

PSC Session on the Central African Republic

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Tomorrow (16 February) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 980th session on the situation in Central African Republic (CAR).

The Permanent Representative of Ghana is expected to make an opening remark in her capacity as chair of the month. The Commissioner for Peace and Security, Smail Chergui, and representative of the Economic Community of the Central African States (ECCAS) are expected to provide a briefing on the situation in CAR. The representative of CAR, the A3 and the UN are also likely to deliver a statement as per the usual practice.

The last PSC session on CAR was convened during its 972nd meeting held on 24 December 2020, few days before the election day. The presidential and parliamentary elections were held on 27 December in a context of rising tension as the opposition intensifies pressure on the government despite the call of the PSC on 'all the parties to uphold the electoral calendar defined by the National Electoral Authority (ANE) and the Constitutional Court'. According to the information note submitted to the PSC ahead of tomorrow's session, 'out of a set of 5,408 polling stations, around 800 were unable to open due to threats made by armed groups'. In the 4 January, preliminary results the ANE announced incumbent president Faustin-Archange Touadéra was declared winner with 53.92 % of vote, which was later certified by the Constitutional Court.

Disagreement over the electoral process between the government and opposition political and armed forces in the country demanding postponement of the elections precipitated the most

serious deterioration in the political and security situation of the CAR since the 2019 AU facilitated Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic (APPR- RCA). The turning point was the establishment on 15 December 2020 of the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), an umbrella body of six armed groups,¹ with strong backing from former President François Bozizé, who, after being ousted by the Séléka armed groups in 2013 and returned to CAR after six years of exile, has been under the UN sanctions list for 'engaging in or providing support for acts that undermine the peace, stability or security of CAR' in the 2013 crisis. Coming into existence not long after the rejection by the Constitutional Court of the candidacy of Bozizé for failing to meet the 'good morals' and 'clean criminal record' requirements for candidacy, CPC sought to implement the armed removal of the government. This has plunged the country once again into violent conflicts, as the CPS launched attacks capturing territories in parts of the country.

Despite PSC rejection during its 972nd session of 'any idea or strategies aiming at unconstitutional political transition in the country,' the members of the CPC launched attacks in various parts of the country including Bossangoa (25 December 2020) Bangassou (3 January), Damara (3 January), and Bouar and Grimari (7-9 January). The attempt of the CPC to violently capture the capital city Bangui on 13 January, which claimed the lives of many people including seven UN peacekeepers, was averted by the intervention of UN troops and the CAR military with backing from Rwandan and Russian troops. The CAR forces and MINUSCA also (reportedly backed by Rwandan and Russian troops) managed to repulse several attacks and recaptured key towns from the armed groups, notably Bangassou (some 450 miles from Bangui bordering DRC).

Despite their unsuccessful attempt to capture Bangui, the armed groups have besieged the capital city by blocking strategic roads. Of particular interest to the Council would

be the blockage of Bangui-Garoua Boulaï corridor, the main supply route for the capital Bangui and the entire country. According to media reports, thousands of trucks have been stranded on the border with Cameroon carrying food, medicine and humanitarian aid, causing spike in food price (more than 50% rise in some places) and exacerbating the already dire humanitarian situation. The severe shortage of supplies including food items that this has resulted in raises the issue of the use by armed groups of starvation as a method of war, which constitutes violation of international humanitarian law.

The security deterioration ultimately forced the government to declare a 15-days state of emergency across the country on 21 January, which was extended for six months before its expiry on 4 February.

The eruption of the armed rebellion, which disrupted the conduct of the election in some parts of the country, represents a major blow to the 2019 APPR-RCA, particularly the pledge of the signatory armed groups in Article 5 'to renounce the recourse to weapons and violence'. Without urgent and firm collective action to arrest this situation, the peace agreement faces a major risk of collapse, reversing the security gains achieved.

Given the role of the AU and ECCAS as guarantors of the political agreement, tomorrow's session offers the PSC with the opportunity to explore ways and means of salvaging the peace process. A welcome development that would interest the PSC in this respect is ECCAS decision to establish a 'permanent mediation framework for a lasting peace in CAR' and appoint a 'Permanent Mediator of the Central Africa Crisis' at the extraordinary session of the Conference of Heads of State and Government of ECCAS on the situation in CAR held on 26 December 2020. Also of interest for the PSC is the 8 January press release by armed groups not affiliated to the rebel CPC, which after consultation with the guarantors and facilitators

of the political agreement, reassured their commitment to respect the APPR-RCA and called for the latter to invoke article 35 of the agreement relating to sanctions.

In the briefing from ECCAS representative, PSC members may be interested to know the progress towards the establishment and operationalization of the mediation framework as well as the appointment of a mediator.

Yet, confounding an already dire situation, a union of several political parties, Democratic Opposition Coalition (COD-2020), rejected the result and called for its annulment claiming widespread irregularity and low voter turnout because of insecurity. In a joint statement made on 5 January, Jean-Pierre Lacroix (UN Under-Secretary-General for Peace Operations), Smaïl Chergui (AU Commissioner for Peace and Security), Gilberto Da Piedade Veríssimo (President of the Commission of ECCAS), and Josep Borrell (High Representative of EU for Foreign Affairs) called for political actors to respect the final results of the presidential election, and engage in political dialogue. Similarly, the mini-summit of the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), held on 29 January in Luanda, called on all parties to resolve differences through dialogue.

The worsening humanitarian situation is also likely to feature in the PSC discussion. According to the latest report by OCHA (United Nations Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs), the violence internally displaced north of 240,000 while the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reported some 105,000 individuals fleeing to the neighboring countries, mainly to DRC, as of late January. OCHA's report further highlights that in 2021, 2.8 million out of the total population 4.9 million (more than half of the population) require humanitarian assistance and protection.

Following the loss of lives of civilians, CAR partner forces and MINUSCA peacekeepers, the UN Security Council (UNSC), in a

statement issued following the 18 January attacks, not only condemned the act but also warned parties that 'attacks against peacekeepers may constitute war crimes.' It is to be recalled that the PSC during its 936th meeting convened on 10 July 2020, requested CAR's government, together with MINUSCA and the two guarantors of the APPR-RCA to conduct an investigation of the attacks against government forces, MINUSCA, humanitarian agencies and civilians.

The expected outcome is a communique. The PSC is likely to take note of the final results of the December presidential election as proclaimed by the Constitutional Court on 18 January, and congratulate President Touadéra on his re-election. The PSC may reaffirm the APPR-CAR as the only peace framework within which the crisis in the CAR has to be resolved comprehensively. The PSC is expected to reiterate from its 972nd session its strong condemnation of the collusion of Bozizé 'with some armed groups (in launching) a rebellion warfare against the government and UN peacekeepers (MINUSCA) which resulted in blatant human rights violations, war crimes and crimes against humanity for which he will be held personally accountable.' Also of significance for the PSC to follow is the recommendation in the information note for tomorrow's session for the PSC to request the AU Commission, having regard to Article 35 of the APPR-RCA, 'to set up its own sanction regime and implement it effectively, in collaboration with Regional Economic Communities, targeting all those, including former President Bozize, who are violating the peace agreement and International Humanitarian Law, those providing them with materiel aid, as well as those individuals, groups or entities involved in the trafficking of CAR's mineral and other natural resources.' The PSC may urge the armed groups for the immediate halt to the blockage of the Cameroon-Bangui corridor and welcome the efforts of MINUSCA, CAR and partner forces to restore this key road connection.

The Council may welcome the announcement of the newly re-

elected president for an inclusive dialogue and may in this context call on all political actors in CAR to respond positively and engage in a constructive political dialogue to resolve their grievances. The PSC may call on ECCAS to work with the AU and others on its proposed establishment of a permanent mediation framework for supporting CAR political forces, with all regional and international coordinating their engagement, within the framework of the APPR-RCA. Paying tribute to MINUSCA peacekeepers, the PSC is expected to condemn the attacks against civilians and MINUSCA forces and reiterate the call it has made during its 936th session for investigation of the attacks to adopt appropriate sanctions against perpetrators. The Council may also express its grave concern over the deteriorating humanitarian situation and call international community to step-up the effort in providing humanitarian assistance, including by filling in the huge humanitarian financial gap due to the meager receipt of 8 percent of the requested US\$ 444.7 million.

¹(Unity for Peace in the Central African Republic (UPC) of Ali Darassa, Patriotic Movement for the Central African Republic (MPC) of Al Khatim, the Return, Reclamation and Rehabilitation Movement (3R) of Abas Sidiki, part of the Popular Front for the rebirth of the Central African Republic (FPRC) led by Nourredine Adam, the anti balakas (Ailes Maxime Mokom and N'Gaissona) and the RJ Sayo Movement).