

Open session on refugee protection, migration and human rights in Africa

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PSC Open Session on Refugee Protection, Migration and Human Rights in Africa

Tomorrow (20 June) the Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU) will have an Open Session on Refugee Protection, Migration and Human Rights in Africa marking the Africa and World Refugee Day.

The session will receive a briefing from AU Department of Political Affairs on existing AU normative framework, initiatives and projects on migration, forced displacement and integration. Chair of the AU Permanent Representatives' Committee (PRC) Sub-Committee on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons will also make statement. Representatives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the ICRC, Regional Economic Communities/Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs), European Union and various embassies and members of the civil society working on migration, internally displaced people (IDPs) and statelessness will also be part of the session.

The focus of this year's theme of the world refugee day is 'the world we want: Inclusion, empowerment. And access to services for refugees'. In this respect, the session is expected to examine the current state of the crisis of IDPs, refugees, and migrants in Africa in respect to access to services. In terms of the Africa refugee day, which coincides with the world refugee day, it is an occasion for highlighting preparations for the 50th year anniversary of the 1969 OAU Convention for Refugees in 2019. The session is accordingly

expected to hear about the emerging best practices and stories of African refugees in terms particularly of inclusion, empowerment and access to services.

As outlined in the concept note for the session, some of the key issues for deliberation include the scale and trend of the flow of refugees in Africa, the factors behind the trend and the challenges arising from the rise in the flow of refugees in Africa. The 2017 UNHCR statistics show that there are 6.2 million refugees and asylum seekers in Africa, hence overwhelming majority of African refugees are hosted in African countries. As the major African countries of origin of refugees identified in the concept note indicate (Burundi, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan), the vast majority of refugees in Africa are in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa regions, highlighting that much of the refugee flow is associated with regions witnessing high level of conflicts and violence.

These features of the refugee problem in Africa raise two crucial issues for discussion for tomorrow's session.

First, there is a case to be made from the regional concentration of refugees (Horn of Africa and Great Lakes regions) for having architecture on the protection of refugees focusing particularly on these two regions. This can be a question of operationalization of the African Humanitarian Architecture focusing on the refugee crisis in these regions. Alternatively, it can be a question of initiating coordination and response mobilization platform bringing affected countries of the two regions.

Second, the close association of refugee flows and conflicts also raises questions about the necessity of factoring in the plight of refugees in conflict management and conflict resolution processes. In this respect, one issue that needs to be addressed is the lack of mechanism for integration into and

consideration within the PSC processes of the work and input of the PRC Sub-Committee on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons and the Special Rapporteur of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights on Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Internally Displaced Persons.

Tomorrow's session will take place against the backdrop of the July 2017 decision of the AU's Executive Council declaring 2019 the Year of Refugees, Returnees and IDPs. Next year also marks ten years to the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa known as the Kampala Convention. The coming year will thus see a series of commemorative events aimed at raising the visibility of the issue of forced displacements in Africa. In the briefing from the DPA, the steps being taken to operationalize the African Humanitarian Architecture as per the relevant decision of the Executive Council, AU responses to the refugee crisis in Africa and the plans for the 2019 Year of Refugees, Returnees and IDPs is expected to receive attention. With respect to response to the refugee crisis, reference would be made to the various emerging best practices that host countries are implementing and also the challenges they are facing.

The chairperson of the PRC Subcommittee is expected to highlight the activities of the committee. This is expected to draw on the report that the sub-committee presents to the PRC. Among others, this is expected to draw attention to the various field missions that the Subcommittee undertook, most notably for purposes of the PSC, to countries in conflict. These include DRC, Nigeria and South Sudan.

With respect to migration, update would be provided on efforts for addressing the plight of migrants particularly in Libya and those crossing the Mediterranean Sea. As the 12 June statement of Moussa Faki Mahamat, AU Commission Chairperson suggest, one of the issues expected to draw particular attention is the risk that 600 refugees stranded in the

Mediterranean Sea faced and the reluctance European countries showed to assist them. This incident also draws attention to the efforts for addressing the plight of migrants stranded in Libya including in terms of both their repatriation and their being held in illegal detention centers where they have been held captive and auctioned for slavery. In this regard, the PSC is expected to welcome the decision of the UN Security Council imposing sanctions on six individuals accused of leading smuggling and trafficking networks of migrants in Africa.

It is also anticipated that the ten-year AU Migration Policy Framework (MPFA) Plan of Action (2018 – 2027) will inform the part of the deliberation on migration. The framework envisions coherent management of migration and harmonization of the different continental documents and initiatives on migration and movement and displacement. In terms of issues affecting the response of the AU to issues of migration, Chairperson Mahamat's January 2018 report on the activities of the AU and its organs noted the related challenges of speaking with one voice due to varying interests and priorities of various AU actors and inadequate resources for supporting continental common positions, and the resultant donor dependency.

While representatives of AU states participating in the session would highlight their respective experiences, best practices and challenges faced including in terms of inclusion, empowerment and access to service of refugees, many are also expected to highlight not only the need for mobilizing support for the humanitarian needs of refugees and IDPs but also the imperative of addressing the root causes of forced displacement including refugee flows. In this respect, the importance of the AU Protocol on the Free Movement of Persons, Rights of Residence and Establishment and the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is expected to be underscored. The promotion of regional integration, trade and human mobility and Africa Union's border management mechanism

will be discussed through the lens of migration, and as durable solutions to the crisis.

The expected outcome of the session is a statement. Various themes are expected to be addressed in the statement.

These include the role of conflicts in Africa in precipitating forced displacement including refugees, commendation of the efforts of host countries in providing protection for refugees and calling for continental and international support for these efforts and the challenges facing migrants particularly those in Libya and the need for assistance of those crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Other areas to be addressed include the need for establishing mechanism/approach within PSC processes for ensuring that issues of refugees and IDPs are systematically integrated in conflict management and resolution initiatives (such as through preparation of quarterly/biannually special reports focusing on this theme) and the possibility of an initiative for establishing regional coordination and response architecture for the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa as the regions with the most refugees.