



**Briefing to the Security Council on the Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS)
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Mr. President, Distinguished Members of the Council,

1. I am honored to be here today to brief you on the latest report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS).

Excellencies,

2. Since my last briefing at this forum in July, the West Africa and Sahel region has experienced a devastating surge in terrorist attacks against civilian and military targets. The humanitarian consequences are alarming. I will highlight some of these challenges as well as ongoing initiatives to tackle them. I will also address overall political developments in the region with a focus on forthcoming elections this year.
3. The West Africa and Sahel region has been shaken by unprecedented terrorist violence in recent months. As I emphasized during my briefing to the Security Council on 16 December 2019, relentless attacks on civilian and military targets have shaken public confidence.
4. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, casualties from terrorist attacks have increased five-fold since 2016 with over 4,000 deaths reported in 2019 alone as compared to an estimated 770 deaths in 2016. Most significantly, the geographic focus of terrorist attacks has shifted eastwards from Mali to Burkina Faso and Niger, and is increasingly threatening West African coastal States. The number of people killed in Burkina Faso has increased from about 80 in 2016 to over 1,800 in 2019. The number of displaced persons has increased ten-fold to about half a million, in addition to 25,000 who have sought refuge in neighboring countries.
5. The terrorist attacks are also often deliberate efforts by violent extremists to capture weapons and trafficking routes and engage in other illicit activities, including illegal artisanal mining in certain areas that sustain their networks.

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6. Terrorism, organized crime and intercommunal violence are often intertwined. This is especially true in peripheral areas where the State's presence is weak. In those places, extremists provide safety and protection to populations; as well as social services in exchange for loyalty. For this reason, at the July 2019 High-Level Conference on Counter Terrorism and Prevention of Violent Extremism in Nairobi, the Secretary-General emphasized that counter-terrorism responses must focus on gaining the trust and support of local populations.

Excellencies,

7. Governments, local actors, regional organizations and the international community are mobilizing across West Africa and the Sahel to respond to terrorism and violent extremism. Indeed, many solid frameworks, resolutions and declarations already exist at the strategic level. On 21 December, at its Summit of Heads of State and Government, ECOWAS adopted a 2020-2024 action plan for the eradication of terrorism in the sub-region, following the Community's extraordinary summit in Ouagadougou in September, during which it pledged to mobilize one billion USD internally. The African Union - Lake Chad Basin Commission Regional Stabilization Strategy for the Lake Chad Basin is also a regional approach which sets the parameters for early warning and early engagement on all forms of local conflicts.
8. Now, Mr. President, Distinguished Members, is the time for action. Regional and sub-regional leaders must follow through on the pledges made and international partners must lend their full support to the implementation of existing mechanisms. We need to prioritize a cross-pillar approach at all levels and across all sectors to ensure the most effective support to Governments in the region. The UN response in the Sahel serves as a template in this approach.
9. UNOWAS also worked closely with the Mano River Union to resuscitate the Basin's cross-border security and confidence building measures.
10. Farmer-herder clashes remain some of the most violent local conflicts in the region. Close to 70 per cent of West Africa's population are dependent on agriculture and livestock-rearing for a living. That is why it is so important to ensure peaceful coexistence between farmers and herders. Climate change, among other multiple factors, is increasingly exacerbating farmer-herder conflicts. The impact of climate change on security also spawns a negative relationship between climate change, social cohesion, irregular migration and criminality in some places.

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11. The all-too-worrying trends in terms of security must not distract from positive political developments in many parts of West Africa and the Sahel. Dialogue with citizens and across political divides is taking place in several countries. For example, The people of The Gambia have successfully concluded the second round of public consultations on a new Constitution and peacefully conducted the Truth, Reconciliation, and Reparations process. In Sierra Leone, Mauritania, Senegal and elsewhere, encouraging dialogues are ongoing with a view to promoting national unity.

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12. In the months ahead, the electorates in six West African countries will choose their leaders in democratic contests. In this vein, the people of Guinea-Bissau and their Electoral Commission deserve congratulations for the exemplary conduct of last year's presidential election, which marks an important step forward in Guinea Bissau's democratic development. The United Nations will continue to support the Government and the people of Guinea Bissau in their efforts towards consolidating peace and development.

13. On 22 February, Togo will hold its next presidential election. Following recent electoral and constitutional reforms, it is urgent that any outstanding pre- and post- electoral grievances are addressed using legal channels.
Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Niger are also preparing for polls later in the year. Unresolved grievances, incomplete national reconciliation processes, and sentiments of manipulation of institutions and processes carry risks of tensions and manifestations of political violence.
The resumption of dialogue in Guinea, with the impulse of the United Nations and other partners, has yielded early results, including the release of political prisoners. The United Nations reiterate calls on national stakeholders to overcome their differences in the spirit of building consensus in order to ensure the holding of peaceful legislative elections scheduled for February 2020. In the months ahead, UNOWAS will continue working closely with all national stakeholders and regional partners, especially ECOWAS, to promote consensus and inclusiveness in all the elections to be conducted in the region.

14. In this regard, UNOWAS will also continue to urge Member States in the region to adopt legislation or implement existing laws to promote the participation of women and youth in these important milestone polls. UNOWAS will continue to work in tandem with regional and other partners to convey consistent and firm messages in this regard, especially as we commemorate the 20th anniversary of UNSCR 1325 this year. A resolution I might add that West African women made a very important contribution to its adoption.

15. In conclusion, as I have just outlined, stakes are high in the region this year, both in terms of security and political developments. As UNOWAS' mandate is renewed, we count on the Council's continued full support to accomplish the tasks assigned.
I thank you for your kind attention Excellencies.