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Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. P.O. Box: 3243 Tel.: (251-11) 5513 822 Fax: (251-11) 5519 321  
Email: [situationroom@africa-union.org](mailto:situationroom@africa-union.org)

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PEACE AND SECURITY COUNCIL  
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**BRIEFING NOTE**

**UPDATED BRIEFING ON THE SITUATION IN THE SAHEL REGION**

## UPDATED BRIEFING ON THE SITUATION IN THE SAHEL REGION

### I. INTRODUCTION

1. The situation in the Sahel region has remained fraught with heightened insecurity, deteriorating humanitarian and human rights situation, differentiated climate security risks, amidst a challenging socio-economic situation. While the region continues to witness volatile unprecedented attacks, the reconfiguration of coalition of insurgent groups unearths a disturbing trend with high probability of unparallel attacks if not earnestly addressed. This briefing note is therefore prepared to apprise the AU Peace and Security Council on the current security, political, socio-economic and geopolitical dynamics within the Sahel region. It equally underscores key interventions by the African Union (AU) and collective prospects for stabilizing the region.

### II. POLITICAL SITUATION

2. The political situation in the region has been characterized by stalled democratic processes, including the deliberate restriction of civic and democratic expressions, premised by the delayed operationalization of the political transition roadmaps in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso. While some progress has been attained on the implementation of the transition timetable in Mali, the situation is less clear in the other countries.

3. **In Mali**, regarding the transition process; two major developments can be noted. The first is the completion of the operationalization of the Independent Electoral Management Authority (AIGE). The AIGE's regional, cercle, commune and embassy coordinating bodies were set up - with a few months' delay - between May – June 2023, and which enabled the body to organize the constitutional referendum of 18 June 2023. On 18 June 2023, Malians were called to the polls to vote on the draft of the new Constitution, held in Mali and in Malian embassies and consulates and within a challenging security context, particularly in the northern and central regions. As a reminder, the draft Constitution was adopted by 97% "Yes" votes to 3% "No", with a turnout of 39.40% of voters, according to the provisional results proclaimed by the AIGE. It is however left to the Constitutional Court to make pronouncements on the final results, prior to the promulgation of the text that will open a new era in national life.

4. Relatedly, the difficulties observed during the organization of the Constitutional Referendum, included among others, the poor distribution of biometric electoral cards, and some logistical setbacks, which constitute important challenges, which needs to be redressed to ensure transparency and credibility of the next elections. The same is true for the operationalization of the new regions, with less than eight months to go before the end of the Transition. According to the new Administrative Map handed over on 19 May 2023, to the President of the Transition, Mali now has one district (the district of Bamako), 19 regions, 159 *cercles*, 474 *arrondissements*, 815 *communes*, 12,641 villages, fractions and neighborhoods; all of which fuel concerns about compliance with the Transition timetable.

5. With regard to the country's relations with ECOWAS, while it is true that there is no open crisis to report, the difficulty of organizing a visit by the ECOWAS mediator H.E Goodluck Ebele Jonathan is obvious. Announced prior to the referendum, the visit was postponed until after the referendum, and later postponed to after the ECOWAS Summit of Heads of State and Government held on 9 July 2023. The situation remains puzzling, given that the Mediator was supposed to report on the country's situation during the recently concluded ECOWAS Summit. Finally, given that the referendum was held some three months late, it remains critical that all stakeholders are encouraged to resume consultations on updating the Transition timetable, with a view to implementing outstanding activities, including the upcoming elections within agreed deadlines.

### III. UPDATE ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 2015 PEACE AGREEMENT AND MINUSMA DRAWDOWN

6. The situation regarding the implementation of the of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali resulting from the Algiers process, has remained a deadlocked, with new concerns. Despite all efforts made by International Mediation team, to relaunch dialogue between the signatory parties, and the visit to Kidal by the Minister for National Reconciliation (May 2023), the situation has not evolved favorably. It further crystallized after the 18 June referendum in Kidal was not held, due to differences regarding the modalities of incorporation of the Peace Agreement within the new constitution.

7. Moreover, with regards to the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), it is worth noting that on 16 June 2023, during the 9350th session of the United Nations Security Council, Mali's Foreign Minister called for the immediate withdrawal of MINUSMA. The Malian authorities underscored that MINUSMA had failed in its mission, and accuse the mission of being a catalyst for the crisis. It should be recalled that relations between MINUSMA and Mali had deteriorated since last year, and a few days before the renewal of its mandate, MINUSMA complained that restrictive measures taken by the transitional government were hampering the mission's operations, particularly in the area of human rights monitoring. Mali in turn accused MINUSMA of instrumentalizing the human rights situation. The publication in May 2023 of the Moura report, which questioned the role of the Malian defense forces in the massacres of 500 civilians in the village of Moura, was seen as the last straw.

8. Meanwhile, on 30 June 2023, the UN Security Council confirmed the withdrawal of MINUSMA from Mali (Resolution 2690), due to be undertaken within a short timeframe of six months, finalized by December 2023. The immediate consequences of MINUSMA's withdrawal could be the likely weakening of the 2015 Peace Agreement, endangering established civilian protection mechanisms and the possible breakdown of the ceasefire between Malian forces and the signatory Movements. In addition, the withdrawal may increase the vulnerability of secondary towns, with a consequent impact on the local economy and humanitarian assistance in areas of high security challenge. In view of the possible "security vacuum" which could be created by the withdrawal, given MINUSMA's fundamental role in implementing the Peace Agreement, the AU considers the conduct a strategic reflection and initiatives aimed at preserving peace dividends and the revitalization of the 2015 peace process, to which the Parties continue to demonstrate their commitments.

9. **In Burkina Faso**, progress regarding the update and implementation of the transition timetable, has been stalled; fueling suspicions that the government was seeking to extend the transition period. Moreover, given the low recovery of the occupied territory, high level of population displacement and low rate of redeployment of government services, there are concerns that the Authorities might not meet agreed deadlines within the transition timetable. During a political dialogue organized on 4 July 2023, by the Centre for Democratic Governance, it was underscored that until proven otherwise, elections would be held in 2024, especially as the Prime Minister was able to assert in his State of the Nation address on 30 May 2023, that the government was in control of 65% of the national territory, and the situation should continue to improve. As underscored during his allocution, critical concerns are aligned towards the security situation in the country than the political process, particularly in view of the scale and frequency of terrorist attacks, which continues to claim many civilian and military lives.

10. It is worth underscoring that the political context in Burkina Faso has been marked by some challenges, including restriction on freedoms of expression and assembly. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that it is regrettable that the Comité Conjoint de Suivi de la Transition (Joint Transition

Monitoring Committee) for Burkina Faso has not been officially launched, despite the holding of its first meeting at expert level from 31<sup>st</sup> January to 2 February 2023. As is the case in Mali, it seems the launch of this mechanism has been equally hampered by the difficulty in organizing a mission to Ouagadougou by the ECOWAS Mediator for Burkina Faso, H.E Issoufou Mahamadou. It was alleged that the authorities were awaiting the outcome of the ECOWAS Summit of 9 July 2023, before considering resuming consultations within the Joint Monitoring Mechanism. However, some progress has been recorded on the electoral front. The Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI), already adopted its "operational plan for post-transition electoral consultations". In the opinion of the Commission's Chairman, this general planning document will enable the Commission to adapt to the evolution of the Transition timetable, with a view to meeting the agreed deadlines.

11. **In Guinea**, the political transition process has equally remained challenging. The difficulties in relaunching the inclusive political dialogue and the resumption of opposition demonstrations have had severe bearings on the transition process. While religious leaders had stepped up meetings with a view to relaunching dialogue between the Prime Minister and political players, they later withdrew from the talks, accusing the government of lack of political will, and decided to resume with demonstrations. Relatedly, several demonstrations were organized by Guinea's Stakeholders in Conakry and in some regions of the country during the month of May, at the launch of the constitutional orientation debate by the National Transition Council (CNT). These demonstrations resulted in a dozen deaths and several injuries, while demonstrations have been suspended, the situation remains of concern. Following the launch of the constitutional debate by the CNT, all stakeholders (political parties, civil society representatives, trade unions, traditional and religious leaders, among others) were invited to make their contributions and proposals with a view to drafting the new constitutional law (15 -30 May 2023). However, the forces boycotted the debates. It is therefore within this context that the working and cooperation visit of the President of the Union of the Comoros, who is also the current Chairman of the AU, made on 23 June 2023 is highlighted.

#### **IV. UPDATE ON THE 63RD ORDINARY SESSION OF THE AUTHORITY OF ECOWAS HEADS OF STATE AND GOVERNMENT**

12. On 9 July 2023, the 63rd Ordinary Session of the Authority of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government was held in Bissau, Guinea Bissau to deliberate on the Regional Integration dynamics, Peace, Security and Democracy, Institutional Reforms, International Cooperation among other issues. Key decisions arrived at, and regarding transition processes in the Region, included the call for a re-assessment of the mediation efforts within Countries in Political Transition, given the minimal cooperation that the ECOWAS Mediators had received from the Transition Authorities. In addition, the Authority urged the transition Member States to remain committed to the agreed 24-month transition timetables, and to expedite the operationalization of their relevant Joint Transition Monitoring and Evaluation Mechanisms. With regards to the withdrawal of MINUSMA from Mali, and the presence of foreign private armies on peace and security in the ECOWAS region; the Authority agreed on a constituted Presidential Task Force, comprising Benin, Guinea Bissau and Nigeria to deepen reflections on the withdrawal of MINUSMA and all related security matters. The Authority requested the ECOWAS Commission to propose, within 90 days, a comprehensive response mechanism to the dual developments of the MINUSMA withdrawal and the presence of foreign private armies in the Region. It equally urged the United Nations and the Malian authorities to urgently facilitate the movement of the ECOWAS Member States' contingents and their assets deployed in Mali, in connection with the withdrawal of MINUSMA.

## V. SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS

13. Despite sustained collective efforts by the Sahelian Countries and Partners, the security situation in the Sahel has remained restive, characterized by volatile attacks, perpetrated by terrorist groups and armed bandits, including those using improvised explosive devices (IEDs), continue to claim many victims, particularly in the Liptako-Gouma region, known between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. While the countries of the region have equipped themselves with increasingly robust means of fighting back against terrorist groups and other criminals, these efforts must be maintained and intensified to enable, in particular, the genuine reconquest of occupied localities and the return of internally displaced persons. They must also be much more holistic and inclusive, as military solutions alone are not enough. The decision to end MINUSMA's mandate and oblige it to withdraw from Mali within six (6) months also raises questions.

14. **In Mali**, the authorities' assertion of the army's "rise to power" has enabled it to adopt a resolutely offensive stance against armed terrorist groups, in the fight against insecurity. Joint operations with forces from other countries in the region have also produced encouraging results. For example, on 22 April 2023, in the village of Mourdiah (Koulikoro region), the Malian Armed Forces (FAMAs) launched a large-scale attack that destroyed a "terrorist sanctuary" and "neutralized some sixty terrorists"; on 20 May 2023 the General Staff of the Armed Forces announced that, as part of the Maliko plan and Operation Kèlètigui, the FAMA had carried out actions that had resulted in the neutralization of 167 terrorists, the arrest of 32 others and the seizure of numerous war materials, including a tank carrier, IED manufacturing equipment, ammunition, etc. On 4 June 2023, during a clash between a FAMA patrol and terrorists in the village of Kaya, 21km from Ténenkou in the Mopti region, three civilians and a suspected terrorist were killed.

15. As part of bilateral cooperation, the FAMAs carried out joint operations with the Burkinabe Armed Forces in Finkolo, Danderesso and Niantaga (in the Sikasso and Koutiala regions), resulting in the destruction of several terrorist bases. Eight (8) terrorists were neutralized on 27 April 2023 in another operation by the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) supported by their partners, in the villages of Dao Sorkey and Bara. Thus far, the offensive by the FAMAs and their partners has failed to prevent terrorist attacks and persistent insecurity. The available data illustrate the intensification of the conflict in the areas already affected (Ménaka, Ansongo and Gao). These include increasingly frequent clashes between the Etat islamique au Grand Sahara (EIGS), the Groupe de Soutien à l'Islam et aux Musulmans (GSIM/JNIM) and the Mouvements signataires de l'Accord pour la paix among others.

16. In the center of the country, the army continued its anti-terrorist operations, with a continued focus on security. The decline in civilian casualties in these parts of the country (Mopti, Ségou) can be attributed to the pressure exerted by military operations in Mali on extremist groups in recent months. Secondly, this trend could also be due to the massive displacement of populations from their localities prior to the attacks, or to "agreements" made with terrorist groups. Furthermore, although violence in the south has remained relatively low, attacks attributed to extremist groups were recorded for the first time in Kayes. Overall, insecurity in the country, which has led to population displacement, continues to fuel tensions between socio-professional groups. In addition to these tensions, there is little documented evidence of natural resource management tensions and conflict dynamics in the Sikasso region of southern Mali, the country's breadbasket and most densely populated area. However, this region should not be considered immune to the effects of conflicts in northern and central Mali, the constraints posed by the over-exploitation of natural resources and the effects of environmental degradation and climate change. It is therefore against this backdrop of resilience on the part of armed terrorist groups, and the risk of terrorism spreading to areas previously spared, that the decision to withdraw MINUSMA troops from Mali was taken, at the request of the Malian

Transitional Government, which has not failed to reassure the international community of its ability to guarantee the security of the State and its people

17. **In Burkina Faso**, the situation continues to deteriorate, despite offensive actions by the military and the Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP). According to the Prime Minister, as of 30 May 2023; the government was in control of about 65% of the national territory, however, this means more than 30% of the territory was still outside state control, which is considerable in view of the forthcoming elections. Meanwhile, it is worth highlighting that the defense and security forces have carried out a number of large-scale operations against terrorist groups, such as operation LAABINGOL (112 terrorists officially neutralized) and the February operation in the Warweogo forest, which is said to have neutralized several dozen terrorists (including leaders).

18. Despite these efforts, terrorists continue to attack defense and security forces, and civilians, causing many casualties and significant material damage. For example, on April 15, 2023, a major attack targeted a detachment of soldiers and volunteers for the defense of the homeland, located near the airfield 15 km from Ouahigouya, leading to about forty (40) deaths, including six (6) soldiers and thirty-four (34) volunteers for the defense of the homeland, as related by a press release from the governor of the North region on 16 April 2023.

19. **In Niger**, several terrorist attacks were equally recorded during the period under review. Most of these attacks mainly targeted the defense and security forces, including the attack on 13 February 2023, where 10 soldiers were killed, 17 February 2023, where 17 soldiers were killed. Meanwhile on March 4, 2023, the Makalondi police station (Tillabery) was attacked, among others. These attacks demonstrate the resilience of armed terrorist groups, who continue to attack from time to time, despite pressure from the Nigerien army. In fact, military operations in the Diffa region (south-east Niger) have resulted in the arrest of hundreds of people (March 2023) and the killing of "around thirty terrorists". On May 22, military sources announced that eight (8) terrorists had been killed and 82 suspects arrested during several operations carried out by the Armed Forces of Niger. Weapons, magazines, several vehicles, motorcycles, cell phones and long-range communications equipment were seized or destroyed.

## **VI. HUMAN RIGHTS AND HUMANITARIAN SITUATION**

20. Civilians in many insecure areas in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger continue to be exposed on a daily basis to serious violations of their fundamental rights and freedoms. Allegations of serious human rights violations have also been made against defense and security forces, notably in Burkina Faso and Mali. Violations include the right to life (civilians killed, including by IEDs), the right to physical integrity (wounded), the right to education (schools closed, set on fire or destroyed), the right to health (health centers destroyed or rendered inaccessible), the right to property (theft of livestock), freedom of movement, freedom of trade, freedom of opinion, freedom of worship, among others.

21. **On the humanitarian front in Mali**, global shortages and soaring commodity prices continue to undermine the country's social safety net. In February 2023, the UN estimated that 8.8 million people needed humanitarian aid, an increase of 29.4% on the previous year. However, in the latest report from the UN Secretary-General, the number of internally displaced people had fallen by 8.9% (375,539) by April 30, 2023. As of March 2023, 1,752 schools remained closed, affecting around 525,600 children. UNICEF estimates that across the country, more than 6.4 million children aged 5 to 17 are out of school for reasons linked to insecurity and other factors such as poverty.

22. **In Burkina Faso**, the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate, with new population displacements reported - 9,236 people arriving in Ouahigouya from Karma in the Centre-Nord region; 1,084 people arriving in Loropéni in the South-West from the Cascades region, according to the UN

Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, as of 29 April 2023. Essential needs for these people usually entail shelter, especially during the winter season. The humanitarian situation remains one of the priorities of the Transition authorities, who, during recent talks with MISAHEL, called on the African Union to "take concrete and urgent action in this area". The AU should be more receptive to such an appeal, for since the mission carried out by the Department of Political Affairs, Peace and Security in August 2022, during which a field visit was made to an IDP camp, it has provided any concrete support.

## VII. KEY AFRICA UNION INTERVENTIONS

23. On the political front, in January 2023, the Chairman of the AU Commission visited Mali and Burkina Faso to express the AU's support towards the transitional authorities and encouraged the respect to commitments made with ECOWAS. In this wise, MISAHEL continues to support the transitional authorities through the good offices of the High Representative and participation in the joint transition monitoring mechanisms in Burkina Faso and Mali. Moreover, the current Chairman of the African Union visited Guinea from 23 to 24 June 2023. This visit was an opportunity to discuss with the President of the Transition on the conduct of the Transition and the support of the African Union for the success of this process with a view to the return to constitutional order. In July 2023, MISAHEL visited Burkina Faso to exchange views with the Transition authorities and other stakeholders on the general situation and the needs and prospects for AU support for the transition process. In particular, the visit provided an update on the situation, informed the Transition authorities about the planned visit by the PSC, and advocated the resumption of dialogue within the joint framework for monitoring the Transition.

24. In early February 2023, the AU Commissioner for Humanitarian Affairs made a fact-finding and support visit to Mali. During this visit, she went to Gao and Ménaka, where she was able to meet with the local population, technical and financial partners and the Transition authorities. Concrete assistance from the AU is now expected to alleviate the suffering of the people. Relatedly, MISAHEL obtained support from Swedish cooperation through a three-year financial package that includes support for the Transition in Mali. This support includes the mobilization of consultants on political and institutional reform, youth and gender issues. Meanwhile, discussions are also underway with the Office of the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Peace and Security regarding European Union support for the transitions in Mali and Burkina Faso.

## VIII. OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

25. The multifaceted crises shaking the countries of the Sahel remain of key concern especially due to the fact that despite collective efforts deployed by concerned Member States and partners, the situation continues to deteriorate. In view of the above, Council may wish to consider the following recommendations:

- a) **Take note** of the progress attained in the execution of the transition calendars in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso, and, the transition Authorities to accelerate momentum towards full implementation of transition timelines within collectively agreed deadlines;
- b) **Express** deep concerns over the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel region and **call** on the Government and transition Authorities, to uphold their responsibility in ensuring collective security of its people and the respect of the rights and freedoms of its citizens;
- c) **Call** on all AU Member States and International Partners to urgently provide requisite financial, technical and humanitarian assistance to the Sahelian countries, including countries in transition, in support of efforts towards stabilization and constitutional order; and

- d) **Express** deep concerns over the systematic violation of human rights perpetuated against civilians and **urge** the Government Authorities in the region to ensure strict compliance to the instruments of International Human Right Law, Internal Humanitarian Law and the broader African Union Strategic Compliance Framework especially by security officers.

#### **On Mali**

- a) **Commend** the transition Authorities on the conduct of the Constitutional Referendum in Mali and Malian Consulates as a key milestone to the effective implementation of the Transition Calendar, and **urge** the Malian Authorities and Stakeholders to accelerate inclusive efforts towards the full operationalization of outstanding actions of the Transition timetable within collectively agreed deadlines;
- b) **Express concern** over the stalled implementation of the 2015 Peace and Reconciliation Agreement between the Malian Authorities and the Signatory group, and **reiterate** the critical need for consensual and inclusive dialogue by all Parties on the imminent revitalization of the Process; and
- c) In view of the withdrawal of MINUSMA, **call** on the Transition Authorities and the United Nations in Mali to ensure troop drawdown is undertaken based on ground conditions, to avoid any security loophole and foster the effective protection of civilians;

#### **On Burkina Faso**

- a) **Commend** all efforts undertaken by the Transition Authorities in regaining the territorial integrity of the nation and reaffirms the solidarity of the Union, nonetheless and **urge** the Burkinabe Authorities to ascribe to the full compliance to instruments of International Human Rights Law and the AU Strategic Compliance Framework in its fight for peace and stability;
- b) **Express** concern on the stalled implementation of the Transition Calendar, and **call** on the Authorities to expedite collective efforts towards the full operationalization of the transition process; and
- c) **Reiterate** the imperative of the operationalization of the Joint Transition Monitoring Committee in Burkina Faso, aimed at fostering an inclusive transition process and **call** on the Authorities to ascertain adequate efforts are actioned towards the inclusive effectuation of the Joint Transition Monitoring Committee.

#### **On Guinea**

- a) **Take note** of all efforts undertaken towards the full delivery of the transition program, and **reiterate** the imperativeness of the transition process to be inclusive with the collective efforts of all stakeholders, to guarantee a credible transition process;
- b) **Call** on all Guinean stakeholders, living forces and socio-politico Actors to work in collaboration with the transition authorities, to effectuate a participatory, and inclusive process birthed by national ownership towards the return of constitutional order; and
- c) **Request** the AU Commission to work with ECOWAS and the United Nations to provide the requisite support to all countries undergoing transition, in furtherance of an inclusive return to constitutional order, peace and stability.



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# Communiqué of the 1162nd Meeting of the Peace and Security Council held on 20 July 2023, on Updated Briefing on the Situation in the Sahel.

Peace and Security Council

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