

Briefing session on the peace and security impacts of COVID19 in Africa

Automatic Heading TextDate | 14 April, 2020

Tomorrow (14 April) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is scheduled to hold a briefing session using the other new format of its meeting, namely via virtual teleconference (VTC). It is envisaged that the session will focus on the implications of COVID19 on peace and security in Africa. Introduced as a measure to enable the PSC to work continuously, following a trial remote meeting on zoom on 8 April, arrangements are made with AU IT experts for the first VTC meeting of the PSC to be held tomorrow.

It is anticipated that John Nkengasong Director of Africa Centre for Disease Control (Africa CDC) will join the session to deliver the briefing. Invitation has also been extended for Tedros Adhanom Gebreyesus, the Executive Director of the World Health Organization (WHO), to present a briefing. The expectation is that these interventions help establish how the novel coronavirus (COVID19) affects peace and security, clarify the gravity and various dimensions of the impact and proffer recommendations on mitigation strategies.

The virus, which first emerged in China, has now affected 1.7 million people and killed more than 100, 000 others in countries from all parts of the world. So far, COVID19 cases have been reported in 52 member States of the AU, with a total of about 14,000 infected people and 747 deaths, according to the latest statistics released by the Africa CDC. The threats that the pandemic poses have prompted the convening of two meetings of the Bureau of the AU Assembly remotely.

As the novel coronavirus (COVID19) spreads rapidly across

Africa and member states started to take measures for preventing and containing the spread, the AU Chairperson, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa convened two virtual meetings of the Bureau of the AU Assembly on 26 March and 3 April respectively. The communique of the first meeting warned that 'poverty, poor sanitation, an existing disease burden, overstretched health systems and extreme urban population density mean that the pandemic could explode in an even more catastrophic way than has been seen thus far in Africa.' Underscoring the need for urgent prevention measures and collective action, the meeting decided the establishment of a continental anti-COVID-19 Fund to which the members of the Bureau to immediately contribute US \$12,5 million as seed funding.

In the second meeting, focusing on the socio-economic impact of COVID19, the Bureau highlighted, in the communique it adopted, 'the devastating socio-economic and political impact of the pandemic on African countries.' With the Bureau focusing principally on the public health response and the socio-economic consequences of COVID19, it paid little attention to the peace and security impacts of the virus in Africa. There were only two peace and security relevant issues referenced in passing. Thus, the communique stated the need for giving special attention to the Sahel in the light of terrorist activities and the imperative to establish humanitarian corridor. Yet, no less grave in the African context the public health and socio-economic dimension of the pandemic is its impact on peace and security. Indeed, the Director of Africa CDC, John Nkengasong, is quoted for noting that the coronavirus could be a 'national security crisis first, an economic crisis second and a health crisis third' depending on how African countries respond to the pandemic. Indeed, the prospects of the impact of pandemic on peace and security in Africa is very dire and even if difficult to measure, it can involve risk of a widespread breakdown of peace and security at a scale unprecedented since the AU came

into operation. Given the risk of deterioration of the situation of countries in conflict, the relapse back to new forms of conflict of countries in transition and the descent of other into instability due to pressure related to COVID19, the significance of tomorrow's session of the PSC cannot be overstated.

The concern on the peace and security impact of COVID19 arises from a number of factors. The first of such factors is the impact of the spread of COVID19 in countries with conflict. For these countries including those on the agenda of the PSC namely Central African Republic, Libya, Mali and Sahel, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan and countries in Sahel and Lake Chad Basin, it would have the effect of worsening the security situation and the humanitarian impact of conflicts. Countries in the Sahel region, which are already facing the threat of terrorism and violent extremism, will now have to wage another battle against the spread of COVID-19. The insecurity coupled with poor health care infrastructure and capacity also has the effect of limiting efforts for containing the spread of the virus with potentially devastating consequences for conflict affected populations and the most vulnerable among them.

A related concern arises from the disruptive impact of COVID19 and the measures adopted to contain it on national, regional and international efforts for conflict management and resolution. As UN Secretary-General warned on 25 March the pandemic threatened to divert international attention and resources from resolving ongoing conflicts and supporting peace processes.

The first consequence of the impact of COVID19 on conflict resolution efforts is that ongoing peace processes come under increasing stress. Indeed, some peace processes have stalled, while others are facing delays. For instance, the PSC has learned from its latest meeting on the situation in South Sudan that COVID19 would affect the timelines and implementation of the Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution

of the Conflict in South Sudan. The second consequence is increasing risk of escalation of violence as conflict parties seek to use the situation for gaining military advantage. Examples in this respect include the spike in terrorist attacks observed in the Lake Chad basin and the attacks on hospitals reported in Libya.

For members of the PSC, the impact of the pandemic on AU peace support operations notably the AU Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), the ad hoc coalitions authorized by the PSC namely the Multinational Joint Taskforce (MNJTF) and the G5 Sahel Joint Taskforce and the joint UN-AU Mission in Darfur (UNAMID). PSC member states, particularly contributing countries would be keen on measures taken to safeguard the personnel of these missions from COVID19 and to adjust the operation of these missions including rotation of troops or planned drawdown of troops.

The other factor for concern arises from abuse by some in government of the anti-COVID19 measures for clamping down on dissenting political voices, opposition political parties and civil society organizations. Related to this is also the excessive use of force by security forces against civilians, fueling resentment and tension. As security forces resort to draconian measures, as leaders in Kenya, South Africa and Uganda admitted, to curb the spread of this deadly disease, human rights and civil liberties will be at risk. This could trigger resistance from affected communities, leading to the eruption of instability and where the capacity of governments gets stretched beyond limits, resulting in breakdown of law and order.

This is directly related to the human rights dimension of the mandate of the PSC as provided for in Articles 3 and 19 of the PSC Protocol. In this context, a major area of interest for the PSC is how to ensure that measures taken for containing COVID19 are done within the bounds of applicable AU human rights standards, within the framework of the communique of

the 866th session of the PSC including the guidance that the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) provided through its 24 March statement.

In countries where contested transitions are underway or where elections expected to be contested or closely fought are scheduled, the pressure resulting from both the spread of COVID19 and its socio-economic consequences is sure to deepen existing fault lines, thereby triggering simmering political tensions to boil over. Major peace and security issue would thus arise where changes to election schedules are made due to COVID19 without minimum consensus among various political forces or where elections are held amid the disruption that the pandemic caused to electoral politics. The situation can be particularly dire for countries going through a fragile transition. Sudan is already facing dire economic conditions and hundreds came out to the streets in Khartoum few days ago in protest against the transitional government.

Finally, the peace and security of African states also stands to face major test from the social instability that the socio-economic impact of the COVID19 measures could trigger. Irrespective of how countries fare in dealing with the public health dimension of COVID19, it is unlikely that any country can escape the dire socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. According to a study of the AU, the disruption that the anti-COVID19 measures that countries in the world adopted and the spread of the virus have caused on economic activities could lead to a loss of 20 million jobs. The World Bank also warned that the pandemic is expected to push African countries into recession in 2020, the first time in 25 years. Trade and investment flows have declined significantly, and the tourism and airline industries are already hit very hard. Many in Africa who depend on the money that their kit and kin in the diaspora send for their survival will feel the pinch as remittances dry up as do the majority of people who depend on the informal sector. Governments are also feeling the impact of foreign currency crunch. The damage that these economic

consequences would have on the livelihood of millions of people, the majority of whom are young people, is sure to fuel social tension and put citizens and governments on a collision course.

Other areas of concern for tomorrow's PSC session include the humanitarian impact of the virus as COVID19 measures disrupt humanitarian supply chains, movement of humanitarian actors and access to those in need of humanitarian assistance. Countries hosting huge number of refugees and internally displaced persons will be bound to face an enormous burden posing serious protection challenges. In this respect, an issue of particular importance for members of the PSC is the steps that need to be taken not only to protect IDPs, refugees, asylum seekers and migrants from COVID19 but also from humanitarian disaster that may result from lack of supply of humanitarian assistance. This raises questions on how the AU assists in restoration of humanitarian supply chains and facilitate humanitarian action and support for humanitarian actors.

Recognizing the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to the maintenance of international peace and security, the United Nations Secretary-General has called for an immediate global ceasefire. Chairperson Moussa Faki has also echoed the urgent call by the Secretary-General underscoring the need to silence the guns and mobilizing all our efforts in the fight against COVID-19.

The expected outcome of the session is a communique.

It is expected that the PSC will express grave concern about the impact of COVID19 on peace and security in Africa noting in particular the risk for a widespread breakdown of peace and security on the continent at a scale unprecedented since the AU came into existence, reversing gains made through the investment that the AU in partnership with the international community mobilized over the years with consequences for continental and international peace and security that are

difficult to contemplate.

The PSC may also urge that particular attention is given to countries in conflict not only in terms of facilitating the provision of the required technical, medical and socio-economic support but also in supporting conflict resolution efforts in those countries. Welcoming the call for global ceasefire by the United Nations Secretary-General, the PSC may call of the AU Commission and Regional Economic Communities working alongside the UN to support efforts for cessation of all hostilities by conflict parties.

Having regard to the implications of COVID-19 on the AU's conflict prevention, management and resolution efforts including contributions to AU Peace Fund, the PSC may underscore the need to reinvigorate the AU peace and security architecture in light of this new and emerging challenge in order to help address the threat for a widespread breakdown of peace and security on the continent. The PSC may urge the AU Commission working with relevant RECs/RMs to initiate communication with member states for assessing peace and security risks and helping them initiate mitigating measures. It could also request that AU regional and liaison offices, PSC authorized or mandated missions expand their focus to cover the peace and security impacts of COVID19, while ensuring the safety and security of their personnel.

Regarding elections taking place in Africa this year, Council may call upon member States to undertake the necessary consultation with political stakeholders and build national consensus on the way forward. It may also appeal to governments to undertake their COVID-19 response efforts without contravening their commitments to respecting applicable human rights principles as provided for in the ACHPR statement of 24 March.

Given the direct consequences of the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on peace and security in Africa, the PSC may

welcome the communique of the first virtual meeting of the Bureau of the AU Assembly establishing the special fund and urge member states and others to contribute to the fund. The PSC may also similarly welcome the outcome of the second AU Assembly Bureau meeting, particularly the call for a comprehensive stimulus package for Africa, including, deferred payments, the immediate suspension of interest payments on Africa's external public and private debt in order to create fiscal space for Covid-19 response measures and for rapid and concrete support as pledged by G20 and the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, including flexible disbursement policies and IMF Special Drawing Rights (SDRs).

The PSC could also underscore the critical role of Africa CDC and the imperative for collective global action in the fight against COVID19 and reiterate the support expressed by the Chairpersons of the Union and the Commission to the WHO under the leadership of Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.