

THE UN OFFICE FOR WEST AFRICA

WEST AFRICA

Composed of 15 countries, West Africa has more than 250 million inhabitants spreading over some 5 000 000 km².

The sub-region is home to Africa's leading oil producer, Nigeria, and Côte d'Ivoire, the world's largest cocoa producer. All 15 countries are members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a sub-regional organization aiming at economic integration and conflict resolution.

A number of West African countries have embarked on the path to peace and stability. However, large parts of the sub-region have known instability and conflict for several years. As a result, four countries – Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia and Sierra Leone – host UN peace missions, while the UN system as a whole is active in a wide range of political, development, human rights and humanitarian activities.

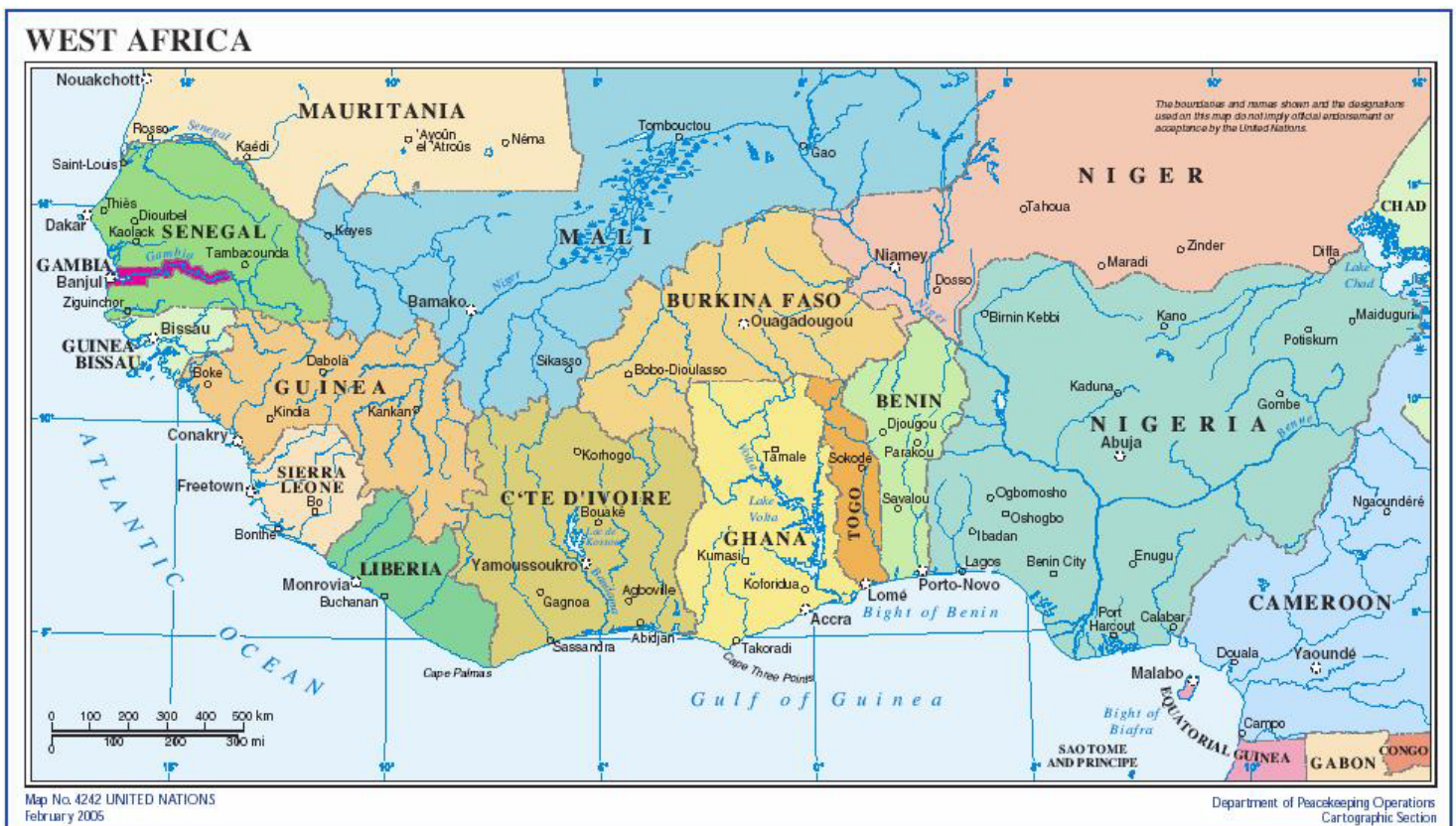
The cross-border impact of conflict in West Africa is sometimes further exacerbated by ethnic, cultural and historical links, and conflict has often spread from one country to another.

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To address this situation, the UN Secretary-General, in agreement with the Security Council, has established the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA) as an innovative response to the pressing call by ECOWAS leaders for a sub-regional approach to the many challenges facing peace and security. UNOWA is the first UN regional peace-building office in the world, with a mandate to harmonize UN activities and promote the integration of a sub-regional, as opposed to country-by-country, approach.

UNOWA's team includes officers with responsibility for political, humanitarian, human rights, information and development affairs. UNOWA participates in Security Council and other missions from UN Headquarters to West Africa.

The establishment of UNOWA was part of an attempt to decentralize and bring regional UN activities on in the areas of conflict prevention and peace-building closer to the local realities and needs.



Mr. Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah (Mauritania) was appointed by the Secretary-General as Special Representative for West Africa (SRSG), and he took up his functions as head of UNOWA in September 2002.

UNOWA ONGOING PROJECTS

The office was established with the overall mandate to develop a United Nations sub-regional integrated approach in conflict prevention and management and to promote peace, security and development in West Africa. In this connection the Special Representative convenes regular meetings with heads of UN regional and political offices in West Africa.

At the request of the UN Security Council or the Secretary-General, UNOWA is currently engaged in the preparation and implementation of a number of initiatives related to peace and security. These include the following:

CROSS-BORDER CHALLENGES

On 25 March 2004, the report of the Secretary-General on ways to address cross-border challenges in West Africa such as mercenaries, child-soldiers, small arms proliferation and roadblocks, was presented to the UN Security Council with a set of strong recommendations on how to address them (S/2004/200). Following the meeting, the Security Council issued a Presidential Statement (S/PRST/2004/7) emphasizing the importance of a regional approach to West Africa, and a wider strategy of conflict prevention, crisis management and post-conflict stabilization in the sub-region. A meeting of UN agencies and peace missions together with civil society and other partners agreed on an implementation plan on 30 April 2004.

UNOWA prepared a Progress report on the implementation of the recommendations included in the Secretary-General's report on cross border issues in February 2005 (S/2005/86). This was welcomed by the Security Council on 25 February 2005 (S/PRST/2005/9).

CÔTE D'IVOIRE CRISIS

At the request of the Secretary-General, a study on the Regional impact of the Côte d'Ivoire crisis was made available to the Members of the Security Council in April 2004. UNOWA will continue to follow up the issue and provide updates to the Security Council accordingly.

COOPERATION WITH ECOWAS

Successful regional integration needs a close working relationship with ECOWAS, the West-African organization in charge of issues related to peace and security, which has been steadily increasing in effectiveness, commitment and resource-mobilization. Within its ongoing cooperation with ECOWAS, one of UNOWA's most important objectives, a joint work programme has been established involving projects related to security sector reform, democratization, economic integration, youth unemployment, small arms, and transborder cooperation.

Building on the EU-UN mission to Abuja in February 2004 to assess, together with ECOWAS, the organization's peacebuilding and conflict prevention capacity, a trilateral partnership among UNOWA, the EU and ECOWAS has also been established. A trilateral action plan with priority activities in the area of peace and security has been developed and endorsed at Ministerial Meetings in the Netherlands and Luxemburg in 2005. Regular meetings among UNOWA, the EU and ECOWAS are held in Dakar and elsewhere.

DISARMAMENT DEMOBILIZATION AND REINTEGRATION

Recent and ongoing conflicts have highlighted the need to make the Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) of ex combatants a serious priority. Three regional meetings have been convened by UNOWA in 2004 and 2005 on the harmonization of DDR programmes West Africa. Representatives from UN peace missions and UN institutions in West Africa, DDR national commissions, ECOWAS, the European Union Presidency, development partners, and civil society organizations shared views, information and experiences on current DDR practices in the subregion, particularly as these practices impact on peace and security, and formulated basic principles and guidelines for a regional harmonized approach to DDR in West Africa.

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

With 60% of the population in many West African countries being under the age of 20, youth issues deserve serious consideration. Youth unemployment in particular is increasingly a major source of concern in the sub region. At the request of the Security Council, UNOWA is

working on practical recommendations and a regional strategy to tackle this challenge that is so linked to present and future security and political stability.

SECURITY SECTOR REFORM

Too often, Security Forces in West Africa have appeared as a source of insecurity rather than a factor of democratic stability. Security Sector Reform has therefore been identified as another key priority for the sub-region. In November 2004, practical project proposals on Reform of the Security Sector were developed at a regional workshop which took place in Dakar with the participation of senior officers from the military and security forces of the sub region, and representatives of Governments, West African civil society organizations and international development partners.

The meeting developed a shared understanding of Security Sector Reform as a conflict prevention tool in West Africa and devised specific projects on non-military threats to security sector notably in three areas: the health sector, including the prevalent issue of HIV/Aids in the armed forces; the administration of justice; and the fight against cross-border criminal activities.

INTEGRATED STRATEGIES FOR SENSITIVE BORDER AREAS IN WEST AFRICA

Porous borders and neglected border areas call for a regional border approach. Building on its work on subregional cross-border issues, UNOWA recently launched an initiative addressing the economic, political, security and humanitarian problems especially affecting the populations of certain border areas in West Africa and developing multi-agency strategies for stabilizing these areas. Integrated strategies for four border clusters will be developed for: (i) Guinea/Côte d'Ivoire/Liberia/Sierra Leone (Guinea-Forestiere); (ii) Mali/Burkina Faso/Côte d'Ivoire/Ghana; (iii) Mauritania/Mali/Niger; (iv) Senegal/Gambia/Guinea-Bissau. The main recommendations of these strategies focused on areas such as security sector reform, joint border management, small arms proliferation, social and humanitarian assistance and civil society collaboration. Subsequent meetings involving a variety of partners are envisaged in the sensitive border areas themselves.

In April 2005, the SRSR convened a major meeting in Timbuktu (Mali) involving a wide

selection of security, development and political actors from northern Mali, northern Niger and eastern Mauritania in order to devise an integrated strategy for this border area. A similar meeting focusing on southern Burkina Faso, southern Mali and northern Cote d'Ivoire is planned for September 2005.

Further work is also planned within the framework of UNOWA's activities on issues such as legitimacy and peaceful alternation to power; rapid urbanization; electoral issues and other matters of importance for the region.

These studies involve widespread consultations not only with the other UN entities active in the sub-region, ECOWAS, Member states and development partners, but also with civil society organizations including the private sector as well as independent experts.

As part of its humanitarian role, UNOWA is closely associated with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) in strengthening the United Nations regional humanitarian response particularly in advocacy, protection and contingency planning.

With the aim of reinforcing respect for human rights, including of women and vulnerable categories, UNOWA also supports the development of a sub-regional strategy for the protection and promotion of these rights.

GOOD OFFICES MISSIONS

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSR) for West Africa represented the Secretary-General in the Linas-Marcoussis negotiations on Côte d'Ivoire in 2003 and accompanied the new Prime Minister, Mr. Seydou E. Diarra, when the latter flew from Dakar to take up his functions in Abidjan. He also represented the Secretary-General at the ECOWAS-led peace negotiations on Liberia in Accra in July-August 2003.

The SRSR is in frequent contact with the heads of the other UN peace operations in the sub-region in Cote d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau and chairs the high-level meetings of Heads of UN peace operations in West Africa.

UNOWA follows closely the internal developments in several countries of the region. One of UNOWA's major concerns is to help

minimizing instability relating to elections or the transfer of power and the SRSG maintains close contacts with West African leaders.

As part of his good offices on Togo, and following visits to that country, the SRSG attended on 19 May 2005 in Abuja, the Mini Summit on the Situation in Togo, during which the Heads of State and Government held extensive discussions with the Government of Togo and the leaders of Togolese political parties. The Summit centered on the functioning of Togolese institutions and the return of the country to normalcy, especially the establishment of an all-inclusive national reconciliation government, the respect for human rights, the return of refugees and the preparation of forthcoming legislative elections.

CAMEROON/NIGERIA MIXED COMMISSION

The SRSG for West Africa, Mr. Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, also serves as Chairman of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission, established in November 2002 by the United Nations Secretary-General, at the request of President Biya and President Obasanjo, to facilitate the implementation of the ruling of the International Court of Justice on the Land and Maritime Boundary between Cameroon and Nigeria on 10 October 2002.

Since December 2002, the Mixed Commission has held regular meetings alternately in Yaoundé and Abuja.

UN OFFICE FOR WEST AFRICA UNOWA

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