

Unblocking the obstacles to effective Continental Early Warning System (CEWS)

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Tomorrow (16 April), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 1208th session to discuss the theme of 'unblocking the obstacles to effective Continental Early Warning System (CEWS)' with a joint briefing by the Committee of Intelligence and Security Services of Africa (CISSA), African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT), and African Union Mechanism for Police Cooperation (AFRIPOL).

Following opening remarks by Jainaba Jagne, Permanent Representative of The Gambia to the AU and stand-in Chair of the PSC for the month of April, Bankole Adeoye, Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS) will make a statement. The representatives of CISSA, ACSRT, and AFRIPOL are expected to deliver briefings.

This session comes within the framework of PSC's [1014th \(2021\)](#) session, which requested CISSA, ACSRT and AFRIPOL to provide quarterly briefings to the Council on emerging threats to peace and security on the Continent in the effort to strengthen conflict prevention and early warning mechanisms. Previously, during its [360th \(2013\)](#) session, the PSC had agreed to receive a periodic update, at least once every six months, on the state of peace and security on the continent, using horizon scanning approaches. In recent years, the security threats of terrorism, unconstitutional changes of government and climate change have dominated such briefings.

The last time the PSC received a briefing on continental early warning and security outlook was at its [1170th](#) session in August 2023. In that session, the PSC requested the Commission to ‘urgently review and adapt all AU counter-terrorism legal frameworks to ensure that they are in sync with the existing international counter-terrorism legal frameworks.’ The session specifically called for future early warning briefings to address the persistence of terrorism, particularly in the Sahel, and to propose actionable strategies for mitigating security challenges in the region. As a follow-up to this specific request, tomorrow’s briefing may provide highlights on the state of terrorism in the Sahel as part of the broader horizon scanning of the emerging and existing security threats in the continent.

ACSRT’s database indicated a staggering 99% surge in terrorist attacks and a 53% rise in terrorist-related deaths recorded between January and December 2023, compared to the corresponding period in 2022. The Sahel stands out as the most severely affected region, not only within Africa but also globally, accounting for almost half of all deaths from terrorism worldwide, per the 2024 Global Terrorism Index (GTI) [report](#). Central Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, notably the tri-border area described as the ‘Liptako-Gourma’, have seen the most significant increase in the impact of terrorism among the Sahelian nations, with Burkina Faso now ranked first on the GTI. (For more details on the state and dynamics of terrorism in the continent, see Amani Africa’s [analysis](#) on the theme). Besides terrorism and violent extremism, the electoral landscape of the continent also remains an issue requiring closer follow-up, with elections planned in twenty Member States for 2024.

The central focus of tomorrow’s session ‘the obstacles to effective early warning’ and unblocking them requires serious consideration. As the Chairperson [noted](#) to Amani Africa’s [‘in the words of the PSC Chairperson’](#), this session will look into

ways of enhancing and fully operationalizing the CEWS to strengthen anticipation, preparedness and early response to conflicts across the continent.

As envisaged under article 12 of the PSC Protocol, the main purpose of the early warning system is the provision of timely advice on potential conflicts and threats to peace and security to enable the development of appropriate response strategies to prevent or resolve conflicts in the continent. Experience shows that despite the institutional and technical advances made in operationalizing CEWS, the actual operation of CEWS in providing early warning and those responsible for taking action in initiating timely responses leaves a lot to be desired. As a result, AU's engagement in peace and security is generally characterised by firefighting as opposed to detecting and preventing violent conflicts and crises from breaking out.

Broadly speaking, the challenges to CEWS can be grouped into two: technical and institutional and political. The technical aspect of early warning and analysis concerns the development of methodologically sound and substantively rigorous and solid early warning reports. Related to this is the process not only for the collection of quality data but also for an informed analysis and interpretation of the early warning data.

The other technical issue is determining the point at which a crisis/situation warrants the attention of the PSC for early action. This is not an easy matter. Developing clear and objective criteria and ensuring their consistent application remains critical for an effective preventive mechanism. In light of this, the PSC's 11th (Cairo) retreat emphasised the importance of establishing a 'trigger mechanism and indicators' to facilitate the role of the PSC in assessing the need for early action. This was echoed during the 1073rd session, where the PSC called upon the Commission to develop and urgently submit such mechanism and indicators for

consideration. However, it remains unclear whether this request has been followed-up on.

The other challenge that traverses the technical and political domains is the lack of effective flow of information between the early warning mechanism and those responsible for initiating early response, the Chairperson of the AU Commission and the PSC. Cognizant of this challenge, the [conclusions](#) of PSC's 13th (Mombasa) retreat on its working methods emphasised leveraging the horizon scanning briefings and informal consultations as platforms for the Commission and the PSC to exchange particularly 'sensitive' early warning information. The retreat's conclusions envisage monthly early warning meetings between the PSC Ambassadors/Charge d'Affaires and the Commissioner for PAPS, as well as quarterly consultations between the PSC and the Chairperson of the Commission. While there are efforts to convene the informal interactions, there is still much to be desired in terms of regularizing the monthly and quarterly early warning briefings between the Commission and the PSC.

The political challenge relates to a) the extent to which the CEWS operates consistently across different country or regional situations and most importantly b) the reluctance, if not outright rejection, of Member States, and even the Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs). As noted by the PSC during its [1073rd \(2022\)](#) session, there is a persistent denial of credible early warning reports of looming crisis and conflict situations, often invoking of sovereignty, thus obstructing timeous early action including deployment of preventive diplomacy and mediation. There are also instances where the principle of subsidiarity has been invoked by the RECs/RMs to prevent the situation from reaching the agenda of the PSC. While Member States have the obligation to commit themselves to facilitate early action by the PSC and/or the Chairperson of the Commission pursuant to article 12(6) of the PSC Protocol,

there is a need to enhance quiet/back channel diplomacy with Member States signalling potential crises.

From a perspective of overcoming these challenges, one of the key issues is ensuring confidence and trust in the early warning. This is crucial not only for dealing with some of the technical challenges but also some of the political ones, as well as it would contribute to limiting the scope for denial. The other issue is determining the nature of the response and how the response/early action is pursued. It may be advisable that at the early stages of a crisis, the early action is pursued discretely and using non-intrusive methods. It is only when the crisis has reached a boiling point and discrete measures would not be fitting that more public preventive diplomacy is deployed. It is at this stage that consideration should be given to putting the matter on the agenda of the PSC.

Meanwhile, there is also need for the AU to reinvigorate the CEWS which suffered a major institutional setback when its structure was removed from the PAPS department structure established as part of the institutional reform of the AU. This needs to be revisited. The role of the CEWS (which is based on human security considerations) cannot be replaced by CISSA, ACSRT or AFRIPOL, whose approach, by the very nature of their institutional and technical formation, largely draws on and is informed by state security analytical tools including intelligence.

It is also important for the AU to leverage, reinvigorate and sharpen some of its preventive tools. For instance, despite the expectation of a regular engagement between the PSC and the Panel of the Wise pursuant to [665th \(2017\)](#) session, which requested quarterly briefings from the Panel of the Wise, such interactions have [not](#) been regular and remain to be fully institutionalized. The Continental Structural Conflict Prevention Framework and its tools, the Country Structural

Vulnerability Resilience Assessment (CSVRA) and the Country Structural Vulnerability Mitigation Strategies (CSVMS), are largely [ignored](#) despite its potential to strengthen the CEWS by addressing structural causes of conflicts.

The expected outcome of the session is a communiqué. PSC may also follow-up on the implementation of previous decisions meant to strengthen the continental early warning system and bridge the gap between early warning and early action. In this respect, echoing the Mombasa Retreat Conclusions, it may urge the Commission to regularize the interactions between the Chairperson of the Commission as well as the Commissioner for PAPS, and the PSC. It may also call for the reinstatement of the CEWS structure as per Article 12 of the PSC Protocol as a measure for reinvigorating early warning and early action. The PSC may also reiterate the conclusions of the Cairo retreat on the establishment of transparent threshold for identifying the point at which early action is activated. The PSC may further request the Commission to streamline the quarterly briefings by the Panel of the Wise with the continental early warning and security outlook briefing. To facilitate more substantive engagement, the PSC may request the submission of a comprehensive report that provides an in-depth analysis on not only thematic issues but also country-specific crises/situations, along with concrete recommendations for early response.