

Ministerial session on the situation in Sudan

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Tomorrow (15 November), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 1185th session at the ministerial level to receive update on the situation in Sudan.

Following the opening remark of Mahamoud Ali Youssouf, Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Djibouti, as the chairperson of the PSC for the month of November, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) is expected to deliver a statement. Mohamed el Hacen Lebatt, Chief of Staff to the Chairperson of the AU Commission and Spokesperson on Sudan is anticipated to brief the PSC on the situation in Sudan. Workneh Gebeyehu, the Executive Secretary of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) is also expected to deliver statement both on behalf of IGAD as the regional body and as the representative of IGAD and the AU in the most recent talks in Jeddah.

In two days, the war in Sudan will finish its 7th month. Yet, there is no sign of the war slowing down, let alone ending. If anything, much of the worst-case scenarios feared about the war continue to unfold. Apart from the continuing downward spiral of the situation with mass atrocities, blatant and deliberate violations of international humanitarian law and one of the world's worst displacement and humanitarian crises, the war is also characterized by the lack of progress from any of the multiple and poorly coordinated processes for stopping it.

The last time the PSC met to discuss Sudan was on 20 October.

At that session, the PSC reiterated its call for cessation of hostilities and protection of civilians. It emphasized the role of IGAD and Sudan's neighboring states. The session also underscored the need for AU to coordinate all efforts for peace in Sudan, although it did not specify a mechanism that is able to accomplish this rather than the approach taken thus far which failed to enable the AU to play its role effectively.

There are a number of issues of pressing concern for the PSC regarding the situation in Sudan as it convenes its session tomorrow. The first of this involves the trajectory of the war and the grave consequences of its downward spiral both for Sudan and for regional peace and security. The second aspect concerns the human rights and humanitarian dimensions of the war. The challenge for the PSC in this respect is to go beyond expression of grave concern and condemnation and take concrete action to demonstrate its commitment to the principle of non-indifference, including in the face of the genocidal mass atrocities taking place in Darfur. The third issue for tomorrow's session concerns developments related to efforts for securing ceasefire and starting a wider and effective political process for resolving the conflict. In this respect as well, it would be of direct concern to the mandate of the PSC to identify what needs to change in the approach to AU's role in the face of the failure of the path taken for the past seven months.

Since last month, there has been an uptick of violence in Darfur after the paramilitary force launched successive offensives in the region. As global attention shifts to the ongoing Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, the seven-month long conflict is taking a turn to the worst. Between 26 October and 4 November, RSF and its allied forces gained ground, claiming to seize control of South Darfur capital Nyala (the second largest city), Central Darfur capital Zalingei, and El Geneina of West Darfur. In a bid to capture all of Darfur, RSF also

vowed to advance toward El Fasher of North Darfur. This expansion in the territorial control of RSF and the tightening of its grip on areas under its control speeding up the de facto division of Sudan into two parts.

This downward spiral and the associated risks carry huge ramifications for the stability of not just Sudan itself but the wider region. Among others, the vacuum that it creates would make it possible for attracting terrorist groups and the emergence of organized crimes such as illicit circulation and trading of weapons, illegal exploitation of natural resources and war economies generally. All of these conditions stand to make the conflict protracted and to deepen the involvement of various state and non-state actors in the region and beyond.

The raging war also risks dragging signatories to the JPA, who have thus far maintained neutral, in a potential confrontation. This could exacerbate the ethnic dimension of the conflict. In his final briefing to the UN Security Council in September, Volker Perthes made a stern warning regarding the ongoing 'tribal mobilization' and its potential ramification for the regional stability and the unity of the country. He said that '[w]hat started as a conflict between two military formations could be morphing into a full-scale civil war'.

Beyond its impact on the cohesion of Sudan as a state and on the Juba peace agreement, this war's most dire consequence is the enormous toll it has on the civilian population. Civilians are made to bear much of the brunt of the violence both on account of being subjected to indiscriminate attacks and deliberate violations on the one hand and the socio-economic and humanitarian difficulties that the war precipitated.

RSF's march towards extending full control over Darfur is accompanied by the perpetration of mass atrocities. These violations echo the genocidal violence the region experienced nearly two decades ago. Ethnically motivated targeting of non-

Arab civilians, mainly from the Masalit communities, are surfacing from reports of local organizations and videos of events captured during RSF military campaign in West Darfur in early November. Most recently, on 3 November, the UN human rights office (OHCHR) [expressed](#) alarm over reports that 'women and girls are being abducted', chained and held in 'inhuman, degrading slave-like conditions' in areas controlled by the RSF in Darfur. While the events in Darfur constitute the worst incidents of violations of human rights and international humanitarian law, such violations are not limited to Darfur. Nor is the RSF the only one involved in such violations. Both SAF and RSF are implicated in gross violations. UNITAMS [documented](#) 655 alleged incidents of human rights violations and abuses between 7 May and 20 August 2023, most of which were reportedly attributable to RSF.

On the humanitarian front, the seven-month long conflict has unleashed 'one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history', according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)'s 2 November humanitarian update on Sudan. The conflict claimed more than 10,000 lives (ACLED [recorded](#) 10,400 fatalities) while displacing more than 6 million people, which makes Sudan the country with the largest number of displaced people in the world. The conflict also left 25 million, more than half of the population, in need of humanitarian aid. A recent [statement](#) by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) also indicates that children are bearing the 'heaviest brunt of the violence' with a recorded 3 million children fleeing the violence in search of safety, food, shelter and health care. According to UNICEF, this figure makes Sudan the largest child displacement crisis in the world. UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Food programme (WFP) also [warned](#) that acute food insecurity could worsen from November 2023 to April 2024 in 18 hunger hotspots, with Sudan among those of highest concern.

Despite this, only 33 percent of the \$2.6 billion required to

help those in need in Sudan this year is funded. Additionally, the nature of the war is also severely hampering humanitarian access as briefings presented to the PSC on 28 September and early in October highlighted. Sudan is suffering from the triple challenges of dire humanitarian crises, utterly inadequate provision of resources for meeting the growing humanitarian needs of the suffering civilian population and lack of humanitarian space.

Notwithstanding the continuing acts of violence being inflicted on the civilian population involving incidents of mass atrocities including acts amounting to those prohibited under Article 4(h) of the Constitutive Act, the PSC and the AU in general did not go beyond expression of concern and condemnation of breaches and violations of human rights and international humanitarian law. These are exposing the PSC to legitimate charges of falling back to the old politics of indifference to mass atrocities that is characteristic of the now defunct AU's predecessor, the Organization of African Unity. On the other hand, the UN Human Rights Council decided to establish an independent international fact-finding mission for Sudan last month, with a mandate to investigate and establish the facts, circumstances and root causes of all alleged human rights and international humanitarian law violations in the context of the conflict that erupted in mid-April.

On the peace process front, earlier in May and June, both AU and IGAD rolled out parallel roadmaps for the resolution of the conflict, which they had to eventually harmonize. AU's Expanded Mechanism – established in April with the aim to bring all relevant stakeholders under one platform has lost steam and exists only in name. IGAD's decision to assume leadership through the establishment of the quartet, as well as its [12 June action points](#) – including the proposal to facilitate a face-to-face meeting between the leadership of SAF and RSF and initiate inclusive political process within

ten days and three weeks, respectively – have also stalled. One of the major factors for this was the rejection by the SAF of Kenya's role as chairperson of the IGAD quartet. In an encouraging turn of events, following a meeting held in Nairobi Kenya on 13 November, Kenya's President, William Ruto and SAF's chief and the head of Sudan's Sovereign Council, Abdel-Fattah Al Burhan, agreed on the need to speed up the Jeddah talks on ceasefire and to this end convene an IGAD summit.

The Jeddah talks focusing on ceasefire was also suspended until the start of this month. The latest round that ended on 7 November fell short of a ceasefire. Instead, the warring parties [agreed](#) to participate in a joint humanitarian forum led by OCHA to address impediments to humanitarian access and deliveries of assistance; identify points of contact to assist with movements of humanitarian personnel and assistance; and implement confidence building measures, including the establishment of communication between SAF and RSF leaders. This notwithstanding, the statement from the meeting of Ruto and Burhan criticized the Jeddah process for its slow progress. A major development in the latest round of Jeddah talks is the inclusion of IGAD's Executive Secretary, also on behalf of AU, as co-facilitator of the talks. This is indeed a step in the right direction, although IGAD's Executive Secretary's role could not be a standing arrangement, hence underscoring the need for a high-level standing facilitator or panel of facilitators.

From 23 to 26 October, various Sudanese civilian actors and stakeholders, met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to form a united front for pushing for peace. This meeting led to a decision to form the 'Coordination of Civil Democratic Forces (CCDF)' headed by former Sudanese Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. The CCDF is envisaged to prepare the ground for the envisaged convening of a 'founding conference' with more diverse representation from Sudan in eight weeks. In a [press statement](#)

dated 26 October, the Troika (Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States) welcomed the meeting claiming it as 'an important step towards the formation of an inclusive and representative pro-democracy civilian front'. Around the same time, South Sudan also convened a consultative meeting with the Sudanese signatories to the Juba Peace Agreement (JPA) to 'evaluate the implementation of the JPA and consult with the parties on peace negotiations between RSF and SAF'.

A major gap in the AU's engagement, which also accounts for its lackluster performance on the Sudan file is the failure to designate a dedicated high-level mechanism that works on a full-time basis. It has been long overdue for the PSC to heed President Museveni's proposal when he chaired summit level session of the PSC last May on the establishment of a high-level facilitator or panel of facilitators. Such a mechanism whose sole mandate is to work on the search for finding solution to the war in Sudan (rather than the current arrangement in which officials of the AU handle the file as one responsibility among many other matters that they are responsible for) can be established as a joint standing mechanism of IGAD, the AU and the UN and hence provide the requisite sustained engagement and technical backing for the IGAD quartet.

The expected outcome of the session is a communiqué. PSC is expected to welcome the resumption of the Jeddah talks and the participation of IGAD, also on behalf of the AU, as a co-facilitator of the talks. While welcoming the commitments agreed to by SAF and RSF to facilitate humanitarian aid and implement confidence building measures, it may echo the regret of the co-facilitators that the warring parties failed to reach on a ceasefire. It may also commend Sudanese civilian actors for the convening of a meeting in Addis Ababa, and in this regard, PSC may express its full support to the envisaged convening of a founding conference as part of the effort to end the ongoing conflict and bring Sudan back on track toward

a civilian government. Considering the failure of AU's approach thus far, the PSC may revisit the proposal that was put on the table during its summit level meeting on Sudan held in May and decide to establish a high-level panel of facilitators (which may be appointed jointly by AU, IGAD and UN) to work on the situation in Sudan on a full-time basis.

The PSC is expected to express its grave concern over an uptick of violence in recent weeks. The PSC may in this regard strongly condemn reported gross human right violations, including ethnic-driven killings, rape, torture, looting, and destruction of civilian facilities. As RSF now targets El Fasher of North Darfur, PSC may join growing calls for the paramilitary and its allied forces to immediately put a halt to its offensive in El Fasher to avert civilian casualties. PSC may further urge both warring parties to honor the 11 May Jeddah Declaration of Commitment to Protect the Civilians of Sudan and respect their obligations under international humanitarian and human rights law. In the face of the continuing incidents of mass atrocities, the PSC may also express its support to the UN Human Rights Council's decision to establish an independent international fact-finding mission. Regarding the humanitarian situation, the PSC is expected to welcome the recent outcome of the Jeddah talks in which the warring parties committed to participate in a joint humanitarian forum led by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to address impediments to humanitarian access and urge speedy action to implement these commitments. The PSC may also request that a conference for mobilizing support from within the continent and beyond towards contributing to addressing the resource gap for humanitarian assistance.