

Open Session on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts

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Tomorrow (18 August), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to convene its 1101st session which will be an open session on children affected by armed conflicts (CAAC).

Following opening remarks of the Permanent Representative of The Gambia to the AU and Chairperson of the PSC for the month, Jainaba Jagne, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye is expected to deliver a statement. Robert Nanima, African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) Special Rapporteur on CAAC is also expected to make a statement at the session. Presentations and statements are also expected to be delivered by representatives of the respective Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs), the United Nations (UN) Office to the African Union (UNOAU), the European Union (EU) and Save the Children International to the AU and Pan Africa Office. Four children affected by armed conflicts are also expected to share their experiences at the session.

The last time Council discussed CAAC was at its 1070th session convened on 29 March 2022. At that meeting, Council considered two draft policies essential for the protection of children in situation of armed conflicts – Policy on Child Protection in AU Peace Support Operations (AU PSOs) and Policy on Mainstreaming Child Protection in the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA) – and requested that they be considered by the Specialized Technical Committee for Defence, Safety and Security (STCDSS). At its 14th Ordinary Session

convened on 12 May 2022, the STCDSS considered and adopted both policies. Further to welcoming the adoption of the policies, tomorrow's session may serve as an opportunity for Council and invited participants to reflect on the necessary steps that will be required for their implementation.

Tomorrow's session is expected to deliberate on the general situation of children in armed conflicts in Africa, highlighting some of the more concerning country/region situations and address some of latest issues arising in connection with protection of children in conflict and crises settings in the continent. In the various regions of Africa, the situation of children caught in conflict and crises situations continues to deteriorate, in some cases reaching alarming levels.

According to the United Nations (UN) Children's Fund (UNICEF), West and Central Africa continues to account for a quarter of the global violations against children in situations of armed conflicts. Since 2005, more than 67,000 verified grave violations against children have been recorded in these regions. This accounts for the six incidents which form grave violations – killing and maiming, child recruitment and use, abductions, rape and other forms of sexual violence, attacks on schools and hospitals, and denial of humanitarian access. In the Sahel region in particular, the high rate of displacement resulting from conflict and insecurity has put children at the risk of overlapping grave violations. Reportedly, in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the number of verified grave violations has shown a 40% increase as compared to the data recorded for the last quarter of 2021.

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in Central Africa is among the countries globally that have recorded highest number of grave violations committed against children in the context of armed conflicts. According to the UN, 3,546 violations against 2,979 children were verified in the DRC in the course of 2021. Children are also affected by conflicts in Cameroon

and the Central African Republic (CAR). One of the worst manifestation of the conflict in Cameroon involves the direct targeting of children and schools, thereby leading to the exclusion of hundreds of thousands of children from school as the UN reported. In the North-West and South-West regions of Cameroon, over 700,000 children are estimated to be deprived of education due to attacks on schools. In CAR, about 944,000 children were projected to be in need of psychosocial support due to the impacts of conflict and sexual violence.

In the East and Horn region, Somalia, South Sudan and Sudan are among the countries with highest rates of grave violations recorded during 2021. While no statistics are available, children are among those most affected by the conflict in northern Ethiopia. In South Sudan, the UN verified 196 grave violations against 183 children, including the recruitment and use of 129 children. In Sudan, 202 grave violations were verified against 195 children, including killing of 54 and 112 cases of maiming against 166 children. Somalia has recorded the highest rate of grave violations against children in situations of armed conflicts in the region with 3,340 grave violations against 2,687 children as verified by the UN. Out of these, 1030 were cases of children abducted by Al-Shabaab while 307 were cases of sexual violence against children, 306 of which were perpetrated against girls.

The situation of children affected by conflicts is compounded by food insecurity and challenges to humanitarian access. Such is the case, for example, in the Horn of Africa, which is also experiencing severe drought. According to data availed by UNICEF in early June 2022, over 1.7 million children in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia are estimated to be facing severe acute malnutrition out of which 386,000 reside in Somalia.

In Southern Africa, conflict and terrorist violence in the Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique continues to fuel the displacement crisis in the region. As of September 2021, over 800,000 people were estimated by the UN High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR) to have been internally displaced and out of these, 48% were reported to be children. Since the outbreak of insurgency in northern Mozambique in 2017, about 370,000 children have reportedly been displaced. Recent reports by Save the Children also indicate that renewed violence in the northern region of Mozambique has displaced nearly 30,000 children. In most cases, children in the region are forced to face secondary and tertiary displacement and are growingly running out of safe shelters due to the spread in attacks. Not only does this entail significant immediate challenges, its long term psychological impacts on children will likely be grave.

Although relatively better, Libya from the North African region experiences its share of challenges in relation to protection of children affected by conflict and crisis situations. The latest UN report indicates that 63 grave violations against 52 children were verified in the country throughout 2021. In the midst of continued concerns over protection of human rights of detained migrants, including children, 125 additional cases of detention of children were reported during that period.

In addition to reflecting on these concerning trends faced in the various regions of the continent, Council may also wish to draw attention to the issue of statelessness faced among displaced children or children born in displacement, an issue which has gained relatively little attention in the past. Displaced children or children born to displaced parents are among the principal victims of the consequences of armed conflicts, natural disasters and other crises including political instabilities. Although the issue of statelessness of such children does not become apparent until they are confronted with situations that require official documentations and national identification, studies have demonstrated the prevalence of the issue across Africa.

A recent study by the UNHCR indicates for instance that while

providing exact or estimated statistics on stateless children is not possible – owing mainly to poor birth registration and documentation practices of member States – the risk of statelessness among children in the Horn of Africa has currently become a highly concerning issue. The report specifically highlights that ‘children in Somalia, Djibouti, Eritrea and Ethiopia, including those of mixed parentage, with parents who have been displaced or are members of cross-border communities, and those who have been separated from their parents, are among persons most at risk of statelessness in the Horn of Africa’. It is known that the immediate causes for statelessness are gaps in nationality laws which provide safeguards against statelessness in line with international law. For example, Art.6 of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC) provides the right of every child to acquire nationality. However, children born in displacement (from refugee, migrant or asylum-seeker parents) are often denied this right by host countries.

The expected outcome of tomorrow’s session is a Communiqué. Council is expected to welcome the adoption of the Policy on Child Protection AU PSOs and the Policy on Mainstreaming Child Protection in APSA. It may further highlight the importance of a well-defined strategy to help guide the implementation of these policies and call for the development of such framework. Taking note of the high prevalence of grave violations against children in conflict settings in the continent, Council may urge all parties to conflicts to abide by the fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and international human rights law and to exercise utmost restraint in the conduct of hostilities as to avoid victimisation of children. It may further appeal to all relevant stakeholders including regional and international partners to strengthen their support and assistance for children affected by conflicts in Africa. Having regard to the growing concern of child statelessness, Council may also call on member States to align their laws regulating nationality with relevant regional and

international standards on the prevention of statelessness. Having regard to the absence of data on statelessness among children caught in crisis situations, Council may also call on relevant AU organs such as the ACERWC to conduct a mapping study in that area. In the light of the worrying statistics of children affected by conflicts, the PSC may call on the AU to use the policy on mainstreaming child protection in APSA for preventive diplomacy, mediation, peace-making and peace processes to ensure that measures are put in place for ensuring protection of children in the concerned conflict or crisis settings where these tools are deployed.