

Kenya pushes Western Sahara issue back on AU agenda

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A man poses with a Western Saharan flag as he takes part in a demonstration in support of the Sahrawi people's rights in Malaga on November 28, 2020. PHOTO | AFP

Summary

- A provisional programme for Nairobi as the February Chair of the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) shows Kenya wants heads of state and government to hold a session on the “consideration of the situation in Western Sahara” which has seen renewed violence.
- In the last three years, Kenya and Morocco have bickered in public over Nairobi’s push to have Western Sahara decide its future, via a possible referendum.
- Last year, Morocco lobbied for the session to be cancelled, seeing the agenda as the work of

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Algeria as pushed by then AU Commissioner for Peace and Security Smail Chergui.

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discussions
on the
contested
territory of
Western
Sahara,
setting the
stage for a
possible
counter-
lobbying from
Morocco

which claims it is part of its land.

A provisional programme for Nairobi as the February Chair of the AU Peace and Security Council (PSC) shows Kenya wants heads of state and government to hold a session on the “consideration of the situation in Western Sahara” which has seen renewed violence.

The final programme schedule is expected on Saturday this week, but Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta will speak on the sidelines of the upcoming African Union Heads of State Summit on Sunday in Addis Ababa on “critical issues impacting Peace and Security in Africa” including rising extremism, instability, climate change and urban violence.

However, a tentative programme issued earlier in the week says Kenya has planned for a virtual meeting on February 16 “on the situation in Western Sahara.”

“The meeting on Western Sahara will be a follow up to a previous session of the PSC at summit level that was chaired by HE President Kenyatta on March 9, 2021.

“The objective of the meeting will be to examine the conditions that have given rise to current tensions and violence and assesses whether the policy measures and strategies adopted at the international, regional and national levels are bringing peace to Saharawi,” a note of the programme said, referring to the segment of Western Sahara formally known as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic which is governed by the POLISARIO Front, exiled in Algeria.

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The 15-member Council also includes Benin, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Djibouti, Egypt, Ghana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, Malawi, Ethiopia and Algeria. All members rotate in a staggering three-year cycle

and they deliberate and decide on continental issues of peace and security will also discuss violent extremism, on the same day. But it is the Sahrawi issue that could raise storm.

In the last three years, Kenya and Morocco have bickered in public over Nairobi's push to have Western Sahara decide its future, via a possible referendum.

Last year in March, when Kenya chaired the AU Peace and Security Council, President Uhuru Kenyatta held a session on 'sustainable peace in Africa' which called for "immediate ceasefire" in the Western Sahara and requested the African Union troika and the AU Special Envoy for Western Sahara, Joachim Chissano, to "reinvigorate support to the UN-led mediation."

It urged UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres to make the pending appointment of a Special Envoy to the MINURSO, the UN Mission to Western Sahara, to support peace efforts there. Mr Guterres has since October last year appointed the envoy Italian diplomat Staffan de Mistura as his Personal Envoy to Western Sahara and the UN Security Council has since called upon "Morocco, the POLISARIO Front, Algeria and Mauritania to cooperate more fully with each other, including through building additional trust, and with the United Nations."

Last year, Morocco lobbied for the session to be cancelled, seeing the agenda as the work of Algeria as pushed by then AU Commissioner for Peace and Security Smail Chergui.

Kenya has argued the conflict in Western Sahara had delayed regional integration efforts in the Maghreb region.

Nairobi, however, argues Sahrawi issue was always part of a series of issues central to its running theme of peace and security in Africa, alongside violent extremism, urban conflict, climate change and other conflicts on the continent.

Last year, Moroccan Minister of Foreign Affairs Nasser Bourita had written to Kenyan counterpart Raychelle Omamo, saying there was no consensus on discussing Sahrawi.

“The theme of the discussions risks provoking severe divisions among the PSC members who would be more comfortable to examine unifying and priority issues, over which there is basic consensus especially during the challenging period of Covid-19 pandemic,” Bourita argued in a March 1 letter to Nairobi.

“The Troika should be the sole mechanism of Africa’s bid to resolve the issue, and which affirms exclusivity of the UN Security Council on this matter,” he said referring to the three-member group of former, current and future Chairpersons of the African Union normally known as the Troika on the Saharawi question. At the time, it included South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, DRC’s Felix Tshisekedi and Senegal’s Macky Sall.

Western Sahara, a region in the north-west of Africa was initially a Spanish colony but was taken over by Morocco, which now considers it part of its territory, although a part of it is administered by the government of the Polisario Front.

A United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution proposed a referendum voted for by natives of the region, to decide between independence and integration into Morocco. The Polisario Front favoured separation while the Kingdom of Morocco favoured integration. The referendum has never been held despite the AU's endorsement, however.

In 2020, then US President Donald Trump recognised Morocco's rule over Western Sahara, something the African Union promptly opposed and saying the matter has to be resolved through the referendum as ordered by the UNSC.