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Written statement* submitted by Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association, a non- governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[4 February 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



“Silencing The Guns” Initiative In Africa

The African Union launched the “Silencing the Guns” Initiative hoping to end wars and civil conflicts and prevent gender-based violence and genocide.

Challenges to the “Silencing the Guns” Initiative in Africa:

The roadmap to the “Silencing the Guns” Initiative, adopted in Lusaka, the capital of Zambia in 2016 lacked clarity. It did not include a viable implementation action plan with clear measurable indicators for the implementation of this initiative. To avoid this gap, the African Union adopted a framework in February 2022 to monitor and evaluate the initiative, and the development of an implementation plan to guide the contribution of key actors is underway. Nevertheless, there is still a slowdown in defining specific roles for all non-governmental actors entrusted with implementing the initiative(1). The “Silencing the Guns” initiative also faces additional challenges, such as the growth of armed conflicts, the acquisition of weapons by civilians and non-state groups, and the limited awareness of the initiative.

First: increasing armed conflicts in Africa:

Of the 32 armed conflicts in the world in 2021, almost 15 armed conflicts took place in Africa, with (47%) of the total armed conflicts in the world(2). These conflicts often intersect with the continued flow of illegal weapons in Africa, as violence, Conflict, and the inability to control the borders are natural results of the inability to prevent arms and smuggling. These conflicts make Africa an open market for arms imports, whether legally or illegally; and make African governments compelled to increase military spending, which reduces budgets and development spending, ultimately undermining the achievement of sustainable development goals.

According to the latest available statistics, military spending in Africa reached about \$39.7 billion in 2021, based on data from 48 countries in Africa. It is 1.2% over than total military spending in 2020 and 8% more than total spending in 2018(3). To address the risks represented in the spread of terrorist groups, some countries have raised their armed budgets. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, has raised its 2023 military budget by about 300% compared to 2022(4), and the tendency of countries to increase their military budgets undermines and affects efforts of sustainable development goals, the African Union agenda, and the African Development Bank High 5 priority (the high 5s)(5), even with increased spending “Silencing the Guns” in Africa remains an unattainable goal. Especially in light of the lack of initiatives aimed at collecting weapons, the weakness of social cohesion in most African countries(6), and the proliferation of illegal weapons in the possession of armed groups, for example in the Sahel region, eight civilians are killed daily due to illegal weapons.

In a similar context, the illegal trade in arms in the African continent was and still is the most important factor in impeding any efforts toward “silencing guns” in Africa. Therefore, if African countries are serious about implementing the initiative, they must first realize the active sources of these weapons and destroy it. In Ethiopia, instability led to the trafficking of illegal firearms, especially in light of the seizure of some government stockpiles of weapons and ammunition, and there is a strong link between the perpetuation of violence and the continuation of social grievances, and the continuation of the illegal arms trade in Ethiopia(7). Access to the United Nations’ systematic investigations into the illicit flow of arms is an important source for these countries to exchange experiences and take note of the lessons learned(8).

Monitoring so-called artisanal or improvised weapons may represent an additional step in “silencing the guns”, as about 22 countries in Africa manufacture small arms and light weapons (SALW). For example, In Ghana, the artisanal weapons industry thrives locally, and 80 % of the crimes are reported to have been used. In other countries, such as Côte d’Ivoire, these weapons are classified as illicit weapons(9).

Second: the possession of illegal weapons by civilians and terrorist groups:

What makes it so difficult to fulfill the promise of “silencing the guns” by 2030 is that about 40 million small arms and light weapons (SALW) are in the possession of civilians, including rebel groups and armed militias, which means 80% of the total SALW on the African continent fall into their hands⁽¹⁰⁾, of which fewer than six million are legally registered, compared to about 11 million in possession African countries. This makes the need to collect these weapons and confine them to the state a necessity that can't delay. The proliferation of these weapons has been fueled by the increasing numbers of terrorist groups in West Africa and increasing in the demand for SALW in this region, as the areas in which these groups operate were already illegal arms markets from conflict and post-conflict areas, especially In Libya, Liberia, and Burkina Faso.

Confining arms to the state requires further initiatives aimed at accelerating efforts in line with Target No. 16.4 of the Sustainable Development, which seeks to significantly reduce illicit arms flows by 2030. Additional funding from international donors and States members of the Human Rights Council may also expand support for these initiatives, especially since a large part of the funding of the African Union budget comes from external donors⁽¹¹⁾, who did not support the initiative adequately, according to reliable reports.

Third: Role of Civil Society in the “Silencing the Guns” Initiative:

Raising awareness of the “Silencing the Guns” agenda is one of the important steps that the AU must move towards accelerating the work of the initiative. To raise awareness of this initiative, all key stakeholders, including civil society, must be involved. This requires giving more opportunities to civil society and local communities to participate in the initiative, and there are noteworthy examples of the role of civil society in working to “silence the guns”. For example, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association has participated in supporting the project "The Role of African Youth in Silencing the Guns towards Sustainable Peace" with 41 young people from 18 countries on the African continent. Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association believes that the effectiveness of the Initiative in achieving its objectives is not only related to the collection and destruction of weapons but also the awareness of all with its noble goals, including citizens, and what this initiative could lead to if it was circulated to the African continent, especially reducing military spending to confront terrorist groups and diverting this spending in favor of economic development projects, which could achieve prosperity for the peoples of African countries.

Another example is in the Sahel and West Africa. The International Coalition for the Sahel, a non-governmental coalition of civil society organizations with international funding, was launched to provide a more collective response to the challenges of the Sahel region that provides better protection for the civilian population. One of the axes of this coalition's work was to contribute to the “Silencing the Guns” initiative in Africa. Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights Association also believes that international and African donors have an important role to play in funding research and initiatives led by Think tanks, research institutions, and civil society to consider non-traditional solutions to prevent the proliferation of weapons and stop their use. Despite the launch of the African Amnesty Month for the handover and collection of illegal weapons, which is represented in the person who voluntarily surrenders his illegal weapons will not be subjected to imprisonment or any other legal procedures, despite other similar initiatives initiated by different African countries, but there is a limited response to these initiatives, which is hindering the implementation of the initiative only in a narrow launch in the African continent.

Recommendations

- Member states should increase the funding for initiatives aimed at restricting arms to African countries within the framework of the “Silencing the Guns” initiative

- Defining the specific roles of civil society for the implementation of the initiative within the framework of action adopted by the African Union in February 2022
 - Increasing funding for research and initiatives led by Think tanks, African research institutions, and civil society to consider innovative solutions for the non-proliferation of weapons, border control, and smuggling networks
 - Creating national databases showing weapons permitted by civilians and weapons collected and executed to measure progress on the initiative
 - Accelerating the process of launching security reform and peace-building projects on the African continent with the participation of all major stakeholders.
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- 1) Will Africa be able to stay the course to silence the guns by 2030?, <https://bit.ly/3XYHf1y>
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- 3) Silencing the Guns in Africa, <https://bit.ly/405xNv3>
- 4) DRC: army budget increases by 300% in 2023, <https://bit.ly/3YaIwmd>
- 5) African Development Bank releases new report linking security, investment and development, <https://bit.ly/3Y9fZgP>
- 6) Areas Of Arms In Africa: The African Union Facing Identity Challenges, <https://bit.ly/3kNA0Lo>
- 7) Firearms and Ammunition Trafficking in Eastern Africa, Page 11, <https://bit.ly/3HkqAhQ>
- 8) Illicit Small Arms And Light Weapons In Sub-Saharan Africa, https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2022-12/salw_ssa_2.pdf
- 9) Stemming the flow of illicit arms in Africa, <https://bit.ly/3WKvfiX>
- 10) Ibid, <https://bit.ly/3HGUpdS>
- 11) Silencing the guns in Africa beyond 2020: Challenges from a governance and political perspective, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311886.2021.1995222>