

Update on Operationalization of the African Standby Force (ASF)

Automatic Heading TextDate | 10 March 2022

Tomorrow (10 March), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 1069th session to receive update on the operationalization of the African Standby Force (ASF).

Permanent Representative of Lesotho to the AU and the Chairperson of the PSC for the month of March, Mafa M. Sejanamane, is expected to make opening remarks. AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye, is also scheduled to deliver a presentation. Representatives for each of the regional standby forces, namely East Africa Standby Force (EASF), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) Standby Force, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Standby Force, North African Regional Capability (NARC) Standby Force, Southern African Development Community (SADC) Standby Force, are also expected to make statements.

It is to be recalled that the 14th Extraordinary Assembly on Silencing the Guns convened on 6 December 2020 declared the full operationalization of the ASF and directed the PSC to utilize its framework in mandating and authorizing AU Peace Support Operations (PSOs). The last time Council received update on the status of the operationalization of the ASF was at its 1007th session that took place on 8 July 2021. In that session, Council welcomed the strides made by the AU and RECs/RMs towards the full operationalization of ASF notably in the areas of training, exercise, force generation, pledged capabilities, AU Doctrine on PSOs, AU compliance and

accountability framework, strategic support groups, strategic lift, command and control, communication and information systems (ASF C3IS), and the ASF Continental Logistics Base (CLB) in Doula, Cameroon.

This session is convened within the context of Council's decision, during its last session on ASF, to remain periodically seized of matters related to the implementation of the ASF on a quarterly basis with the view to harmonizing decision-making and reinforcing synergies to effectively and expeditiously respond to security threats in the continent. Accordingly, in tomorrow's session, the Commission as well as RECs/RMs are expected to update members of the Council on major developments undertaken towards the operationalization of the ASF since the 1007th session.

Members of the Council would be also keen to hear from the Commission about progress made in the implementation of some of its specific demands made at its 1007th session. It is to be recalled that the Council requested the Commission to, among others, finalize and submit the 2021-2026 Comprehensive Roadmap on the Enhancement of the ASF; finalize the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Deployment and Employment of the ASF; and immediately set up a 'multi-agency strategic working group chaired by the AU Commission, to coordinate efforts amongst all the relevant stakeholders on the full operationalization of the ASF'. The status of the establishment of a counter-terrorism unit within the ASF as decided by the Council during its 960th session held on 28 October 2020 is another issue of interest to the Council given the changing nature of security threats to the continent marked by upsurge of terrorist attacks and geographic spread of terrorism and violent extremism in the continent.

Recent times have witnessed growing interest among the AU and RECs/RMs to deploy forces within ASF framework to address the spiraling security threats emerging in the continent. SADC

deployed forces in Mozambique (SAMIM) in mid-July last year to combat of terrorism and acts of violent extremism in Cabo Delgado within the framework of ASF. ECOWAS, at its 4th extraordinary summit convened on 9 January 2022, decided to 'activate immediately the ECOWAS Standby Force, to enhance its preparedness, should the need arise' following inability of Malian authorities to conduct election within the agreed timeframe of 18 months. One of the four options proposed by the Independent Assessment Team on the AU's engagement in and with Somalia post-2021 has been also the deployment of EASF though AU opted for other options.

Despite such encouraging developments in terms of actualizing ASF and progress made over the years towards its operationalization, there are still areas of concern that require Council's continued engagement to resolve those issues. One area of concern is the lack of clarity among AU, RECs/RMs and Member States on some of the strategic and political issues such as political decision making, mandating deployment, and command and control of the forces. In this connection, the conclusion and signing of the MoU between AU and RECs/RMs on the deployment and employment of ASF would be vital in clarifying existing confusion on the above and other related issues.

As highlighted in the 1007th session, the 'low level of support to the continued operationalization of the ASF' particularly due to lack of resources including the absence of predictable and sustainable financing remains major impediment hindering full realization of the ASF. Securing predictable and sustainable funding for AU PSOs through the use of UN assessed contribution has been on the top of the agenda of the Union in its interaction with the UN; no breakthrough has been made yet to address the issue. In relation to the Peace Fund, despite significant achievements made in terms of laying out the required legal, operational and governance mechanism, the Peace Fund (which stands at USD 240 million as of September

2021) is still far away from the USD 400 million target. The other concern, as noted by the report of the Chairperson on the 'Status Report/Roadmap on the Full Operationalization of the African Standby Force (ASF) and the Continental Logistics Base (CLB)' that was submitted to the 1007th session, is the 'hesitancy and reluctance by the RECs/RMs to confirm capabilities pledged and how they are to be made readily available'. It is to be recalled that PSC's last session on ASF urged the Commission, together with RECs/RMs, to 'facilitate the development of ASF Military and Police pledged capability roster to ensure efficient planning within the given ASF deployment timelines'.

The expected outcome of tomorrow's session is a communique. Among others, Council may reaffirm the imperative of the full operationalization of the ASF to enable rapid deployment and timeous intervention, and it may welcome the progress made by RECs/RMs and Member States in this respect. It may further call upon on all stakeholders including AU, RECs/RMs, and Member States to scale up efforts that would strengthen the Regional Brigades of the ASF and availing the required support necessary to the full operationalization of the force. In light of the rising threat of terrorism and violent extremism in the continent, Council may urge the Commission to take concrete steps and finalize all actions required to set up a special counter-terrorism unit within the ASF, which would be deployed upon request by the affected Member State and RECs/RMs upon approval by the Council. On the resource challenges facing the ASF, Council is likely to reiterate its 1007th session that requested the Commission to 'explore practical ways and means of resolving these challenges'. Council may also re-emphasize the importance of enhancing coordination and consultation between the Commission and other ASF stakeholders notably RECs/RMs and Member States with the view to harmonizing political decision-making and mandate process for the deployment of the ASF.