

Briefing on the situation of IDPs, refugees and returnees in the COVID19 crisis

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Tomorrow (28 April) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is scheduled to hold a briefing on the situation of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), Refugees and Returnees during the novel coronavirus (COVID19) pandemic. The meeting is expected to take place through VTC, making this the third PSC meeting to take place via VTC since the introduction of the new formats in early April.

The Commissioner for Political Affairs, Minata Samate Cessouma is expected to brief the Council.

The briefing by the Commissioner is expected to shed light on both the scale of Africa's share of IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons and the impact of COVID19 on these categories of people in Africa. As highlighted in the briefing note that Cessouma shared with the PSC, there are more than 17 million IDPs, more than 7 million refugees and asylum seekers and about 72,000 stateless persons in the Africa.

Generally, IDPS, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are found in highly congested spaces such as IDP or refugee camps, which generally lack water and sanitation services. The recommended public health measures including social distancing, self-isolation, washing hands and sanitization of shared spaces are nearly impossible to implement in such spaces. Thus, it is particularly challenging to contain the spread of the virus in such congested IDP and refugee camps lacking space and access to safe water and adequate sanitation. Moreover, such population groups may also suffer

from low level of immunity due to pre-existing conditions, hardships of displacement and malnutrition.

Another factor that makes the effort to prevent the spread of COVID19 among IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants is the fact that the majority of these population groups are in areas affected by conflict and violence. These in particular include the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin regions, the Great Lakes region, the Horn of Africa and parts of North Africa. According to the latest UN Secretary General report on West Africa and the Sahel there are about 10 million people in need of assistance in the Lake Chad basin and more than 2.5 million IDPs across the countries in the region. Even without COVID19 some of these places including the Sahel and Libya have become highly unsafe for these categories of people. In early April UNHCR has reported the attacks on around 25,000 Malian refugees, residing in camps near the border of Burkina Faso and Mali amid the COVID19 pandemic.

The compounded effects of the health emergency, violence and attacks on displaced communities as well as health facilities will be catastrophic and long lasting. An important aspect of the effort to protect IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants is therefore to ensure that some degree of cessation of hostilities is observed and health care facilities and humanitarian actors are protected from attacks.

There is also the issue of access to information, which is a key pillar of the policy response to contain COVID19 that enables individuals and communities to find ways of implementing such precautionary measures feasible for their conditions. The provision of public health awareness measures among IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants is also another area of interest for the PSC and its members.

Various factors including the weak capacities of the health systems of host countries in the continent, the huge resource requirements of the COVID19 response measures and the pressure

of the public emergency mean that the response measures that member states of the AU mobilize generally focus on their citizens. The preparedness and response plans of states may not be tailored to cater for and spare limited capacities and resources for IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are thus at greater risk of being marginalized and unprotected.

Tomorrow's session would thus be critical to draw attention to the vulnerability of these group of people and the imperative for mobilizing efforts for enhanced sanitation and hygiene services as well as overall prevention measures.

The Horn region is another conflict hotspot that may need particular attention by the PSC. The IGAD Extraordinary Summit held virtually on 30 March agreed to develop a regional response strategy, which also incorporates the protection of populations and special groups that experience challenges accessing the national health systems such as IDPs, refugees and migrants. It is essential that such initiatives at the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) level informs continental strategy and efforts and vice versa. The coordination and policy harmonization at national, regional and continental level is critical to effectively respond to the pandemic.

IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants will also be affected on account of the adverse impact of the disruption that COVID19 causes to humanitarian assistance. The limitation on movement have a direct effect on the delivery of aid and lifesaving assistance to communities that need it the most. Displaced population have urgent and continuous needs and any disruption of services to respond such needs poses an existential threat. The closure of borders and bans on international travel has also affected resettlement programs of refugees. The PSC may also consider how current measures taken by governments to contain the spread, including declaration of state of emergency, lockdowns and border closure may affect the safety of IDPs, refugees and returnees

and their ability access information and assistance.

The PSC during its 918 session has stressed the need for protection and assistance of IDPs and refugees in camps and for stakeholders to scale up efforts on detection, testing and contact tracing as well as provision of assistance. Similarly, the Bureau of the AU Assembly of Heads of State and Government has also called for the establishment of humanitarian corridors to support vulnerable groups including refugees and IDPs in the context of current crisis.

A very concerning development that has emerged during this period is the mass deportation of asylum seekers and migrants, which could constitute breach of international human rights and refugee law norms. For example, at a time when capacities for quarantine and testing remains limited, it has been reported that thousands of Ethiopians have been deported from Saudi Arabia and Djibouti. The timing and conditions of deportation will further expose migrants to the virus and pose pressure and challenges to countries of origin, which are already overstretched in responding to the pandemic. Attacks on migrants or refugees on suspicion that they carry the virus such as the one that took place in China is also a major cause for concern.

The other expected effect is on the funding and resource allocation. Government's capacity and that of the international partners is overstretched due to efforts channelled to address the health hazard and the socio-economic implications of COVID19. One of the concerns is that the response aimed at fighting COVID19 may reduce available resource for humanitarian action, which is already not meeting existing demand let alone the additional requirement for fighting COVID19 by humanitarian actors servicing IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants.

Currently, there are no reported cases in IDPs or refugee camps in Africa. However, this may also be due to the limited

capacity of many governments to undertake testing at a large scale. There is thus a need for acting proactively and putting in place measures that ensure that the virus is not spread in such places and, in cooperation with humanitarian actors, mechanisms are established for detecting, isolating and treating COVID19 cases.

The expected outcome is a communiqué.

It is expected that the PSC will acknowledge the particular vulnerability of IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants and the need for their protection. It could reiterate the outcome of its 918 session and urge host countries to ensure that their response measures also cater for the needs of these group of people, including most notably by putting in place a taskforce for coordinating with humanitarian actors and for mobilizing resources for implementing the public health response focusing on these group of people. The PSC may also reiterate the call of the AU Assembly Bureau for the establishment of humanitarian corridors to support vulnerable groups including refugees and IDPs in the context of current crisis and urge member states to ensure that their lockdown, curfews, state of emergency and border closure measures do not interfere with humanitarian access and assistance. The PSC may highlight the need and importance of implementing public health awareness services targeting in particular IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants. To further buttress the efforts of national actors, the PSC may also call for contribution to the AU COVID19 Response Fund dedicated to the needs of these vulnerable population groups.

The PSC may also recall the call of the Chairperson of the Commission, Moussa Faki Mahammat and the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres for cessation of hostilities and urge belligerents to comply with this call including most notably by avoiding fighting in areas where IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants and refraining from attacking humanitarian actors and health facilities. It may call

humanitarian actors and donor countries to ensure that resources mobilized for catering for IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are used for the lifesaving operations for which they are intended and additional resources are allocated for purposes of the COVID19 related needs of this population groups. It may urge countries to suspend the mass deportation of migrants and asylum seekers during this period in compliance with the human rights and refugee law principles and condemn the violence and attacks on refugees, IDPs and migrants including the attacks against African nationals that took place in China. It may also underscore the importance of the role of RECs/RMs including the initiative of IGAD and the need for coordination and policy coherence at the national, regional and continental levels.