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Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel

I. Introduction

1. The present report covers the period from 15 December 2020 to 17 June 2021 and contains an overview of developments and trends in West Africa and the Sahel and the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), including with regard to progress made in the implementation of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel. In addition, it includes an update on the situation in the Lake Chad basin, pursuant to Security Council resolution [2349 \(2017\)](#), as well as a feasibility assessment for a joint civilian project to address intercommunal violence in the subregion, in response to the request of the Security Council (see annex).

II. Developments and trends in West Africa and the Sahel

2. Following the series of presidential and legislative elections that were held during the previous and current reporting periods (see [S/2020/1293](#)), new Governments were installed in several countries of the region. In the Niger, the first-ever transfer of power from one elected president to another took place. In Benin and Ghana, incumbents were sworn in for a second term. In Cabo Verde and Côte d'Ivoire, new parliaments were formed, following their respective legislative elections. In Côte d'Ivoire, that was a significant development, given that all major political leaders and their parties participated in the elections after a decade-long hiatus, in marked contrast to the 2020 presidential election, which certain segments of the opposition had boycotted. Initiatives towards dialogue and national reconciliation have been progressing in several countries, albeit at an uneven and, in some cases, slow pace. Whereas dialogue and consensus-building between political actors in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire have led to gestures and signs of reconciliation, the new permanent framework for political and social dialogue in Guinea has yet to commence its activities. In the Niger and the Gambia, political dialogue and deliberations over constitutional reforms remain deadlocked.

3. The period under review was also marked by a growing perception of democratic reversal across the region, due to widespread views that State institutions and reform processes, as well as restrictions to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, had been manipulated to prevent political opponents from running for office and to constrain the activities of opposition parties, the media and civil society. Concerns over the lack of judicial independence, and its instrumentalization



in a number of countries, allegations of arbitrary arrests and detentions, as well as the intimidation of journalists and activists, and the use of excessive force to quell civil unrest highlighted the persistent risks of shrinking civic and political spaces. Perceptions of impunity continued to undermine citizens' confidence in State institutions, against a backdrop of increasing incidence of hate speech.

4. Continued attacks by terrorist and violent extremist groups, kidnapping, banditry and intercommunal violence resulted in further increases in the levels of insecurity and displacement in a number of countries. While the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic was less severe than initially feared, it nevertheless led to an economic slowdown and a sharp rise in poverty, inequality and vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence. Notwithstanding an enhanced subregional response to the pandemic, the roll-out of national vaccination plans has been uneven, slow and marred by vaccine hesitancy and resistance linked to citizens' mistrust in their Governments or of the vaccines.

A. Politics and governance

5. In Benin, the pre-election period was marked by unrest and violence in the centre and north of the country, due to continuing disagreements over the constitutional and electoral reforms of 2019. The presidential election was held on 11 April 2021, with three candidates and their vice-presidential running mates competing in a largely peaceful contest that excluded some opposition parties and candidates. On 15 April, the Constitutional Court released the final results of the election, declaring the incumbent, Patrice Talon, and his running mate, Mariam Chabi Talata, as President and Vice-President, respectively, with 86.3 per cent of the vote. According to official figures, voter turnout was 50.6 per cent, much higher than the 26.5 per cent estimated by the national electoral platform of civil society organizations. The aspiring presidential candidate of Les Démocrates party, Reckya Madougou, whose candidacy was invalidated by the Constitutional Court, has been in detention since 3 March on charges of terrorism.

6. In Burkina Faso, following the re-election of the incumbent, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, as President, a new Government was announced on 11 January, with the Prime Minister, Christophe Joseph Marie Dabiré, continuing as the Head of Government. Former opposition leader and presidential candidate, Zephirin Diabré, was appointed to the helm of a new Ministry of National Reconciliation and Social Cohesion. Nine of the 33 cabinet members are women, compared with seven in the former Government. The Government's priorities, as presented to the National Assembly by the Prime Minister on 4 February, are decentralization, national cohesion and electoral and governance reforms.

7. In Cabo Verde, parliamentary elections were held peacefully on 18 April. The ruling Movement for Democracy party maintained an absolute majority, with 38 of the 72 deputies. The main opposition parties, the African Party for the Independence of Cabo Verde and the Democratic and Independent Cabo Verdean Union, obtained 30 and 4 deputies, respectively. Twenty-seven women deputies were elected to parliament (37.5 per cent), in near compliance with the 40 per cent quota in the parity law of 2019. On 20 May, the new Government, led by the Prime Minister, Ulisses Correia Silva, was sworn in, comprising 19 ministers and nine secretaries of State, of whom 5 and four, respectively, are women.

8. In Côte d'Ivoire, on 18 March, the Constitutional Council declared the final results of the legislative elections of 6 March. The ruling Rassemblement des houphouëtistes pour la démocratie et la paix party obtained 137 of the 255 seats in the National Assembly, while the opposition and independent candidates secured 91 and

26 seats, respectively, and 1 seat remained vacant. With only 13 per cent of seats held by women parliamentarians, there is a significant shortfall with regard to the 30 per cent quota set by law. On 6 April, the President, Alassane Ouattara, nominated a 41-member Government, including 8 women, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, Patrick Achi, who succeeded the deceased Prime Minister, Hamed Bakayoko. The opposition presidential candidate, Kouadio Konan Bertin, was appointed Minister of Reconciliation and National Cohesion. A final ruling of 31 March by the appeals chamber of the International Criminal Court confirmed the acquittal of the former President, Laurent Gbagbo and his former minister for youth, Charles Blé Goudé, of all charges related to the post-electoral crisis of 2010 and 2011. The former President returned to Côte d'Ivoire on 17 June.

9. In the Gambia, preparations continued for the presidential election to be held on 4 December 2021, with provisions put in place for diaspora voting for the first time. Voter registration commenced on 29 May. Concerted efforts are ongoing, including with support from the Peacebuilding Commission, to mobilize funding to address deficits in the electoral budget for the period 2021–2023. A referendum on a new constitution was cancelled after deliberations, facilitated by the former President of Nigeria, Goodluck Jonathan, and supported by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, ended in a deadlock over the issue of the retroactivity of presidential term limits. The Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission concluded its hearings on 28 May and is expected to end its mandate on 30 June.

10. In Ghana, the President, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, was sworn in for a second term on 7 January, following his re-election on 7 December 2020. On 4 March 2021, the Supreme Court dismissed the petition filed by the former President and opposition National Democratic Congress party candidate John Mahama disputing the election results for lack of evidence of alleged irregularities. On 9 March, the President pledged to revitalize the economy and called for unity and cooperation. The new 46-member Government unveiled on 21 January includes 8 women, as did the previous one.

11. In Guinea, political tensions in the wake of the contested presidential election of October 2020 persisted. The headquarters of the main opposition party, Union des forces démocratiques de Guinée, remained closed on the orders of the Government, while political actors raised allegations of acts of intimidation, arbitrary arrests and travel restrictions. Despite continuing calls by opposition and civil society groups for dialogue, the permanent framework for political and social dialogue, established by presidential decree on 27 January, has yet to become operational. Dissatisfaction with public services delivery and the environmental effects of mining, compounded by an Ebola virus disease outbreak in the eastern region and ongoing restrictions to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic, triggered protests in several locations. The border with Sierra Leone, which was closed in September 2020, reopened in February 2021, whereas the borders with Senegal and Guinea-Bissau remain closed.

12. In Guinea-Bissau, the political landscape was marked by the return of the opposition leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cabo Verde, Domingos Simões Pereira, on 12 March 2021, amid signs of the stabilization of the political situation. Mr. Simões Pereira expressed his intention to contribute to a climate of understanding, to relaunch the country forward. Progress on the constitutional reform process has been hampered by two parallel and competing processes undertaken by the Technical Commission of the President, Úmaro Sissoco Embaló, and the parliament.

13. In Liberia, the National Elections Commission certified 13 of the 15 senators elected in the midterm senatorial elections of 8 December 2020. The certification of

the remaining 2 was pending the decision of the Supreme Court. On 1 April, the Commission announced that the constitutional referendum held on 8 December had failed to reach the two-thirds majority required for passage. Consultations continued on a new electoral code, with a view to, among others, introducing a quota for the political participation of women.

14. On 11 February, the agreement monitoring committee met in Kidal, Mali, for the first time since the signing of the Algiers Peace Agreement in 2015 and recommitted, among others, to beginning a new phase of the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration process and new development projects. On 13 April, the President of the Coordination of Azawad Movements and a key player in the Malian peace process, Sidi Brahim Ould Sidati, was assassinated in Bamako by as yet unidentified armed individuals.

15. The transition of Mali was interrupted by the arrest and detention, on 24 May, of the civilian interim President, Bah N'Daw, and the Prime Minister, Moctar Ouane, who were forced to resign on 26 May before being released from detention. On 28 May, the Supreme Court appointed the former Vice-President, Assimi Goïta, a military officer and member of the Comité national pour le salut du peuple, as the new President of the transitional Government. On 30 May, an extraordinary summit of Heads of State and Government of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), held in Accra, condemned what they referred to as a “second coup d'état”, suspended Mali from the Economic Community and called for the immediate appointment of a new civilian prime minister and the formation of an inclusive Government. On 8 and 9 June, a high-level ECOWAS delegation led by the former President of Nigeria, Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, visited Mali and urged the transitional authorities to work towards the holding of presidential and legislative elections accepted by all political actors within the stipulated transition timetable. On 11 June, a 28-member Government was appointed, headed by the Prime Minister, Choguel Maïga.

16. In Mauritania, on 9 April, the former President, Abdel Aziz, joined the opposition Ribat Al Watani party and called upon his supporters to follow suit. On 11 March, the former President and 13 other officials had been indicted for corruption and other charges. The current President, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, continued his outreach meetings with opposition leaders.

17. In the Niger, the second round of the presidential election took place on 21 February. Violent protests against the preliminary results broke out in several cities, between 24 and 26 February, during which at least 650 individuals and opposition figures were arrested and detained, including the former Prime Minister, Hama Amadou. On 21 March, the Constitutional Court confirmed the victory of Mohamed Bazoum of the ruling Parti nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme, with 55.7 per cent of the vote. The opposition candidate, Mahamane Ousmane, of the Renouveau démocratique et républicain party rejected the results. On 31 March, an attempted coup d'état was swiftly quelled by the presidential guard. At his inauguration, on 2 April, the President vowed to redouble efforts to address the security threats and prioritize education, in particular for girls, while calling upon Malian authorities to extend State sovereignty in northern Mali. The new 33-member Government formed on 7 April includes 5 women.

18. In Nigeria, amid calls for their dismissal due to worsening violence and insecurity across the country, on 26 January, the President, Muhammadu Buhari, accepted the resignation of the chiefs of the security service and announced their replacements. On 1 April, the Independent National Electoral Commission announced that the voter registration exercise would commence on 28 June for the general elections to be held in 2023.

19. In Senegal, violent demonstrations erupted at the beginning of March in several cities, in the wake of charges of alleged rape having been brought against the candidate in the presidential election of 2019, Ousmane Sonko, which were perceived by his supporters as being politically motivated. On 8 April, the Government announced the establishment of an independent commission to investigate the events. An independent audit of the voter register concluded that the register was reliable, but opposition parties have rejected that assessment. Deliberations continued under the Political Commission for National Dialogue towards a reform of the electoral code ahead of local elections, which have been further postponed by presidential decree to January 2022. Following growing discontent over the pandemic-related curfew that has affected livelihoods, on 22 April, the President, Macky Sall, convened a national youth summit and committed \$825 million to efforts to reduce unemployment.

20. In Sierra Leone, during a town hall meeting on 10 March, the President, Maada Bio, urged civil society to work with all political parties and to respect the former President, Ernest Bai Koroma, as a senior statesman. Nevertheless, tensions between the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party and the main opposition party, All People's Congress, remain surrounding the continued judicial pursuit of the former President and his associates, as well as the midterm population census, leading to a heated debate in Parliament on 19 April.

21. In Togo, a ministerial decree of 15 February established a national consultation between political actors, as a framework for consultations between political parties to examine possible amendments to the Constitution and electoral provisions. The national consultation is also aimed at proposing confidence-building actions ahead of the regional elections, which have yet to be scheduled, however, some opposition parties are boycotting the framework.

B. Security situation

22. The overall security situation in West Africa and the Sahel remained volatile, with high levels of violence, notably in parts of the central Sahel and Nigeria. Despite the scaling up of military and counter-insurgency operations by national armies, the Multinational Joint Task Force, the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel and international partners, attacks by extremist and criminal groups in the subregion, targeting civilians, humanitarian personnel and assets, defence and security forces and civil defence volunteers, continued to increase during the reporting period. In the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area shared by Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger, rival terrorist groups competed over territory and resources, in particular stolen goods, trafficking routes, artisanal gold mines and illegal taxation. The absence of State authority in the area also created a conducive environment for militant and criminal groups to operate and recruit new members.

23. In Burkina Faso, in the first half of 2021, hundreds of civilians were killed in attacks by presumed terrorist groups in the eastern region, while at least 15 civilians were reportedly kidnapped and subsequently executed in Sitenga, Sahel region. In April, 70 people were reportedly killed, including 30 civilians, of whom four were children. Security forces and civil defence volunteers were also frequently targeted in various provinces. In June, more than 100 civilians, including 7 children, were killed and several others injured by unidentified assailants in a village in the Province of Yagha, in the Sahel region.

24. In Mali, attacks against national and international security forces continued unabated, with at least 40 reported incidents between 1 January and 1 April. On 15 March, at least 33 Malian soldiers were killed, and 14 others injured, in an attack on a security post in Tessit, Gao region. In attacks on a United Nations convoy on the Douentza-

Timbuktu axis on 13 January, and on the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) camp in Aguelhok, Kidal region, on 2 April, 4 peacekeepers were killed and 34 were injured. Furthermore, a total of 307 attacks against civilians were reported in April and May.

25. In the Niger, civilians bore the brunt of extremist assaults. In the first quarter of 2021, large-scale attacks against civilians in Tillabéri and Tahoua regions resulted in a record high combined death toll of more than 400 people. In Diffa, on 21 February, alleged Boko Haram elements attacked a convoy carrying election materials, killing an electoral official, while in Bankilare, Tillabéri region, a polling station was attacked during the run-off presidential election.

26. The situation in Nigeria continued to pose multidimensional security challenges. Boko Haram factions, bandits and unidentified armed groups increased their attacks against security forces and humanitarian agencies, but mostly against civilians. In the previously calm south-eastern region, there were numerous attacks by unidentified shooters targeting security personnel and installations. During the reporting period, the frequency of kidnappings for ransom increased exponentially, affecting more than 1,570 people, including 800 secondary school students, predominantly in Kaduna, Katsina, Zamfara and Niger States. In late April, the Governor of Niger State announced that Boko Haram factions had taken control of some territories in the state, marking an extension of their operations beyond north-eastern Nigeria. Security challenges in the country have triggered knock-on effects on public safety, food security and social cohesion, with separatist voices growing louder.

27. In the period under review, terrorist groups continued to probe the border defences of coastal countries. In Côte d'Ivoire, four attacks on security personnel were carried out during the reporting period, in Kafolo, Tehini and Tougbo, close to the border with Burkina Faso. In Senegal, the authorities dismantled a cell affiliated with Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin in the eastern town of Kidira, causing the President to attend, for the first time, the ordinary session of the Authority of Heads of State of the Group of Five for the Sahel, held in N'Djamena on 15 February.

28. Amid the increasing levels of violence, national and international military operations registered some successes during the reporting period. A joint operation conducted by 1,500 French, 900 Burkinabé, 850 Malian and 150 Nigerien soldiers, from 2 January to 3 February, weakened the militants' grip on parts of northern Mali and facilitated the reopening of the road from Gao to Hombori. The deployment of 1,200 Chadian forces to the Niger bolstered the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel in the Liptako-Gourma central corridor.

29. Efforts by local communities to engage in dialogue with armed groups also resulted in tangible outcomes. In Burkina Faso, peace talks between the *Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie* and local authorities in Soum and Yatenga provinces facilitated the reopening of a road between Tiou, Burkina Faso, and Koro, Mali, used by cross-border traders. Despite the continued violence in Djibo, Soum province, local initiatives helped to create a tense calm in an area that had previously been a hotspot for attacks. In Mali, local peace talks contributed to a reduction in the number of security incidents and civilian casualties. From 12 to 24 January, the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue facilitated talks that led to a series of agreements between the Fulani and Dogon communities in Koro, Mopti region. On 14 March, the High Islamic Council in Mali brokered a ceasefire agreement between traditional *dozo* hunters and members of the *Front de libération du Macina* affiliated with *Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin*, in Niono district, Ségou region.

30. The Gulf of Guinea remained a piracy hotspot, despite indications of a slight decrease in the number of incidents taking place, compared with the previous

reporting period. From January to March, the Interregional Coordination Centre for Maritime Safety and Security in the Gulf of Guinea recorded 20 incidents, compared with 45 incidents in the last quarter of 2020, including 9 in the maritime space of ECOWAS, and 40 kidnappings. Kidnappings for ransom, which constituted the primary modus operandi, became increasingly sophisticated, with the use of mother ships to operate farther from shore, as evidenced in the pirate attacks perpetrated between 7 and 10 February on four ships between Cameroon and Sao Tome and Principe. According to the International Maritime Bureau, the sole crew fatality in 2021 occurred in the Gulf of Guinea.

31. During the reporting period, law enforcement agencies made large seizures of drugs, counterfeit medicines and other smuggled items. In the first quarter of the year, over 11 tons of cocaine and over 24 tons of cannabis were seized by authorities in Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Guinea, the Niger and Senegal. On 21 March, the French Navy intercepted a ship in the Gulf of Guinea carrying more than six tons of cocaine. Between February and May 2021, the airport anti-trafficking unit in Guinea-Bissau carried out five seizures of a total 3,930 kg of cocaine. In Senegal, authorities dismantled a smuggling ring of counterfeit medicines, and a group of wildlife traffickers was arrested in Côte d'Ivoire.

C. Sustainable development

32. In *African Economic Outlook 2021*, released on 12 March, the African Development Bank estimated that the gross domestic product in West Africa had contracted by 1.2 per cent in 2020. The contraction has led to a sharp rise in poverty and inequality and accentuated social tensions. National responses to the COVID-19 pandemic continued to result in a reduction of the fiscal space, necessitating difficult trade-offs between protective social services and productive investments. Border closures between Guinea and its neighbouring countries affected trade and wealth creation.

33. United Nations country teams are implementing socioeconomic response plans for long-term recovery, focusing on critical areas, including job creation for young people and women, social protection, assistance to the health sector and access to education, with catalytic effects towards the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Delayed COVID-19 vaccination campaigns, insecurity and political instability risked jeopardizing recovery efforts.

D. Humanitarian context

34. The humanitarian situation across the subregion remained highly precarious, as insecurity, violence, internal displacement, poverty and malnutrition exacerbated extreme levels of vulnerability. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, almost 29 million people in the Sahel required assistance and protection in 2021, which represented an increase of 5 million over the beginning of 2020. In Burkina Faso, a record number of 3.5 million people will require emergency assistance in six priority regions. In Mali, 5.9 million people will need humanitarian assistance, up from 4.3 million at the beginning of 2020. In the Niger, compared with early 2020, the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance increased by 900,000, to 3.8 million. In addition, in north-eastern Nigeria, 8.7 million people require some form of assistance, with critical support required for 6.5 million people who are most vulnerable.

35. Across the Sahel, the population of displaced people increased to 5.3 million. In Burkina Faso, a further 200,000 people fled their homes, bringing the total number of displaced persons to 1.2 million, the majority of whom are women and children. In

Mali, the number of internally displaced persons increased by 60,000, to 347,000 in total. In the Niger, the number of persons who have fled their homes rose by 34,000 during the reporting period, to reach 300,000 internally displaced persons by end of May 2021.

36. The level of food insecurity remained alarmingly high. Across the Sahel, 14 million people were expected to face severe food insecurity during the upcoming lean season, from June to August. A total of 6.3 million children were facing acute malnutrition, including 1.6 million who were suffering from life-threatening severe acute malnutrition. In the Niger, 2.3 million people faced acute food insecurity and 457,000 children under 5 years of age were exposed to severe acute malnutrition. In the Lake Chad Basin, the number of people facing hunger in 2021 was expected to increase by half a million compared with the previous year. In Nigeria alone, 4.3 million people were expected to face acute hunger during the upcoming lean season.

37. Insecurity and attacks severely disrupted the delivery of basic social services and constrained humanitarian access in many areas, depriving distressed communities of essential assistance and exposing humanitarian personnel to increased risks. Across the Sahel, more than 5,000 schools were closed or non-operational, jeopardizing the realization of children's right to education, especially for girls, who are the least likely to return to school after prolonged interruptions. In the central Sahel, 136 health centres were closed due to insecurity, and most of those that are still open are not fully functional. Maternal mortality in the crisis-affected areas was much higher than national averages. Women and girls also faced increasing risks of abduction, forced marriage and sexual assault. In the Niger, more than 50 per cent of children between 7 and 16 years of age were out of school, and outbreaks of measles, cholera and meningitis have affected the most vulnerable. In Nigeria, insecurity created challenges in terms of access and logistics, which compounded the already dire humanitarian situation.

38. Burkina Faso, Mali, the Niger and Nigeria have developed humanitarian response plans requiring about \$2.7 billion to reach 16.2 million people. As of mid-June, 16 per cent of the funding for those plans had been secured.

39. As of 16 June, West Africa and the Sahel had registered nearly 500,000 cases of COVID-19 and 6,833 deaths. Across the region, the COVID-19 pandemic further increased vulnerability and contributed to an increase in gender-based violence. Vaccination campaigns have started in all the countries of the subregion through COVAX, the vaccine pillar of the Access to COVID-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator.

E. Human rights

40. During the reporting period, there were positive developments with regard to human rights and the rule of law through the strengthening national normative frameworks and measures to fight impunity in the region. In the Gambia, the ruling on 27 January by the Supreme Court in the case concerning Yankuba Touray, alleged to have committed gross human rights violations during the Jammeh presidency, was welcomed as a prelude to more prosecutions. In Burkina Faso, on 15 April, a military court charged the former President, Blaise Compaoré, the former Chief of Defence Staff, General Gilbert Diendéré, and 12 others for the assassination of the former President, Thomas Sankara, in 1987. On the same day, in Côte d'Ivoire, the militia leader, Amadé Ourémi, was convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment for crimes committed during the post-electoral crisis of 2010 and 2011. In Liberia, authorities continued to collaborate with European and neighbouring countries in investigations into crimes committed during the civil war.

41. In several countries in the region, respect for human rights and the rule of law was undermined by excessive use of force and arbitrary detention, especially during violent protests. In the context of the pre-electoral violence in Benin, it reportedly resulted in two deaths. In the Niger, several persons were arrested in the wake of the post-electoral violence, although authorities claim that most of them have since been released. In Guinea, an unknown number of opposition and civil society figures remain in pretrial detention. Activists in all three countries have voiced concerns about politically motivated arrests of civil society actors, opposition members and political activists exercising their rights to freedom of speech and assembly. In Senegal, the violent protests in March left at least 10 dead and more than 500 wounded, amid attacks against journalists and the closure of media outlets.

42. There were allegations of physical assaults perpetrated against journalists and political activists in Guinea-Bissau that raised serious concerns about press freedom and freedom of speech. Human rights actors and organizations in Ghana have urged authorities to investigate incidents relating to the detention of media practitioners, while those in Nigeria have denounced the human rights implications of the repeated attacks against schools and abduction of students, including on the right to education and freedom from inhuman or degrading treatment. Attacks against prisons in Nigeria and the deaths of inmates in detention in Guinea further highlighted the need to enhance the security and management of penitentiary facilities and for a thorough inquiry into these deaths and the conditions of detention.

43. Persistent human rights violations allegedly committed by security forces during counter-terrorism operations remained of concern. In the Niger, on 28 March, several allegations of sexual violence involving soldiers of the eighth Chadian battalion of the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel, in Tera, were brought to the attention of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Joint Force. The Joint Force responded swiftly through a series of measures in line with its internal procedures on the conduct of internal investigations, developed in the context of the compliance framework, with OHCHR support.

44. On 30 March, MINUSMA released a report on the findings of the human rights investigation into the air strike carried out by French forces operating under Operation Barkhane in Bounty, Douentza region, on 3 January. The investigation confirmed that at least 22 people were killed, including alleged members of the Katiba Serma extremist group. MINUSMA recommended that Malian and French authorities conduct an independent, credible and transparent investigation in order to examine the circumstances of the strike and any impact on the civilian population of Bounty.

F. Women and girls

45. There was progress made in the development of institutional and regulatory frameworks on women and peace and security, however, more efforts will be needed to ensure their implementation. In the Gambia, new legislation on matrimonial issues and access to property was adopted in March to safeguard the rights of women and girls. In Liberia, new DNA-testing equipment for assessing evidence in rape cases was installed, and the National Elections Commission developed a protocol on combating violence against women. On 6 April, Mauritania validated its national action plan for the implementation of Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#), leaving Cabo Verde as the only country in the region without an adopted national action plan. On 23 April, the ECOWAS Commission launched its guidelines for mainstreaming the women and peace and security agenda throughout its departments.

46. There were mixed developments with regard to the political participation and representation of women. On the one hand, social media campaigns and monitoring

mechanisms enhanced the active participation of women and young people in the elections in Benin, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire and the Niger. In Cabo Verde, the opposition African Party for the Independence of Cabo Verde fielded a woman candidate for Prime Minister. On the other hand, the overall number of women in the new Governments of Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire and the Niger largely remained the same. In the Niger, although the number of women parliamentarians (48 of 166 seats) slightly exceeded the quota, with women holding 5 of the 33 ministerial posts, the country failed to meet the 30 per cent quota set by law in the formation of the Cabinet. The mixed results, while attributable in part to the lack of resources and political support, call for enhanced engagement and outreach to implement existing legislation.

III. Activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel

A. Good offices and special assignments of the Special Representative

47. In the light of the developments and trends set out above, the Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel continued to support national and regional efforts to prevent conflicts and sustain peace. These efforts were undertaken in close collaboration with resident coordinators and United Nations country teams, as well as through advocacy for institutional reforms and inclusive approaches to constitutional, electoral and security processes. Owing to restrictions put in place to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic, several engagements were held virtually, which affected sensitive processes that required confidentiality.

48. On 23 January, the Special Representative participated in the fifty-eighth ordinary session of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, at which he called for prioritizing dialogue to resolve political differences, build consensus and ensure inclusive governance. The Authority appointed the Presidents of Ghana and the Niger to lead resource mobilization for the ECOWAS action plan for the eradication of terrorism, 2020–2024, and extended the mandate of the ECOWAS mission in the Gambia until December 2021, to be succeeded by an ECOWAS police mission. The Special Representative renewed the commitment of the United Nations to working with ECOWAS in pursuit of common objectives.

49. On 25 January, the Special Representative and the Chairperson of the African Union Commission visited Sierra Leone to discuss political developments, COVID-19 pandemic recovery plans and the Yenga border dispute between Guinea and Sierra Leone. They commended efforts to foster national cohesion and reconciliation and called for a consensual resolution of the border standoff with Guinea. Following their visit, the two countries held exchanges at the ministerial level that culminated in a visit by the President of Sierra Leone to Conakry on 15 February and the subsequent reopening of the border.

50. On 26 January, the Special Representative, together with the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, visited Cabo Verde. They discussed regional developments and commended the commitment of Cabo Verde to democracy and the political participation of women.

51. From 7 to 10 February and on 9 and 10 March, the Special Representative undertook two visits to Benin in support of efforts to promote an environment conducive to a credible and peaceful presidential election. He consulted with the President of Benin and national stakeholders, including members of the opposition, and called for dialogue to address contentious issues. While emphasizing persistent

grievances, stakeholders expressed their commitment to ensuring the holding of peaceful elections.

52. In Guinea-Bissau, the Special Representative, together with the resident coordinator, held consultations with national stakeholders, from 10 to 12 February, to address the situation of the former Prime Minister, Aristides Gomes, who had sought refuge at the United Nations premises since March 2020. Consequently, Mr. Gomes was allowed to leave Guinea-Bissau on medical grounds on a special United Nations flight on 12 February 2021.

53. On 15 February, the Special Representative attended the seventh ordinary session of the Authority of Heads of State of the Group of Five for the Sahel, held in N'Djamena. At the summit, the Chair of the ECOWAS Authority recalled the ECOWAS commitment to contribute \$1 billion to the fight against terrorism in the region. The Chairperson of the African Union Commission reaffirmed the expected deployment of African Union troops to support the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel.

54. On 20 February, the Special Representative returned to the Niger, in follow-up to his visit of 27 December 2020, for the second round of the presidential election. He consulted with national stakeholders and members of electoral observer missions to help to facilitate a conducive environment for holding the election. He also attended the inauguration of the President in Niamey on 2 April.

55. From 24 to 27 February, the Special Representative consulted with the President of the Gambia, Adama Barrow, and other national stakeholders on preparations for the presidential election to be held on 4 December, as well as on constitutional, security sector and other reforms. The Special Representative advocated for the establishment of credible mechanisms to ensure the implementation of recommendations contained in the final report of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission, which is expected to be submitted to the President at the end of June.

56. Throughout the violent protests in Senegal in early March, the Special Representative remained in close contact with national stakeholders, including the President. He also engaged with the United Nations country team to explore ways to support national authorities in addressing grievances and building trust in State institutions.

B. Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission

57. Restrictions imposed to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic continued to affect the work of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission, as final mapping and other processes largely relied on remote collaboration. Under the auspices of the Subcommission on Demarcation, which met in Abuja from 21 to 28 February, the parties advanced in discussions on some of the outstanding points of disagreement, towards the final demarcation of the land boundary. With the easing of travel restrictions, field operations for the construction and emplacement of 322 boundary pillars resumed in March and were concluded in mid-May. To date, 1,673 pillars have been constructed of an estimated total of 2,696.

C. Enhancing regional and subregional partnerships to address cross-border and cross-cutting threats to peace and security

58. UNOWAS maintained its close collaboration with regional and United Nations partners. On 9 March, UNOWAS and ECOWAS held their annual meeting via videoconference. Participants committed to strengthening joint communication and

adopted a joint workplan for 2021, which was focused on support for preventive diplomacy, farmer-herder dynamics, climate security and gender-related and human rights issues, among other things.

59. UNOWAS sustained its support to the rotating presidency of the Group of Five for the Sahel in the implementation of its road map, including through the deployment of a planning specialist who facilitated the transfer of institutional knowledge among the presidencies. UNOWAS also continues to provide assistance to the Group's Sahelian Threat Analysis and Early Warning Centre, which, in February, launched a mapping exercise of armed groups in the region and established a network of research centres to coordinate and prioritize research on peace and security.

1. Dynamics between herders and farmers

60. Drawing on their study on pastoralism and security, UNOWAS and ECOWAS jointly published a best practices handbook on managing and preventing farmer-herder conflicts, which was based on lessons learned from Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Nigeria and Senegal. To scale up the implementation of the decisions of the executive committee of the Secretary-General on farmer-herder dynamics, the UNOWAS working group on pastoralism and conflict prevention was expanded to include the office of the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel, the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA) and other United Nations entities. A core team of the working group led the development of a joined-up analysis that took stock of farmer-herder dynamics in West and Central Africa.

2. Lake Chad basin

61. UNOWAS, UNOCA and the Lake Chad Basin Commission conducted joint missions to Cameroon and Chad (21 February to 6 March), the Niger (11 to 17 April) and Nigeria (25 April to 1 May). The delegation engaged with stakeholders in areas affected by Boko Haram, assessed the human rights situation and advocated for humanitarian support.

3. Cross-border security strategy in the Mano River Union

62. During a high-level meeting held on 13 and 14 January, the Special Representative and the Secretary-General of the Mano River Union discussed the challenges confronting countries of the Mano River basin, including a spillover of insecurity from the Sahel. The Special Representative called for enhanced cooperation with ECOWAS and the full operationalization of the Union's joint cross-border security and confidence-building units. The United Nations resident coordinators from the four countries who participated in the meeting agreed upon new initiatives to combat hate speech.

4. Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea

63. Cognizant of the negative impact of piracy on trade, security and the rule of law, the Special Representative for Central Africa and the Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel jointly convened a virtual high-level meeting on 18 March with the Presidents of the Commissions of ECOWAS and the Economic Community of Central African States and the Executive Secretary of the Gulf of Guinea Commission. Participants agreed upon steps to reactivate regional coordination mechanisms, notably the inter-regional coordination centre and the West and Central African subregional centres.

5. Adverse implications of climate change

64. In an effort to strengthen gender sensitivity and resilience to climate change, UNOWAS formed a partnership with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and members of the Working Group on Women, Youth, Peace and Security in West Africa and the Sahel, that culminated in two joint climate risk assessments, in Liberia and Nigeria.

6. Security sector reform, drug trafficking and transnational organized crime

65. UNOWAS continued to support security sector reform processes in the subregion. During a joint assessment mission conducted by UNOWAS and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to the Gambia, from 8 to 12 February, national and international counterparts expressed concern over the lack of implementation of the security sector strategy, 2020–2024. They called for the strengthening of coordination mechanisms and for adequate financial support. From 29 March to 2 April, UNOWAS deployed a technical mission to Conakry to assess ongoing efforts to develop a policy for defence and security forces on addressing sexual and gender-based violence and on the recruitment and promotion of women within the force.

66. In relation to combating transnational organized crime, in February, UNOWAS and UNODC adopted a workplan for enhancing joint analysis and advocacy. The two entities are preparing a meeting of the high-level policy committee and the programmatic advisory committee, scheduled for the latter part of 2021, to reactivate the West Africa Coast Initiative on combating drug trafficking.

7. Implementation of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel

67. On 7 January 2021, the Secretary-General appointed Abdoulaye Mar Dieye as Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel. Working closely with UNOWAS and other United Nations entities, the Special Coordinator is leading resource mobilization efforts for the implementation of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel and the United Nations Support Plan for the Sahel. The Special Coordinator has also engaged with other key stakeholders and partners to anchor the strategy within existing frameworks.

68. On 8 and 9 February, the Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel and the UNDP Regional Director for Africa jointly chaired the eleventh meeting of the steering committee for the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel, organized jointly by UNOWAS and the United Nations Development Programme. Participants reviewed progress made in key regions, including the Liptako-Gourma tri-border area and the Lake Chad basin. They identified steps for resource mobilization and committed to accelerating the provision of United Nations integrated support to regional initiatives and partnerships with ECOWAS, the Group of Five for the Sahel, the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the Liptako-Gourma Authority. At the summit of the Group of Five for the Sahel held on 16 February, the Secretary-General reiterated his call to ensure that the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel had stable and predictable funding, through a mandate by the Security Council under Chapter VII of the Charter of the United Nations and sustained financing, including through assessed contributions.

69. On 28 April, the Deputy Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel and the Special Coordinator provided a briefing to the Peacebuilding Commission on ongoing efforts to increase cross-border investments and provide greater support for women and young people. The Commission called for more structural investments, as well as stronger multi-partner support to individual countries in the Sahel. The

Office of the Special Coordinator and UNOWAS organized a consultative meeting, held on 20 and 21 May, between the Group of Five for the Sahel and the United Nations entities in Dakar, which provided an opportunity to reaffirm common priorities and identify new areas of targeted support, including in the area of intercommunal dialogue. At the meeting, the Special Coordinator advocated for the harmonization of planned Group of Five for the Sahel activities with the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel road map, 2021–2022, which provides strategic and programmatic reference points for United Nations country teams, notably in terms of cooperation with communities and local authorities. The Special Representative also underlined the need for flexibility, encouraged the reactivation of the Ministerial Coordination Platform for the Sahel and reiterated United Nations support for accompanying governance reforms and stabilization efforts. The chair of the Group's Council of Ministers drew attention to weak resource mobilization as one obstacle that was hampering the implementation of the Group's priority investment plan.

70. The Peacebuilding Fund has provided catalytic funding to support the Group of Five for the Sahel and related priorities for the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel, notably in the areas of cross-border cooperation, conflict resolution, access to justice, building resilience to climate change, improving the management of natural resources and empowering women and young people. Meanwhile, efforts are ongoing to strengthen coordination for better communication on the Sahel. On 9 March, a steering committee was launched to spearhead an initiative to change the narrative on the Sahel, under the leadership of the Deputy Secretary-General. Members of the steering committee include the singer, Baaba Maal, civil society representatives, including young people and women, and representatives of the private sector, the media and academia.

D. Promoting good governance, respect for the rule of law, human rights and gender equality

71. The Special Representative continued to advocate for the full implementation of the women and peace and security agenda of the Security Council. On 12 February, he chaired the eleventh regional open day on Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#), at which 160 participants from 17 countries identified ways to accelerate the implementation of the resolution at the community level, which included the recommendation to establish a specific fund for promoting the political participation of women.

72. UNOWAS supported efforts to implement the youth and peace and security agenda in the subregion, in line with Security Council resolution [2250 \(2015\)](#). In collaboration with resident coordinators and United Nations country teams, it supported initiatives in Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, the Niger and Togo aimed at promoting the integration of young women and men into conflict prevention, electoral and peace processes. In Benin and Côte d'Ivoire, UNOWAS support for national chapters of the West African Network of Young Women Leaders led to the launch of digital campaigns and the adoption of declarations on peaceful elections. Similarly, in Togo, UNOWAS supported peace clubs in 10 localities in promoting youth participation in decision-making.

73. In April, UNOWAS, in collaboration with ECOWAS and OHCHR, organized a virtual regional consultation on the instrumentalization of the justice system. Consequently, a network of ministers of justice will be set up to serve as a platform for facilitating engagement with civil society and international partners in strengthening the autonomy of and confidence in the judiciary. On 12 and 13 April, UNOWAS contributed to discussions on civic space and human rights in electoral

processes at the forum of non-governmental organizations preceding the sixty-eighth session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.

IV. Observations and recommendations

74. I welcome the beginning of vaccination campaigns in countries of the subregion to combat the spread of COVID-19, which continued to affect West Africa and the Sahel, affecting economic development, causing hardship and exacerbating social inequalities and tensions. In this regard, I reiterate my call for a global vaccination plan to ensure equitable access to vaccines and enable societies to emerge from the crisis with greater resilience.

75. The first-ever transfer of power from one democratically elected Head of State to another in the Niger is a positive development. However, the subsequent attempted coup d'état demonstrates the need for continued vigilance and sustained efforts to strengthen social cohesion and national unity. The early warning signs of a democratic retreat across parts of the region further warrant urgent attention and action by all stakeholders to avert this trend.

76. The participation of several opposition parties in the legislative elections and other national reconciliation initiatives in Côte d'Ivoire, the appointment of a Minister for National Reconciliation from the ranks of the opposition in Burkina Faso and the establishment of a comprehensive dialogue framework in Togo are welcome developments. The creation of a permanent framework for political and social dialogue in Guinea could be another encouraging step towards strengthening social cohesion. This work should commence expeditiously, with the inclusive participation of key stakeholders such as civil society, women and young people.

77. As the Gambia moves towards its presidential election in December, all stakeholders should be encouraged to redouble efforts aimed at building consensus, including around the constitutional reform process, which should produce a constitution that reflects the aspirations and will of the Gambian people and set the foundation for the consolidation of democracy.

78. The return to Guinea-Bissau of the former presidential candidate and opposition leader, Mr. Simões Pereira, is a mark of progress in the country's political stabilization process, which should be strengthened through the implementation of the pending institutional reforms outlined in the Conakry Agreement on the Implementation of the Economic Community of West African States Road Map for the Resolution of the Political Crisis in Guinea-Bissau and the ECOWAS road map, in particular the completion of a consensual constitutional reform that will set the basis for all reform processes.

79. Despite advances in national legislation on gender parity laws, the number of women in the new governments and parliaments across the subregion remains dismally low. It is essential that countries in the subregion take all measures necessary to comply with their national and regional commitments on gender equality, including by ensuring adequate budgetary allocations for the meaningful implementation of national action plans on the implementation of Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#) and related resolutions.

80. I am gravely concerned about the volatile security situation in the Sahel and the Lake Chad basin, coupled with increasing competition between rival terrorist and extremist groups over the control of resources and territory, which continues to place civilian populations at risk. Kidnappings for ransom, which have evolved as a new modus operandi of criminal groups partly working in concert with extremist groups, compound the situation. In this context, the enhanced protection of educational

establishments and other vulnerable installations, as well as the implementation of specialized rehabilitation measures for the hundreds of abducted people, especially children, is essential.

81. I commend the mutual efforts of countries participating in the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel and the Multinational Joint Task Force to address security challenges. I am also encouraged by their efforts to better integrate human rights due diligence into their operations. It is vital for countries of the subregion to further enhance coordination and for international partners to scale up support for those initiatives.

82. The ongoing efforts of ECOWAS to accelerate resource mobilization for its action plan for the eradication of terrorism should be encouraged. I call upon ECOWAS member States and international partners to support holistic and integrated approaches, including through the implementation of the regional strategy for the stabilization, recovery and resilience of the areas of the Lake Chad basin region affected by Boko Haram, the Group of Five for the Sahel priority investment plan, the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel and the United Nations Support Plan for the Sahel. Cognizant of the limitations of a security-focused approach, countries of the subregion should intensify efforts to address the root causes of instability, by integrating humanitarian, development, governance, human rights and sustaining peace dimensions into their responses. While further promoting community-based dispute resolution mechanisms, populations must not feel compelled to rely on armed auxiliary groups as security providers. In addition, human rights institutions should continue playing their crucial roles in the protection and promotion of human rights and in ensuring accountability for human rights violations, which remains a major challenge in the region.

83. High levels of displacement and food insecurity, as a result of conflict, drought and flooding, require both short-term and long-term solutions, which draw on home-grown knowledge and partnerships that integrate local, national and regional policies, across political, economic, humanitarian and other sectors. I urge all parties to respect the humanitarian principles of impartiality and neutrality, remove barriers to humanitarian access and facilitate the delivery of emergency assistance to populations in need.

84. I commend the Governments of Cameroon and Nigeria for their continuous commitment to completing the demarcation of their land and maritime boundaries, despite security challenges and challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic. All parties should intensify efforts to accelerate the completion of the mandate of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission.

85. I wish to express my appreciation to the Governments of the ECOWAS region, the African Union, the Group of Five for the Sahel, the Mano River Union, the Gulf of Guinea Commission and the Lake Chad Basin Commission for their continued cooperation with UNOWAS. The close partnership between UNOWAS, the United Nations entities in West Africa and the Sahel, civil society organizations and other institutions is essential to supporting the region. I would also like to express special appreciation to both my former Special Representative, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, who completed his mandate on 7 April, and to my new Special Representative, Annadif Khatir Mahamat Saleh, who assumed his functions on 26 April, as well as to the staff of UNOWAS and the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission for their continuing efforts to advance peace and security in West Africa and the Sahel.

Annex

Feasibility assessment for a joint civilian project to address intercommunal violence

I. Mandate

1. In its presidential statement of 3 February 2021 (S/PRST/2021/3), the Security Council requested the Secretary-General to explore the feasibility of a joint civilian project between UNOWAS and relevant regional organizations, such as the Group of Five for the Sahel, ECOWAS and the African Union, with the aim of stemming the increasingly destabilizing phenomenon of intercommunal violence and preventing its recurrence in the region. The Council requested the Secretary-General to include in the present report recommendations with viable options for establishing the project. Preliminary proposals are therefore set out below.

II. Context

2. Intercommunal dynamics across West Africa and the Sahel stem from very diverse issues and are often characterized by deadly cycles of attacks and retaliation, with direct implications for regional peace and security. While the root causes are diverse and mutually reinforcing, manifestations include ethnic tensions, escalating conflict and violence between farmers and herders, as well as artisanal miners, violent religious extremism, land disputes and disputed access to natural resources, such as water and arable land. Although climate change constitutes a root threat multiplier, the manipulation of identity for political purposes and the breakdown of traditional dispute management mechanisms aggravate tensions and conflict. Addressing the root causes and manifestations of intercommunal violence remains the primary responsibility of national Governments.

III. Existing regional initiatives and frameworks

3. A number of existing regional initiatives and frameworks address the issue of intercommunal dynamics, and the attendant violence, in West Africa and the Sahel.

4. The ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework is a collective operational and structural conflict management tool, agreed upon by ECOWAS member States, aimed at strengthening the peace and security architecture in the subregion, in order to prevent violence, including at the community level. The ongoing review of the Framework, which is focused on evaluating the status of implementation of the plans of action for the implementation of its 15 components, is expected to lead to the development of a new generation of action plans that are more in consonance with the mutating conflict environment in the subregion. The exercise provides an opportunity to apply a more strategic focus to addressing the root and proximate causes and evolving manifestations of intercommunal conflicts. With support from the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and UNOWAS, ECOWAS will engage with civil society groups in the context of the review process, which is expected to be finalized in the third quarter of 2021. The support is aimed at promoting a more human security-focused approach to the development of the new action plans and, upon adoption, their operationalization at the national and community levels, in order to stem and prevent the recurrence of violent conflict.

5. The Group of Five for the Sahel has identified the prevention of intercommunal violence as one of the cornerstones of its efforts to complement military operations

with development and stabilization efforts across the Sahel. UNOWAS has partnered with the Group on various initiatives to boost State-owned and community-owned dialogue capacities to enhance early warning reporting and to prevent violent extremism across the Sahel. The proposed joint civilian project could link its work with the Regional Cell for the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism, established in 2016 in collaboration with the Office of Counter-Terrorism, and the Group's Sahelian Threat Analysis and Early Warning Centre, as well as engage with the Association of Local Authorities with the aim of enhancing the role of decentralized communities in promoting dialogue and improving civil-military cooperation in the Liptako-Gourma region.

6. The Liptako-Gourma Authority has protocols for internal cooperation among mayors and governors that envisage their collaboration for the prevention of local conflicts. The United Nations is supporting the Authority's efforts in that area, including through initiatives such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)-led stabilization facility, which targets 60 communities in selected localities in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger, with the aim of reoccupying abandoned territories, restoring State authority and provision of basic social services and infrastructure and creating economic activities able to generate revenues in the short term.

7. Concerning the Mano River Union, UNOWAS has supported the Union's cross-border security strategy with its cross-border security and confidence-building units to promote cross-border community engagement.

8. In the Lake Chad basin region, the African Union Commission and the Lake Chad Basin Commission are implementing the regional strategy for the stabilization, recovery and resilience of the areas affected by Boko Haram. Anchored on nine strategic objectives, the strategy is designed to address the short-term, medium-term and long-term needs of the region. It is also supported by relevant United Nations agencies, funds and programmes.

IV. National peace architectures

9. Countries in West Africa and the Sahel have multiple and often coexisting mechanisms to address local conflicts, spearheaded by traditional, government, or religious authorities at the national or sub-national level. Their achievements are often under-reported. In some countries, such structures are under a coherent architecture for peace, while in other countries they operate in an ad hoc fashion on the basis of local, comparative advantages or specific interests.

10. In Burkina Faso, several institutions have been established with the aim of promoting social cohesion and sustaining peace and upholding the traditions of tolerance and peaceful coexistence. There are at least 11 ministries or State institutions, including the recently created Ministry of Reconciliation and Social Cohesion, focusing on causes of intercommunal conflicts, including land, national resources, human rights issues and pastoralism. There are more than 13 peacebuilding civil society organizations with a mandate to address specific intercommunal and religious tensions. At the community level, many more mechanisms are still active, involving councils of elders, traditional chiefs and kings, as well as local civil society and women's groups. Those actors share common features, including legitimacy and acceptance by the local communities. The Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and UNOWAS are accompanying the national efforts to operationalize those infrastructures for peace.

11. Several national initiatives geared towards addressing intercommunal conflicts are also being undertaken in Ghana, Mali and Nigeria. In Ghana, the National Peace

Council has been involved in mediating and addressing intercommunal conflicts. In Mali, negotiations between communities have resulted in local settlements that have reduced the number of violent incidents. In Nigeria, farmer-herder peace forums in Benue and Nasarawa States meet regularly to sustain inclusive dialogue and find home-grown solutions to emerging conflicts.

V. Recommendations

12. Based on a preliminary mapping of the existing actors and initiatives in the prevention and resolution of intercommunal violence in West Africa and the Sahel, it can be concluded that the proposed joint civilian project should be grounded in existing regional and national frameworks and interventions, to avoid duplication of efforts. In addition, it would be important to ensure the meaningful participation of local communities in its design and implementation. The joint civilian project should leverage the comparative advantages of UNOWAS and the critical developmental and coordination role of the Office of the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel to address existing gaps, such as the need to increase information-sharing on ongoing efforts to tackle intercommunal violence, design and implement microprojects to support communal livelihoods and strengthen the harmonious coexistence of communities.

13. The following options could be considered:

(a) Supporting the UNDP-led stabilization facility assisting the Liptako-Gourma Authority by providing analysis and political accompaniment through the good offices of the Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel, as well as the integrating and galvanizing role of the special coordinators of the United Nations field presences in the region. The stabilization facility's interventions in terms of the rehabilitation of basic services, the revitalization of economic activities and the improvement of long-term civil-military cooperation, as well as intracommunal and intercommunal cohesion, lend themselves to being scaled up with minimal delay. Against a continuously degrading security environment, the facility operates in a context that is politically highly sensitive, requiring continuous analysis and mediation;

(b) In collaboration with ECOWAS, promoting the holding of inclusive dialogue initiatives at the local level in a number of countries, to facilitate ownership and the meaningful operationalization of the forthcoming action plans for the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework. The dialogues should be aimed at addressing issues of relevance for the targeted communities, with particular attention given to the peace-development nexus, and involve all key stakeholders, including civil society organizations and women's and youth groups.

14. While proposing to initially focus on those two points of entry, UNOWAS will pursue discussions with regional and subregional organizations, the Special Coordinator, United Nations resident coordinators and other relevant regional stakeholders to assess the feasibility of other options. In that regard, the Peacebuilding Support Office will be a critical partner in the promotion of catalytic funding. Other development partners, such as the World Bank and the African Development Bank, could also be engaged, drawing on their respective work in the areas of conflict prevention and building resilience, and the conduct of fragility assessments in the region.