

Security and trade top issues at annual African Union summit

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Addis Ababa, February 18 (RHC)— African leaders are meeting in Addis Ababa for an annual summit aiming to jumpstart a faltering trade deal while also focusing on the continent's most pressing challenges, which include armed conflict and a worsening food crisis.

As the continent reels from a record drought in the Horn of Africa and deadly violence in the Sahel region and the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo, the two-day African Union (AU) meeting in Ethiopia will look to address these issues and accelerate a free-trade pact launched in 2020.

The African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA) is billed as the biggest in the world in terms of population, gathering 54 of 55 African countries, with Eritrea the only holdout. African nations currently trade only about 15 percent of their goods and services with each other, and the AfCFTA aims to boost that by 60 percent by 2034 with the elimination of almost all tariffs.

But implementation has fallen well short of that goal, running into hurdles including disagreements over tariff reductions and border closures caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the summit's sessions will be held behind closed doors at AU headquarters in the Ethiopian capital.

A main focus of the summit will be on trying to achieve ceasefires in the Sahel and the eastern DRC where the M23 armed group has seized swaths of territory and sparked a diplomatic dispute between Kinshasa and Rwanda, which is accused of backing the rebels.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that Africa needed "action for peace" to combat rising violence and promote democratic freedoms on the continent.

"I am deeply concerned about the recent rise in violence by armed groups in the eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and the rise of terrorist groups in the Sahel and elsewhere," Guterres said at the start of the summit.

At a mini-summit on Friday, leaders of the seven-nation East African Community called for all armed groups to withdraw from occupied areas in the eastern DRC by the end of next month. "We cannot walk away from the people of DRC, history will be very harsh on us. We must do what we have to do," Kenya's President William Ruto told the meeting.

Al Jazeera's Malcolm Webb, reporting from Addis Ababa, said all previous meetings in recent months involving presidents Felix Tshisekedi of the DRC and Paul Kagame of Rwanda, and sometimes other regional leaders have not amounted to any change on the ground. "The M23 armed group has continued to seize territory from the Congolese government, and has been increasingly accused of atrocities and abuses against civilians," he said.

Created in 2002 following the disbanding of the Organization of African Unity, the AU comprises all 55 African countries, with a population of 1.3 billion people. While the bloc has been credited with taking a stand against coups, it has long been criticised as ineffectual.

Kagame is due to present a report on the reform of AU institutions. He has been urging the AU to implement major reforms for years, including a push towards financial independence, with the bloc largely dependent on foreign donors.

Comoros President Azali Assoumani, leader of the small Indian Ocean archipelago of almost 900,000 people, is due to take over the one-year rotating AU chairmanship from Senegal's Macky Sall.

Junta-ruled Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea, which have been suspended from the AU, cannot participate in this weekend's summit. However, diplomats of the three Sahel nations are in Addis Ababa to push for readmission.

Al Jazeera's Webb said that for the AU, and the international community generally, elections with irregularities are not a "grave concern." "Military coups for the African Union are considered over the line," he added.

"For return to civilian rule, that decision on Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso lies with the African Union's Peace and Security Council."

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