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**REPORT OF THE SUB-COMMITTEE ON REFUGEES, RETURNEES
AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS**

REPORT OF THE PRC SUB-COMMITTEE ON REFUGEES, RETURNEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PERSONS (JANUARY– DECEMBER 2020)

1.0. INTRODUCTION

1. The Permanent Representatives Committee (PRC) Sub-Committee on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) is responsible for the implementation of the AU policies on humanitarian issues. It comprises all Member States and is currently chaired by the Republic of Uganda. During the period January-December 2020, the Sub-Committee carried out various activities in line with its work-plan adopted at the beginning of the year. The 2020 work-plan was executed within an inauspicious environment marked by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) which ravaged the African continent since February and still poses a major health hazard with dire socio-economic and political consequences. These activities include:

- a. Briefing to the Peace and Security Council and Member States on humanitarian issues
- b. Financial contribution in support of 16 Member States;
- c. Follow-up on the operationalisation of the African Union Humanitarian Agency;
- d. Participation during the Annual Humanitarian Symposium;
- e. Briefings by the Commission;
- f. Celebration of the World Refugee Day; and
- g. Participation in the Executive Council Meeting (EXCOM) of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

2.0. ACTIVITIES

2.1. Briefing to the Peace and Security Council and the Member States on humanitarian issues.

2. The African Union Commission, in close liaison with the PRC Sub-Committee on Refugees, Returnees and Displaced Persons, briefed the Peace and Security Council (PSC) during its 921st meeting held on 28 April 2020 on the situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees, returnees, migrants and peacekeepers in Africa in the context of the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic in Africa. The briefing was delivered by the Commissioner for Political Affairs, Amb. Minata Samate Cessouma.

3. This meeting had the positive impact by way of appealing to Member States to facilitate the continental efforts against COVID-19 pandemic by opening up their airspaces for humanitarian purposes, including the protection to healthcare workers and humanitarian actors.

4. The Commission with the support of the Sub-Committee on Refugees, Returnees and IDPs briefed the Peace and Security Council during its 929th meeting held under the theme of the year: "*Silencing the guns: creating conducive conditions for Africa's development*" on 2 June 2020. The Commission made a briefing on the

cessation of hostilities and the humanitarian truce in Africa within the framework of AU Roadmap for silencing the guns in the context of COVID-19.

5. This meeting received further briefings from two keys partners namely the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT).

6. The meeting emphasized the urgency for conflict prevention, management and resolution in Africa. It highlighted the need for belligerents to cease hostilities, give peace a chance, scale-up humanitarian action and earmark resources towards the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

7. During its meeting held on 9 November 2020, the PRC Sub-Committee received a briefing from Mr. Cosmas Chanda, the UNHCR Representative to the AU and the UN Economic Commission for Africa on the impact of COVID-19 on forced displacement in Africa.

8. The briefing highlighted the fact that in Africa, the coronavirus pandemic has reached countries already struggling to cope with the impact of violent conflict, natural disasters, terrorism with devastating consequences for forcibly displaced persons across the continent.

9. Africa is home to a third of global forcibly displaced persons including, 19.2 million IDPs; 7.8 million refugees and asylum seekers; and 172,000 stateless persons. These groups are more vulnerable to the adverse effects of COVID-19. The United Nations has launched the Global Humanitarian Response Plan, much of which is devoted to the African continent.

2.2. Financial contribution in support of 16 Member States

10. The PRC Sub-Committee financial contribution in support of 16 Member States of the Union affected by various humanitarian crises during the year. The beneficiary countries are as follows South Sudan, Nigeria, Sahrawi, Cameroon, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Madagascar, Lesotho, Mauritius, Senegal, Somalia, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and Sudan. Each of these countries received financial assistance to the tune of USD100,000 to support governmental responses to their specific humanitarian challenges. Sudan which is the country most affected by the flooding in 2020 and the recent large number of refugees from Ethiopia received a sum of USD300,000.

11. The Sub-Committee could not conduct humanitarian assessment missions in these countries in the course of the year due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The lockdown measures, states of emergencies, curfews, border closures and restriction on international travel prevented the deployment of the humanitarian assessment missions during the reporting period.

2.3. PRC Sub-Committee follow-up on the operationalization of the African Union Humanitarian Agency.

12. As in previous years, the PRC Sub-Committee on Refugees has continued to follow-up on the implementation of the AU Assembly Decision Assembly/AU/Dec.604 (XXVI) of 30 January 2016 adopted in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, that call for the establishment of an African Union Humanitarian Agency (AUHA) to respond to the humanitarian challenges in the continent and the subsequent decision of the Executive Council EX.CL/Draft/Dec.2 (XXXVI) adopted in February 2020, in Addis Ababa, that requests the Commission to expedite the validation of the feasibility study on the African Humanitarian Agency with full involvement of Member States and RECs.

13. On 8-9 June 2020, the PRC Sub-Committee attended the webinar involving Member States and Regional Economic Committees (RECs) aimed at the validation of the feasibility study on the operationalization of the AUHA. This meeting adopted the draft feasibility study with amendments.

14. Members of the Sub-Committee attended the subsequent Member States and RECs meeting organized by the Commission on 10 November 2020 for the validation of the statute of the African Union Humanitarian Agency. The Extraordinary session of the STCs on Migration, Refugees and IDPs which was planned to hold virtually on 24 - 27 November 2020, could not be convened by the Commission due to COVID-19. Consequently, therefore, the Extraordinary Session of the STC on Justice and Legal Affairs convened on 27 – 30 November 2020, could not consider the draft Statute for the Agency as originally planned.

15. The draft state of the Agency will be considered by the 4th Ordinary session of the STC on Migration, Refugees, and IDPs scheduled for March 2021, and the STC on Justice and Legal Affairs before submission to the Ordinary Session of the Executive Council in July 2021 for consideration and adoption paving way for the operationalization of the Agency in 2021. The Sub-Committee will continue to follow-up on the operationalization of the AUHA in 2021.

2.4. Participation during the Annual Humanitarian Symposium

16. From 11 to 13 November 2020, the Commission organized and hosted the 8th Annual Humanitarian Symposium on the theme: Humanitarian Action and Silencing the Guns. The three-day humanitarian symposium received wide participation from members of the Sub-Committee on Refugees, which included all AU Member States, and was conceptualized with the following sub-themes : *a) Supporting inclusive Humanitarian Responses to COVID-19 pandemic in Africa; b) Humanitarian Action within the context of the AU theme of the year 2020 : Silencing the Guns : Creating conducive conditions for Africa's Development within Humanitarian context and c) Building the Momentum on the Achievements of 2019 AU Theme of Year on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: Towards Durable Solutions for Forced Displacement in Africa »*

17. Apart from the AU Member States, members of the PRC Sub-Committee on Refugees, the 8th annual Humanitarian Symposium was attended by representatives from AU organs, RECs, partners, media, representatives of displaced persons, civil society organizations, research organization, and youth. The meeting was the occasion for participants to reflect and discuss on the humanitarian responses in of the AU the

context of COVID-19 while taking stock of progress achieved in implementing the AU themes of 2019 and 2020.

18. On the sub-theme relating to the Humanitarian Response to COVID-19 Pandemic in Africa, the Symposium underscored the unprecedented adverse impact of COVID-19 in Africa. This impact is compounded by ongoing conflicts, natural disasters, terrorism and climate change. There is a need for an inclusive national COVID-response plan based on a “whole of society” and centred on human rights approach with the support of the AU particularly the Africa-CDC. These national responses must consider specific risks and vulnerabilities of displaced people and people in detention. The PRC Sub-Committee has an important contribution and role to support this initiative.

19. On the sub-theme relating to Humanitarian Action within the context of the theme of the year 2020, the meeting emphasized the devastating impact of conflicts on civilians, especially women, the youth and children. Conflicts generate massive displacement. Refugees and IDPs face significant challenges including lack of access to basic services. The meeting recognized that the silencing the guns agenda is indeed ambitious but must be pursued with the support of all stakeholders through increased investment including on preventive diplomacy and supporting AU based institutions and mechanisms such as Panel of the Wise, FEMWISE and similar mechanisms at the level of RECs.

20. On the sub-theme relating to Building the Momentum on the Achievements, the meeting expressed strong recognition for the leadership role of the champion of the theme H.E. Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, the President of Equatorial Guinea for steering the successful implementation of 2019 AU Theme of Year on Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons: Towards Durable Solutions for Forced Displacement in Africa. The meeting highlighted the inextricable linkages between the themes of 2019 and 2020 as they both emphasise the need to prevent violent conflicts in Africa.

21. The Symposium further recognized several achievements including the voice and role played by displaced women in the implementation of the 2019 theme of the AU. Five countries namely Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Somalia, and South Sudan ratified the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons (the Kampala Convention) during the period under review increasing the number of ratifications to 31. Despite these achievements, the Symposium recognized the need to do more in ensuring the actual implementation of the Convention.

2.5. Briefing of the Sub-Committee on flooding in Africa

22. On 8-9 June 2020, the Sub-Committee, with support from the Commission, organized an open session that received the two main briefings: (a) Briefing from UNHCR on the impact of the COVID-19 on displaced persons and (b) Briefing from OCHA on flooding in Africa.

23. OCHA demonstrated the millions of people have been impacted by floods across East, West and Central Africa with some 1.5 million of them displaced. In East

Africa, over 4 million people have been affected, including 1.6 million in Somalia; nearly 1.1 million in Ethiopia; over 850,000 in South Sudan; over 350,000 in Kenya; and thousands in Tanzania and Uganda. In Sudan, about 875,000 people have been affected by the country's worst floods in decades. In West and Central Africa, flooding has affected 2.2 million people, more than twice as many as last year. This includes over 515,000 people in Niger; more than 435,000 in Nigeria; and over 285,000 in Chad. Several countries in Southern Africa also experienced flooding earlier in 2020.

24. OCHA underscored that flooding comes at the same time as the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted people's lives and livelihoods and stretched Government and humanitarian resources in many countries. The floods have destroyed houses, infrastructure, crops, and fields, threatening agricultural production, food security, and socio-economic livelihoods.

25. In Sudan, millions were at risk of contracting water and vector-borne diseases. By the end of September, over 1.5 million malaria cases were reported, reaching epidemic levels in 15 out of 18 states, and outbreaks of chikungunya and viral hemorrhagic fever were also reported.

26. OCHA concluded that there are critical needs for investment in development, early warning, and longer-term flood mitigation activities, which many countries across the continent are actively pursuing. However, it is also important to acknowledge that the climate crisis was rapidly outpacing the collective efforts of Member States to prevent and mitigate disasters. An intensification of these efforts must therefore be accompanied by a drive for global action to tackle the climate crisis.

2.6. The Celebration of the World Refugees Day on 20 June 2020

27. On 20 June of each year, the Sub-Committee along with the Commission and its humanitarian partners commemorate The World Refugee Day. The celebration of the 2020 World Refugee Day was constrained by COVID-19 and was, thus, limited to the statement delivered by H.E. Amb. Minata Samate Cessouma, Commissioner for Political Affairs on behalf of the Chairperson of the Commission.

28. The statement encouraged the Member States to ensure that the efforts by governments go beyond addressing the immediate healthcare challenges caused by the COVID-19 pandemic to also comprehensively address the broader socio-economic and political impacts of the pandemic. These include effects of natural disasters and climate change, endemic poverty and hunger, unemployment, social inequalities, lack of clean water, proper shelter and sanitation, urban slums and informal settlements, as well as food insecurity.

29. The statement also highlighted the AU theme of the year 2020 "Silencing the Guns: Creating Conducive Conditions for Africa's Development" and highlighted that the effective prevention, management, and resolution of violent conflicts will go a long way towards ensuring durable solutions to forced displacement in Africa. Efforts to implement the global ceasefire should be intensified to implement sustainable solutions for durable peace and stability in Africa.

2.7. Meeting of the Executive Council (EXCOM), UN High Commissioners Programme

30. Members of the PRC Sub-Committee on Refugees could not travel to Geneva to attend the 72nd Ordinary Session of the Executive Council of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee due to COVID-19. Instead, the AU Representation Office in Geneva attended the meeting on behalf of the AU.

31. The AU statement underscored the unprecedented time that the 2020 EXCOM was convened characterized by the COVID-19 pandemic that created multi-dimensional challenges and risks to economies and the development prospects aspirations of communities and countries across the world especially those in developing countries and to displaced communities and individuals.

32. The impact of COVID-19 in these fragile economies, however, increases as countries struggle with the consequences of jobs and livelihood losses, extended school closures, and extreme pressure on key services particularly in health. Despite the joint call by the UN and AU for a ceasefire, conflicts are raging unabated in the Sahel, Lake Chad region, Libya, and Mozambique.

33. The Statement further highlighted the humanitarian and developmental consequences of the devastating flooding which have resulted in lives lost, massive displacement, diminished livelihoods, and destruction of property in many countries across Africa as well as the locust infestation and Army worm which have also devastated agriculture and livelihood in many African countries.

34. On a positive note, the statement saluted the five AU Member States that have ratified the Kampala Convention (Ethiopia, Equatorial Guinea, Mozambique, Somalia, South Sudan) through the advocacy made by the AU and UNHCR during the year 2019.

3.0. CHALLENGES

35. The Sub-committee was not able to execute some of its planned activities for the year 2020 including Assessment missions to countries due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the reallocation of the AU operational budget to the AU COVID-19 Response Fund managed by Africa-CDC. Consequently, most activities were not implemented including the humanitarian assessment missions.

4.0. CONCLUSION

36. Despite its funding challenges, the PRC Sub-Committee of Refugees, Returnees and Internally Displaced Persons successfully implemented a considerable number of the activities it set out in the 2020 work-plan. It is advised that the remaining activities be carried forward as an integral part of the Sub-Committee's 2021 work-plan.

37. The Bureau of the Sub-Committee will develop the draft work plan and present it to members of the Sub-Committee for consideration and adoption in February / March 2021

5.0. RECOMMENDATIONS

38. Given the multiplicity of humanitarian challenges confronting the Continent and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Africa, it is recommended that the Sub-Committee on Refugees, Returnees and IDPs should:

- a) Continue to sensitize Member States to facilitate the continental effort against the COVID-19 pandemic, among others, by opening up their airspaces to facilitate the delivery of material and equipment for the fight against the pandemic and humanitarian support to the population in need.
- b) Continue to sensitize the Member States on a need for an inclusive COVID-response plan that considers specific risks and vulnerabilities of displaced people and other vulnerable persons
- c) Continue to advocate for the implementation of sustainable solutions for lasting peace and stability by addressing the root causes of displacement of refugees and IDPs in the Continent.
- d) Continue the promotion of African Union legal instruments on humanitarian issues.
- e) Continue to follow-up on the operationalisation of the African Union Humanitarian Agency with the expectation that it will begin operations in 2021.
- f) Seek opportunities to raise awareness of appropriate response to early warnings of humanitarian crises resulting from both conflicts, terrorism, natural disasters and climate change.
- g) Collaborate with the Sub-Committee on SEAF to convene the Continental Humanitarian / pledging conference in order to replenish the SEAF fund.

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