

Updated briefing on the situation in the Horn of Africa

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Tomorrow (10 February), the African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) will convene its 1064th session to receive updated briefing on the situation in the Horn of Africa as one of its agenda items. This agenda item is added on the request of the AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa.

Following the opening remarks by Kenya's Permanent Representative and Chairperson of the PSC for the month, Jean Kamau, AU Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security (PAPS), Bankole Adeoye, is expected to make statement. The main focus of the session is to receive updated briefing from AU High Representative for the Horn of Africa, H.E. President Olusegun Obasanjo, who is undertaking visits to various parts of Ethiopia. The focus of the briefing is accordingly expected to be on the activities of the High Representative for peace process in Ethiopia since the last briefing.

This is the third time that the High Representative briefs the PSC since his appointment in August 2021. It is to be recalled that the last time the Council convened a dedicated session on the situation was during its 1045th meeting that was held on 08 November 2021. It is expected that during tomorrow's session his briefing will address two issues. The first of these that PSC member states expect him to brief them on is his work plan and strategies for implementing the peace process. Second, the High Representative is expected to provide an overview of peace and security developments on the

situation in Ethiopia since his last briefing in November 2021. He is also expected to highlight his diplomatic engagements since he last updated the Council, and may outline next steps.

Since the PSC's last briefing from the High Representative, there have been significant developments in the conflict in northern Ethiopia. The conflict has taken a heavy toll on civilians and the economy since its eruption in early November 2020. In the course of 2021, the conflict expanded beyond Tigray and spilled over to the neighbouring regions of Amhara and Afar. Since November, the dynamics of the conflict have changed, with the military balance of power shifting in favour of Ethiopian Government forces. Tigrayan forces, under pressure from drone reliant counter-offensive from Federal Government forces, announced on 21 December their withdrawal from territories they seized in Amhara and Afar regions and retreated to their own region. On 23 December 2021, the government of Ethiopia announced a pause to the fighting stating that it will not move further into Tigray region.

Some other notable developments include the announcement on 7 January 2022 by the government on the release of high-profile political prisoners including senior members of Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF). The Chairperson of the AU Commission issued a statement dated 8 January 2022 expressing that he is 'pleased to learn of the release of political opposition figures detained in Ethiopia.' The government also issued a law setting up a national dialogue Commission, which is being viewed by international actors as a welcome development despite uncertainties and contestations about inclusivity and representativeness of the process. It was against this background that the UN also issued a statement. In a statement that the UN Secretary-General issued on 19 January, he stated that Obasanjo 'briefed him about the efforts being made by the government of Ethiopia and the Tigray Peoples' Liberation Front (TPLF) to move towards a

resolution of the violent conflict.'

Though the PSC discussed the situation in Ethiopia during the summit level session in last March under AOB, a formal and substantive engagement happened only at its 1045th emergency session of November 2021. In that session, the Council, among others, urged parties for an immediate cessation of hostilities and pursue political dialogue. The Council also highlighted the imperative of ensuring an impartial, effective, transparent and prompt investigation into alleged violations. It further requested at the session, to receive periodic updates on the situation and tomorrow's session is also convened within this framework. It is to be recalled that Ethiopia requested the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) to conduct a joint investigation into the alleged human right violations in Tigray during the March summit level session. The ACHPR launched investigation independently on its own in June 2021, despite lack of agreement with the government of Ethiopia on the modalities for such investigation.

On the side-lines of the AU Summit held on 5-6 February, Obasanjo held consultations. One such consultation he held was with Djibouti's President Ismail Guelleh. The discussion led to the expression of support by Guelleh to the mandate of Obasanjo and approval of the assignment of Mohamed Idriss Farah, former Permanent Representative of Djibouti to the AU and a well-known figure in the diplomatic circles in Addis Ababa, to Obasanjo's mediation team.

Continuing with his effort to achieve ceasefire and progress towards establishing the ground for peace talks, Obasanjo undertook visits to parts of Ethiopia including Kombolcha and the capital of Tigray, Mekelle. He also travelled to the Afar region along with President Sahelework Zewde. Since his appointment in August, Obasanjo has been engaged in shuttle diplomacy between Addis Ababa and Mekelle, and further interacting with key actors such as Kenya and US. In

tomorrow's session, Obasanjo is expected to brief the Council about his recent diplomatic engagements to end the conflict and update the Council where the process currently stands. Among others, he is expected to highlight on-going efforts to address the humanitarian situation in various parts of the country and potential for progress for the release of prisoners of war which may serve as catalyst for progress in other fronts.

On the battle front, despite the suspension of ground offensive, there have been reports that drone attacks targeting places in Tigray have continued. Similarly, most recently reports have emerged that fighting has erupted and continues in Afar involving Tigrayan forces. These have resulted in the needless loss of innocent lives and the displacement of others. On the other hand, essential services such as banking and electricity remain disconnected.

Two issues may be of interest to the Council in tomorrow's discussion. The first is how to secure an immediate cessation of hostilities and unhindered humanitarian access, which would further pave the way for a broader political settlement to the conflict. Second, some positive developments notably the delivery through air of much needed aid by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) highlights the importance of addressing the dire humanitarian situation in the region and other parts, including by resolving the conditions limiting the delivery of emergency food aid and medical assistance. According to a 20 January OCHA situation report, an estimated 9.4 million people need food assistance in northern Ethiopia, and 3.9 million people in Tigray are in need of health services. In this respect, it remains critical for the AU to intensify its engagement through the High Representative, particularly in terms of encouraging the expansion of the current efforts and openings in the delivery of humanitarian assistance towards full humanitarian access to those most in need of such assistance.

The expected outcome of tomorrow's session is a communique. The Council may particularly reiterate its call for immediate cessation of hostilities and unhindered access to humanitarian access as a first step towards a broader political settlement to the conflict. The Council may however welcome the recent developments that contribute to reducing tension including the release of prisoners and the decision not to enter into Tigray as well as the retreat of Tigrian forces to Tigray. Commending the efforts of the High Representative to the Horn of Africa, the Council may urge the Representative to seize the moment and step-up diplomatic engagement with parties to the conflict as well as regional leaders and actors for sustaining some of the initial positive measures taken. The PSC may also welcome the delivery of aid by the ICRC and encourage the easing of the conditions that have impeded humanitarian access for reaching those in desperate need of humanitarian assistance before it is too late. It may also call on the international community to extend full support to the efforts of Obasanjo and to encourage all sides to enhance measures that facilitate the smooth delivery of humanitarian aid, the end of the resumption of essential services, the achievement of ceasefire and the process towards peace talks.