



UNOWAS Magazine

Together for Peace

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

For a strengthened regional partnership

S A H



UNOWAS

UNITED NATIONS OFFICE
FOR WEST AFRICA
AND THE SAHEL

BUREAU DES NATIONS UNIES
POUR L'AFRIQUE DE L'OUEST
ET LE SAHEL



CNMC

CAMEROON-NIGERIA
MIXED COMMISSION

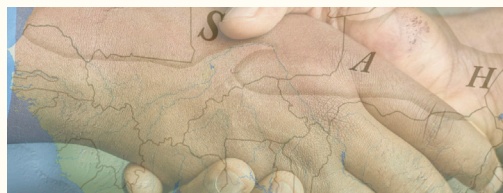


COMMISSION MIXTE
CAMEROUN-NIGERIA

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The voice of youth counts



Accelerate Progress, Invest in Women !



Leonardo Santos SIMAO

Special Representative of the United Nations
Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel
and Head of UNOWAS/CNMC

For a strengthened regional partnership

In the face of increasingly complex and pernicious challenges that threaten peace and stability on a daily basis and make the lives of millions of people even more fragile, greater mobilization and a strong commitment on the part of all national, regional and international players are urgently required to stem the spread of these challenges and preserve peace and stability in West Africa and the Sahel.

Twenty-two years after its establishment, UNOWAS has continued to promote a responsible regional partnership with the various actors operating in the sub-region in order to better coordinate efforts to improve good governance, strengthen the rule of law and consolidate peace and stability, while supporting the capacity development of state actors,

civil society and citizens in West Africa and the Sahel.











Convinced of this approach, UNOWAS has renewed its regional commitment by recently signing a Cooperation Agreement with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and with the Mano River Union (MRU).

The Cooperation Agreement with ECOWAS, signed on February 8, 2024 in Abuja, Nigeria, and the one signed with MRU on March 1 in Dakar, mark a new stage in the cooperative relationship between the two entities and UNOWAS. They strengthen existing cooperation with both institutions in areas as diverse as conflict prevention and resolution, the promotion of good governance, human rights,

including gender mainstreaming, the fight against gender-based violence and the protection of women's rights. Other areas include respect for the rule of law, support for inclusive political processes, the promotion of sustainable peace and stability, social development, the fight against terrorism, violent extremism and transnational crime, and combating the effects of climate change on human security.

The signing of the two Cooperation Agreements with ECOWAS and the UMR confirms the determination of the three entities to deepen their regional partnership and work together to promote peace and prosperity in West Africa and the Sahel.

10 THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT UNOWAS

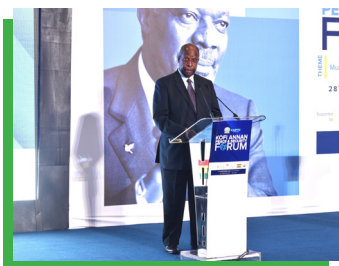
-  UNOWAS, United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, was established in 2002 as a regional special political mission of the United Nations Department of Political Affairs and Peacebuilding (DPPA).
-  UNOWAS is headed by a Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel.
-  UNOWAS implements the mandate given by the United Nations Security Council to prevent crises and conflicts through an active role in preventive diplomacy, good offices and political mediation.
-  The UNOWAS mandate covers 15 countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo-Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.
-  UNOWAS works closely with the various United Nations entities including regional and international partners such as the Economic Community of West African States, the Mano River Union, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, the Gulf of Guinea Commission, the Group of Five for the Sahel and the African Union, to consolidate peace and prevent conflicts.
-  UNOWAS supports the 15 countries in their efforts to consolidate good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and gender mainstreaming in conflict prevention and management initiatives.
-  UNOWAS supports sub-regional institutions and States in their efforts to address cross-border and cross-cutting threats to peace and security in the sub-region. UNOWAS also contributes to the analysis and assessment of the impact of climate change on security and stability in the sub-region.
-  UNOWAS contributes to the implementation of the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS) to support the countries of the Sahel facing multiple challenges such as, security, development, the management of the effects of climate change and the promotion of sustainable development.
-  Special Representative of the Secretary-General is also the Chairman of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission (CNMC), created to facilitate the implementation of the judgment rendered in 2002 by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the border dispute between Cameroon and Nigeria.
-  CNMC supports the work of border demarcation between Cameroon and Nigeria. It also supports the needs of populations affected by demarcation work. Since its creation, CN has demarcated 2050 km of a border estimated at 2100 km, and built 2213 pillars out of a total estimated at 2969.

SRSG Simão visits Burkina Faso and Niger



Following the decision of the Alliance of Sahel States, composed of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, to withdraw the Economic Community for West African States (ECOWAS), the Special Representative Leonardo Santos Simão, visited Burkina Faso from 6 to 8 March and Niger from 25 to 28 March. In Burkina Faso, SRSG Simão met, inter alia, with H.E. Mr. Apollinaire Joachimson Kyelem de Tambela, Prime Minister; H.E. Mr. Karamoko Jean-Marie Traoré, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Regional Cooperation and Burkinabè Abroad other transitional government representatives. He underlined the importance of mobilizing donor support to meet the humanitarian challenges affecting Burkina Faso and stressed the need to maintain dialogue between the three countries and ECOWAS to maintain the benefits of regional integration. In Niger, he was received in audience by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Co-operation and Nigeriens Abroad, Bakary Yaou Sangaré, and the Minister of State, Minister of the Interior, Public Security and Territorial Administration, Brigadier-General Mohamed Toumba. The Special Representative advocated for strengthened cooperation between the United Nations and Niger, and stressed the importance of dialogue amongst national, regional and international actors.

In Ghana, the Special Representative emphasizes the centrality of Partnerships



SRSG Simão visited Ghana from 26 to 29 February to participate in the third edition of the Kofi Annan Peace and Security Forum (KAPS Forum), a high-level event under the theme “Migration and Societal Resilience in a Multipolar World Order: Addressing Conflicts and Building Peace in Africa”. Mr. Simão highlighted the centrality of partnerships to address the challenges that undermine progress on peace, security, and sustainable development, and reaffirmed UNOWAS commitment to further engage with national partners and with regional and sub-regional organizations, including the African Union and ECOWAS, the Accra Initiative, among others. During his visit, Mr. Simão was received by His Excellency, Mr. Nana Akufo-Addo, President of Ghana, with whom he discussed various issues pertaining to peace and security in the sub-region, including the continuous threats of terrorism and maritime security, and ways to strengthen partnership between the UN and the government and people of Ghana. The Special Representative commended Ghana’s leadership role in the advancement of security in the sub-region through continuous commitment to the Accra Initiative.

Role of Human Rights and rule of law in the organization of elections



UNOWAS, in collaboration with the Regional Office for West Africa of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR-BRAO), organized on 25 January a regional exchange on the theme “The role and the place of human rights and the rule of law in the holding of inclusive, credible, transparent and peaceful elections in West Africa and the Sahel. The session aimed to strengthen consideration of the imperatives of human rights and the rule of law in the prevention of electoral violence and related crises. Participants analyzed the link between human rights, the rule of law and elections, as well as the role of civil society.

Regional Dialogue on National Security and Refugee Protection



The Deputy Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel Ad Interim, Mr. Khassim Diagne took part in the Regional Dialogue on National Security and Refugee Protection which was held in the Togolese capital, Lomé, on March 21 and 22. Organized jointly by the Togolese government and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the aim of this regional dialogue was to foster inter-governmental exchange on how states in the sub-region are meeting their international obligations in terms of refugee protection, while addressing national security concerns and priorities. Mr. Diagne welcomed this joint initiative by the Togolese government and UNHCR, which he said was of the utmost importance, and whose work would benefit the commitment of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), particularly in terms of conflict prevention. He recalled that civilian populations often find themselves caught in a vice, between insecurity and the humanitarian consequences and human rights violations that ensue.



Water for Peace

Creating ripples for a better future

To learn more, read the United Nations World Water Development Report 2024: water for prosperity and peace [here](#).

At the United Nations Security Council, Simão advocates a strengthening of the partnership with regional and international actors to face the many challenges in West Africa and the Sahel



Special Representative Simão to the UN Security Council

On 11 January 2024, the Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), Leonardo Santos Simão, presented the latest report of the Secretary-General on the activities of UNOWAS to the United Nations Security Council. The transition processes in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, the persistence of political tensions, the growing insecurity in the Sahel with a worsening humanitarian situation, and the negative impact of climate change on peace and security in the sub-region, were at the heart of Mr. Simão's presentation and the interventions of the various delegations.

Addressing the Security Council, the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel, Leonardo Santos Simão, stressed that “significant progress has been made in consolidating democracy, responding to the desire for change driven by an increasingly demanding younger generation.” According to him, the successful conduct of the 2023 presidential election in

Liberia “demonstrated the capacity of institutions to organize credible polls and put in place governments with constitutional legitimacy”.

On the other hand, political tensions in Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau, following electoral processes, “reminded of the need to build the credibility of institutions and processes of democratic governance, in a sustained man-

ner, failing which, underlying fragilities are always likely to resurface one way or the other,” he said.

In his statement, the Special Representative also expressed concern about the shrinking civic and political space in some countries of the subregion. “Regrettably, arrests of journalists and human rights defenders, as well as restrictions to internet access and free-

dom of the press, amongst other concerns, again fueled perceptions of a decline of the civic and political space in some countries,” he said, while stressing the importance of respecting fundamental freedoms, “including freedom of assembly and expression, to build trust between citizens and institutions.”

Also on the political front, and in view of the ongoing transitions, Mr. Simão reiterated UNOWAS’ commitment “to continue advocating for dialogue to accelerate a return to constitutional order reflecting citizens’ aspirations and ensure transparency, inclusivity and respect for human rights in the management of the transition processes.”

On the other hand, the security situation and governance challenges remain major concerns that have a significant impact on the lives of communities and constantly threaten to reverse progress in other areas, the Special Representative added. He mentioned the worrying security and humanitarian situation, particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Niger’s unconstitutional change of power in July created a “belt of military-led governments”, compounding security, humanitarian and governance challenges, he said. It deeply regretted the arrests of journalists and human rights defenders, as well as the restrictions on civil liberties.

The Special Representative also highlighted the “high level of uncertainty” surrounding the transition process in Mali. The date of the elections has not yet been set, he said. He noted the reconfiguration of regional security mechanisms in the region resulting from the withdrawal of the UN Mission in Mali, the departure of foreign forces and the uncertainty surrounding the G5 Sahel since the departure of Niger and Burkina Faso. UNOWAS,

he assured, will continue to promote dialogue with a view to “accelerating the return” to constitutional order.

Speaking about the impact of climate change on peace and security in West Africa and the Sahel, a reality that we cannot ignore, he said, Mr. Simão briefed Security Council members on the results of climate risk assessments undertaken by UNOWAS which indicate that “climate change reinforces security risks by exacerbating inter-communal conflicts and social tensions.” Besides, just before the start of the Security Council meeting, the members of the Security Council who have joined the common commitments related to climate, peace and security – France, Guyana, Japan, Malta, Mozambique, the Republic of Korea, Slovenia, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States of America – issued a statement “expressing their deep concern about the serious negative impacts of climate change on peace and security in West Africa and the Sahel and calling for urgent action.” In this regard, they argued that: “Conflict-sensitive climate adaptation, mitigation and resilience actions, supported by subsequent financing, are an important lever for peacebuilding and social cohesion in the sub-region.”

Mr. Simão also called for greater participation of women. “It is imperative that women take their place in decision-making bodies,” he stressed, while welcoming greater representation of women in legislative bodies in Benin, Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone.

The Special Representative concluded his remarks by reiterating UNOWAS’ commitment to working with regional and international partners to consolidate much-needed peace, security and democracy in West Africa and the Sahel. “In the face of multiple chal-

lenges, UNOWAS will stay the course and deploy its capacities, using its good offices, calling for humanitarian access and promoting respect for human rights and the rule of law,” he pledged.

The various delegations then spoke and highlighted the crucial role of sub-regional and regional agencies, UNOWAS and other UN agencies in a sub-region where the impact of the unconstitutional change of government in some countries is causing growing political tensions. Several countries, including the United States, expressed concern about the disintegration of democracy in the subregion and called for the promotion of democratic processes. Korea, for its part, has called for a “timely” return to constitutional order, in cooperation with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). France also welcomed the mobilization of ECOWAS, “which promotes democracy and the return to constitutional order in all countries where it has been undermined”. It is essential for ECOWAS to establish a dialogue with States in order to resolve the common threats facing the region, the delegation of Russia stressed.



Conflict-sensitive climate adaptation, mitigation and resilience actions, supported by subsequent financing, are an important lever for peacebuilding and social cohesion in the sub-region

UNOWAS strengthens its partnership with ECOWAS and MRU



SRSg Simão and President of the ECOWAS Commission Omar Aliou Touray, at the signing of the Cooperation Agreement.

By signing a Cooperation Agreement with ECOWAS and the Mano River Union (MRU), UNOWAS reaffirms its commitment to a strengthened regional partnership in favor of peace, democracy, and sustainable development.

In the face of increasingly complex and pernicious challenges that threaten peace and stability daily, and undermine the lives of millions of people, greater mobilization and a strong commitment on the part of all national and regional players is urgently required to stem the spread of these challenges and preserve peace and stability in West Africa and the Sahel.

For more than two decades, the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) has consistently favored a regional approach in its commitment to conflict prevention

and peacebuilding, making regional partnership a major pillar of its action.

It is in this spirit that UNOWAS has signed a Cooperation Agreement with ECOWAS and UMR to strengthen their cooperation and reaffirm their commitment to their ongoing partnership for peace, democracy, and development.

On February 8, 2024, in Abuja, Nigeria, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of UNOWAS, Mr. Leonardo Santos Simao, and the President of the ECOWAS Commission,

Dr. Omar Aliou Touray, signed a Cooperation Agreement which defines the operational framework of cooperation and interaction for joint and complementary actions within the framework of United Nations support to regional and sub-regional organizations.

The Cooperation Agreement with ECOWAS marks a new stage in the cooperative relations that have linked the two entities for 22 years. It reinforces existing cooperation between the two institutions, such as annual meetings, the development and monitoring of joint annual work plans,

participation in relevant and ad hoc meetings of both institutions, as well as regular information sharing and joint commitments. Areas of cooperation highlighted in the Cooperation Agreement include conflict prevention and resolution (mediation, good offices and all other means of peaceful dispute settlement, and peacebuilding), the promotion of good governance, human rights, including gender mainstreaming, the fight against gender-based violence and the protection of women's rights. Other areas include respect for the rule of law, support for inclusive political processes, the promotion of sustainable peace and stability, social development, the fight against terrorism, violent extremism, and transnational crime, and combating the effects of climate change on human security.

In the same vein, UNOWAS and UFM agreed on March 1 to further strengthen their partnership, by signing a three-year Cooperation Agreement

for the period 2024-2026. Signed by the Acting Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel, Khassim Diagne, and the Secretary General of the UFM, Ambassador Maria Harisson, this Cooperation Agreement defines the main areas of joint activities aimed at promoting peace, security and stability within the member states of the sub-regional organization, namely Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone.

Welcoming the excellent collaboration between UNOWAS and the MRU Secretariat, Mr. Diagne stressed that "today's signing of the Cooperation Agreement bears witness to our unwavering joint commitment to work together to serve the people of the sub-region and strengthen peace and democracy".

For her part, MRU Secretary General Ambassador Maria Harisson praised the excellent working relationship be-

tween UNOWAS and her organization "to accelerate access to regional stability for some 50 million people to help them reach their full potential and achieve economic development".

Since 2013, UNOWAS and the MRU have regularly signed Cooperation Agreements to guide UN support to MRU member states. This 2024-2026 agreement, signed during a crucial period for West Africa and the Sahel marked by increased challenges, including insecurity and unconstitutional changes of government, will take stock of achievements in democratic governance and new threats to peace and security.

The signing of the two Cooperation Agreements with ECOWAS and the UMR illustrates the deepening of the regional partnership and testifies to the commitment of the three entities to peace and prosperity in West Africa and the Sahel.



Simão welcomes the commitment of Cameroon and Nigeria to finalize the demarcation process



In his capacity as Chairman of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission (CMCN), Leonardo Santos Simão visited Yaoundé, Cameroon, to reaffirm the United Nations' support for the finalization of the demarcation process.

Following his visit to Abuja, Nigeria, on February 8, during which he held talks with the Nigerian authorities, the Chairman of the CMCN made a point of visiting Yaoundé to take stock of the situation with the Cameroonian authorities. From March 5 to 7, Mr. Simão held working meetings with, among others, the Prime Minister, H.E. Mr. Joseph Dion Ngute, and H.E. Mr. Felix Mbayu, Minister Delegate for the Commonwealth attached to the Minister of External Relations. He also met with Cameroon's delegation to the CMCN, led by its Head, Minister Michel Zoah, and the UN country team.

This visit is part of the Commission President's continuing commitment to support the two countries' tireless efforts to complete the border demarcation process, in accordance with the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling

of October 10, 2002. Discussions addressed the various aspects related to the completion of the demarcation process, in particular the need to reach an agreement on the delimitation of the three border zones on which differences persist.

In this respect, Mr. Simão welcomed the decision of the two neighboring countries to resolve their disagreements over the areas mentioned within the Mixed Commission and to no longer resort to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), as they had announced at the 34th session of the Mixed Commission.

The Chairman of the CNMC reaffirmed the United Nations' unwavering support to the two countries. He encouraged the UN country team to continue its support and complete, as soon as

possible, the update of the needs assessment of the populations affected by the demarcation, and to mobilize the necessary resources to implement projects aimed at meeting the challenges identified with a view to strengthening the confidence and support of the populations on the border demarcation.

Established in November 2002 by the late UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan at the request of Presidents Paul Biya of Cameroon and Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, the CNMC's mandate is to facilitate implementation of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling of October 10 2002, on the border dispute between Cameroon and Nigeria. To date, the CMCN has demarcated 2065 kilometers of an estimated 2100 kilometers of border.

Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission in Action

Activities

Achievements

Facilitating the withdrawal of troops and transfer of authority in Lake Chad area, along the land boundary and in the Bakassi Peninsula

The CNMC facilitated the peaceful transfer of authority over Bakassi to Cameroon through the Greentree Agreement, in accordance with the judgment of the International Court of Justice.

Demarcation of the land boundary and delimitation of the maritime boundary between the two countries

2,050 kilometers of demarcation have been surveyed and approved by Cameroon and Nigeria out of a total of approximately 2,100 kilometers

Delineation of the maritime boundary in accordance with the Judgement of the International Court of Justice

Out of a total of 2696 pillars to be built, 1673 pillars have already been built and placed

Addressing the situation of local populations in boundary areas affected by the demarcation activities

The CNMC, in liaison with partners, has developed confidence building programs to mitigate the impacts caused by the demarcation.

Making recommendations on confidence-building measures aiming at promoting peaceful cross-border cooperation

The Mixed Commission also approved the recommendations for crossborder cooperation on hydrocarbon deposits straddling the maritime boundary

UN Agencies unite to strengthen community resilience in Gulf of Guinea amid displacement crisis



A mother and child- Ivory Coast
Photo : WFP

As the number of refugees fleeing armed conflict and human rights violations in the Central Sahel has sharply increased over the past 12 months in West Africa's coastal countries, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) have launched a US\$142 million joint response plan for refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced people and host communities in the Gulf of Guinea.

The worsening security and humanitarian situation in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger has triggered refugee movements towards Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo. In early 2024, the number of people seeking refuge in the northern regions of these four countries, rose to 87,000 people predominantly women and children.

The joint response plan aims to reinforce the resilience of communities in the northern regions by increasing access to protection, food, nutrition, education, healthcare, water and sanitation, and livelihoods opportunities through community-based approaches. It aligns with existing development interventions that support national and local efforts, enhance the capabilities of communities, and foster enduring social cohesion.

"We find it imperative to invest in strengthening host communities in the northern regions of the coastal countries, to enhance their capacity to withstand shocks and foster resilience while protecting and assisting forcibly displaced populations and seeking solutions to their displacement," said Abdourouf Gnon-Konde, UNHCR Regional Bureau Director for West and Central Africa.

The food security and nutrition situation in the area is also worsening, with the number of food insecure people projected to soar from 208,000 in 2020 to over 3.9 million in June 2024, according to the November 2023 Cadre Harmonisé food security analysis. In the municipalities hosting asylum seekers, over 20 per cent of the population face food insecurity. Essential public services and infrastructure are strained, leading to reduced functionality and heightened pressure on education and health systems.

"The influx of asylum seekers and internally displaced persons is adding another layer of social and economic distress within communities already struggling to make ends meet due to limited access to basic services, income and food" said Margot Van der Velden, WFP's acting Regional Director for Western Africa. "Together, we are committed to working with governments and partners to strengthen national systems for food security and nutrition while reinforcing community resilience and social cohesion" This situation underscores the urgent need for a collaborative response by the four United Nations agencies in West Africa to support the displaced populations and address the challenges they face.

Endorsed by national authorities, this collaborative effort brings together humanitarian and development partners and local actors, committed to protecting and uplifting those affected by displacement. Through this plan, the UN agencies aim to anticipate future shocks, mitigate potential adverse impacts, and contribute to the stability and resilience of the Gulf of Guinea nations.

The plan will address the immediate needs of 200,000 refugees and asylum seekers, 47,000 internally displaced people, and 317,000 residents in host

communities. It aims to build social cohesion, improve infrastructure, and boost local economies, thereby laying a foundation for long-term resilience against shocks and stresses.

It comprises a regional chapeau and four distinct country chapters outlining the response and needs in each country. The response is framed around a common methodology aimed at streamlining data collection processes and analysis, coordinating emergency response, embracing a community centric approach and mainstreaming protection principles into existing practices. As an advocacy framework, this joint plan will help pool the limited resources in a harmonized response across four countries, working with a joint approach and regularly sharing information with key partners involved.

According to IOM Deputy Regional Director for West and Central Africa Mrs. Kristina Mejo "Inaction exacerbates food insecurity, amplifies vulnerabilities, disrupts education, and poses significant health and housing challenges. It also leads to further movements of populations of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, seeking the protection, settlement, and assistance options that they didn't find in their first place of arrival, with the risks of secondary movements further impacting their vulnerabilities."



Inaction exacerbates food insecurity, amplifies vulnerabilities, disrupts education, and poses significant health and housing challenges.

The voice of youth counts



The SRSRG with participants in the regional dialogue

Ahead of the elections scheduled in many countries in West Africa and the Sahel, a regional dialogue between Special Representative Leonardo Santos Simão and young women and men from the sub-region was held in Lomé, Togo, on February 29, 2024. It was an opportunity to listen to young people talk about peace and security, as well as about the national and sub-regional socio-political situation.

“It is vital to take the necessary measures to further support young people whose contribution to elections is a guarantee of sustainable development in the countries of the sub-region, because without the involvement and active participation of young women and men, it will be difficult to face the many challenges.” These words of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel, Leonardo Santos Simão, delivered during the dialogue with young women and men of the sub-region, gathered in Lomé on 29 February, reflect the urgency of redefining the role of young people in peacebuilding. This inevitably requires political inclusion and the inclusion of young people’s voices in the decision-making process.

The United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), which Mr. Simão heads, recognizes the critical importance of engaging with young people, especially those in the sub-region. Africa is currently undergoing a profound demographic change with more than 60% of the 420 million inhabitants under the age of 25 and the United Nations Development Programme estimates that by 2030, nearly half of the world’s youth will live in Africa. Unfortunately, youth participation in governance, including decision-making, development and peace processes, is low.

UNOWAS is working to change this paradigm in the sub-region by supporting the efforts of States, organizations and other partners to promote the ef-

fective participation of young people in electoral processes, which is a key element in strengthening their role in peacebuilding. Especially, at this time, when several countries in West and Central Africa are due to hold elections during this year 2024. And Senegal, which has already held its presidential election on 24 March 2024, is paving the way for this change, with a democratic alternation and the election to the supreme magistracy of Mr. Bassirou Diomaye Faye, 44 years old, making him the youngest president of the Republic of Senegal. Other crucial presidential elections will be held in Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, and Senegal and legislative elections, which have not been held since 2018, coupled with regional elections, will be held in Togo.

It is in this context and mindful of the need to hold peaceful elections in the subregion that UNOWAS organized a dialogue between the Special Representative, Simao, and the youth of the subregion. This initiative, which aimed to explore and improve the participation of young people in the upcoming elections, was a framework for exchange on various topics related to peace, security, as well as the sub-regional socio-political situation. In his opening remarks, Mr. Simao pointed out that the goal was to create an open space that would allow people to listen to the young people who are the future and whose voices matter.

For several hours, more than a hundred participants, representatives of women's and youth organizations in Togo, as well as other countries in the sub-region, the administration and

institutions of the Togolese Republic, the Defence and Security Forces (FDS), customary authorities, political parties, and trade unions, shared their views and perspectives on the participation of young women and men in the upcoming elections, the challenges and expectations of young people in the processes before, during and after the elections. They also shared good practices and planned initiatives to improve peaceful methodologies and opportunities for young people in West Africa and the Sahel region. These young people from Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal and Togo also conveyed their messages and expressed their opinions, concerns and expectations regarding the electoral issues and the actions to be taken to achieve lasting peace in the countries of the sub-region.

This regional dialogue was preceded by a three-day workshop to mobilize stakeholders for the holding of peaceful regional and legislative elections in Togo, which brought together decision-makers, peace actors, women, youth, and the Togolese defense and security forces, who agreed on a declaration of commitments that was presented to the Togolese authorities and the Special Representative at the Closing Ceremony.

Stakeholder mobilization workshops for the holding of inclusive, peaceful and violence-free elections are a privileged tool for conflict prevention in the countries of the sub-region, for UNOWAS and its partners, in particular the members of the Working Group on Women, Youth, Peace and Security in West Africa and the Sahel.



Regional dialogue participants

Accelerate Progress, Invest in Women!



Photo: communication campaign for the virtual session.

On the occasion of the celebration of International Women's Day, the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) and its partners organized, on 4 March 2024, a virtual session on the theme «Inclusive Futures: Advancing the Economic Empowerment of Women and Girls in West Africa and the Sahel». Synthesis.

To foster economic growth, food security, income opportunities, improve the living conditions of the most vulnerable, especially in rural areas, it is crucial and urgent to invest in gender equality and the advancement of women.

According to the latest Progress Report on Gender Equality published by UN Women and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), “poor commitment to gender equality is to blame for the limited progress made on Sustainable Development Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.” Expanding women's participation in

leadership and decision-making and maximizing investments in gender equality at the national, regional and global levels are among the concrete actions mentioned in this report to significantly accelerate progress by 2030.

In West Africa and the Sahel, women and girls face many economic, social and environmental challenges. Economically, they have lower labour force participation rates and a significant gender wage gap. Socially, cultural norms and practices limit their rights, freedoms, empowerment and representation. It is in this context that the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), in collabo-

ration with the African Development Bank (AfDB) and UN Women, organized on 4 March 2024 a webinar entitled “Inclusive Futures: Advancing the Economic Empowerment of Women and Girls in West Africa and the Sahel”. The aim was to enrich understanding and discussion on methods to improve economic opportunities for women and girls in the West Africa and Sahel regions, in line with the theme of the 2024 International Women's Day – “Count Her in: Invest in Women. accelerate progress.”

Chairing the opening session of the webinar, Mr. Khassim Diagne, Acting Deputy Special Representative of the

Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel, focused on dismantling systemic barriers to the economic engagement of women and girls in conflict zones. Mr. Diagne advocated for resilience, gender equity, and regional development through collaborative efforts.

Over 4 hours, 200 participants, including experts from UN Women, the AfDB and women entrepreneurs, discussed how to address challenges and seize opportunities to improve the economic status of women in the region. They discussed, among other things, the current situation of women's and girls'

economic participation, the barriers they face, as well as innovative and existing inclusion strategies. Emphasis was placed on education, entrepreneurship, employment policies, digital literacy and affordability.

WOMEN'S EQUAL PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION IS KEY TO INCLUSIVE DECISIONS

