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**PEACE AND SECURITY COUNCIL 661ST MEETING
23 FEBRUARY 2016 ADDIS ABABA, ETHIOPIA**

PSC/MIN/COMM.2(DCLXI)

COMMUNIQUE

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The Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU), at its 661st meeting, held at the ministerial level, on 23 February 2017, adopted the following decision on the theme "Protecting Children from Conflicts: Highlighting the Case of Child Soldiers in Africa":

Council,

1. **Takes note** of the Information Note provided by the AU Commission on Protecting Children from Conflicts: Highlighting the Case of Child Soldiers in Africa. Council **further takes note** of the statement made by the Acting Director for Peace and Security, on behalf of the Commissioner for Peace and Security. Council **also takes note** of the presentations made by the AU Commission, and by Retired Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire of Romeo Dallaire Child Soldiers Initiative, as well as of the statement made by the United Nations Office to the African Union;
2. **Recalls** the Executive Council Decision EX.CL/Dec.712 (XXI), adopted in June 2012, at its 21st Ordinary Session, held in Addis Ababa, in which the Executive Council requested the PSC to take into account the rights of the child in its agenda, as well as its previous communiqués and press statements on protection of children in conflict situations, particularly Press Statements [PSC/PR/BR.(DXCVII)], [PSC/PR/BR.(CDXCI)] and [PSC/PR/BR.(CDXXXIV)] adopted at its 597th, 491st and 434th meetings, held on 10 May 2016, 9 March 2015 and 8 December 2014, respectively;
3. **Expresses deep concern** over the continuing violations of children's rights, erosion of their welfare and violence perpetrated against children, including sexual violence, attacks against schools, as well as wanton destruction of educational infrastructure, not only during situations of armed conflicts, but also during times of peace. Council **further expresses concern** that children are increasingly severely affected by violent extremism and forcibly recruited by armed groups. Council **also expresses deep concern** that children encountered in security operations are often treated systematically as security threats rather than victims, arrested and detained in counter-terrorism operations and used as spies for intelligence-gathering purposes, which puts them at more serious risk. In this regard, Council **calls** for concerted efforts in preventing violations of children's rights and to urgently end child soldiers;
4. **Reiterates concern** over the continuation of illicit proliferation of small and light weapons, a situation which creates the terrible conditions that contribute to recruitment of children into child soldiers;
5. **Acknowledges** that the persistence of the problem of recruiting child soldiers in the continent constitutes a moral and criminal tragedy that Africa has to urgently and squarely come to terms with and accordingly find durable solutions. Council **further acknowledges** the double tragedy that the recruitment and use of child soldiers brings up, namely prolongation of conflict and enlarging the magnitude of killing, injuring, destruction and socio-political disharmony;
6. **Condemns in strongest terms possible** the continued recruitment of child soldiers on the continent by whomever, wherever and for whatever purposes, and **emphasizes the need** for AU Member

States to take robust punitive measures against all perpetrators of violations and abuses against children, including state and non-state actors;

7. **Acknowledges** that despite the global engagement towards the protection of children in conflict situations and the progress achieved to strengthen the existing AU legal frameworks, grave child rights violations remain an urgent and serious concern in African countries affected by conflict. Council **further notes** that the implementation of these instruments and turning commitments into concrete action still remains a daunting challenge across the continent. In this regard, Council **emphasizes** that it is the primary responsibility of each government to ensure that children are protected and that their rights and welfare are promoted and **calls on** all AU Member States to fully implement the existing AU instruments on protection of children and their rights;

8. **Commends** the Commission's efforts towards ensuring that troop contributing countries uphold international humanitarian law in the conduct of operations and enforce conduct and discipline amongst mission personnel, such as the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) which has institutionalized training on protection of women and children as part of the predeployment training. Council **further commends** the development by the AU of the Operational Guidance Documents on Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) and children which can be used by all AU peace support operations missions, AU Member States and Regional Economic Communities/Regional Mechanisms (RECs/RMs), as reference documents highlighting case studies and lessons learnt across the continent. Council **also applauds** all Member States who have established formal demobilization and reintegration processes to ensure a long-term reintegration of children into society. In this regard, Council **urges** Member States and RECs/RMs to make full use of these Guideline Documents in the protection of children in African communities;

9. **Underlines the need** for governments to institutionalize the protection of children within their disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) and security sector reform (SSR) programmes, as well as to include rehabilitation and opportunities for education to former child soldiers, particularly in countries emerging from conflicts, and make full use of DDR and SSR, especially paying attention to rehabilitation of child soldiers, re-skilling and integrate them into the community;

10. **Expresses concern** that, despite the progress made in developing a comprehensive normative and operational child protection framework, serious gaps continue to exist in terms of implementation and follow-up, thus undermining the effectiveness of Africa's response to challenges relating to the protection of children in conflict situations. Accordingly, Council **stresses the urgency** for an action-oriented approach to give concrete expression to the commitments made by the Member States to protect children in conflict situations. In this respect, Council:

- i) **urges** Member States to sign and ratify the main international and regional instruments on protection of children's rights, in particular the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and incorporate these instruments into their national legal frameworks and implement them consistently;
- ii) **underscores** the imperative for Member States of enhancing good governance, democracy,

education, prevention, research, training and advocacy as essential strategies for addressing and ending the tragedy of child soldiers;

- iii) **further underscores the need** to develop national action plans that will strengthen efforts towards elimination of recruitment of child soldiers, whilst also partnering with all national and international stakeholders to support national efforts by providing technical expertise and support in the areas of advocacy, policy, legal reform and programme response;
- iv) **urges** Member States to share their experiences, among themselves, in programmes of rehabilitating ex-child soldiers and integrating them into the into societies;
- v) **underlines the need** for more government commitment, through the allocation of dedicated funding towards the implementation of child protection and development programmes;
- vi) **emphasizes the need** to include negotiation on the release of all children to child protection actors/officers in the mediation efforts undertaken to end conflict;
- vii) **requests** the Commission to continue conducting regular sensitization to Member States on child rights in general, through the annual PSC open meetings, as well as focused support to Member States based on individual needs;
- viii) **further requests** the Commission to finalize the recruitment of the child protection advisor who will assist in mainstreaming child protection in the work of its activities related to peace and security, including focus on capacity enhancement and setting up of child protection units in armed forces.

11. **Reiterates** the request to the Chairperson of the Commission to appoint a special envoy on children, peace and security, to ensure more attention and action on issues of children rights, safety, health, education and protection, particularly in conflict situations in Africa;

12. **Emphasizes** the urgent need for the implementation of the AU Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to silence the Guns in Africa by Year 2020, which includes taking robust action to end recruitment and use of child soldiers in Africa. In this context, Council **recommends** to the Assembly of Heads of States and Government of the AU to consider declaring 2018 as the 'Year of Campaign for Abolition of Child Soldiers in Africa';

13. **Decides** to remain actively seized with the matter.