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AFRICA, UNITED NATIONS SHOULD IMPROVE STRATEGIES FOR COUNTERING TERRORISM, EXPERTS SAY AT ADDIS ABABA MEETING

NEW YORK, 15 June (Office of the Special Adviser on Africa) -- The recent move away from rhetoric about a “global war on terror”, which has dominated international responses since 11 September 2001, is a welcome development, noted experts on terrorism who met recently under United Nations auspices in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. That shift has now created space for a new discourse on terrorism and counter-terrorism in Africa, one that is better shaped by African realities and priorities.

The 3-4 June experts group meeting on “African Perspectives on International Terrorism” was convened by the United Nations Office of the Special Adviser on Africa. In addition to the Office officials, participants included representatives from the African Union, regional economic communities, members of the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force and non-governmental experts, among others.

Patrick Hayford, Director of the Office of the Special Adviser, explained that, while one goal of the meeting was to explore ways to improve African awareness and understanding of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, adopted by the General Assembly in 2006, its participants also highlighted the need to “strengthen the African voice in the global discussion on terrorism in New York.”

The meeting provided a forum for experts to discuss African perspectives on terrorism, as a first step towards enriching the ongoing global debate on terrorism and developing ways in which the global and African perspectives could more effectively reinforce each other. Recognizing that many in Africa have tended to view the previous discourse on terrorism as a distraction from more pressing challenges confronting the continent, the participants emphasized the importance of addressing issues of terrorism and counter-terrorism against a broader background. That wider context includes the many other complex security challenges facing Africa, such as trafficking in drugs, firearms and persons, ongoing civil wars, post-conflict reconstruction and the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, as well as chronic poverty and underdevelopment.

The adoption in 2006 of the United Nations Global Strategy had already marked a step away from a “hard” military style towards countering terrorism, by taking a more nuanced approach that anchors terrorism firmly within the criminal justice system and endeavours to strike the right balance between human rights and security. The participants noted that United States President Barack Obama’s new approach to counter-terrorism has fostered a global climate that is more favourable to the United Nations Strategy’s emphasis on addressing the political and economic conditions that have been conducive to the spread of terrorism.

Despite Africa’s resource and other constraints, the meeting’s participants observed, it was the first region in the world to develop a regional counter-terrorism framework. That included the 1999 Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism of the previous Organization of African Unity, followed by the African Union’s 2002 Plan of Action on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in Africa and a 2004 African Union Protocol to the Organization of African Unity Convention. The African Union has also established an Algiers Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism to help foster regional approaches to countering terrorism.

To maximize the impact of the United Nations Global Strategy on the continent, the experts stressed that implementation must take into account local and subregional contexts, with African institutions and other stakeholders assuming key roles. The African Union and its Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism should continue to take the lead in raising awareness of the threat and stimulating more information-sharing and capacity-building activities on the continent. Africa's subregional economic communities also need to be empowered and develop a stronger voice on issues of terrorism.

Although many parts of Africa share similar vulnerabilities to terrorist activities, participants observed that the threat level varies from one part of the continent to another. It is thus unsurprising that there is neither a common perception of the threat nor a single African perspective. In such a vast and diverse continent, most recent terrorist attacks have been limited to a few locales, such as Algeria, Morocco, the Sahel and the Horn. There and elsewhere, some continue to view terrorism as a predominately "Western" problem, as many Africans are more directly affected by disease, crime, poverty and hunger than by global terrorism.

The experts noted that building public support for counter-terrorism in Africa will continue to be problematic where Governments lack respect for human rights and the rule of law. Participants commented that, in the wake of 9/11, a number of African States, often under pressure from the West and the United Nations Security Council, adopted counter-terrorism legislation that was inconsistent with international human rights norms. The participants thus agreed on the need to devote more attention to ensuring a human rights-based approach to countering terrorism on the continent, and welcomed efforts by the African Union to incorporate human rights into its counter-terrorism work.

Participants in the expert meeting pointed to the critical roles that civil society and the media could play in helping African States increase awareness of the threat that terrorist activities can pose to local communities and development priorities, as well as to deepen public support for Government actions that address terrorism in ways that uphold the rule of law and do not hamper the work of civil society. Unfortunately, most African Governments continue to view counter-terrorism as an exclusive Government responsibility and therefore limit the flow of information to the media and civil society. Greater civil society action is nevertheless critical for ensuring a "bottom-up" approach to addressing terrorism, and the African Union, regional economic communities and United Nations can help provide more space for such involvement.

Turning to the United Nations engagement with Africa on issues of terrorism, the experts emphasized that implementation of the United Nations Global Strategy should also reflect a "bottom-up" approach, rather than be dictated by stakeholders in New York or other United Nations centres. This could be done, a number of experts suggested, through greater information sharing, more field missions and United Nations-supported programmes for building African capacities and additional efforts to bring African voices to the work of the Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee and other United Nations initiatives. The Office of the Special Adviser could play a useful role in facilitating greater engagement between the United Nations in New York and African stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector and the media. The United Nations system should better integrate its traditional counter-terrorism work with broader United Nations efforts to promote governance and stability in Africa.

Besides strengthening its Algiers-based Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism, the African Union should convene a high-level meeting on holistic approaches to terrorism, a number of participants recommended. Such a meeting would aim to develop initiatives that could be taken by African stakeholders -- especially the African Union and its New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and African Peer Review Mechanism -- so as to ensure that recent changes in the global counter-terrorism approach are well reflected on the African continent.

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