

Update on the deployment of the 3000 troops in the Sahel region

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Tomorrow (16 December), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) is expected to convene its 1127th meeting to receive update on the deployment of the 3000 troops in the Sahel region. The update will be one of the two agenda items that the PSC is set to consider in this session and the meeting is expected to take place in-person.

Following opening remarks of the Permanent Representative of the Federal Republic of Nigeria to the AU and Chairperson of the PSC for the month, Victor Adekunle Adeleke, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye is expected to deliver a statement. AU High Representative for Mali and the Sahel, Mamane Sidikou, and the representatives of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the G5 Sahel may deliver statements.

The decision to deploy 3000 troops to Sahel was made by the AU Assembly at its 33rd Ordinary Session [Assembly/AU/Dec.792(XXXIII)] in February 2020. While PSC discussed the situation in the Sahel several times this year, including during its 1087th session in June and 1116th session in October, the last time that PSC dedicated a stand-alone session on the deployment of the 3000 troops was its 950th meeting that took place on 30 September 2020. In that meeting, PSC endorsed the Revised Strategic Concept Note on Planning Guidance for the Deployment of 3000 Troops to the Sahel and requested the AU Commission together with the G5

Sahel and the ECOWAS to develop and submit the Concept of Operations (CONOPS) for the deployment of the troops. At its 1087th session of 1 June 2022, PSC also requested the Chairperson of the Commission to 'intensify consultations with the concerned stakeholders, inclusive of ECOWAS, ECCAS, and G5 Sahel Joint Force' on the deployment and 'promptly brief the PSC on the outcomes of the consultations for due consideration'. Most recently, during its 1116th session, PSC expressed its commitment to 'revisit the possible deployment of 3000 troops for six months'. Tomorrow's session is an opportunity to assess progress made in that regard and deliberate on actions that should be taken to expedite the deployment.

The security situation in the Sahel has deteriorated as the region continues to experience increasing terrorist attacks and geographical spread of these attacks, which makes the deployment of the Force even more important today than two years ago when the decision for the deployment was made. Bilateral and multilateral security arrangements in the Sahel are facing enormous challenges at a time when strong cooperation and coordination is desperately needed, raising the fear of creating security vacuum that could be exploited by terrorist groups. One month after its decision to leave the G5 Sahel Joint Force, on 14 June, Mali's military authorities announced to end the commitment of Malian personnel serving in the western zone (Mali-Mauritania) and central zone (Mali-Burkina Faso-Niger) as of 30 June. The operating environment for United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) has become very challenging. Growing number of troops contributing countries are announcing either suspension of activities or the intention to terminate troop contribution for various reasons. The last French military unit of Barkhane forces also left Mali on 15 August after a fallout between the two countries following the 24 May coup.

Against the backdrop of the expanding threat of terrorism and

ever deteriorating security situation of the Sahel marked by the spike in asymmetric warfare, there is also a growing call for a more robust AU-led peace support mission in the Sahel. On this point, UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, was quoted, in his 5 May 2022 interview with French radio station RFI, saying that 'but it [MINUSMA] is operating in circumstances that really call not for a peacekeeping force, but a strong force to enforce peace and fight terrorism.' He further called for an African-led mission with a 'Chapter Seven Security Council mandate' and 'obligatory financing' as more fitting to the security situation in Mali than MINUSMA. Recent developments and regional dynamics in the region as highlighted above could make now an opportune time to take the implementation of the 3000 troops deployment forward.

Challenges remain abound while pursuing the implementation of the deployment. The first is the funding issue. Mobilizing funds for another deployment while the existing AU peace support operations are experiencing enormous financial and logistical challenges would remain an arduous task for the AU. It is to be recalled that Assembly decision 792 requested the Permanent Representatives Committee (PRC) to explore funding options, as well as ECOWAS to take necessary steps for the 'urgent disbursement of its pledged 100 million USD' to support the deployment.

The second challenge would be generating the required number of troops. The July 2020 revised Concept Note envisaged AU in coordination with ECOWAS to lead the force generation process within the AU Member State but excluding the G5 Sahel Countries (Burkina Faso, Chad Mali, Mauritania, and Niger). Generating 3000 troops in a context where many African countries have been already overstretched in the fight against multiple security threats within their respective regions is not expected to be an easy task.

The third challenge is lack of cohesion among members of the G5 Sahel. If the original plan of integrating the 3000 troops

into the G5 Sahel Force with a unified command is to remain intact, there is a need for achieving shared commitment among the countries of the Sahel for the effectiveness of the 3000 troops deployment.

Fourth and most important is the assumption underpinning the proposed deployment of the 3000 troops. The experience thus far shows that the military response, while necessary, has failed to deliver in terms of reversing the trend in the incidents of terrorist attacks and geographic spread of attacks. There is therefore a need for asserting the primacy of the political. As such, attention should focus on rolling out a multidimensional strategy that aims at mobilizing governance, development, environmental and humanitarian interventions into which the military response is integrated. As such, it may as well be necessary for the PSC to await the joint AU-UN assessment that former Nigerian President Mahamadou Issoufou is undertaking in order to consider the deployment of troops as part of the recalibration of regional and international efforts for addressing the security situation in the Sahel.

The expected outcome from tomorrow's session is a communique. PSC is expected to express its concern over the persistence of growing terrorist attacks in the Sahel region and the spread of such attacks towards West African coastal states. It may note the unfavorable developments around the different collective security arrangements operating in the region, and in that regard, PSC may express concern over the possibility of creating security vacuum likely to be exploited by terrorist groups. Against the backdrop of worsening security situation in the Sahel and the challenges that existing security arrangements are facing, PSC may stress the need to expedite the implementation of Assembly decision 792 for the deployment of additional 3000 troops in the Sahel. To that end, PSC may wish to set a timeline for the finalization of the CONOPs for the deployment, which is critical to its

operationalization. PSC may also request the Commission to step up engagement with relevant regional mechanisms, Member States, as well as international partners to address issues of funding and force generation of the deployment. The PSC may further emphasize the importance of harmonization and coordination among the various security forces and actors. Finally, and most importantly, it may re-emphasize the importance of adopting a comprehensive approach that would address not only the immediate security challenges but also the underlying causes of the security crisis in the Sahel. The PSC in this light may request the AU Commission to continue working on the planning for the deployment of the troops having regard to and with a view of making it informed by and anchored on the outcome of the ongoing AU-UN joint assessment.