

PSC Session on Protection of Children in Conflict Situations in Africa

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Tomorrow (11 May) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 995th session virtually, to discuss on the theme 'protection of children in conflict situations in Africa'. The session is to be convened in the context of Council's decision at its 420th meeting to hold annual sessions dedicated to children affected by armed conflicts (CAAC), as well as its decision at its 956th meeting to dedicate two sessions per year, to receive briefings on the situation of children affected by conflict situations, from the African Committee of Experts on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACERWC) and related partners. As indicated in its information note, the main objective of the session is for Council to receive updates on the state of children's rights in conflict situations and to reflect on how well protection of such children is integrated in AU conflict prevention, management and resolution architecture.

The session is set to start with the opening remark of the PSC Chairperson of the month and Permanent Representative of People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, Salah Francis Elhamdi. Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security, Bankole Adeoye and Commissioner of Health, Humanitarian Affairs and Social Development, Amira El Fadil will also make key remarks. Presentations are also expected from invited participants including ACERWC Special Rapporteur on CAAC, Save the Children, and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Tomorrow's session is expected to highlight recent trends

about how ongoing conflicts are affecting children in conflict affected areas. Various reports indicate that in the various conflict settings civilians bear much of the brunt of conflicts and crises. Children are among those most affected. This is the case whether in situations of armed conflict such as those in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes regions or in situations of terrorist violence in the Sahel, Lake Chad Basin, Somalia and Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique.

Children are affected by violence both as indirect victims and direct targets of the violence. They end up sustaining physical violence, forced into displacement and fleeing into neighbouring countries as refugees as recent events in Cabo Delgado province of Mozambique and Tigray region of Ethiopia have highlighted. They also suffer the most, as the situation in South Sudan attest, from conflict induced hunger and malnutrition in conflict situations. Children are among the main victims of recruitment, use, sexual abuse and exploitation in conflict situations. The recurrent incidents of abduction of school girls and boys by Boko Haram has put spotlight on children as direct targets of terrorist attacks and abductions. Similar incidents of attacks on school have also been reported in conflict affected parts of Cameroon.

Even when children survive the physical effects of conflicts and terrorist violence, they are not spared from being deprived of access to basic necessities such as health care and lose opportunities due to disruption of their access to education. For instance, UN reports show that in Central Sahel alone, 4,000 schools were forced to cease function in early 2020 due to direct attacks and insecurity, leaving about 650,000 students out of education.

The rate of displacement of children has also been most concerning in recent months. By end of April this year, the UN has reported that 168,000 children were forced to flee their homes due to the widespread violence which broke out in Central African Republic (CAR) in the run- up to the elections

of December 2020. In addition to the spike in displacement of children, the Covid-19 pandemic has further compounded the situation. Particularly, internally displaced (IDP) and refugee children continue to be excessively affected as a result of the outbreak of the pandemic. With that in mind, Council has emphasised at its 921st session, that part of the AU Covid-19 Response Fund should be directed towards provision of humanitarian assistance to refugees and IDPs among other vulnerable parts of society. Having regard to the accelerating rate of the pandemic in some parts of the continent and the potential impact on IDP and refugee children there, Council may reiterate this point and call on Member States to mobilise more support to those countries that have high numbers of IDP and refugee populations.

The first issue that these various issues affecting children in armed conflict raise is how to ensure protection of children during conflicts. This is not about the deployment of security measures only. In this respect, it is of significance that measures are taken to ensure that conflict actors observe human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL) standards. This necessitates not only urging the actors to abide by these standards and reminding them of the responsibility they bear for violations of those standards but also putting in place mechanisms for monitoring, investigating and reporting incidents of violations. Additionally, it is incumbent on governments to facilitate humanitarian access and initiatives for protecting and supporting civilians and children affected by violence. The situation of displaced and refugee children not only in recent conflict situations but also those from frozen conflicts also deserves particular attention. Recurring incidents of attacks on schools also underscore the importance of and the need for upholding such frameworks as the 'Safe School Declaration', aimed at ensuring children in conflict situations continue to enjoy their right to education.

The second issue relates to the settlement of the conditions of conflict and terrorist violence, including the resolution of the underlying causes. In this respect, the issues requiring attention include absence of good governance and democratic inclusion, weak presence of state institutions and public services in areas far from urban centres, depleting resources on which communities depend for their livelihoods, marginalization and inequality and lack of respect for and protection of fundamental rights of affected people. Given the consequences of violence, there is also a need for initiating measures for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of conflict affected regions.

Tomorrow's session also presents the chance for the PSC to follow up on its request at previous sessions, for the AU Commission to implement Assembly/AU/Dec.718 (XXXII), adopted at the 32nd Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly, convened on 10-11 February 2019. Assembly/AU/Dec.718 (XXXII) underscores four strategic resolutions essential to child protection, which are: the establishment of an accountability, monitoring and reporting mechanism; the development of a child protection architecture for the AU; the establishment of child focal points in all AU missions; and the establishment of an office of Special Envoy on children in situations of conflict. In this respect, the address from the two Commissioners' remarks is expected to provide update on these four areas relating to AU's role.

It is also to be recalled that at its previous session, Council was presented with the final 'Policy on Integration of Child Protection into the African Peace and Security Architecture (APSA)', developed by the AU Peace and Security Department (PSD). Tomorrow's session presents the opportunity to examine the level of implementation of decisions related to child protection, within the framework of APSA, including relevant organs of Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs).

The form that the expected outcome of the session takes remains unknown. It is expected that the PSC will express its concern about the plight of children in conflict affected countries in Africa. The PSC may call on all parties to armed conflicts to comply with international, regional and national instruments applicable to the protection of children in conflict situations, including international human rights law and IHL. It may also call on the AU Commission to ensure the full operationalization and implementation of the AU mechanisms for protection of children in conflict situations. To ensure that children in armed conflicts continue to enjoy their basic rights, Council may urge all relevant actors to strive for ensuring that access to humanitarian assistance is guaranteed to enable children to get access to life saving services including food, health care and education. Council may also underscore the importance for Member States, the AU Commission, RECs/RMs and the international community to enhance their child protection capacity in conflict situations at the national, regional and continental levels. In this regard, the PSC may urge the international community to enhance its support for humanitarian assistance particularly for displaced and refugee children.