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## **Joint Op-ed by Amb. Ramtane Lamamra, African Union High Representative for Silencing the Guns, and Izumi Nakamitsu, United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs**

### **Pursuing efforts to silence the guns in Africa**

The 29th Summit of the African Union (AU), held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 3 to 4 July 2017, declared the month of September of each year, till 2020, as “Africa Amnesty Month for the surrender and collection of illicit small arms and light weapons (SALW)”. It is also to be recalled that the 33rd AU Summit held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, from 9-10 February 2020 adopted the theme of the Year 2020 as “Silencing the Guns – Creating Conducive Conditions for Africa’s Development”. The year 2020 was, therefore, intended to give greater emphasis to efforts at national, regional and continental levels on Silencing the Guns, and also a culmination for the Africa Amnesty Month.

However, the year 2020, so far, has been a year of unprecedented challenges and opportunities for Africa in the continent’s onward march towards sustainable peace and development as envisioned in the 2017 Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silencing the Guns in Africa by 2020. The Coronavirus pandemic has compounded efforts of AU Member States for greater economic and social progress. It has also compromised and slowed efforts for revamped peace initiatives on the continent, from Libya to Mali, the Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel regions where violent extremism and terrorism have continued unabated. Badly needed access to conflict and crisis areas by humanitarian actors has severely been affected. The peacebuilding efforts and reach of support and relief efforts to the affected Member States has been limited. Hence, the dual impact of the conflict and the damage caused by the coronavirus pandemic on the most vulnerable, namely refugees, internally displaced persons, returnees and migrants, as well as youth, women, children and the elderly has been exacerbated.

In the face of these challenges, windows of opportunity have opened up: The 33rd AU Summit re-energized collective political will for AU Member States to forge ahead and silence the guns on the continent. The Summit recommended that in implementing activities under the theme of the year, special attention is paid by the AU, Regional Economic Communities and Regional Mechanisms for Conflict Prevention, Management and Resolution (RECs/RMs) and Member States to hardcore security issues/challenges, whose resolution is expected to generate more dividends in to the African efforts to silence the guns and promote a conflict-free Africa. In March 2020 the United Nations Secretary-General and the AU Commission Chairperson called for all belligerents to observe ceasefires throughout the Coronavirus period in order to allow unimpeded humanitarian access to conflict areas and to free up resources for addressing the COVID-19 global pandemic. Building on the momentum and commitment boldly expressed by the Heads of State and Government of the African Union through the Silencing the Guns in Africa by 2020, the international community, through United Nations Security Council



Resolution 2457 (2019), has underscored the importance of the two joint UN-AU partnership frameworks in galvanizing concrete and practical system and commission wide support towards helping Africa make tangible progress towards achieving its goal of creating a conflict free continent. Resolution 2457 (2019) is, indeed, an expression of the readiness of the international community to support the implementation of the African Union Master Roadmap of Practical Steps to Silence the Guns in Africa by year 2020.

The Resolution also creates an opportunity that should be seized by States and all entities working for peace and security in Africa. There is no doubt that sustained political will and resources are important factors for translating into reality the vision of an Africa in which guns are silent, armed conflict are a thing of the past and peace, security and economic progress are the order of the day.

It is in spirit that, mindful of the provision of UN Security Council Resolution 2457 (2019), the United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs and the African Union Commission, with financial contributions from Germany and Japan, have launched a project to support Amnesty Month activities undertaken by Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia and Kenya in 2020. The project is supporting these countries in sensitization and awareness campaigns on illegal gun-ownership and illicit flows of weapons; collection and destruction of illicit small arms and light weapons and their ammunition; and training of law enforcement officials.

While it is understood that illegal gun-ownership by civilian populations and illicit trafficking and procurement of weapons by armed groups is often a symptom of a much deeper governance problem, we must not lose sight of the fact that it is a central problem in efforts to “Silencing the Guns”. A holistic approach to addressing the issue effectively demands sustained efforts by all segments of society. It is not a government affair alone. Civil society organizations and grass-roots community have a role to play. The inclusion of these actors in government dedicated institutions such as the national commissions or national focal points for combating illicit flows of weapons is a valid proposition.

Perceived from this angle, the AU Master Roadmap for Practical Steps of Silencing the Guns in Africa by 2020, together with its September Africa Amnesty Month constitute concrete policy responses to the Sustainable Development Goal Target 16.4 which calls for significant reduction in illicit arms flows by 2030.

African Governments have made headway in recent years, partly by establishing national commissions, national focal points and points of contact in their governments to tackle illicit arms flows. These institutions are vital in achieving coordinated national efforts for the implementation of national, regional and global policies and instruments on illicit trade and trafficking in small arms and light weapons.

While the novel coronavirus pandemic has set back some efforts, the United Nations and the African Union Commission have invigorated their partnership under Chapter VIII of the United Nations Charter, and will continue to work together towards “Silencing the Guns” in Africa and related peace and security issues.