the peoples on the continent facing food insecurity. The PSC may also call on the international community to sustain its support for humanitarian assistance, which is the only avenue for sustaining the lives of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers.

The session also presents an opportunity for horizontal coordination. In this respect, the engagement in tomorrow's session of the Sub-Committee on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons in Africa, which plays a significant role in providing policy recommendations and solutions with respect to such population groups, is of importance.

The expected outcome of the session is a press statement. The PSC is expected to request the AU Commission to work on the issue of food insecurity among displaced persons, in collaboration with WFP, UNHCR, UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other relevant partners. Council may also call on member States to contribute to and replenish the SEAF. In that spirit, Council may encourage member States to participate at the upcoming Continental Humanitarian Summit and Pledging Conference which is expected to take place in Equatorial Guinea, during November this year. The AU Commission may also be requested to expedite operationalisation of the AHA. PSC may reiterate the request it made at its 921st session, for the AU Commission to mobilise support for member States hosting high number of refugees, IDPs and undocumented migrants and to ensure that part of the AU COVID-19 response fund goes towards provision of humanitarian assistance for these groups of people. It may also urge member States to discharge their responsibilities in ensuring the creation of conditions for the protection of the physical security of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers and for unhindered humanitarian access. The PSC is also expected to call for enhancing efforts in addressing the root-causes of

violent conflicts. The PSC may also reiterate the need for host states to ensure utmost respect for non-refoulement and voluntary return, hence desisting from forced return of IDPs, refugees and asylum seekers.