African defense and security forces facing the COVID-19 pandemic

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In response to the rapid spread of Covid-19, many African States have adopted measures restricting the movement of people, limiting freedom of movement and the right of assembly and prohibiting large-scale gatherings. As in other countries around the world where similar measures have been adopted, defense and security forces play a leading role in the implementation of these measures. For example, Côte d'Ivoire and Senegal have declared a state of emergency, which makes it possible to govern by decree or simple administrative measures, while Togo has declared a "state of health emergency" in accordance with constitutional provisions: the Togolese authorities have also simultaneously decided to set up a special anti-pandemic unit, composed of 5,000 defense and security forces personnel, to be deployed throughout the country to enforce the measures adopted. Curfews have also been decreed in many capitals, such as Dakar, Nouakchott and Ouagadougou, where the security forces are responsible for enforcing the ban on movement at nightfall.

Henceforth, enforcing the various coercive and emergency measures in accordance with human rights and the rule of law, as well as the principle of proportionality in the use of force, is a major challenge for the African defense and security apparatus. Since the entry into force of the various provisions, accusations against the security forces have indeed multiplied, relayed by the press and amplified by social networks, supported by videos,

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1 Available at https://globalbrief.ca/2020/04/les-forces-africaines-de-defense-et-de-securite-face-a-la-pandemie/. Original in French. Own translation.

Niagalé Bagayoko | **African defense and security forces facing the COVID-19 pandemic**

for example in Abidjan, Dakar and Ouagadougou. In Chad, DRC and Kenya, journalists have also been targeted by the security forces for their coverage of the restrictions - as reported by the ACLED project,[2] while in Niger, Amnesty International has denounced the arrest or summons by the police of journalists, for their treatment of the epidemic. Some of the images - including scenes of humiliation, degrading treatment or physical violence - demonstrate once again, if proof were needed, the imperative need to consider respect for human rights and human dignity as an integral part of the professional skills of the defense and security forces. The numerous press articles devoted, both by the international and national media, to the role of the defense and security forces in the implementation of measures related to the fight against the virus and the interventions of civil society organizations, particularly in certain civic spaces that tend to be restricted, demonstrate that these different actors intend to play their rightful role in terms of public control of security systems in the context of an unprecedented crisis. The internal inspection mechanisms within the defense and security forces themselves are also called upon to play an essential role in this respect. In South Africa, for example, the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID) is already conducting several investigations to determine the exact conditions of deaths suspected of being linked to the excessive use of force by the police units responsible for enforcing the "lock-down" decreed by the authorities.

In addition, in many countries in situations of open conflict, crisis or post-crisis situations, the defense and security forces have in recent years been the subject of allegations, often proven, of abuse or abuses against populations or certain communities, particularly in Mali, Burkina Faso, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic. In Guinea-Conakry, the defense and security forces, deployed in recent months to repress demonstrations opposing the constitutional reform that would allow President Alpha Condé to run for a third term, are now responsible for enforcing the state of emergency declared to deal with Covid-19. The serious acts of violence that may have been committed by some units of the armed forces of the above-mentioned countries should prompt utmost vigilance in considering the prerogatives now granted to the military, gendarmes, police or border services deployed in the context of the current health crisis.

Finally, it is essential to delimit as clearly and strictly as possible the respective responsibilities of the different categories of forces deployed, with the mobilization of military person-

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2 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, https://acleddata.com/about-acled/

Niagalé Bagayoko | **African defense and security forces facing the COVID-19 pandemic**

nel as a third category force in the context of explicitly formulated requisitions to prevent any undue and abusive involvement of these defense forces in missions to maintain public order. The possible use of intelligence services to gather a certain amount of disease-related information within communities will also need to be closely monitored.

However, the contribution of African defense and security forces to the collective fight against the current pandemic should also be considered from a constructive perspective. From this point of view, it is first of all important to look at the previous experiences that the continent's armed forces have accumulated in their involvement in the fight against HIV/AIDS (particularly in southern Africa) and the Ebola virus (particularly in West Africa and the Mano River region as well as in the DRC, often with the assistance of bilateral and multilateral partners), both to contain the spread of these diseases within their ranks and to contribute to the national effort to contain them.

Similarly, the measures now being taken by some military units to limit the spread of the disease among their own personnel deserve particular attention. For example, in Nigeria, the military has activated an internal process to prevent the outbreak within the barracks, in conjunction with other security services including the Nigeria Police, the Nigeria Security and Civil Defense Corps and the Fire Services. The protection of personnel of the defense and security forces against the spread of the virus and the eventual care of infected personnel and their families by their respective institutions, is indeed a crucial issue now, as demonstrated by the shortcomings and difficulties encountered by the systems put in place within some Western armies.

Furthermore, the health crisis linked to the spread of Covid-19 also calls for a rethink of the role of certain services of the defense and security forces, in particular that of the armed forces' health services as well as the engineering services. In Morocco, for example, it was decided in mid-March 2020 that the Royal Armed Forces (FAR) would provide health structures equipped to compensate for the deficit in the health system if necessary. More generally, the experience of certain African armies, such as those of Ghana or Senegal, in the construction of field hospitals, acquired in the framework of cooperation programs or through their experience of crisis management in the UN or bilateral framework, could prove useful in the short term, in the event of overloading of civilian health services. In the longer term, military health services can play an important role in the provision of health

Niagalé Bagayoko | **African defense and security forces facing the COVID-19 pandemic**

care as well as in future vaccination campaigns, should a vaccine be developed. Some training centers, such as the Ecole du Service de Santé des Armées de Lomé (ESSAL), could also in the longer-term work on the lessons learned from the management by African armies of the Covid-19 health crisis.

It is also interesting to note that prison systems, often neglected by public security policies, have received immediate attention from the very beginning of the crisis. In Togo, for example, 1,048 persons detained in several prisons in the country have been released. The same in Niger, where the release of a number of prisoners (including the former President of the National Assembly, Hama Amadou) occurred, and in Senegal, where the former President of Chad, Hissène Habré, along with other detainees, was granted provisional release to protect him from the effects of the virus on his health.

More broadly, the manner in which African defense and security forces will discharge the responsibilities assigned to them in the management of this health crisis could help develop relations of trust with populations and communities, whose cooperation and receptiveness will be essential to ensure the effectiveness of the measures adopted.

For this reason, it is particularly important that the need to work towards increased democratic governance of security systems should not be overlooked. It is already likely that many cooperation programs will be redirected towards support for African health systems, a late and reactive response to calls for such support long before the emergence of the Covid-19 virus. However, it will be important not to lose sight of the fact that the long-term efforts to work towards security systems reform (SSR) must be continued. All too often, changes in donor priorities have been one of the factors explaining the poor progress made in SSR: in recent years, the processes undertaken have often been diverted from their initial objectives - in particular as regards democratic governance, respect for the rule of law and promotion of human rights - by new priorities which have ended up monopolizing the reform agenda (e.g. the fight against terrorism, prevention of violent extremism, the fight against illegal migration). It will of course be necessary to take into account the consequences and lessons learned from the management of the coronavirus pandemic by the African defense and security apparatus. Nevertheless, the structural effort that is essential to strengthen the operationality but also the democratic governance of the African defense and security apparatus, whose crucial role in the future of the continent, beyond the mere

Niagalé Bagayoko | **African defense and security forces facing the COVID-19 pandemic**

response to security crises, is once again demonstrated by this pandemic, should not be abandoned or neglected.

Finally, the crisis linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, more than ever before, calls for consideration of the "human security" approach, conceptualized by the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) as early as 1994, which calls for security to be considered not only from a military angle but also in its social, political, food, environmental, community and health dimensions, as well as in its global and transnational dimension and not only in its national and state-centric dimension.

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