



UNOWAS *Magazine*

Together for Peace

Quarterly Magazine of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel

**Peacebuilding
in West Africa
and the Sahel
put to the test
by COVID-19**



EDITO

Mohamed Ibn Chambas

**Special Representative of the Secretary-General
and Head of the United Nations office for West
Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS)**



There is no doubt that we are going through an unprecedented period in our history.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic more than a year ago, has had - and continues to have - negative consequences worldwide.

Lives have been disrupted, economies have been destroyed, and anguish is mounting as the pernicious and pervasive pandemic continues its devastating action.

The mobilization of the international community has brought salutary responses that will have to be reinforced to better assist countries and populations whose means are limited while they are already facing multiple challenges as is the case for West Africa and the Sahel countries.

Indeed, the sub-region did not need this additional challenge which accentuates the factors of instability and undermines the efforts of States to improve the living conditions of their populations and achieve sustainable development objectives.

But thanks to the launch of the COVID-19 vaccines, a new hopeful phase is emerging. A phase that requires -from all of us - increased vigilance and solidarity of action.

As the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has pointed out, "at this critical moment, vaccine equity is the greatest moral test facing the global community. We must ensure that everyone, everywhere, can be vaccinated as soon as possible. »

The mobilization displayed during the 58th Ordinary Session of the Heads of State and Government of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) held on 23 January, demonstrates the commitment of the countries of the sub-region to act with solidarity and synergy in their fight against the pandemic, while continuing their efforts to consolidate peace and democracy through, in particular, the holding of elections as scheduled in various countries, despite -sometimes- constraining circumstances.

In line with its regional approach, UNOWAS has intensified its good offices activities and exchanges with regional partners to better support them during this challenging period.

We must remain vigilant and not relax our efforts as the pandemic, in addition to terrorism and the effects of climate change, unfortunately remain important challenges for the governments and peoples of the sub-region.

UNOWAS EN BREF

SRSG Ibn Chambas reiterates UN Support to the Government and people of Niger

The Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, undertook from 19 to 23 February a solidarity mission to Niamey (Niger) where the second round of the presidential election took place on 21 February.

During his mission, Mr. Ibn Chambas met with the President of Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou. He commended him for his leadership in strengthening Democracy in Niger, and congratulated the Independent National Electoral Commission for the organization, and the Nigerien people for their peaceful participation.

[More here](#)



Steering Committee Meeting of the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel

The eleventh meeting of the Steering Committee of the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS) and the United Nations Support Plan (UNSP) was held from 8 to 9 February 2021. The objective of this meeting was to provide strategic leadership, guidance and orientation for effective governance and implementation of the UNISS/UNSP.

[Visit the UNISS website](#)

Women groups assess the implementation of the UNSCR 1325 in West Africa

The Special Representative Mohamed Ibn Chambas chaired on 12 February the Regional Open Day on the UNSCR 1325, and subsequent resolutions, on Women, Youth, Peace and Security. Over 100 women and young leaders from the region, including those from rural areas, as well as actors from civil

society organizations, representatives of regional organizations, participated in the event. The aim of the meeting was to assess the level of awareness and implementation of UN Resolutions 1325 (2000) and subsequent, and to identify ways to accelerate action at the community level.

[More here](#)

Moussa Faki Mahamat et Mohamed Ibn Chambas visitent la Sierra Leone et le Cabo Verde

The Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), Mohamed Ibn Chambas, and the Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AU), Moussa Faki Mahamat, visited Sierra Leone and Cabo Verde, from 25 to 26 January.

They praised the continued commitment of the two countries to peace and democracy, especially their commitment for enhancing the space for women's participation in all spheres of society and governance.

[More here](#)



Interview with Mr. Mohamed Ibn Chambas on CNMC work

In 2020, IBRU awarded the third annual Ray Milefsky award to the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission (CNMC), the United Nations organisation tasked with implementing the 2002 International Court of Justice (ICJ) judgment covering the two states' land and maritime boundaries. IBRU Director Phil Steinberg interviewed Mohamed Ibn Chambas, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel and Chair of the CNMC.

[More here](#)

UN Security Council calls for support to West Africa and Sahel

On 11 January 2021, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), Mohamed Ibn Chambas, briefed via videoconference, members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on the activities carried out by his office and provided an overview of developments and trends in West Africa and the Sahel.

West Africa and the Sahel region continues to suffer from multiple challenges, triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, that are plunging most countries of the region into recession and leading them to a diversion of resources from productive investments and the fight against insecurity. "Now that we are facing a second wave of the pandemic, and relieved that vaccines are being distributed, it is ever more important that we collaborate to apply the manifold lessons learnt in terms of improving governance and delivering essential services for societies to emerge more adept, secure, and resilient," said the Special Representative to the members of the UNSC, adding that "Nowhere has this resilience been more sorely tested than in the Sahel, where an ever more volatile climate has brought massive floods, affecting more than 1.7 million people and resulting in the destruction of houses and livelihoods".

Electoral calendar maintained

But despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the electoral calendar was maintained, and the polls overall went well. "Electoral Management Bodies have demonstrated impressive technical capacity to organize and conduct five presidential, three legislative, and two local elections in West Africa," stated Mohamed Ibn Chambas. He further noted that increasingly, elections have also been funded exclusively from national budgets.

Working for global equitable
access to COVID-19
vaccines ▼





During his briefing to the UNSC, the Special Representative underlined the significant progress made on both women and youth, peace and security agenda in West Africa and the Sahel. "I am encouraged that action plans are now in place in 14 out of the region's 16 countries and I am pleased that this Council is giving the matter its utmost attention. Girls' education remains a critically important lever for development. Political will and resources to implement the various instruments, especially education for girls, must therefore remain a priority," he stressed. The Special Representative reiterated the commitment of UNOWAS to continue accompanying national and regional actors to enhance peace and stability in West Africa and the Sahel.

On its part, UNSC underscored the importance of addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and violent extremism in West Africa and the Sahel, as well as the need for a holistic approach to address the causes of intercommunal violence in the region.

The UNSC welcomed the African Union initiative to deploy a force in the Sahel, which it "looks forward to", the Council underlined the need for security efforts to be aligned with political objectives and to promote the restoration of civilian security, among other initiatives.

Support to the sub-region

In this regard, the representative of the Northern Ireland, the UNSC President for February, issued a presidential statement (S/PRST/2021/3), requesting the Secretary-General to explore the feasibility of a civilian joint project between the United Nations Office for West Africa and

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the Sahel (UNOWAS) and regional organizations, such as the G5 Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union, with the aim of stemming and preventing intercommunal violence. The UNSC also requested the Secretary-General to include in his next UNOWAS report recommendations with viable options for establishing such a project, and his Special Representative to update the 15-member organ on these recommendations during his next briefing.

On the role of women, the UNSC commended the country efforts to advance women's participation in political processes, and welcomed the active leadership of women in recent electoral processes in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea and Niger, as well as the appointment of a new female Prime Minister in Togo and proportion of women in the new cabinet of Liberia.

Underlining the adverse effects of climate change, ecological changes and natural hazards on the stability of West Africa and the Sahel region, the UNSC stressed the need for long-term strategies, based on comprehensive risk assessments by Governments and the United Nations, to support stabilization.

Echoing the concerns expressed by the Special Representative, Mohamed Ibn Chambas about the humanitarian, socioeconomic, political and security repercussions of the COVID-19, particularly its second wave, on the countries of the sub-region the UNSC called for continued support of West African countries to ensure a comprehensive response, including equal, affordable access to a vaccine.

On the same subject:

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



Statement by the President of the Security Council



West Africa and the Sahel - Security Council Open VTC / Briefing of the SRSR Ibn Chambas



Secretary-General Calls for Early Action to Avoid World of 'Vaccine Haves and Have-Nots'



Also in this issue:

- [Peacebuilding in West Africa and the Sahel put to the test by COVID-19](#)
- [ECOWAS and UNOWAS reaffirm their commitment to consolidate peace and stability and to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic](#)
- [After UNIOGBIS's closure, UNOWAS, together with the UN system and other partners, will continue to support peacebuilding in Guinea-Bissau](#)
- [Interview with Rosine Sori-Coulibaly: "In Guinea-Bissau, if people come together, they can move forward resolutely on the path of development"](#)
- [The Mano River Union \(MRU\) and UNOWAS reaffirm their joint engagement to support the Member-states of the Union](#)
- [Interview with Andrea Ori, Regional Representative of the West Africa Regional Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights](#)

ECOWAS and UNOWAS reaffirm their commitment to consolidate peace and stability and to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic

During the 58th Ordinary Session of the Heads of State and Government of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), held by videoconference on 23 January 2021, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General, Mohamed ibn Chambas, renewed the commitment and support of the United Nations, particularly in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.



On the same subject:

[Remarks by Mohamed Ibn Chambas to the 58th Ordinary Session of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government](#)

"We must remain vigilant and not relax our efforts because the pandemic is still here I strongly encourage the coordinated implementation of the COVID-19 protocols and related decisions, including on land borders, within the framework of the relevant measures prescribed by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)."

Coordinated approach against the COVID-19

At a time when several countries in the sub-region are facing a second wave of COVID-19, this message of vigilance and encouragement from the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary General for West Africa and the Sahel, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, was welcomed and supported by the 15 Heads of State of the sub-region. In this connection, the Heads of State approved the ECOWAS Harmonized Protocol on the Cross-Border Movement of Persons and Goods during the pandemic. The Heads of State and Government also adopted a group approach for the purchase of vaccines and instructed the ECOWAS Commission to set up "a Revolving Vaccine Fund that will serve to ensure the availability of vaccines against COVID-19 in the region, through a common supply in the short term and regional manufacturing in the medium and long term."



[Final Communiqué of the 58th Ordinary Session of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government](#)



This means that 240 million doses of vaccine will be purchased through direct and collaborative approaches to manufacturers, partners and friendly foreign governments who may be willing to sell additional doses they have previously acquired. Vaccination campaigns are to begin by the end of June 2021 at the latest, as instructed by the Heads of State.

Peace and stability

On another crucial issue, the Member States reaffirmed their commitment to the promotion of peace, security and stability, which are prerequisites for the economic integration and development of the sub-region, and welcomed the generally good conduct of the presidential elections in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea and Niger, while stressing the need to resolve disagreements and tensions around some of the elections. For his part, Mr. Ibn Chambas recalled that "although these elections were generally successful, disagreements and tensions, which sometimes led to violence and loss of life, characterized some electoral processes. This demonstrates that elections continue to be a source of conflict mainly due to the lack of consensus in the resolution of contentious issues".


The Special Representative further stressed the importance of prioritizing dialogue to resolve political differences and reach consensus and ensure inclusive governance. He also noted that, "As several other countries prepare for various elections in the coming months, including presidential elections in Benin and Niger (second round), legislative elections in Cabo Verde and Côte d'Ivoire, and a constitutional referendum in The Gambia, the United Nations, in close collaboration with ECOWAS and other partners, will continue to support the efforts of these countries to ensure that these elections contribute to the consolidation of democracy in the region.

With regard to The Gambia, the Heads of State called on "the competent authorities to maintain dialogue with a view to the timely adoption of the Constitution and the respect of the electoral calendar." They also expressed concern over the emerging tensions between political actors in Guinea Bissau "around the planned revision of the Constitution and urged them to forge a consensus on the draft constitutional review, while reminding all actors of the long political-institutional crisis that the country has experienced and inviting them to work for the stability of the country."

The United Nations encouraged ECOWAS "to accelerate the implementation of its 2020-2024 plan of action for the eradication of terrorism in the sub-region. In this regard, the Special Representative stated that, "we encourage the strengthening of coordination between this plan, the regional strategy for the stabilization of the Lake Chad Basin and the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS), to ensure a comprehensive approach and long-term stabilization.

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- [After the closing down of UNIOGBIS, UNOWAS and its partners will continue to support Guinea-Bissau](#)
- [Interview with Rosine Sori-Coulibaly: "In Guinea-Bissau, if people come together, they can move forward resolutely on the path of development"](#)
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The background of the top half of the page features the flag of Guinea-Bissau, which consists of a red upper triangle with a green star, a yellow lower triangle, and a green horizontal band in the center. The flag is shown waving on a flagpole against a light blue sky with some green foliage visible in the background.

After UNIOGBIS's closure, UNOWAS, together with the UN system and other partners, will continue to support peacebuilding in Guinea-Bissau

The closure of the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea-Bissau (UNIOGBIS) on 31 December 2020 marked an end to 22 years of UN special political missions in Guinea-Bissau. Through successive mandates, the United Nations has made a significant contribution to promoting and consolidating political dialogue, supporting the national reconciliation process, promoting and protecting human rights, promoting gender equality, supporting the fight against drug trafficking and transnational organized crime, and supporting the strengthening of the rule of law and state reforms.

Since the independence in 1974, Guinea-Bissau has been plagued by chronic political instability. To help this country, which is considered one of the poorest countries in the world, the international community, led by the United Nations, has provided various forms of assistance and cooperation aimed at building stable democratic institutions and achieving greater economic prosperity.

Closure of UNIOGBIS

Following the armed conflict of 7 June 1998, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), in its Resolution 1233 (1999) of 6 April 1999, decided to establish the United Nations Mission in Guinea Bissau (UNOGBIS), which will be expanded and integrated into the UN Country Team in 2008, on the recommendation of the then Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, and renamed the United Nations Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Guinea Bissau (UNIOGBIS).

Through successive mandates implemented over more than two decades, the United Nations has made a significant contribution to promoting and consolidating political dialogue, supporting the national reconciliation process, promoting and protecting human rights, promoting gender equality, supporting the fight against drug trafficking and transnational



**22 years of
loyal services
to the people of
Guinea-Bissau**

organized crime, and supporting the strengthening of the rule of law and state reforms.

The closure of UNIOGBIS follows a strategic assessment mission in 2018, requested by the UNSC, which recommended a phased cessation of activities and the closure of the mission as part of a transition. In view of the situation, a lighter UN political footprint in the country was recommended, with greater emphasis on economic and social development. In this regard, the Security Council agreed and requested, in coordination with the authorities of the country, a reconfiguration of the United Nations presence in Guinea-Bissau in its resolution 2458 (2019), confirmed by the resolution 2512 (2020).

Peace and stability in Guinea-Bissau

The authorities of Guinea-Bissau, the United Nations and their partners have commended the success of the political mission, UNIOGBIS, which is demonstrated by “The absence of violence, the holding of free elections, the use of legal channels to resolve political conflicts, the increased participation of women and youth in political processes, the strengthening of the fight against drug trafficking, and the remarkable progress made in national human rights monitoring. »

In a statement to the press on 31 December 2021, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, thanked the Government and the people of Guinea-Bissau for their strong partnership with UNIOGBIS and the United Nations System. The Head of the United Nations went on to commend all regional and international partners for their effective commitment and contribution to peace and stability in Guinea-Bissau. He also expressed his deep appreciation to the leadership and staff of UNIOGBIS for their tireless efforts and dedication in implementing the mandate of the Mission, despite the difficult political environment.

New Chapter

At the official closing ceremony of UNIOGBIS, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Guinea-Bissau, Rosine Sori-Coulibaly, called for “continued concerted action by all national stakeholders, with the support of the international community, to stabilize the fragile system of governance, ensure the proper functioning of State institutions and address other pressing political and socio-economic challenges. »

Now, a new chapter is opening for the UN in Guinea-Bissau, with a lighter political footprint and greater emphasis on economic and social development. The UN's commitment will remain as steadfast. The UN system, through UNOWAS and the Country Team, will continue to accompany the people and Government of Guinea-Bissau in their efforts to achieve sustainable peace and development. For UNOWAS, the main focus will be on supporting the Government in fully implementing the reforms outlined in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Road Map and the Conakry Agreement, through good offices and related assistance. During UNIOGBIS' closing ceremony, the Head of UNOWAS, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, while paying tribute to the immense work carried out by the UNIOGBIS teams, reaffirmed this commitment. Promoting inclusive and participatory processes and strengthening political representation and opportunities for women and youth will form part of these efforts.

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Rosine Sori-Coulibaly
Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General
in Guinea-Bissau

Interview with Rosine Sori-Coulibaly

Ms. Rosine Sori-Coulibaly, was the last Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General who led the UN Mission in Guinea-Bissau until its closure on December of last year. Interview

“In Guinea-Bissau, if people come together, they can move forward resolutely on the path of development”

Mrs. Coulibaly, tell us about the UN mission in Guinea-Bissau and about the assessment you make of its work?

It was in the aftermath of the civil war of 1998, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the Community of Portuguese Language Countries (CPLP) tried to intervene together to put an end to the civil war and to pacify the country. An appeal was made at the level of the United Nations, which led the United Nations Security Council to decide to send a peacekeeping mission whose mandate evolved over time.

There were assassinations, crimes of coups d'état. The country was destroyed by the civil war that the United Nations found. After 20 years, I can say that we have come a long way. We are no longer at war in this country, political assassinations and repeated coups d'état are part of the history. Elections have been organized, and a Head of State was able to finish his tenure without being assassinated or without a coup d'état. All these things constitute huge gains today.

What was the main role of the UN mission in the country?

The main role of the United Nations in this country was to promote and strengthen the framework of dialogue between the actors. Because of absence of trust between the actors, it was

difficult to bring them around the table to discuss. Many agreements have been signed between the political actors, but there was no real respect for the commitments made. But dialogue was possible, and for example, the legislative elections took place and a parliament is in place, as well as the presidential election that was held with the support of all partners and with the great mobilization of the people of Guinea-Bissau who contributed to the establishment of the national institutions.

What about the fight against drug trafficking and the promotion of human rights?

Unfortunately, we know that this country has the reputation of being a hub for drug trafficking. We have strengthened the institutions through training programs, through the sharing of essential standards, through the implementation of working tools that have been tested elsewhere. Thanks to this, there have been remarkable drug seizures, judgements have been made and this will remain in the history of this country.

The United Nations has invested heavily in promoting respect for human rights. Currently, we do not have very strong institutions in Guinea-Bissau, but when we see human rights defenders working, we are proud to have been able to build a network of people at the level of human rights activists, civil society. Indeed, we



have worked a lot with women's groups, with youth groups, which means that we have a civil society coalition that is well equipped to continue to defend the values that the United Nations has committed itself to in this country.

▲
Bissau-Guineans voted
for legislative elections
(UNIOGBIS)

The United Nations mission comes to an end after 22 years in Guinea-Bissau. What is your personnel feeling?

There is work to be done, there are institutions that need to be strengthened. There are many important reforms that need to be carried out, be it in the security sector, be it in the area of dialogue and freedom of expression, be it in the area of democratic expression at the grassroots level, because here we do not have a legitimate local authority elected and representing the people. We believe that this is the work that needs to be done. And you know, nothing is taken for granted forever.

Now, I think there is still a way to go, that's the feeling I have. But above all, I have a feeling of hope. This country, if people get together, they can resolutely move forward on the path of development. And this is possible.



Currently, we do not have very strong institutions in Guinea-Bissau, but when we see human rights defenders working, we are proud to have been able to build a network of people at the level of human rights activists...



◀ International Peace Day
celebration in Bissau

The Mano River Union (MRU) and UNOWAS reaffirm their joint engagement to support the Member-states of the Union

As part of their continued regional partnership, The Mano River Union (MRU) and the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) held a high-level meeting in Dakar on 13 and 14 January to review their joint work plan and enhance their partnership.

The nature of the challenges facing West African countries and the Sahel requires sustained coordination and cooperation between UNOWAS and sub-regional organizations. Since its establishment in 2002 [\[link to site\]](#), UNOWAS has placed the regional partnership at the heart of its strategic action to better accompany countries in the sub-region in their efforts to address the increasingly complex challenges and to consolidate peace and democracy.

To this end, an important high-level meeting between UNOWAS and the Mano River Union (MRU) was held in Dakar last 13 and 14 January to review their joint work plan (2020-2021), and assess its state of implementation, particularly in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic which has impacted the countries of the Mano River Union.

The high-level meeting was attended by Ambassador Medina A. Wesseh, Secretary-General of the MRU, Mohamed Ibn Chambas, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary -General for West Africa and the Sahel, a representative of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), the Regional representative of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights for West and Central Africa, the United Nations Resident Coordinators of Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire, the Senior Regional Coordinating Officer of DCO Office in Dakar, and the United Nations Peace and Development Advisors of MRU's Member States.

On the same subject:

Meeting on Peace and Security within the Mano River Union



Ambassador Medina A. Wesseh, Secretary-General of the MRU, and Mohamed Ibn Chambas, SRSG for West Africa and the Sahel



The participants had the opportunity to discuss various issues related to peace and security, including elections. In this regard, while acknowledging that despite the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts, the planned electoral calendar in the countries concerned has generally been respected, participants, however, have underlined that serious acts of violence have been recorded in some countries of the MRU.

The meeting stressed the importance of the role of the joint regional approach involving ECOWAS, MRU, development partners and the United Nations, in easing tensions and promoting reconciliation and social cohesion as a key priority in the sub-region.

UNOWAS has placed the regional partnership at the heart of its strategic action to better accompany countries in the sub-region in their efforts to address the increasingly complex challenges

Despite the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a significant constraint to the implementation of the joint MRU-UNOWAS work plan, the two organizations have reiterated their determination to enhance their partnership and agreed to achieve concrete and targeted actions such as to increase advocacy with Governments of Member States for the reopening of borders, whilst assisting them to break and stop the upsurge of COVID 19 in the sub region; to foster social cohesion at border communities by building the capacity of Joint Border Security and Confidence Building Units (JBSCBUs) through training and infrastructure development; to strengthen collaboration and experience sharing between Elections Management Bodies in MRU Member States with a view to establishing a strong sub regional network; to create a platform for increased advocacy on human rights issues, issues related to women and youth empowerment and women's increased participation in governance; and the fostering of cross border trade; to evaluate the MRU cross border strategy and develop a training manual on border management, among others.

Three questions to...



**Ambassador Medina A. Wesseh,
Secretary General
of the Mano-River
Union (MRU)**

You are the Secretary General of the Mano-River Union (MRU) since 2017, could you tell us more about your organization?

MRU is a community of people in 4 countries, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. It started to be a union in 1973 and it was joined by Guinea in 1980 and Cote d'Ivoire in 2008. To date, we have 4 member-countries and individuals of these countries are same people across the borders. It's a beautiful mosaic of nearly 50 million people. When you walk across between Liberia and Sierra Leone, you don't notice the difference. You go to the border between Guinea and Sierra Leone, or you go to Danane, Touleupleu, Cote d'Ivoire, it is the same. MRU is one of the oldest institutions of regional economic communities and our four Member States are full part of the Economic Community of West African States. As you may be aware, the mandate of the MRU is to promote peace and ensure regional stability between its four Member States as enshrined in the revised 15th Protocol on Peace, Security, and Defense adopted by the Heads of States on June 2012 in Conakry, Guinea.

The Secretariat coordinates, collects, convenes and helps Member States to implement their national plan of action. (...) In 2019, for example, we have moved away from the old ten-year strategic and now we are in a five-year plan.

The Mano River Union was an inherently unstable region. What are the challenges you are facing today and how do you work with countries to build peace?

We have lot of challenges. MRU countries had in the last two decades, lot of challenges related to civil strives and wars, but have come to a long way, thanks to the international community, particularly the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel. That is the reason why we are working with UNOWAS to see how we can consolidate peace.

The program we are currently working with UNOWAS is with our border communities because the porosity of borders is enormous. Between the four countries, we have over two hundred informal crossings. With UNOWAS we come up with a framework of cooperation to identify those borders that are problematic with for instance smuggling, human trafficking, drug trafficking.

We have been able to put all this together and say let us be able to set up what we call the joint borders security and confidence building units. When they are functional, they are able to solve and address problems at the local level because these joint border units consist of members of the military, the police, the intelligence, the gendarme, customs, traditional leaders, opinion leaders, women and youth leaders. And if there are some specific economic activities that are going on in those areas, with an industrial company, they bring people to represent their corporation.

Testimonies have shown that conflicts are part of the communities' everyday existence but when they persist it is a matter of making use of local knowledge, local skills. What we want to do, going forward, is to see how we can work with UNOWAS, the United Nations System as a whole, to take a holistic approach to address some of these challenges that we have in our border communities and see what kind of alternative livelihood we can propose to people in those areas so it is not seen as "the further away you are from the center the more neglected you are". So, we believe with our new perspectives, our new introspection, our approach to peacebuilding will bring development closer to the people and have a meaning in their lives.

What are your main achievements and priorities?

I believe that the MRU team in the last two years, have been able to revive and revamp the organization. In 2019, we had a major conference in Freetown where we invited important players in the sector on the issue of renewable energy and clean cooking between the Government of Sierra Leone and MRU. As you know, energy is one of the infrastructure deficits and I believe that if we intend to solve some of these problems, we will be better at integration. MRU has come at edge and we have been able to take a proposal to the African Development Bank to look at four areas: transport, energy, agriculture and the center of excellence.

I think that we are making serious progress and we look forward to collaborating with the United Nations System. We have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with UNDP to be able to take development to the populations. So that people will see the relevance of some of these institutions in their lives. That is what makes MRU particular and different because we take from the grassroots to our heads of State and take it back down to the people.

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In the Mano River Union region,
the porosity of borders is
enormous.

Empowering local communities
can increase collective oversight
of security services



Interview with Andrea ORI

Andrea ORI is the Regional Representative of the West Africa Regional Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, a leading institution of the United Nations responsible for the protection and promotion of human rights in West Africa. UNOWAS Magazine wanted to know more about his perspective and the role of his office. Interview.



You are the Regional Director of The UNCHR Regional Office for West Africa (WARO), can you tell us more about your office?



Andrea ORI,
Regional Representative of
the West Africa Regional
Office of the United Nations
High Commissioner for
Human Rights

The Regional Office for West Africa (WARO) established in 2008 is the main UN agency in charge of the protection and promotion of human rights in West Africa. The office has consolidated its expertise and know-how in the field of promotion, protection, and mainstreaming human rights into the UN programmes and activities. Human rights perspectives and issues have been channeled through a consolidated partnership with UN agencies and funds, at country and regional levels. Strategically, the Office is part of the larger response that the international community and the UN have elaborated to respond to the regional challenges faced by West African countries. WARO and its partners have set up new mechanisms and enacted new policies to act upon the cross-border nature of many political, securities, human rights, humanitarian, environmental, and technological concerns. This will drive the work of the regional office together with the international community for the next year.

A task which not easy giving the multiplicity of challenges, particularly with the ongoing threat of the Coronavirus pandemic?

The West Africa sub-region comprises of 15 States, with a population of nearly 400 million people and covering an area of roughly 5 million km². The most considerable changes in the region in the past four years concern the democratic transitions mainly in Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire and The Gambia. Despite some progress in the democratic space in these countries, during the last year, there have been some regressions on the humanitarian and peace & security in Burkina Faso, with a possible spillover to the coastal countries such as Togo, Benin and Cote d'Ivoire. In addition, West African countries continue to face challenges related to economic, social needs and climate change. The negative impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on the economies of the region is eroding progress made to improve Economic Social Cultural Rights, transitional justice, impunity, inequality as well as climate change.

You rightly stated: “that the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economies of the region is eroding progress made to improve ESCR, transitional justice, impunity, inequality as well as climate change.” Can you tell us more about what was achieved- and what is your office concrete support?

The region has seen some improvements regarding gender and equal participation of men and women in policy, decision, and law-making bodies, as well as, in key State positions throughout the sub-region. In February 2017, The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) ministers adopted four key documents to advance gender mainstreaming and the inclusion of women in political, peace, and security processes. However, women continue to face discrimination, and gender-based violence is still widespread which explains the adoption, last month, by the Heads of states and governments of the region of a Declaration on Zero Tolerance to Sexual and Gender-based Violence and the Elimination of all Forms of Violence Against Women and Girls at all times and circumstances within the ECOWAS Region.

In terms of our concrete action, at the regional level, WARO has supported initiatives aimed at harmonising national legislation with international human rights standards, in particular on women's rights and rights of LGBTI persons. Very soon after the outbreak of the pandemic on the continent, our office which chairs the UN Regional Gender Thematic Group has shared key insights and recommendations on how the COVID 19 would impact the situation of women and sexual minorities to inform decision-making in this regard.

With WARO's technical assistance, several national legislations have been reformed in order to conform to the ratified international and regional instruments to protect women's rights and promote gender equality. The many West African States are signatories to international and regional treaties and conventions.

The COVID 19 pandemic has once again challenged some of the progress made, in particular, the centrality of obtaining accurate data on this matter proved crucial. To respond to this need, WARO developed a project with UNICEF and UN Women to assess the impact of the pandemic from a gender perspective in several countries of the region such as Senegal, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire or Sierra Leone. In 2021, the Office intends to continue this work and support the realization of additional surveys and additional analysis intended to support decision-making by all actors.

In 2021, the focus will be put on understanding how the pandemic has affected their work and on supporting the participation of women, particularly women human rights defenders. With regard to the members of the LGBTI community who were already victims of wide spread and systematic violations of their rights in several countries, WARO will continue to support the documentation of their cases to inform innovative advocacy, building capacities of their organizations, facilitate the exchange with other key actors such as special procedures' mandate holders and bilateral partners.



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According to various reports, the situation of children in the sub-region is also of concern. What is your assessment and what are the actions your office has taken to address this issue?

The situation of children in the region continues to be worrisome, as early marriages, various forms of exploitation, including forced begging, child labour, and traditional practices affecting their health continue to take place. In response, ECOWAS adopted in 2017 a strategy for the protection of children's rights in West Africa.



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◀ Young street children in the streets of Dakar (HRW)

Through its support to governments in strengthening national legal and institutional frameworks relating to children's rights, the office has been able to position itself as an essential partner in the promotion and protection of children's rights in West Africa. In this sense, the implementation of the Project to support the protection of child victims of violations of their rights (PAPEV) financially supported by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation will contribute significantly to the promotion and protection of children's rights. The Covid-19 pandemic has further highlighted the plea of neglected children, especially those living on the streets or in "daaras" (so-

called Coranic schools that accommodate them in insalubrious conditions) without any protection or care. It is in this context that WARO in partnership with ECOWAS has proposed to the governments of six countries supported by the project (The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, and Senegal). WARO has supported the health and psycho-social care, but also the return and reintegration of the children into their families of origin.

What are the key activities and projects your office envisages to undertake for 2021 to help address the multiple challenges?

On Treaty Body Capacity Building Programme, WARO will continue its engagements aimed at supporting member States in complying with their implementation of human rights instruments and reporting obligations to human rights mechanisms, as well as improving their capacities in cooperating with those mechanisms. This will help to sustain progress achieved in establishing NMRF in all countries of the region. WARO's efforts will particularly seek to resorb backlogs reporting under ESCR, CEDAW and CRC. WARO will also continue to support States' engagements with the UPR for Togo, Niger and Sierra Leone, laying the ground for the year after for Benin and Ghana.

The Regional Office has significantly contributed to the establishment and strengthening of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRI) to improve the national protection systems, and enhance the monitoring of and protection against human rights violations, with a special focus on women's rights. Support from the office to the members of the Network of NHRIs will continue to enhance their effectiveness and help them to align their statutes to the Paris Principles on NHRIs.

The office has already established a project jointly with UNODC and financially supported by the Kingdom of The Netherlands to enhance the capacity of the Member States of the region to protect the rights of migrants. The PROMIS project promotes a



human rights-based response to smuggling of migrants and addresses human rights violations related to irregular migration in West Africa. In 2021, PROMIS aims to consolidate its achievements in the focus countries (Senegal, Mali, Niger, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia) and will move towards the next phase (phase 3) that will start in the course of the year for a duration of 4 years. WARO will continue the ongoing work in the focus countries and will expand with additional activities in Burkina Faso, Chad and Nigeria. Strong emphasis will be on enhancing capacities of national authorities, CSOs and other stakeholders to apply a gender-sensitive approach to migration. Specific attention will go to the socio-economic rights of migrants and the implications of the Covid-19 crisis on the rights of migrants.

Furthermore, still addressing the frontier issue of people on the move a new project will be implemented in close collaboration with headquarters, to address the human rights, migration and climate change nexus in the Sahel region. The CLIMIS project promotes a rights-based and gender-sensitive approach to migratory challenges posed by climate change. The project contributes to the implementation of the SDGs, the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) among others.

The Office will also enhanced its engagement with youth, particularly young human rights defenders. In a project on youth and women human rights defenders, the Office will contribute to ensuring that their voice is heard in the efforts to build a society that is fairer and more respectful of the rights of all in the post COVID era.

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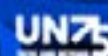
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