

# Renewal of G5 Sahel Joint Task Force and adoption of Strategic Concept of AU Force

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Today (21 April) the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council is expected to consider the renewal of the mandate of the G5 Sahel Joint Force and the adoption of the Strategic Concept Note to allow the development of a new Concept of Operation on the deployment of a 3000 AU force in support of the G5 Sahel. It is to be recalled that on 9 April 2019 the PSC renewed the mandate of the G5 Sahel Joint force during its 838th meeting, the PSC renewed the mandate of the G5 Sahel Joint Force for a period of 12 months until 12 April 2020. During today's session the PSC is expected to renew the mandate of the Joint Force for a further period of 1 year from 13 April. The impact of measures adopted by countries of the Sahel to contain the novel coronavirus on the Joint Task force would be of interest for member states of the PSC. Also, of interest to the PSC is the current state of operationalization of the Joint Task Force.

The Joint Force continues to face various operational, capability and equipment shortfalls, limiting its full operationalization. The lack of air assets, armored vehicles and transport capabilities and individual protection equipment compounds the threat posed by the use of improvised explosive devices. The Joint Task Force is not the only ongoing operation in the Sahel. It operates alongside the UN Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). The relationship between the G5 Sahel Joint Task Force and MINUSMA is governed by resolution 2391 of 8 December 2019, under which MINUSMA provides operational and logistical support to the Joint Task Force.

Despite the large number of initiatives and the on-going efforts of the G5 Sahel Joint Task Force, the situation in the Sahel has witnessed major deterioration during the last quarter of 2019 and in early 2020. Perhaps more than any other part of the continent, where the sound of the guns has become loudest is in the Sahel. The number of violent incidents in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger has increased sharply. In geographic scope as well, the violence in the Sahel has during 2019 spread across the region. As the UN Chief Representative for West Africa said in a briefing to the UN Security Council on 8 January 2020, this geographic expansion of terrorist attacks 'is increasingly threatening West African coastal States'. Over the course of 2019, fighting and terrorist attacks in Mali forced more than 80,000 people flee their homes. In Burkina Faso, that witnessed the most surge in violence in 2019, the number of people displaced increased by tenfold to over 560,000, with the figure predicted to skyrocket to 900,000 people by April 2020. Across the three affected countries of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, since the start of 2019, more than 670,000 children have been forced to flee their homes. According to UNICEF, between April 2017 and December 2019, the three countries witnessed a six-fold increase in school closures due to violence.

Against the background of the deteriorating security situation and in the context of the debate of the AU Assembly for a continental support for Sahel countries in the fight against the expanding terrorist threat, the 33rd Ordinary Session of the AU Assembly decided to deploy 3000 troops for a period of six months. It is to be recalled that during the ECOWAS summit on 14 September 2019, the Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS tasked their respective ministers of defence and security with assessing the possibility of deploying and using the ECOWAS Standby Force in counter-terrorism operations. The Heads of State also pledged to mobilize \$1 billion (2020–2024) for regional counter-terrorism efforts.

In pursuit of the AU Assembly decision, on 16 March 2020 the AU Commission convened a High-Level Consultative meeting with ECOWAS and G5 Sahel representatives in Niamey, Niger. One of the outcomes of the consultative meeting was the establishment of a technical committee of representatives of the AU Commission, ECOWAS and G5 Sahel to conduct the planning of the operation.

To inform today's session relating to the endorsement of the 3000 AU troops to the Sahel, a strategic concept note has been shared with members of the PSC. The strategic concept note envisages that the strategic end state of 3000 AU troops is 'to significantly degrade terrorist groups to allow the Sahel countries facilitate stabilization efforts across the affected communities and ensure effective capacity building of their National Defense and Security Forces to assume responsibilities in addressing regional security challenges'.

In considering the strategic concept note, it is of interest to member states of the PSC to consider a number of issues. One such issue is the scope of the mandate of the AU force. This relates to the question of whether the main role of the force is engaging in combat operation against armed terrorist groups in support of G5 Sahel countries. The other issue is the question of the relationship between the AU force and the G5 Joint Task Force. Other issues include the plan for mobilizing the troops and the provision of the required funding including for troop allowances, mission support and importantly the logistics.

In terms of command and control, there is also a question of clarity around the respective roles of the AU, ECOWAS and G5 Sahel. The 3000 AU force is initiated as an expression of solidarity of AU member states with countries of the Sahel region. While it requires for its success the use of a political strategy and the mobilization of the required legitimate infrastructure of local governance and socioeconomic

development interventions, the deployment of this force brings a much-needed additional support for the campaign to roll back the spread of terrorist operations in the Sahel region.

The expected outcome of the session is a communique. It is expected that the PSC would express its concern about the expansion of terrorist attacks in the Sahel region. While welcoming the role of the G5 Sahel Joint Task Force, the PSC is also expected to renew the mandate of the Force for a further period of 12 months. In doing so, the PSC would also call for the provision of financial, training and logistical support to the Joint Task Force. The PSC is also expected to adopt the strategic concept note on the deployment of the 3000 strong AU force and give guidance on the planning of the deployment of the force including close consultation with the UN to prepare the ground work for authorization by the UN Security Council.