OpED

Peace and Security amidst COVID-19 by H.E Amb. Smail Chergui

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The outbreak of COVID-19 has had a devastating effect on the global order, impacting our social, economic and political efforts across the globe including Africa. According to figures by the Africa Center for Disease Control (Africa CDC), over 17,247 Africans have been infected with almost 910 of those succumbing to the disease. The African Union (AU) in collaboration with its partners has led interventions to contain the spread of COVID-19 on the continent with the leadership rallying to ensure robust preparedness for the aftermath of the pandemic. The impact of COVID-19 cannot be overstated with research indicating a potential global recession. Africa is predicted to be the most affected due to losses in revenue streams and decline of 3-8% in GDP in 2020 alone. The pandemic is not just a health issue, the implications are far reaching on the socio-economic, political and security spheres; a development that poses the critical question on Africa’s ability to absorb the socio-economic and political consequences of COVID-19.

Lockdowns and curfews in most cases have resulted in the loss of jobs and revenue streams for 85.5% of Africans that work in the informal sector and who depend on daily wages increasing the risk of food insecurity and loss of livelihoods across the continent. This comes after the UN has warned of a second wave of desert locust threatening east Africa further compounding the situation. As a result many countries are reporting a surge in crime and Gender Based Violence (GBV) particulary in urban areas.

It is worth noting that a significant number of conflicts on the continent are resource-based, fueled by climatic shocks, structural governance deficits and the lack of institutionalized dispute resolution mechanisms. The COVID-19 environment is likely to exacerbate these tensions as communities grapple with government responses that directly affect their ability to feed their families. The most vulnerable will remain at-risk with more than 30 million refugees and internally displaced people spread across our continent.

The rise of xenophobia and stigmas targeted at infected and recovered patients as well as their families are also a security faultline that need to be adequately addressed by States. While community sensitization programs are much needed, it is strenuous to undertake sufficient sensitization measures in conflict hotspots with limited medical services, electricity, potable water and Internet. In the same vein, State responses to COVID-19 have created a new working method with millions of workers telecommuting. Consequently, the e-working world has reinforced the need for enhanced cybersecurity measures to counter the misuse of cyberspaces in the spread of propaganda, misinformation, hacking and in some cases, exploitation by extremist groups as a recruitment platform.

At least 15 Member States are slated to hold elections through the end of 2020. In this context, the pandemic has raised crucial concerns over the organizations of the elections within stipulated time and in accordance with constitutional provisions. Some political actors and citizens are concerned that many governments may take advantage of the pandemic to
entrench themselves beyond their constitutional limits while on the other hand, there are calls by citizens, groups and political parties for governments to postpone elections until the pandemic is contained as part of efforts to reduce and mitigate the spread of the virus but also to avoid the disenfranchisement of citizens especially those in areas which are most affected by the pandemic. The risk of electoral violence during this time could also result in the flight of people both internally and into neighboring countries, increasing the risk of further contamination.

As the sharing of news through social media increases, the misinformation or ‘fake news’ has also the potential to threaten public health measures and to disrupt societal trust in state institutions.

While COVID-19 runs its course in Africa, conflict prevention and mediation efforts have been affected. The novel coronavirus has delayed the implementation of critical peace agreements and hampered our mediation efforts at the local level. The armed group negotiation in Sudan, the implementation of the Central African Republic Peace Agreement as well as the ongoing discussions in Libya have taken a backseat. The recently established transitional governments in South Sudan and Sudan are also in need of robust mediation and diplomatic support in addition to economic support, efforts that have been hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Further, terrorist and non-state armed groups are also capitalizing on the pandemic to increase attacks. In West Africa, Boko Haram insurgents launched an offensive against an army base claiming lives of hundreds of peacekeepers. In the Horn of Africa, Al-Shabaab has continued to attack civilian populations in Somalia and Kenya with the most recent attack on a UN compound in Somalia. In Southern Africa, the Islamic State affiliated jihadi group have increased their attacks in Mozambique. While the spread of terrorism and extremism on the continent is worrisome, it is even more alarming to see terror groups leverage the outbreak of coronavirus to spread misinformation as well as utilize diverse social media platforms to spread extremist ideologies and foster recruitment.

These incursions continue against the backdrop of challenges faced by our peacekeeping operations. As a preventive measure, critical operations and rotations have been delayed or cancelled as military and police forces are quarantined, measures that will likely delay much needed offensive operations as mobile forces are forced to hold defensive positions longer than anticipated. In the same realm, the State security forces across the continent are overstretched. Forces tasked with crucial counterterrorism measures are now being redeployed to enforce government measures such as lockdowns, curfews and border security. Furthermore, the already limited resources earmarked for preventing and countering violent extremism are being redirected towards the provision of humanitarian and healthcare supplies. Inadvertently, African countries with limited resources and facing
the scourge of violent conflict are likely to be more affected by both the novel coronavirus and the pre-existing security threat in their backyards.

Despite these challenges, our fight against terrorism and extremism has been unwavering. This is demonstrated by the continued offensive operations undertaken across the continent such as the most recent offensive against Boko Haram by the Chadian forces as part of the MNJTF and the AMISOM offensive in Janale. It is our conviction that the battle against terrorism will continue as we encourage our peacekeepers to adhere to necessary precautionary measures. In light of this, the AU shall sustain its support to the missions as well as the Government and People of Somalia in responding to COVID-19. Additionally, the Commission has continued to actively implement the 792nd Assembly decision to support the fight against terrorism in the Sahel through consultations for the eventual deployment of 3,000 troops. The Peace and Security Council (PSC) has also adopted new working method to remain seized of the continued efforts of the Commission while providing guidance and the much-needed policy frameworks to better respond to both the security challenges and the impact of the coronavirus.

While the novel coronavirus poses multitudes of challenges to our peace and security landscape, it also provides us with opportunities to work decisively to end violent conflicts on the continent and address their root causes. It is in light of this that I strongly support the call for an immediate global ceasefire and for the cessation of hostilities. The threat posed by COVID-19 has highlighted our connectedness and the need to promote multilateral approaches and international cooperation to contain and mitigate the impact of COVID-19. In the search for sustainable peace in these uncertain times, our continental cooperation platforms need to be revitalized, collectively mobilizing efforts towards maintaining global peace while combatting the unprecedented effects of the pandemic. Our collective action and cooperation is needed now more than ever to silence the guns on our continent.