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UN Counter-Terrorism Centre (UNCCT)

VIRTUAL COUNTER-TERRORISM WEEK

6-10 JULY 2020

AFRICAN UNION

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STATEMENT BY His Excellency AMBASSADOR SMAÏL CHERGUI,
AU COMMISSIONER FOR PEACE AND SECURITY

Virtual Counter-Terrorism Week

Interactive Closing Discussion

Member States' Counter-Terrorism Priorities in the Post COVID-19 Environment and Synergies and Complementarities between the COVID-19 and the Counter-Terrorism Agenda

United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT)

6-10 July 2020

UN Headquarters, New York



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Excellency, Under-Secretary-General for Counter-Terrorism,

Mr. Chairman of the Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee,

Excellencies the Member States of the Security Council,

Excellencies the permanent Representative of the UN Member States,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

1. Allow me to begin by thanking the UNOCT for inviting me to address this closing discussion on Member States' Counter-Terrorism Priorities in the Post COVID-19 Environment and Synergies and Complementarities between the COVID-19 and the Counter-Terrorism Agenda.
2. Indeed, the calamities linked to COVID-19 have captured the attention of governments and citizens, since its emergence in late 2019 and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future. The pandemic has also become an important topic for terrorist groups, including Al-Qaida and the so-called Islamic State. Both groups have publicly commented on the virus, offered their own take on the situation and have even proffered advice on how to mitigate its effect through issuing a set of "*Sharia directives to deal with epidemics*" advising their members to hand-wash and keep away from infected areas- which to some extent mirrors the social distancing and quarantining measures spelt out and advocated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).
3. It is also important to note that both groups, ISIS and Al-Qaida, have issued statements urging their supporters to exploit the situation for recruitment, planning and stepping up attacks, thus ignoring the calls for peace and unity.
4. Reports on terrorist activity across the globe in general and in Africa in particular have indeed highlighted heightened efforts by extremist groups to exploit the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to advance their agendas, consolidate their positions, entrench their roots into communities, extend their tentacles, and attract new members to expand their support base and strengthen their ranks.

Chair,

5. Groups such as Boko Haram, JNIM, ISGS, ISWAP and Al-Shabaab have undeniably stepped up attacks in their zones of operations, while terrorists affiliated to the so-



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called IS also claimed new territory in Mozambique. ADF also continues its deadly attacks against Civilians and Defense and Security Force in Eastern DRC.

6. Indeed, as the world's attention turns almost completely to the COVID-19 pandemic, the battle against terrorism in Africa has taken one of its deadliest turns yet. From January to April 2020, the Continent recorded a total of 508 terrorist attacks resulting in 2,938 deaths, in comparison with the same period in 2019, where 497 terrorist attacks and 2,584 deaths were recorded; representing a 2.21% increase in the number of attacks and 13.70% increase in deaths. This demonstrates that terrorist did not lose any of their operational capabilities, even more, this shows that their degree of lethality has increased.
7. While the first three months of the year 2020 witnessed consistent monthly increases in terrorist attacks and deaths, there was a drastic decline in both number of terrorist attacks and deaths in April, whereby ninety-nine terrorist attacks that led to 529 deaths were registered, thus representing 35% and 44% declines in the number of attacks and deaths respectively. The decline in number of terrorist attacks and deaths in April could be attributed to a number of factors including vigorous counter-terrorism operations in the Lake Chad Basin (LCB), the *Liptako-Gourma* region and Mozambique.
8. Since the beginning of the year, the Sahel Belt of West Africa has recorded the highest number of terrorist attacks and casualties compared to the rest of the Continent. There were sixteen attacks leading to 148 deaths Southern Africa, specifically in Mozambique and ten attacks that resulted in thirty deaths in North Africa.
9. The five most affected countries in the first four months of 2020 were Mali, the DRC, Nigeria, Somalia and Niger.
10. Some of the high profile attacks recorded during the period include the 3rd of January attack in *Tillaberi* Region, Niger where an unidentified group attacked a military camp killing eighty-nine soldiers. The 23rd of March ambush on a military truck in *Gorgi* village, *Borno* State, Nigeria led to the death of seventy Nigerian soldiers. The 23rd of March invasion of a military base in *Boma* Island in the Lake Chad region of Chad by Boko Haram fighters resulted in the killing of ninety-eight Chadian soldiers and injuring of fifty others. The 7th of April attack in *Xitaxi, Cabo Delgado, Mozambique* by *Al-Sunnah Wa-Jammah* (ASWJ) terrorists killed fifty two young men who has refused to join their ranks, and the more recent attack On 11 June 2020, where 11 soldiers and one gendarme were killed in an attack on a military post near Kafolo, Cote d'Ivoire near the border with



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Burkina Faso.

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11. Terrorists have employed increasingly sophisticated tactics in recent months as they have driven deeper into Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso whereby they attacked army bases and dominated villages with surprising force. They are destroying infrastructure, assassinating local leaders and assaulting key army posts in coordinated strikes to alienate government from the people.
12. They exploit border areas to meet in forested hideouts, to plan ambushes and attacks, share intelligence and exchange battle tips, including how to make roadside bombs, particularly near the tristate border of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.
13. To some worrying degree, it is noteworthy that despite the support from the international community, JNIM, ISGS, and other extremist groups appear to be gaining ground by exploiting longstanding grievances in the region, *inter alia*, governance deficit, perceived neglect of vast areas of territory, and existing inter-ethnic tensions (often emanating from scarcity of resources).
14. While the spread of terrorism and violent extremism on the continent is worrisome, it is even more alarming to see terror groups exploiting the outbreak of COVID-19 to spread their propaganda messages as well as utilize diverse social media platforms to spread extremist ideologies and boost recruitment. They are occupying as much space as they are occupying both the physical and the virtual or cyber space.
15. Indeed, terrorist groups can seize the situation to their advantage in specifically the battle of winning the hearts and minds of populations. Where governments are already struggling in providing basic services to communities, extremists could step in to fill the "*humanitarian vacuum*" created by the COVID-19 outbreak, by increasing service provision (medical, water and food), acting as the de facto authority, and building on that popular support, for their cause and proto-states.

Chair,

16. While the short-, medium-, and long-term effects of COVID-19 are difficult to determine, it is clear that it will impact the global CT responses and allocated resources. Member States are indeed reallocation CT resources and CVE Budgets, to manage the



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increased pressure on government budgets caused by the pandemic. We, at the AU, are already feeling this impact, since all CT activities funded by our Member States are reallocated to COVID-19, reducing dramatically funding for CT/PCVE technical assistance and capacity building programs. This is even impacting contributions to multinational forces involved in CT or peacekeeping operations. The pandemic has slowed our activities and efforts in reaching the noble cause “Silencing the guns in Africa”.

17. As the pandemic continues it can also offer other opportunities to terrorist and violent extremist groups. Some of which are highlighted below:
- i. **Radicalization:** The terror groups, such as ISIS and Al-Qaida have historically capitalized on natural disasters as supposed proof that God is supporting them in targeting their enemies— impressing upon followers that if a natural disaster causes this much suffering, terrorist action can bring about similar destruction using man-made methods. Indeed, the so-called ISIS had initially gloated over the COVID-19 pandemic in its al-Naba magazine, describing it as a punishment for “*crusader nations*”. While we witness a rise of xenophobia acts, with some linked to COVID-19 pandemic, we also need to ponder the possibilities of the emergence of ultra-national extremist/terror groups on the continent.
 - ii. **Financing:** While Kidnapping-For-Ransom and drug-trafficking continue to finance terrorist organizations, illegal exploitation and trade of natural resources are emerging as major sources of terrorism financing in Africa. The COVID-19 pandemic can lead to an increase in COVID-19-related crimes, including fraud, cybercrime, misdirection or exploitation of government funds or international financial assistance. These new sources of proceeds for illicit actors are being exploited by terrorist and transnational crime organizations.
 - iii. **Weaponizing the virus:** There are increasing worries that terrorists could try to weaponize their own virus by trying to infect other people. They might use children and women as potential carriers as well as Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) and Refugee Camps as contamination centers or Hubs.
 - iv. **Terrorism and Transnational Organized Crime Nexus:** As countries around the globe continue to maintain their borders closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, thus increasingly restricting the movement of goods and people, transnational organized crime and terrorist groups will likely increase their exploitation of the



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security *vacuum* created by the shift in attention. They will look for new zones of exploitation, and that will include the cyber domain, the cyber domain, money laundering, and diversion of funds to finance their operations. For example, by exploiting economic incentive measures and insolvency schemes as a means for natural and legal persons to conceal and launder illicit proceeds or misuse and misappropriate domestic and international financial aid and emergency funding;

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18. Despite these challenges, our collective fight against terrorism and violent extremism has been resolute. Our Member States have not remained idle especially those at the receiving end of terrorist attacks. 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*; Operation *Comoe* jointly undertaken by troops from Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso to flush out terrorists and violent extremists from the border area; and Operation *Lafiya Dole*, in which Nigerian troops are battling terrorists in the Northeastern part of the country. We can only encourage the Member States to continue, with the help of the International Community, their relentless fight against terrorist groups and criminal networks, including drug traffickers, to eliminate and deny them the opportunity to further take advantage of the difficult situation posed by, *inter alia*, the COVID-19 pandemic.
19. It is our conviction that the fight against terrorism will continue unabated as we encourage our defense and security forces to adhere to necessary precautionary measures. We salute the continuous and active implementation by the Commission of the 792nd Assembly decision to support the fight against terrorism in the Sahel through the eventual deployment of 3,000 troops, which will certainly make its positive impact felt across the region.
20. While the COVID-19 pandemic poses multitudes of challenges to the peace and security landscape, it also provides us with opportunities to harness our efforts towards working decisively to end violent conflicts on the continent and address their root causes. We need to think outside the box and allow ourselves the space to engage in innovative ways to Silencing the Guns in Africa, even those guns carried by Terrorists and Violent Extremists:



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- i. We need to engage terrorists and violent extremists in dialogue and encourage them to surrender, in particular those that have been forcibly enrolled into the ranks of these groups. At the same time we need to demonstrate as much resoluteness to eradicate the root causes conducive to the spread of terrorism and violent extremism as the resolute demonstrated to combat the threat altogether;
- ii. We need more innovation and partnerships to help prevent the spread of terrorism and violent extremism at national, regional and continental levels, using available resources;
- iii. We need to move beyond predominantly military action to include soft approaches;
- iv. With the multitude of security arrangements and forces operating within regions, in particular in the Sahel, we need to set-up proper and stronger coordination between the different forces operating in the field and clarity with regard to command and control.

Excellencies,

21. As the burden of the COVID-19 pandemic spreads further into the Africa, the potential for terrorist groups to continue to exploit existing vulnerabilities to gain support and strength will likely increase. It is vital that neither the concerned Member States in the different regions, their neighboring countries, the RECs nor the international community turn their focus away from countering the threat that such groups pose. Continued cooperation and more comprehensive approaches that address the underlying drivers of radicalization towards terrorism and violent extremism are necessary to stop the further spread of terrorist activity in Africa. Without such concerted efforts, the spread of COVID-19 will serve to reinforce the frustrations and grievances that have allowed these groups to gain a foothold in the first place, and will render the challenge of preventing and successfully combating terrorism and violent extremism more difficult than ever. Our collective action and cooperation is needed now more than ever to silence the guns on our continent.

I thank you all.