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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 23 June to 14 December 2020 and provides an overview of developments and trends in West Africa and the Sahel. It captures the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) and highlights progress made in the implementation of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel. In addition, it provides an update on the situation in the Lake Chad basin, pursuant to Security Council resolution [2349 \(2017\)](#).

II. Developments and trends in West Africa and the Sahel

2. Since the previous report ([S/2020/585](#)), citizen demands for inclusive participation in political processes and for effective and accountable governance have intensified across West Africa and the Sahel. Constitutional reforms are ongoing, despite challenges, in the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. Terrorist activities have increasingly become intertwined with intercommunity and farmer-herder conflict, compounding a precarious security situation and acute humanitarian needs in large parts of the Sahel. While Governments in the subregion responded effectively to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, the pandemic has triggered a severe economic slowdown, which, along with climatic conditions, has exacerbated the already dire humanitarian situation.

3. Elections were held in Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia and the Niger. To varying degrees, tensions arose over the inclusivity of electoral processes, electoral management bodies and the accuracy of voter registers, among other contentious issues. In some cases, electoral preparations were accompanied by complaints by the opposition about the instrumentalization of the judiciary, COVID-19 emergency measures and the extension of presidential term limits.

A. Political and governance trends

4. In Benin, between 29 May and 21 August, elected local officials, including three women, took office in all 77 communes and municipal councils. Seventy-one municipalities are headed by the pro-government parties, Union progressiste and Bloc républicain, while the opposition party Forces Cauris pour un Bénin émergent runs



the remaining six. In view of the overwhelming pro-government majority in both the municipalities and Parliament, civil society organizations have expressed concerns about the inclusivity of the 2021 presidential election. It is of note that, under the 2019 amendments to the electoral law, presidential and vice-presidential candidates are required to obtain 10 per cent sponsorship from elected representatives. Civil society organizations are of the view that opposition candidates may be unable to fulfil that requirement, which would diminish prospects for an inclusive election.

5. In Burkina Faso, combined legislative and presidential elections were held on 22 November. Thirteen candidates, including one woman, contested the presidential election, while more than 5,000 candidates, including 265 women, contested 127 legislative seats. The elections were held in a largely calm environment; however, about 7 per cent of the electorate were unable to vote owing to the closure of polling stations because of insecurity. It should be recalled that, on 25 August, the National Assembly had amended the electoral code, allowing for a validation of the polls even if voting could not take place in an estimated 17 per cent of the national territory owing to insecurity.

6. In Cabo Verde, municipal elections were held on 25 October. The ruling Movement for Democracy won 14 of the country's 22 municipalities. The main opposition party, the African Party for the Independence of Cabo Verde, secured the remaining eight municipalities, including Praia. Women accounted for 45 per cent of those elected to preside over municipal assemblies in the country. Nevertheless, no woman was elected as mayor among a vast majority of male candidates.

7. In Côte d'Ivoire, the presidential election was held on 31 October amid tensions over the incumbent's third-term candidacy, the non-inclusivity of the electoral process and the boycott of the polls by the two main opposition parties, the Parti démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire – Rassemblement démocratique africain, led by Henri Konan Bédié, a former President, and the Front populaire ivoirien, led by Pascal Affi N'Guessan, a former Prime Minister. Electoral violence, which started on 10 August, resulted in at least 85 fatalities and 484 injured. On 9 November, the Constitutional Council declared the incumbent President, Alassane Ouattara, the winner, with 94.27 per cent of the votes. Following the polls, the opposition unilaterally announced the creation of a national transitional council under the leadership of Mr. Bédié. In reaction, the international community called upon opposition stakeholders to respect the constitutional order, national institutions and favour dialogue. In a meeting on 11 November, Mr. Ouattara and Mr. Bédié noted the need to "restore trust" and agreed to further talks. Subsequently, both sides made minor concessions, including the release of some opposition leaders and the de facto suspension of "civil disobedience" measures adopted by the opposition. During his swearing-in, on 14 December, the incumbent President pledged, among other things, to establish a ministry for national reconciliation and called upon all political parties to enter into a dialogue in order to strengthen peace and stability in the country.

8. In the Gambia, on 22 September, the National Assembly rejected the draft bill for a new constitution following a lack of consensus on the issues of the retroactivity of the proposed two five-year presidential term limits, the powers of the executive vis-à-vis the legislature and the replacement of the single-round presidential electoral system with a 50+1 majority system. The rejection caused concern over a possible reversal of the democratic reform agenda, which was a key campaign promise of the election of 2016 that brought the current President, Adama Barrow, to power. Meanwhile, preparations for a new electoral code continued.

9. In Ghana, a presidential election was held on 7 December, with 12 candidates contesting, including three women. Despite isolated incidents of violence leading to the loss of life, the polls were held peacefully. The Electoral Commission declared

the incumbent President, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, of the ruling New Patriotic Party, winner, with 51.3 per cent of the vote, against 47.3 per cent obtained by the former President, John Dramani Mahama, of the main opposition party, the National Democratic Congress. In legislative elections held the same day, disputes ensued over which party had won the majority, as the former President and the National Democracy Congress contested the results of both elections.

10. In Guinea, a contested presidential election was held on 18 October. Twelve candidates, including the incumbent President, Alpha Condé, the leader of the opposition party Union des forces démocratiques de Guinée, Cellou Dalein Diallo, and two women, took part in the race. On 19 October, Mr. Diallo declared himself the winner on the basis of an unofficial vote tally. Subsequently, clashes erupted in Conakry and several towns across the country, resulting in the deaths of at least 27 civilians. On 1 November, the Constitutional Court dismissed the complaints lodged by the leader of the opposition and three other presidential candidates and released the final results, declaring the incumbent President the winner, with 59.5 per cent of the votes, with Mr. Diallo coming second, with 33.5 per cent.

11. In Guinea-Bissau, the political situation remained relatively stable but tense. The ruling by the Supreme Court of Justice on 4 September ended the dispute over the presidential election. On 9 September, Parliament approved the State budget for 2020 and the national development plan of the Government led by Nuno Gomes Nabiam. On 10 September, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) began withdrawing its forces, the ECOWAS Mission in Guinea-Bissau, from the country after an eight years' presence. The United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNIOGBIS) is slated to close on 31 December after 11 years of operation. Meanwhile, two parallel and competing constitutional reviews, led by Parliament and the President's technical commission for the review of the Constitution, respectively, risk fuelling further political tensions. Despite initial support by the Government, United Nations efforts to establish a high-level platform on reforms comprising national and international partners failed to materialize, owing to opposition from the President, Úmaro Sissoco Embaló.

12. In Liberia, the President, George Weah, partially reshuffled his cabinet on 1 October and changed the leadership of several national institutions. Nine of the 15 new appointees were women. On 8 December, Liberia held midterm senatorial elections, two representative by-elections and a contentious constitutional referendum. Challenges around resource mobilization, the composition of the National Elections Commission and the alleged politicization of the police compounded a lack of trust in State institutions. Only 20 out of 118 eligible candidates contesting senatorial seats were women. Despite heightened tensions and instances of election-related violence during the campaign, the polls generally went on successfully.

13. In Mali, widespread demonstrations and a coup d'état prompted the resignation of the President, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, on 18 August. In response, ECOWAS instituted sanctions and demanded the establishment of a civilian-led transitional Government. A charter for the transition issued on 1 October, and a transitional Government was formed on 5 October. The former Minister of Defence, Bah N'Daw, and a former head of the military junta, Colonel Assimi Goita, were appointed as transitional President and Vice-President, respectively. This led to the lifting of sanctions imposed by ECOWAS. These developments took place against the backdrop of a slow implementation of the peace agreement of 2015, a worsening socioeconomic climate and a deteriorating security and human rights situation. On 3 December, the 121 members of the National Transitional Council were appointed. On 5 December, Colonel Malick Diaw was designated as President of the Council, amidst concerns

about the decision by the Government to appoint military officers as civilian State representatives.

14. In Mauritania, the President, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, appointed Mohamed Ould Bilal as the new Prime Minister on 6 August. In August, the former President, Mohamed Ould Abdel-Aziz, was briefly detained and questioned following the release of a report by a parliamentary commission of inquiry alleging embezzlement of funds under his Government. All ministers incriminated in the report of the commission, except for one, were dismissed.

15. In the Niger, local elections were held on 13 December. The political context before the presidential and legislative elections scheduled for 27 December were marked by the absence of the opposition representatives in the Independent National Electoral Commission and in the institutional framework of the political dialogue.

16. In Nigeria, peaceful governorship elections were held in Edo and Ondo States on 19 September and 10 October, respectively. Three women contested the two polls, which were won by the incumbent Governors. On 15 October, the Chair of the Independent National Electoral Commission, Mahmood Yakubu, urged legislators to ensure the timely review of the Electoral Act ahead of the next presidential election in 2023.

17. In Senegal, the Political Commission for National Dialogue resumed its deliberations after a COVID-19-induced break. The Commission reached consensus on several issues, including an independent audit of the register of voters and of the elections of 2019, to feed into the elaboration of a new electoral code. On 29 October, the President, Macky Sall, dissolved his cabinet. On 1 November, he named a new cabinet, approximately 18 months after assuming his new mandate. The new cabinet comprises 37 ministers and State ministers, including eight women.

18. In Sierra Leone, the commission of inquiry presented its reports to the President, Julius Maada Bio, in September. The reports contained charges of misappropriation of public funds by officials of the All People's Congress (APC) administration from 2007 to 2018. In this regard, the commission recommended the confiscation of properties of key APC members, including the former President, Ernest Bai Koroma. The APC dismissed the proceedings as politically motivated. On 5 October, Mr. Bio suspended the Minister of Agriculture on allegations of corruption.

19. In Togo, on 28 September, a new government was appointed, led by Victoire Tomegah-Dogbe. Ms. Tomegah-Dogbe is the first woman to hold the office of Prime Minister and follows the election in 2019 of the first woman President of the National Assembly, Yawa Djigbodi Tségan. Addressing Parliament on 2 October, Ms. Tomegah-Dogbe identified job creation, infrastructure development and social harmony as the key priorities of her Government.

B. Security trends

20. Since the previous report, the overall security situation in the region has become more complex. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated existing conflict drivers and fuelled a radicalized narrative by extremist groups who blame Governments for the adverse impacts of the pandemic. The central Sahel remained vulnerable to multidimensional emergencies, governance deficits and weak institutions, violent extremism, the effects of climate change, food insecurity, rapid demographic growth and large-scale forced displacement. While the Liptako-Gourma tri-border region and the Lake Chad basin witnessed a decrease in violent incidents, partly due to the rainy season and counter-terrorism actions undertaken by security forces, lethal attacks against humanitarian actors further complicated humanitarian access in the Niger and

Nigeria. Violent clashes occurred in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea in the context of contested electoral processes. In Ghana, attacks by the Western Togoland secessionist group on police stations and road blockades in the Volta region raised new security concerns, ahead of the country's general elections.

21. Attacks continued in Burkina Faso, predominantly in the Est, Sahel and Centre-Nord Regions, leading to increased violence against civilians, displacements and terrorist, violent extremist and criminal groups taking control of territory. In the Est Region, on 6 August, unidentified gunmen killed at least 20 people in an attack on Namoungou village, and on 4 October, at least 25 internally displaced persons were killed by unidentified armed individuals in the Centre-Nord Region. The establishment of civilian volunteer groups have aggravated tensions along ethnic lines in some locations and triggered human rights concerns. On 15 October, at least 20 displaced persons who were returning to their homes in the Sahel region were reportedly killed by unidentified armed elements. On 11 November, another attack in the Oudalan province, Sahel region, reportedly claimed by "Islamic State West Africa Province", left 14 soldiers dead. Those attacks intensified the humanitarian crisis and lack of confidence in authorities, while the security services struggled to bring the situation under control.

22. In Mali, attacks by violent extremist groups against security forces and civilian populations continued. Between 10 and 13 July, clashes between security forces and demonstrators caused 14 civilian deaths (11 men and three boys) and led to the resignation of the President, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, and his Government. On 3 September, at least 10 Malian soldiers were killed in an attack in Guiré on the border with Mauritania. On 12 October, violent extremists killed 25 people, including 13 soldiers, in multiple attacks in Sokoura, central Mali, near the border with Burkina Faso, burning down an army base and ambushing troops sent as reinforcements. In this fragile security context, an agreement was reached between the transitional authorities and extremist groups, including Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, to exchange approximately 200 prisoners suspected or convicted of serious crimes in exchange for four hostages, including the prominent opposition figure, Soumaïla Cissé.

23. The security situation in the Niger was more stable compared with the previous reporting period, although rival extremist groups continued to clash in the Diffa Region. The rainy season impeded the movements of both extremist groups and security forces. However, the army conducted operations in border areas near Burkina Faso and Mali, sometimes jointly with the French Operation Barkhane. In this context, from 15 to 27 August, 15 hostages of Boko Haram were freed in the Tillabéri Region. In late October, a national of the United States of America was abducted in the south of the Niger and subsequently rescued by United States forces in northern Nigeria.

24. Nigeria faced security challenges on multiple fronts. Despite the rainy season, violent extremist attacks against security forces continued in a coordinated and targeted manner. Cooperation between motorcycle bandits and Boko Haram factions across several northern states was observed. On 25 September, Boko Haram factions reportedly attacked the convoy of Governor Babagana Zulum along the Baga Highway in Borno State, killing 15 members of his security detail. The Nigerian defence forces then increased air operations. From July to October, there were about 102 incidents of kidnapping in the Federal Capital Territory alone. In early October, popular protests against police brutality and human rights violations erupted in several states, which resulted in the disbandment of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad police unit. The protests, however, degenerated into violence and riots in several states, resulting in people getting killed and injured.

25. The Gulf of Guinea remained a piracy hotspot, albeit with a lower number of incidents compared with the previous reporting period. The Interregional Coordination Centre for Maritime Safety and Security in the Gulf of Guinea recorded 17 incidents from July to September, compared with 34 in the previous quarter. Of the 17 incidents, 15 occurred in the ECOWAS space. In addition, during the reporting period, the Centre recorded the kidnapping of 31 people in the ECOWAS maritime space. About 550 distressed migrants were rescued at sea by the Senegalese and Mauritanian navies, while 350 migrants died. On 17 July, a pirate attack occurred 240 nautical miles off the coast of Benin, compared with a maximum range of 70 miles at sea in the previous reporting period.

26. According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, maritime routes were increasingly used by criminal networks owing to COVID-19-related restrictions on air and land travel, including for trafficking counterfeit medicines. In August, three containers loaded with 15 million tramadol tablets were intercepted by the police in Lagos, Nigeria. On 12 and 26 September, the Drug Enforcement Agency of Liberia made seizures of various drugs, including 26 kg of cocaine. On 30 October, the Senegalese navy intercepted a fishing boat and seized about 17 tons of cocaine. Guinea-Bissau appears to be emerging as a distribution depot of cocaine destined for Lisbon, considering the number of arrests of drug traffickers that was made on that route between July and September.

C. Sustainable development trends

27. West African countries effectively contained the COVID-19 pandemic. A coordinated regional response was led by the President of Nigeria, Muhammadu Buhari, in his capacity as ECOWAS Champion on the Fight against COVID-19, in collaboration with the West African Health Organization.

28. However, despite relatively low caseloads and fatality numbers, the pandemic has had severe socioeconomic, political and security repercussions in the region, which risk reversing gains in socioeconomic development and progress with regard to the Sustainable Development Goals.

29. Border closures reduced trade and increased the prices of basic necessities, while revenues for export commodities declined. Economic growth projections have been revised downwards and indicate that the region is plunging into a recession. On 7 July, the African Development Bank reported that the gross domestic product of West Africa was expected to decline by up to 6.2 per cent, as opposed to earlier pre-pandemic growth projections of 4 per cent. The most affected countries are Nigeria (-4.4 per cent), Cabo Verde (-4 per cent) and Liberia (-2.5 per cent). In September 2020, the African Union Commission further estimated that, across Africa, up to 49 million people might be pushed back into extreme poverty.

30. Efforts to strengthen the economy and health sector and improve livelihoods have imposed difficult budgetary trade-offs on Governments throughout the region. On 22 October, the International Monetary Fund released figures indicating that fiscal deficits in the ECOWAS zone had increased from 4.4 to 7.3 per cent of gross domestic product, with up to 16.4 per cent in Ghana. The increased debt burdens reduce the potential for productive investments and achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

D. Humanitarian trends

31. The humanitarian situation in the region deteriorated in the second half of 2020 as a result of escalating conflict, extreme weather patterns and the COVID-19 pandemic. Insecurity continued to trigger new population displacements, with a cumulative figure of 5 million people, which is currently 1.4 million higher than in 2019, including 4.1 million internally displaced persons and 870,000 refugees.

32. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, following the midyear revision of humanitarian response plans to reflect the impact of COVID-19, 31 million people are in need of life-saving assistance; an increase of 7 million compared with the beginning of 2020. More than half of those 31 million people are children. Latest assessments after the lean season further estimate that close to 15 million people are facing critical food shortages, twice the number of 2019. Two million children under five years of age are suffering from life-threatening severe malnutrition.

33. The 2020 humanitarian response plans for the Sahel, with a total requirement of \$3.55 billion, were funded at 49 per cent. On 20 October, donors at a ministerial round table on the central Sahel co-hosted by the Governments of Denmark and Germany, the European Union and the United Nations pledged more than \$1.7 billion to scale up humanitarian aid to Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger.

34. As at 11 December, West Africa and the Sahel had registered approximately 260,000 COVID-19 cases and 6,439 deaths. While the public health impact was not as devastating as initially feared, related restrictions, such as the closure of markets, quarantines and curfews, deeply affected livelihoods, traditional pastoral movements and access to food for the most vulnerable. Young women and men were disproportionately affected. Internally displaced people faced additional risks owing to crowded living conditions, while women and girls were at increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence.

35. Twelve countries in the region recorded excess rainfalls that affected more than 1.5 million people and resulted in the destruction of houses, property and crops. This was an additional stressor, as the affected countries already struggled to tackle insecurity, malnutrition and different types of epidemics.

36. In Burkina Faso, 1 million people have been forced to flee their homes owing to insecurity, an increase of 150,000 compared with the previous reporting period. The majority of displaced people are women and children, and more than 75 per cent remain without adequate shelter. Insecurity, displacement and extreme weather have also increased food insecurity, with 3.3 million people nationwide facing critical shortages, twice as many as in 2019. More than 2,200 schools remained closed owing to insecurity, depriving nearly 350,000 children of access to education. In addition, flooding has affected more than 106,000 people, increasing the total number of people in need to 2.9 million, including 1.7 million children.

37. The multidimensional crisis in Mali has left 6.8 million people, about one third of the population, in need of humanitarian assistance, including 3.4 million children. Close to 290,000 people are internally displaced, an increase of 70,000 compared with the previous reporting period and four times more than in early 2019. A total of 1.3 million people are facing acute food insecurity and 188,000 children are estimated to be affected by severe malnutrition.

38. In the Niger, almost 500,000 people have been forced to flee their homes, up by 60,000 compared with the previous reporting period. The Regions of Diffa, Tahoua, Tillabéri and, increasingly, central Maradi have all seen significant inflows of internally displaced persons, as well as refugees from Nigeria. In addition, 2.7 million

people are struggling with acute food insecurity, including more than 530,000 children suffering from severe malnutrition. Severe floods affected 550,000 people and destroyed thousands of houses and schools, also resulting in the loss of crops and livestock. In total, 3.7 million people, 55 per cent of them children, require humanitarian assistance, representing an increase of 1.4 million compared with 2019.

39. In north-east Nigeria, the number of people in need of emergency assistance increased from 7.7 million at the beginning of 2020 to 10.6 million, about 80 per cent of whom are women and children. Close to 2 million Nigerians, 78 per cent of whom are women and children, are internally displaced, and 256,000 are refugees in Cameroon, Chad and the Niger. Humanitarian access remained limited owing to insecurity and the targeting of aid workers. In July, three aid workers were kidnapped and killed. Heavy rainfalls and floods have affected over 100,000 people, further constraining access. About 4.3 million people are currently food insecure, up from 3.7 million at the beginning of 2020.

E. Human rights trends

40. Attacks by violent extremists and other armed groups, excessive use of force by security personnel and political and electoral violence persisted in a climate of impunity, with grave implications for the protection of civilians and the respect for human rights and international humanitarian law in the region.

41. Allegations of human rights violations by security forces and civilian volunteer groups in counter-terrorism operations, including extrajudicial killings, were reported. In Guinea-Bissau, insecurity and human rights abuses against political opponents remained a concern, with reports of arbitrary arrests, intimidation and unlawful detention of political opponents. Freedom of the press in the country was equally constrained, as social media political bloggers and activists were targeted by uniformed armed personnel.

42. Incidents of hate speech, instrumentalization of ethnicity and disinformation were reported in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea during the electoral period, as well as in Guinea-Bissau. In Burkina Faso in particular, the partial exclusion of displaced communities from the electoral process for security reasons was decried as inadvertently disenfranchising segments of the population most affected by insecurity and raised concerns about the exercise of political and civic rights.

43. Some measures were taken to address the situation. In the Niger, on 4 July, the National Human Rights Commission presented to the President, Mahamadou Issoufou, the findings of its investigations regarding allegations of violations committed between 27 March and 2 April by security forces in I-n-Atès, Tillabéri Region. The Commission accused members of the security forces of summarily executing 71 unarmed civilians. In Nigeria, a military court sentenced a corporal to five years' imprisonment for rape and attempted murder of a displaced girl in Bama town, Borno State. Initiatives such as the repeal of criminal libel laws and the enactment of the Police Act in Sierra Leone, as well as the steps taken to address allegations of violations committed by the Special Anti-Robbery Squad police unit in Nigeria, were encouraging signs of efforts to ensure accountability.

F. Trends in gender issues

44. There was notable progress in the participation and representation of women in political and peace processes in several countries. The first woman Prime Minister of Togo leads a cabinet comprising 11 women and 22 men, including the youngest

minister in the history of the country (29 years of age), who is in charge of energy and mines. In Guinea, Liberia, Mauritania and Nigeria, women were nominated to strategic positions. In Mali, however, the number of women ministers decreased from seven to four in the transitional Government.

45. Women also participated more actively in the elections. Three women in Burkina Faso, three in Ghana and two in Guinea ran for president. On 18 October, the Niger changed its law to increase the quota of women from 15 to 25 per cent for elected representatives and from 25 to 30 per cent for public appointments to higher functions. However, in Cabo Verde, political parties failed to fully comply with the parity law of 2019 requiring that 40 per cent of candidates for the municipal elections be women.

46. Efforts were made at national and regional levels to address sexual and gender-based violence. In Sierra Leone, on 24 July, President Bio launched the first sexual offences model court to enhance access to justice for victims of sexual and gender-based violence and strengthen accountability. In Mauritania, on 30 July, the Council of Ministers adopted a bill creating a national observatory for the rights of women and girls. In Liberia, on 11 September, the President declared rape a national emergency.

47. At the regional level, on 9 October, the ministers of gender and women's affairs of ECOWAS adopted new measures to address sexual and gender-based violence, including forced and early marriage; and issued a declaration of zero tolerance for violence against women and girls. On 12 October, ECOWAS established a working group with regional partners, civil society and non-State actors and developed guidelines on mainstreaming measures against gender-based violence or violence against children into national development and COVID-19 recovery plans.

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

A. Good offices and special assignments of the Special Representative

48. The Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, continued to support national and regional efforts to sustain peace, including through advocacy of and support for inclusive approaches to national dialogues and electoral processes, the promotion of human rights and constitutional and institutional reforms. Owing to COVID-19 restrictions, consultations in the first half of the reporting period were held virtually, affecting sensitive processes that require confidentiality.

49. On 7 September, the Special Representative participated in the fifty-seventh ordinary session of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government. He intensified his preventive diplomacy engagements and undertook several pre- and post-electoral missions, including jointly with ECOWAS and the African Union, to countries that held elections.

50. In Burkina Faso, from 12 to 15 October, the Special Representative met with the presidential candidates, the electoral commission and heads of national institutions and advocated national consultations to increase confidence in the election. He returned from 20 to 25 November for the elections, during which time he continued his good offices and held consultations with key national stakeholders and international partners that contributed to addressing some concerns raised by the opposition coalition during and immediately after the elections.

51. From 20 to 26 September, the Special Representative carried out a pre-electoral mission to Côte d'Ivoire. From 5 to 7 October, he participated in a joint ECOWAS-African Union-United Nations mission, which urged actors to refrain from hate speech and engage in a constructive dialogue for free, inclusive and peaceful elections. From 30 October to 3 November, he interacted with election observation missions in the country and met with the four presidential candidates to convey my call for dialogue and reconciliation in collaboration with ECOWAS, the African Union and other partners. This engagement continued after the election, in support of national and ECOWAS-led efforts to facilitate dialogue and reconciliation.

52. Ahead of the presidential election in Ghana, the Special Representative conducted pre-electoral missions to the country to stress the need for consensus in order to maintain the democratic trajectory. Together with ECOWAS, from 21 to 23 and from 27 to 29 October, he engaged with key national stakeholders and conducted several dialogue activities. He returned to Ghana from 25 to 29 November to pursue consultations with a full spectrum of political actors and institutions, civil society and regional and international partners. On 27 November, he facilitated a meeting between the chairs of the two main parties that was organized by UNOWAS in collaboration with the resident coordinator and the United Nations Development Programme to strategize quiet diplomatic efforts. On 4 December, he participated in the third High-level Meeting of the Presidential Elections Peace Pact that resulted in the signing of a peace pact by the flagbearers of the two main parties.

53. On account of the highly polarized environment in Guinea ahead of the presidential election, the Special Representative undertook several missions to Conakry. Together with ECOWAS and the African Union, from 30 September to 3 October, he met with national stakeholders, including presidential candidates, representatives of women and youth, religious leaders and representatives of the Front national pour la défense de la Constitution, and appealed for a transparent, inclusive and peaceful election. During his visit, he launched a project in support of the constructive role of the media in the electoral process. He returned to Conakry from 17 to 20 October, during which time he engaged with election observation missions and national stakeholders and urged the candidates to resort to legal means to resolve grievances. He undertook another joint mission with ECOWAS and the African Union following the announcement of the provisional results by the electoral commission, to appeal for peace and encourage dialogue.

54. On 12 November, the Special Representative briefed the Peacebuilding Commission configuration for Liberia ahead of the elections and advocated continued support to building and sustaining peace in the country, with a focus on women's participation.

55. In the Niger, the Special Representative carried out pre-election missions to Niamey, from 8 to 11 September and on 18 and 19 November, during which he held consultations on the forthcoming electoral process. In his interactions with stakeholders, mistrust and the absence of dialogue were identified as major challenges.

56. During the pre-electoral period, the Special Representative facilitated forums for stakeholders for peaceful elections in Burkina Faso (17 October), Ghana (26 November and 1 December) and the Niger (19 November). Those forums were convened in collaboration with ECOWAS and the African Union and brought together actors and institutions with a view to strengthening confidence in the electoral process.

57. The Special Representative held videoconferences with resident coordinators in the context of the elections and reform processes in the region. He also liaised with

national and regional stakeholders in the Gambia, advocating the maintenance of the momentum in the country's constitutional reform process.

58. In the context of the United Nations transition process in Guinea-Bissau and drawdown of UNIOGBIS, the Special Representative participated in three high-level tripartite meetings with UNOGBIS and ECOWAS to ensure a seamless handover of functions.

B. Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission

59. The COVID-19 pandemic continued to constraint the work of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission. Field operations remained suspended owing to travel restrictions. Final mapping and other processes, however, continued through remote collaboration.

60. Under the auspices of the Subcommission on Demarcation, which met in Yaoundé from 9 to 13 December, progress was made to advance the demarcation of the land boundary. Five of the 13 outstanding points of disagreement were resolved, and the parties indicated that the remaining points would be addressed over the following two months. Field operations for the construction and emplacement of 322 boundary pillars will resume in January 2021.

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

61. UNOWAS maintained its close collaboration with regional partners and United Nations country teams on a range of issues, covering conflict prevention, women and young people, climate security, human rights and the rule of law.

62. As requested by the Security Council, UNOWAS and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali strengthened cooperation, conducted joint trend assessments on dynamics among terrorist groups in the Sahel and closely coordinated their actions in the context of the coup d'état of 18 August in Mali, including through monthly desk-to-desk meetings on the regional dimension of the crisis, cross-border dynamics and regional cooperation in the fight against terrorism.

63. The Office maintained regular monthly consultations with the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA) on interregional cooperation and carried out joint analyses of the impact of Boko Haram activities on affected communities in the Lake Chad basin. In addition, UNOWAS signed a memorandum of understanding with the Economic Commission for Africa to ensure cross-fertilization of analyses.

64. UNOWAS contributed to two workshops led by the Community of Sahelo-Saharan States, from 21 to 23 and from 26 to 28 October, in Ouagadougou and Niamey, respectively. Those workshops strengthened the capacities of personnel of electoral management bodies in Burkina Faso and the Niger.

65. The Office continued to accompany the Group of Five for the Sahel on the reforms of its Executive Secretariat and related structures. On 5 October, at its eighth session, the G5 Sahel Council of Ministers endorsed the final audit report, which contained, inter alia, a recommendation to expand the Departments of Defence and Security, Governance, Infrastructure, and Resilience and Human Development. In addition, UNOWAS supported the Mauritanian presidency of the G5 Sahel in the implementation of its road map. UNOWAS and the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs continued to support the Sahelian Threat Analysis and Early

Warning Centre of the G5 Sahel in Ouagadougou and its Regional Cell for the Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism in Nouakchott. Together with the International Organization for Migration, UNOWAS assisted the Regional Cell in the implementation of its national action plan in Mauritania.

Conflict between herders and farmers

66. UNOWAS continued to chair the regional working group on the prevention and resolution of conflict between farmers and herders. On 22 June, UNOWAS and UNOCA organized a joint working session with regional United Nations entities to identify new opportunities for engagement across West Africa and the Sahel and Central Africa. Participants in the session recommended actions to reinforce data collection, context-specific analysis and programming, as well as support for ECOWAS and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) in updating and reviewing transhumance protocols.

Lake Chad basin

67. UNOWAS continued its engagements with the Lake Chad Basin Commission in support of national efforts to implement the Commission's Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy for Areas Affected by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region. On 19 August, UNOWAS participated in the inauguration of the Strategy pillar task force clusters, which will, inter alia, support coordination, joint analysis and communication. UNOCA and UNOWAS were designated as co-leaders of the governance cluster.

68. On 9 September, the Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel, together with the Special Representative for Central Africa, the Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support, the Assistant Administrator and Regional Director for Africa of the United Nations Development Programme, the Executive Secretary of the Lake Chad Basin Commission and the European Union Special Representative for the Sahel briefed the Peacebuilding Commission on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel stressed the need for a human rights-based approach and highlighted the importance of coordinated messaging for a reopening of borders. On 8 October, the Deputy Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel also briefed the Peacebuilding Commission on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Burkina Faso and its implications on peacebuilding and sustaining peace. The Peacebuilding Commission advocated additional support for the country's immediate COVID-19 response and socioeconomic recovery plan.

Cross-border security strategy in the Mano River Union

69. In the light of COVID-19-related restrictions, preparations were ongoing for the annual desk-to-desk meeting among UNOWAS, the Mano River Union and ECOWAS, to be followed by a high-level meeting in mid-January 2021. Through its Peacebuilding Fund, the Organization continued to support cross-border engagements between Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia, focusing on social cohesion and security.

Piracy in the Gulf of Guinea

70. Within the framework of Security Council resolution [2039 \(2012\)](#), UNOWAS and UNOCA continued to collaborate on the issue of maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea. However, follow-up meetings between regional counterparts and the Special Representative were constrained by COVID-19-related restrictions.

Adverse implications of climate change

71. In line with its mandate to conduct regional research on and analyses of transnational issues relevant to peace and security, UNOWAS, together with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the Working Group on Women, Youth, Peace and Security in West Africa and the Sahel, undertook climate security risk assessments in Liberia and Nigeria in December 2020. These assessments complement previous joint UNOWAS-United Nations country team fieldwork in Mauritania, the Niger and Senegal. The country reports identified increased conflict between farmers and herders, an erosion of social cohesion and increased migration to urban centres. A study based on the assessments, including two additional ones to be carried out in the second quarter of 2021, is forthcoming. The study recommendations will inform the support that ECOWAS and the United Nations country team provide to Member States in the development of national climate change adaptation plans, including the integration of conflict prevention approaches. A UNOWAS-ECOWAS coordination mechanism has been established for that purpose.

72. As part of its advocacy of the prevention of conflict, on 16 October, UNOWAS briefed the Special Envoy on Climate Action and Finance on relevant trends in West Africa and the Sahel, notably the security implications of climate change with respect to violent extremism, conflict between farmers and herders and growing intercommunity violence, and identified opportunities for further collaboration. UNOWAS also participated in the Community of Practice on Climate Security of the United Nations, which seeks to advance an integrated approach to addressing climate-related security risks.

Security sector reform, drug trafficking and transnational organized crime

73. UNOWAS continued to provide political, technical and strategic support to security sector reform processes in the region. In Burkina Faso, despite the COVID-19 pandemic and electoral preparations, notable progress was recorded with the finalization in September of the national security sector strategy and a bill on the national security architecture. Both are currently pending validation by the presidency and subsequent adoption by the National Assembly. The good offices of the Special Representative have been key in supporting the efforts of the Government of Burkina Faso. He used the opportunity of his participation in the G5 Sahel Interparliamentary Committee conference to draw attention to the importance of the bill on the national security architecture.

74. From 14 to 16 October, in Ouagadougou, the Special Representative participated in the conference of the G5 Sahel Interparliamentary Committee on the oversight of security sector governance in G5 Sahel countries, which offered an opportunity to parliamentarians to share best practices in the fight against terrorism, civilian control and financial transparency. He urged the G5 Sahel countries to further strengthen the sharing of experiences, including on lessons learned in the fight against terrorism, and reiterated the commitment of UNOWAS to supporting security sector reforms in the countries of West Africa and the Sahel.

75. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, no activities relating to transnational organized crime units and the West Africa Coast Initiative were conducted during the reporting period.

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

76. The United Nations pursued its close collaboration with the G5 Sahel, with UNOWAS facilitating coordination between the United Nations integrated strategy

for the Sahel working groups and the G5 Sahel experts, supporting the implementation of the priority investment plan and building capacity to enhance regional cooperation on security. The implementation support unit started establishing protocols supporting the three regional technical working groups, developing communication and partnership strategies, and mapping existing interventions. Following the report of the Secretary-General to the Economic and Social Council on the implementation of integrated, coherent and coordinated support for South Sudan and the Sahel region by the United Nations system in June (E/2020/65), UNOWAS briefed the Peacebuilding Commission on 14 October on challenges and opportunities in relation to the implementation of the strategy.

E. Promotion of good governance, respect for the rule of law, human rights and gender mainstreaming

77. To commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#), the Special Representative chaired a regional event to celebrate achievements and take stock of persistent challenges. On the basis of the findings of a joint assessment undertaken with ECOWAS, participants highlighted progress in women's participation in decision-making and welcomed the development of national action plans and annual workplans in all countries of the region, except Cabo Verde and Mauritania. Identified challenges included the non-allocation of resources for the implementation of the various instruments in support of women and peace and security.

78. By means of videoconferencing, UNOWAS continued to facilitate thematic exchange sessions of the Working Group on Women, Youth, Peace and Security in West Africa and the Sahel, focusing on peacebuilding processes and peace architectures in some countries of the region. UNOWAS will publish a paper on the main conclusions of those sessions.

79. On 2 July, the Special Representative chaired a session of the Working Group on Women, Youth, Peace and Security in West Africa and the Sahel, which validated findings of a survey undertaken by UNOWAS on the sociocultural and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people and highlighted the potential of young people to contribute to resilience and recovery. The survey highlighted the need for training, scholarships and entrepreneurial opportunities for young people to enable them to contribute effectively to the promotion of peace and stability. As a follow-up, UNOWAS will support the design, development and implementation of projects for young women and men affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

80. In partnership with the African Centre for Democracy and Human Rights Studies and the West African Human Rights Defenders' Network, on 9 and 10 July and from 9 to 11 November, respectively, UNOWAS supported the holding of two virtual sessions of the Non-Governmental Organization Forum preceding the sixty-sixth and sixty-seventh ordinary sessions of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. Participants in the virtual sessions reviewed the impact of COVID-19 on human rights and governance in Africa, contributed to the resolutions that were adopted by the African Commission and discussed challenges in their implementation.

81. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was also discussed on 29 July during a ceremony, chaired by the Special Representative and ECOWAS, to celebrate the forthcoming Pan African Women's Day. Similarly, at the Torino Forum on Sustaining Peace, held on 7 September by the United Nations System Staff College in partnership with the Italian Government, UNOWAS shared lessons learned on the role and challenges faced by women in West Africa and the Sahel during the pandemic.

IV. Observations and recommendations

82. The efforts made by ECOWAS, Governments, national stakeholders and the people of West Africa and the Sahel to contain the spread and mitigate the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has plunged millions of people back into poverty and aggravated the plight of women and vulnerable groups, deserve commendation. We must not relent in our efforts to help societies to emerge from this crisis with greater resilience, based on a human rights-focused and gender-sensitive approach.

83. Elections in the subregion have been held amidst heightened political tensions. Electoral-related violence resulted in many fatalities in Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea, posing a threat to stability in the subregion. In this regard, authorities should take urgent steps to deal decisively with violations committed by security forces in policing demonstrations and tackle impunity. In addition, reports of restrictions on the freedom of expression and assembly and other measures perceived as gradually limiting the political space in countries holding elections are concerning. Member States are urged to ensure the full enjoyment of human rights and civil liberties and an open and inclusive political space to guarantee the credibility of constitutional and electoral processes and the legitimacy of State institutions. In preparation for the presidential elections of 2021 in Benin, Cabo Verde and the Gambia, it would be important for all stakeholders to come to an agreement in order to ensure inclusive, credible and peaceful electoral processes.

84. The commendable efforts undertaken in a number of countries of the region to combat corruption and to enhance good governance and promote equitable socioeconomic growth need to be intensified across the region in an impartial, non-partisan and transparent manner. In this regard, perceptions of manipulation of judicial systems and constitutional processes for political purposes must be addressed.

85. Deep-seated mistrust continues to exacerbate divisions among political actors in Guinea-Bissau, requiring concerted actions by all national stakeholders, with the support of ECOWAS, to ensure political stability and the effective functioning of State institutions to address the socioeconomic challenges facing the country, compounded by the outbreak of COVID-19. Concerted actions are also necessary for advancing the reform agenda envisioned in the ECOWAS road map, the Conakry Agreement and the stability pact, which remains critical to the stability of the country. It is vital that the President of Guinea-Bissau, the Government, Members of Parliament and all political stakeholders engage in dialogue without further delay and work in a constructive manner to complete the constitutional review. In this regard, efforts need to focus on reconciling the two parallel processes in accordance with the country's legal framework or on the basis of political consensus among concerned parties, to ensure sustainable peace and the stability that the people of Guinea-Bissau deserve.

86. The swift return to a civilian-led transition in Mali, with the support of ECOWAS, is a positive development. The United Nations remains committed to supporting the efforts of the people of Mali to consolidate peace and promoting socioeconomic development.

87. The security situation in parts of the Sahel, where terrorist and extremist violence is increasingly being perpetrated by endogenous actors and zones of lawlessness are expanding, is concerning. The risk of a further move of terrorist violence towards coastal States remains high and threatens to undo the achievements in democratic governance in the subregion. In this regard, efforts of countries participating in the Multinational Joint Task Force and the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel to address security challenges in the subregion are commendable. It is vital for countries of the subregion to continue to enhance coordination and for international partners to scale up support for those initiatives.

88. Cognizant of the limitations of a security-focused approach, countries of the region should redouble efforts to address the root causes of instability by integrating

humanitarian, development, governance and human rights dimensions into their responses. In this context, and given that national human rights institutions play a crucial role in the protection and promotion of human rights, their enhanced collaboration with security and law enforcement institutions will be critical. Furthermore, it would be important for countries of the region to put in place community-based dispute resolution mechanisms and to take all measures needed to reduce the need of their populations to rely on armed auxiliary groups as security providers, while ensuring full accountability for committed crimes. In this regard, I call upon ECOWAS member States and international partners to fully support holistic and integrated approaches, including through the implementation of the Regional Strategy for the Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience of the Boko Haram-affected Areas of the Lake Chad Basin Region, the G5 Sahel priority investment plan, the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel and its Support Plan for the Sahel.

89. New levels of displacement, reduced access to basic services and loss of livelihoods have caused immense human suffering and aggravated an already dire humanitarian situation. It is essential for 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, especially children, the elderly, women and other vulnerable groups. Against this backdrop, in 2020, floods have highlighted acute vulnerabilities to climatic fluctuations likely to be amplified by climate change, thereby heightening volatility in the subregion. It is therefore imperative to integrate current and projected climate-related threats into all our conflict prevention efforts.

90. The adoption of quota or parity laws to enhance the effective participation of women and young people in national political, peace, security and development strategies is a positive development, as is the enhanced participation of women in elections and their representation in some Governments in the subregion. In this regard, it is essential for countries of the region that have developed and adopted national action plans to implement Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#) and related resolutions to ensure the budgetary allocations necessary for the full and meaningful implementation of those plans. It is equally crucial for Governments in the region to take all measures necessary to comply with their national and regional commitments on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

91. I commend the Governments of Cameroon and Nigeria for their continuous commitment to completing the demarcation of their land and maritime boundaries despite the challenges posed by COVID-19. I acknowledge with appreciation the resolution of five areas of disagreement and I encourage all parties to accelerate the completion of the mandate of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission.

92. I wish to express my appreciation to the Governments of West Africa and the Sahel region, the African Union, ECOWAS, the G5 Sahel, the Mano River Union, the Gulf of Guinea Commission and the Lake Chad Basin Commission for their continued cooperation with UNOWAS. I also extend my appreciation to the United Nations system in West Africa and the Sahel, civil society organizations and other institutions for their close partnership with UNOWAS. I commend and further encourage the close collaboration between UNOCA and UNOWAS on an increasing range of topical and transversal challenges, which reflects and responds proactively to the enhanced cooperation between ECCAS and ECOWAS. I would like to express special appreciation to my Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel and 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.