

VTC session on Cessation of hostilities and humanitarian truce in Africa

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Tomorrow (2 June) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to hold its 929th session through video teleconference. The session focuses on cessation of hostilities and humanitarian truce in Africa within the framework of COVID19 and Silencing the Guns. It is expected that AU Commissioner for Peace and Security, Smail Chergui and the AU Commissioner for Political Affairs Cessouma Minata Semate will deliver briefings to the Council. Additionally, representatives of the Africa Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are scheduled to make presentations.

The Chairperson of the Commission, Moussa Faki Mahammat and the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres have called for cessation of hostilities and urged belligerents to comply with the call including by avoiding fighting in areas where internally displaced person (IDPs), refugees, asylum seekers and migrants reside and refraining from attacking humanitarian actors and health facilities.

Apart from the AU Commission Chairperson, the AU Chairperson South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa and some 17 member states have endorsed the appeal for humanitarian ceasefire during the pandemic. Similarly, the PSC in its communique of its 918th session reiterated the call 'for all belligerents to fully embrace and uphold the Global Ceasefire in order to facilitate efforts being deployed against the COVID-19 pandemic.' UN Secretary-General Guterres reported that in Cameroon, South Sudan and Sudan, armed groups announced

temporary unilateral ceasefires.

While the advent of COVID19 disrupts the AU's 2020 thematic focus on silencing the guns, this call for global ceasefire can serve as an avenue for pursuing the agenda of Silencing the Guns and limiting the impact of COVID19 in derailing this agenda. Tomorrow's session presents an opportunity for considering how best this agenda of cessation of hostilities and humanitarian truce can be pursued. This helps not only in mobilizing enhanced efforts in dealing with the pandemic but also in becoming a vehicle for pursuing the AU's theme of the year on Silencing the Guns.

The focus on cessation of hostilities and humanitarian truce is particularly important in the African context on account also of the emergence of troubling trends during the pandemic. At this particular point as the cases of COVID19 are increasing at an alarming pace on the continent, the need to end wars and to focus on fighting the pandemic has become an existential task for the AU, its member states, partners and the global community at large.

Another concerning trend involves the escalation of violence observed in some conflict settings. This has particularly been the case in the conflict situations in Libya and the increase in incidents of fighting in Eastern DRC. In Central African Republic, incidents of fighting have also been reported including by one of the armed groups, Return, Reclamation and Rehabilitation (3R), that reportedly released a statement in April calling for a ceasefire. The situation in Libya has become particularly worrisome. Expressing regret at how some of these deteriorating conflicts undermine AU's quest for Silencing the Guns, AU Commission Chairperson during his Africa Day message observed that '[t]he tragedy being played out in (Libya) is of profound concern to us all. No-one is blameless in the failure, neither is any segment of the international community, which has a great responsibility in the persistence or even escalation of the conflict.' What

makes the situation in Libya troublesome with respect to the AU agenda for Silencing the Guns is also its very dire impact on and linkages with the security situation in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin regions.

Non-state actors are also capitalizing on this particular situation to make military advances. Examples in this respect include the spike in terrorist attacks observed in the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin region and in Mozambique. Similarly, Al Shabaab has intensified its daily attacks in Somalia, hampering humanitarian efforts to fight the spread of the virus. With respect to the situation in the Sahel, the PSC in its communique of its 920th session, indicated that it 'looks forward to receiving a comprehensive briefing on the security situation in the Sahel and to consider the revised Draft Strategic Concept note on Planning Guidance for the deployment of 3000 troops, not later than 15 June 2020'. Tomorrow's session may serve as an opportunity for providing update to the PSC on the same.

The deliberate targeting of health workers and health facilities has been another key feature in many conflict settings. These attacks further expose people to greater health and safety hazards and exacerbate the spread of the disease among already vulnerable communities. This has particularly been notable in the conflict in Libya.

In terms of the AU theme for 2020 on silencing the guns, Chergui observed that the threat posed by COVID-19 has considerably slowed the momentum of the "Silencing the Guns" agenda. In May an extra-ordinary summit dedicated to Silencing the Guns was scheduled to take place under South Africa's leadership to build the momentum around the annual theme and to strengthen commitment at the highest level. In this respect an issue of particular interest to members of the PSC is how to regain enhanced focus in pursuing the agenda of Silencing the Guns, including through a virtual summit of the AU dedicated to the theme of the year with specific targets.

Cessation of hostilities is particularly indispensable for humanitarian work, an issue that both Semate and UNHCR are expected to address. The continent hosts about 17 million IDPs and about 7 million refugees and asylum seekers. These groups are particularly vulnerable to the effects of the pandemic due to their living condition and existing marginalization. The continuation of conflicts during the COVID19 pandemic has increased the vulnerability and suffering of this category of people. According to AU Commissioner for Peace and Security, Smail Chergui, '[t]his has severely affected humanitarian access to conflict areas and limited the reach of support and relief efforts, exacerbating the dual impact of the conflict and the damage caused by the global pandemic on the most vulnerable.'

The Bureau of the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government has called for the opening of humanitarian corridors to allow assistance in the context of fighting COVID-19. Similarly, during its 921st session the PSC demanded all belligerents in Africa to 'immediately and unconditionally cease all hostilities'. It further appealed to member states to open up airspaces for humanitarian action and to provide protection for healthcare workers and humanitarian actors. In this respect, a welcome development that the AU registered is the deployment of medical staff through the African Standby Force's (ASF) African Strategic Lift Capability to respond to COVID19 in parts of central and western Africa. The close collaboration of the AU Peace and Security Department and Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) has resulted in the deployment of 28 frontline responders to Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Mali and Niger from DRC.

A UNSC resolution supporting the global call on cessation of hostilities during COVID19 has not yet materialized. The absence of a global level leadership and consensus among the big powers has curtailed political impetus to build momentum around the global call. A resolution from the UNSC would have

brought an immense political weight in the ceasefire efforts. However, the adverse effects of such vacuum in leadership and political consensus has manifested in the intensification of violence in countries such as Libya. The gaps have also complicated global efforts in fighting the pandemic.

The expected outcome is a communiqué.

The PSC may further reiterate its previous calls for cessation of hostilities and it may urge belligerents to cease all violence in order to protect people from the scourge of COVID19. The PSC may call on the AU Commission and Regional Economic Communities working alongside the UN to support efforts for cessation of all hostilities by conflict parties. It may in particular request the AU working with RECs and the UN to increase efforts at achieving cessation of hostilities leveraging on announcements that armed groups made particularly in Cameroon, CAR, South Sudan and Sudan.

With respect to the AU's theme of the year on Silencing the Guns, the PSC could call on the AU to mobilize enhanced attention in pursuing the theme of the year. It could, in this regard, request the AUC to discuss with the AU Chairperson on options for convening a virtual summit in pursuit of the AU's theme of the year on Silencing the Guns.

The PSC may express concern over intensification of violence and attacks observed in some conflict settings and condemn the targeting of health facilities, despite the call for a humanitarian truce during the pandemic. The PSC could lend its support to the initiative of SADC with respect to Mozambique and urge the need for early collective action to avoid the risk of entrenchment of terrorist networks in Mozambique with all its consequences both to the country and the region. In respect to Libya, the PSC could request the AU Commission to report on the escalating fighting in the country with proposals on how to limit the impact of the conflict on the region, on how to contain the foreign meddling exacerbating

the situation and on how the AU can support the effective enforcement of the arms embargo.

The PSC could underscore the necessity of international support for the global call and urge the UNSC to exercise leadership in discharging its mandate in the maintenance of international peace and security. The PSC may also express concern over the deepening polarization threatening collective multilateral action for the common problems of the world and may call on the international community to find common grounds to solidify global solidarity in mobilizing towards the fight against the pandemic, including through supporting the call for global ceasefire.