

**Security Council Briefing on the Shared Causes of Intercommunal  
Violence**

**and Preventing Violent Extremism in West Africa**

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**UN Security Council, December 16, 2019**

Madam President, distinguished Members of the Council;

Your Excellency Jean-Claude Kassi Brou, President of the ECOWAS  
Commission;

Your Excellency Smail Chergui, Commissioner for Peace and Security of the  
African Union Commission;

1. Let me start by thanking the United States and Cote d'Ivoire for organizing today's briefing. Intercommunal violence is a vast theme; I will attempt to highlight some of West African and Sahel dynamics, and relevant responses that have brought together local, national and regional actors.

2. As Council members are aware, the region has been shaken by unprecedented violence in recent months. Last week's horrific attack against the Inates military camp, in Niger, still haunts the region: yesterday, the G5 Sahel Heads of State reiterated their call for stronger alliances and support. They also emphasized that the tripod - Government, Population, and Security and Defence forces – should not yield. Relentless attacks on civilian and military targets have shaken public confidence. International forces in the region have also endured significant losses. We must salute the courage and the unbroken spirit of Defense and Security Forces working across West Africa and the Sahel.

Members of the Council,

3. Incidents in the region show how terrorism, organized crime and intercommunal violence can easily intertwine. Yet, it is essential to avoid confusion, and distinguish among the drivers of this violence. Endogenous factors of local conflicts have been documented: they include governance deficit, in particular poor management of natural resources; inequalities and marginalization; corruption; and the

broader failure of governments to deliver its regalian functions – security and justice, in particular in peripheric areas.

4. Concerning violent extremism, the strategy and objectives of armed groups in the region are in the public domain. The use of local dynamics to spread extremism was explicit in Al Qaeda's instructions to its militants in Timbuktu as early as 2012. Using local grievances and "domestic movements" were among the tactics. State weaknesses have been thoroughly exploited. In the areas under their control, extremists provide safety and protection; social services and justice. In this perspective, long-standing grievances serve their purpose.

5. Some of the most violent local conflicts in the region concern transhumance. Extremist groups have managed to implicate themselves in their resolution. An Islamic tribunal near Gao rules on compensations and sanctions in such conflicts. Arrangements between herders and extremists have led to deep societal divides across the region. Yet, we need to avoid generalities. Their relationship differs greatly from one country – or region – to the next. Man-made factors such as the prevalence of weapons combine with a harsh

natural environment, expanding desert areas and climate change, magnifying the issues related to transhumance. But let us bear in mind that close to 70% percent of West Africa's population remain dependent on agriculture and livestock-rearing for their existence. Finding ways to ensure peaceful coexistence between herders and farmers is therefore imperative.

6. Other forms of communal violence are triggered by the nature of the fight against terrorism itself. In many of those countries, security forces are too insufficient to provide adequate geographical coverage. Resorting to "subcontracted", local defense forces, or vigilantes, is a two-edged sword. UNOWAS has been advocating for improved legal frameworks and longer-term approaches with a number of governments who are aware of the risks.
  
7. With regards to religious violence across the region, this year has been particularly brutal. Burkina Faso, especially, has seen unprecedented anti-Christian attacks. Together with other violent extremist and inter-communal violence, they have driven hundreds of thousands of people away from their homes in the northern and central-north regions. This exodus has escalated the flow of IDPs to 500,000, compared to about

50,000 last year at the same period. In Niger, similar patterns of targeted religious violence are observed around Tillaberi and Diffa. Ideologically-motivated violence can feed on conflicts tearing apart communities over land or water disputes. But it has its own causes and rationale, and therefore needs to be addressed differently.

8. Governments, local actors, regional organizations and the international community have mobilized to address this multi-dimensional violence. I will only go over some of the concerted responses and strategic frameworks that exist. Under the Secretary-General, the UN response in the Sahel has increased its cross-pillar focus. Across West Africa and the Sahel, multi-agency initiatives bring together security, development, rule of law and human rights interventions.
9. Our approach is anchored on supporting national governments in their implementation of the SDGs, and building partnerships for greater synergies. We have now useful instruments in place, including the compliance framework for the G5 Joint Force, and renewed focus on governance issues by UN country teams. Some of the critical deficiencies in national responses remain weak justice systems. Efforts

to strengthen justice and police institutions under the Biarritz G7 initiative and the Sahel Alliance, are fully welcomed by national governments; they should also mobilize the UN system.

Madam President,

10. Regional organizations remain our first counterparts for conflict resolution in the region. The recent AU Conference on "Access to Natural Resources and Conflict between Communities" organized in Bamako end-November with the assistance of MINUMSA, provides a framework for the prevention and resolution of local conflicts. Ahead of Ambassador Chergui's recommendations, I would like to call on the Council to support the implementation of the Bamako Declaration.

11. The Council should also extend support to local initiatives: in recent months, we have seen progress in curbing herders-farmers violence, with grass-root dialogues initiated in Mali, Niger and Nigeria. ECOWAS is also capturing best practices from the region, drawing on traditional dispute-resolution mechanisms.

12. Recipes against violent extremism, in particular, are being put in place in many West African countries. They have common denominators: political will; courageous local actors; and the involvement of women and young people. As emphasized in UNSCR 2250 (2015), the youth are at the heart of the response. Curbing violent ideology and religion intolerance, means addressing hateful narratives. There is a key role here for social and traditional media. Many grassroots initiatives can be mentioned, such as inter-faith coalitions in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe states, active to curtail recruitments by Boko Haram. Local peacemakers also benefit from the support of the Finland-based Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers, launched in 2013. Bilateral assistance, at country level, across the region, is also increasingly looking into grassroots reconciliation initiatives.

Madam President,

13. The Council can play a decisive role in accompanying all these efforts: In addition to donor and technical support, assistance on security-related and law enforcement matters remains vital. Curbing

the financial and supply corridors used by armed groups, and the links with illegal trade, requires international cooperation; targeted sanctions and other measures recommended by Panels of Experts, are relevant for leverage. Illegal trafficking in gold, in particular, has been increasingly documented and exposed.

14. ECOWAS' Summit in Ouagadougou in September, yesterday's G5 Summit in Niamey, as well as the discussions planned for the ECOWAS Summit on 21 December in Abuja, highlight the undeterred regional solidarity, and the commitment to bring this violence to an end. The Security Council's support to the region cannot falter at this juncture.

15. The presentation of the Secretary General's report and the consultations on UNOWAS' mandate, in January, will provide us with more opportunities to review the complexity of security dynamics in the region, and pathways to peace and security.

I thank you for your attention.