Statement by Huang Xia, Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region
United Nations Security Council
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Mr. President,
Distinguished Members of the Council,

1. Thank you for this opportunity to present the Secretary-General’s latest report on the implementation of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework for the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the region.

2. At the outset, at a time when our world is going through an extraordinary public health crisis, allow me to express my solidarity and offer my condolences to the Governments and the peoples of the Great Lakes countries, as well as to those elsewhere in the world, for the many victims of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Mr. President, this pandemic has not spared the Great Lakes region, where the number of contaminations is growing, albeit at a moderate rate compared to other regions in the world. To date, according to the WHO, more than 4766 cases and nearly 131 deaths have been reported in the region. While the capacity to contain the pandemic differs amongst the member states in the region, approaches to limit its spread are similar: restrictions of movements, quarantine measures, social distancing, curfews, suspension of international flights, and closing of borders except for movement of cargo etc.

4. At this stage, these measures seem to have enabled the region to curb the progression of the pandemic. However, on the economic front, the negative repercussions of the public health crisis are already significant; there has been an almost complete cessation of activities in critical sectors, such as air transport, tourism, agriculture, petroleum and other extractive industries. In the long term, these preventive measures, combined with the reallocation of resources to address the health crisis, are likely to weaken the already fragile economies, with possible implications for peace, security and development of the region. I would like to congratulate the countries and institutions of the region for the actions taken with diligent to contain the pandemic, including measures to stimulate the economy, targeting vulnerable populations as well as the private sector.

5. While encouraging, these measures should be bolstered. The countries of the region, some of which are emerging from decades of conflicts, will need the steadfast and resolute support from members of the international community, in order to deal with and recover, in a sustainable manner, from the pandemic and its consequences. I would like to express my utmost gratitude to the Secretary-General for his foresight, leadership and unwavering
mobilization of the international community to foster greater solidarity in the fight against the pandemic, including through the alleviation of debts. I would like to welcome the G-20 decision to institute debt moratorium until the end of this year, which should greatly relieve low income African countries and thus help them, I hope, strengthen their health infrastructures. I also thank the partners and donors who have already announced significant donations for the African continent.

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6. Like elsewhere, the pandemic has forced the countries of the region to redirect their priorities. This has affected the implementation of the PSC Framework, resulting in the postponement of two major events namely, the Great Lakes Investment and Trade Conference initially scheduled in Kigali, Rwanda, on 18-20 March; and the 10th Summit of the Regional Oversight Mechanism which was to be held in Kinshasa, the DRC, on 27-29 March. Despite these postponement, I continue to work with the signatory countries and the guarantor institutions of the PSC Framework, namely the African Union, the International Conference on the Great Lakes Region (ICGLR), as well as the Southern African Development Community (SADC), to maintain focus in the delivery of these events and to make further progress in the implementation of the PSC Framework.

7. In this regard, Mr. President, I would like to follow up on my first address to the Council in October 2019, which I delivered with a note of optimism. This optimism remains, given several events which had occurred over the past year with positive implications for the region. These include efforts to stabilize the governing coalition following the peaceful political transition in the DRC, progress achieved to normalize relations between Uganda and Rwanda thanks to the good offices of Angola and the DRC, the formation of a unity government in South Sudan, and the diplomatic settlement by the Governments of the DRC and Zambia of their border dispute. I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Presidents Lourenço, Tshisekedi, Kagame and Museveni for their exemplary efforts to defuse tensions between countries of the region, in line with their commitments under the PSC Framework. I strongly encourage them to sustain these joint efforts and I would like to reassure them of the readiness to support at all times.

8. Progress has also been made in the fight against armed groups operating in eastern DRC. At the initiative of the DRC Government, there have been efforts to increase coordination and exchange of information between the Armed Forces of the DRC, Burundi, Uganda, and Rwanda, in order to optimize military operations against armed groups. In support of these regional efforts, I have, along with the other Guarantors of the PSC Framework, facilitated consultations between the Heads of Intelligence Services of Burundi, Uganda, the DRC, Rwanda and Tanzania. These have enabled the concerned countries to identify non-military measures, including thorough the proposal to establish a Contact and Coordination Group, to complement ongoing military operations against armed groups. This and other recommendations will be submitted for approval to the Heads of State of the region at the next
Summit of the Regional Oversight Mechanism of the PSC Framework. In the meantime, I would like to request the Council’s support to these efforts to enable these countries to secure the required technical and financial support for the operationalization of the mechanisms and measures which will be adopted by the Heads of State of the region.

9. There has also been progress in the area of regional integration. On 3 December 2019, Burundi, the DRC and Tanzania signed an agreement to build a railway connecting the three countries to boost trade in the region. The next Great Lakes Investment and Trade Conference, which my Office is organizing with the ICGRL and the Government of Rwanda, under the patronage of President Paul Kagame, will also be an opportunity to promote such initiatives as it will have as its theme “Cross-border investment and trade as catalysts for regional integration”. This conference will also be a great opportunity to stimulate the enormous economic potential of the region, through responsible investments that should benefit the countries and peoples of the Great Lakes region.

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10. Despite this progress, challenges remain. The greatest challenge undoubtedly remains the activities by armed groups, including in the illicit exploitation of natural resources, which diminishes trust among countries of the region. The resulting insecurity caused by armed groups, especially in eastern DRC where civilians continue to pay the highest price, also fuels the humanitarian crisis in the region.

11. I urge all armed groups to immediately cease their acts of violence against civilians, refrain from blocking humanitarian access, and to engage resolutely in the existing Disarmament, Demobilization, Repatriation, Reintegration and Resettlement (DDR/RR) programs. I would also like to recall that their crimes will not go unpunished and that, sooner or later, justice will prevail. In this regard, I welcome recent legal proceedings, both regionally and internationally, against armed groups leaders. Furthermore, I appeal to the Governments of the region to give all the necessary attention to the Secretary-General’s call on 23 March for Global Ceasefire in their efforts for peace and stability in the Great Lakes region.

12. We must also continue to follow closely electoral processes in the region, which, at times, have been a source of unrest. It is my hope that the upcoming elections in the region, especially in Burundi and the Central African Republic, will be an opportunity to consolidate democratic gains and stability. I encourage all actors to ensure peaceful, inclusive and credible electoral processes. With regard to Burundi, I am pleased to inform the Council that my Office carried out, in collaboration with women leaders and civil society organizations of the region, an advocacy and solidarity mission in Bujumbura in March, and engaged constructively with national authorities and other stakeholders on the promotion of women participation in the electoral process.
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13. The Great Lakes region is facing challenges exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the protracted Ebola epidemic. We must therefore redouble efforts to support the States and peoples of the region to overcome these public health crises and to consolidate the gains made so far in the implementation of the PSC Framework. In this regard, the fight against the pandemic could be the opportunity to build greater solidarity and advance regional cooperation. In the coming months, I shall focus on the following priorities, in collaboration with the Guarantors of the PSC Framework and international partners:

i. Mobilization of the international community in assisting the countries of the region in their fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, which hampers the implementation of the PSC Framework and could have overall implications for peace and security of the region;

ii. Support to ongoing facilitation processes and, where necessary, initiate new engagements to improve relations between the countries of the region, including through a greater involvement of women and youth;

iii. Advance regional security cooperation, with a priority on comprehensive approaches encompassing military and non-military measures, in the fight against armed groups;

iv. Engage consultations with regional and international stakeholders on the illicit exploitation and trade of natural resources, with a focus on addressing obstacles to the sustainable and transparent exploitation of these resources;

v. Finally, I will continue to support preparations for the convening of the next Summit of the Regional Oversight Mechanism of the PSC Framework and of the Great Lakes Investment and Trade Conference.

14. Mr. President, esteemed members of the Council, I know I can count on the unity and backing of the Security Council to help me implement this roadmap in the months ahead, in support of the Great Lakes region in line with my mandate.

Thank you for your attention.