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West Africa: Opportunities For Partnerships In Conflict Management

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A. Understanding Conflict In West Africa

West Africa has been one of the most volatile regions in the world.

The causes of instability and conflict in the region can be broadly categorized as internal, relating to the country-specific economic and social conditions; to the domestic governance and human rights situations i; as well as external, emanating from outside interference from or caused by instability in the neighbourhood. The external causes also include the impact of global developments ii. Depending on such causes, manifestations and consequences of such instability or conflicts in West Africa have varied, ranging from open civil conflicts to internal repression and military dictatorships.

In understanding conflicts in West Africa, it is important to note that conflicts are often the result of a chain of complex and inter-related factors. and therefore no one conflict allows for a straightforward categorization or explanation. For example, is the conflict in Cote d'Ivoire governance-related or an ethnic problem, or one generated by the dwindling economic fortunes of the state? Is it a national or sub-regional problem considering the number of countries whose nationals are directly affected, and the international involvement and interest? Was the conflict in Guinea Bissau in the late 1990s a problem of internal struggle for power or one of managing the sub-regional challenges of citizenship and ethnicity, or a case of state collapse, or a combination of all these factors?

West Africa, including countries emerging from or undergoing conflicts, is relatively naturally endowed iii. Some have attributed the root of the conflicts to the lack of access to these resources by the majority of the population and corruption resulting from weaknesses in the governance and management of these resources. Countries such as Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia could be cited in this category. In the case of Guinea Bissau, such resource-based analysis of the causes of the conflict may not apply as the country is much less endowed than its neighbours. The empirical situation calls for a new or additional set of analyses and explanations to enable a more relevant appropriate response. Here is one area that the EU can work together with the UN – through joint analyses –, particularly in conducting common country assessments; co-funding national institutions of social research; and related initiatives leading to a better understanding of each conflict or potentially unstable country situation.

B. EU-West Africa Ties

Geography and history bind Africa closely. This is even truer in the case of West Africa and Western Europe. West Africa is one of the frontiers of Europe. Therefore, developments in the region easily impact on Europe and vice-versa. For example, when the economy in the West Africa deteriorates and the region suffers major political or natural disasters, the effects are quickly felt on European immigration, with a massive influx of migrants. As recent trends show, drug and human trafficking, smuggling and other forms of transnational crimes could affect both West Africa and Europe. At the same time, West Africa's influence in Europe through trade and other partnerships, including participation in various joint mechanisms and international arrangements, as

well as the contributions of its communities residing in Europe, all indicate the mutual interest and interdependence that exists between the two.

As a result of these and other ties, both Europe and West Africa have an important leverage and influence over each other, which carries the corresponding commitment to enhancing dialogue, cooperation and collaboration. Therefore, in responding to conflicts in West Africa, the EU is a very significant player. This vital role of the EU can be further enhanced through collaboration with other international partners, including the United Nations.

C. UN And Conflict Prevention And Peace Building

The United Nations has the primary responsibility and legitimacy in the maintenance of international peace and security. However, such responsibility can only be effectively fulfilled in partnership with and through the support of its member states.

The role of regional groups and arrangements is also a critical pillar of the UN's work. Over the years, the UN has deployed scores of peacekeeping missions across the globe with most of them operating in Africa, including large multi-dimensional operations in the West African region. Experience has shown that while peacekeeping was useful in stemming the tide of violence, addressing the root causes of conflict requires a holistic approach through long term assistance and sustained engagement.

In his report "In Larger Freedom: Towards Development, Security and Human Rights for All" ^{iv}, the Secretary-General underlines that "no task is more fundamental to the United Nations than the prevention and resolution of deadly conflict". He further underscores that "prevention, in particular, must be central to all efforts, from combating poverty and promoting sustainable development; through strengthening national capacities to manage conflict, promoting democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and curbing the flow of small arms and light weapons; to directing preventive operational activities, such as the use of good offices, Security Council missions and preventive deployments" ^v.

The Secretary-General also emphasized respect for human rights as being the foundation of conflict prevention, when in the same report he wrote that "...development, security and human rights are not ends in themselves: they reinforce each other, depend on each other. In our interconnected world, the human family cannot enjoy security without development, cannot enjoy development without security, and cannot enjoy either without respect for human rights" ^{vi}.

In the case of Sierra Leone, the current focus of both national and international actions is on the consolidation of peace and prevention of relapse into violence. It was with this objective in view that the Security Council established in August 2005 the United Nations Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL) as the first integrated peacebuilding mission after a successful peacekeeping operation. ^{vii}

On a broader level, the establishment of the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) is a significant step towards integrating the peace building process into the UN's post conflict management system. Among other things, the PBC “would provide recommendations and information to improve the coordination of all relevant actors within and outside the United Nations, to develop best practices, to help to ensure predictable financing for early recovery activities and to extend the period of attention given by the international community to post- conflict recovery”. viii

These measures clearly illustrate the shift in emphasis to conflict prevention and peacebuilding and the application of an integrated approach and partnership with national, sub-regional and international organizations.

At the sub-regional level, the establishment of the United Nations Office in West Africa (UNOWA) is designed to ensure coordination and consultation not only among United Nations missions but also with non-UN actors. Through UNOWA, the UN Missions based in the region consult on issues of mutual interest, including cross-border challenges such as security; trafficking of small arms and drugs; and youth unemployment.

D. The UNIOSIL Experience

As already noted, UNIOSIL is the first United Nations integrated post-conflict peacebuilding mission. It was established in recognition of the need for sustained post-conflict engagement, with emphasis on the linkages between security, democratization, development and human rights, and addressing the root causes of conflict. UNIOSIL’s mandate includes assisting the Government of Sierra Leone to consolidate peace by enhancing political and economic governance, building the national capacity for conflict prevention, and preparing for the elections in 2007. The Mission is also mandated to support the efforts of the Government of Sierra Leone, among others, in providing basic services and accelerate progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), through poverty reduction and sustainable growth; develop a national action plan for human rights and help in establishing a national human rights commission; enhance good governance, transparency and accountability of public institutions; promote a culture of peace, dialogue, and participation in critical national issues; and strengthen the Sierra Leone security sector.

In pursuing these objectives, UNIOSIL, along with other actors, including civil society, has assisted the Government of Sierra Leone in developing an integrated Peace Consolidation Strategy (PCS), as a complementary set of actions to the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRSP 2005-7). The PCS provides a comprehensive analysis of threats to peace and security in Sierra Leone, as outlined in the following six broad categories: (i) continuing challenges to internal security, and threats emanating from a still turbulent sub-region; (ii) challenges to a national dynamic of reconciliation; (iii) lack of a momentum of accountability; (iv) respect for human rights and the rule of law; (v) a widespread sense of economic disempowerment; and (vi) lack of a national infrastructure for peace.

In articulating these threats and proposing specific programme interventions to address them, the PCS takes into account Sierra Leone's longer-term national programmes, in particular the Poverty Reduction Strategy and the Security Sector Reform Programme, as well as the priority tasks outlined in Security Council resolution 1620 of 31 August 2005.^{ix}

The United Nations support to Sierra Leone is further enhanced with the country's inclusion on the agenda of the newly established Peacebuilding Commission. This is a very important opportunity and challenge for the country. To ensure an effective engagement in the work of the Commission, UNIOSIL is working closely with the Government and civil society, as well as the country's development partners, in identifying the critical peacebuilding gaps that would require further support and attention by the international community. The four priority areas identified are: youth employment and empowerment; further strengthening of reforms in the justice and security sectors; enhancing the democratization process through support for the electoral system, civil society participation and strengthening the oversight role of parliament; and promoting the capacity of national institutions, particularly the civil service to enhance its effectiveness in public services. These critical challenges and gaps reflect the priorities outlined in the Country's Poverty Reduction and Peace Consolidation Strategies. The PBC endorsed these priority areas at its first country-specific meeting on Sierra Leone held in New York on 12 October 2006.

As Sierra Leone prepares for and conducts its second post-conflict presidential and parliamentary elections to be held in July 2007, tangible progress in addressing the priorities outlined in the Poverty Reduction and Peace Consolidation Strategies remains critical for the continued stability and sustainable development of the country. To that end, UNIOSIL continues to play an important role, including the facilitation of efforts by the international community. The coordinating role of UNIOSIL and the integrated approach it implements have been particularly evident in areas related to preparations for the upcoming elections, as well Sierra Leone's participation in the work of the Peacebuilding Commission.

The mandate of UNIOSIL emphasizes the principles of national ownership and sustainability. At the same time, increased attention is given not only to promote an integrated approach within the UN system, but also to enhance partnerships and joint initiatives involving other partners. This includes the European Commission, regional and sub-regional organizations and international non-governmental organizations. In order to succeed, these and other related activities require the continued engagement and support of the international community, including the European Union and its Commission.

E. Recommended Areas Of Cooperation

United Nations activities in Sierra Leone are focused on supporting post-conflict reconstruction, addressing the root causes of conflict and building national capacities for conflict prevention, as well as laying foundations for lasting peace and sustainable development. These objectives are in line with the

European Union's strategy on Africa adopted by the Council of the European Union on December 2005.x

In view of the above, and the complementary nature of the United Nations and European Union's strategies and objectives, a number of mutually reinforcing approaches to conflict prevention and peace building in West Africa should be pursued at the regional level, taking into account the peculiarities of each country and the region as a whole. In this regard, specific areas of collaboration based on a regional perspective could include:

(i) Support in addressing the root causes of conflict and building regional capacities for conflict prevention and management in a process that would ensure local ownership and sustainability;

(ii) Facilitating programmes which control illicit trade in and smuggling of natural resources; weapons, including small arms; illegal drugs; and other transnational crimes;

(iii) Promoting transparent business practices and corporate social responsibility among European companies operating in the region;

(iv) Assisting in the enforcement of sanctions in conflict situations, including arms embargoes, travel bans and freezing of assets of selected leaders;

(v) Promoting regional cooperation and action by strengthening the capacity of regional organizations to enable them to play a more effective role in the prevention and resolution of conflict.

In West Africa, the promotion of regional cooperation includes assistance to the Mano River Union (MRU) secretariat and support to ECOWAS on the implementation of the Protocol on the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, as well as work on cross border security issues and enhanced regional dialogue.

In Sierra Leone, since the end of the conflict, particularly in recent years, the UN and EU have been closely collaborating in a number of areas, including the management of conflict-related natural resources, such as diamonds, through the implementation of the Kimberley Process; as well as in electoral matters. With the experience gained through continued collaboration in these fields, it is evident that there are a number of areas in which the two organizations can further strengthen cooperation at the national level in several countries of the region. These include:

(a) Support for national institutions to accelerate progress towards the MDGs;

(b) Strengthen democratic practice, including building the administrative capacity of national election institutions;

(c) Support the process of decentralization to bring power closer to the people;

(d) Strengthen the capacity of the justice sector;

- (e) Support improved security by strengthening the capacity of the police force;
- (f) Promote programmes for youth employment and empowerment;
- (g) Promote human rights and gender parity; and
- (h) Support initiatives related to the role of women and their social and political empowerment.

Conclusion

The experience of the UN and other actors across the world illustrates the importance of investing in conflict prevention as an effective tool to build a secure and peaceful environment.

Conflicts in West Africa may not be easily subjected to existing ordinary or scholastic analysis about their nature or be easily prescribed through a one-size-fits-all solution. It is vital to seek a more in-depth explanation by adopting a more focused approach.

In doing so, there are important questions and challenges we need to ask and address at the same time. How do we increase our commitment and support to West Africa without establishing parallel institutions and arrangements that would add to dependency? To what extent do our interventions and assistance recognize and encourage the coordinating role of national institutions, and support the strengthening of national capacity to coordinate? How do we build national institutions and ensure ownership and effective accountability? How do we balance local peculiarities with the need to conform to international standards, or indeed, should there be a separate yardstick for measurement of compliance and outcomes? How can international actors, including international NGOs, build more synergies to work in the interest of the host countries without risking the attainment of their respective organizational goals?

The answers to these and related questions should serve as a basis for an effective strategy and engagement for all concerned in conflict prevention and resolution.

ⁱ Poverty, unemployment, diseases, illiteracy, poor infrastructure, ethnicity, religion, corruption, weak state institutions, among others.

ⁱⁱ For example, changes in the international economic and trade relations, increase in the price of petroleum and other essential imports, as well as decline in the price of export raw materials from the region.

iii Sierra Leone: diamonds, titanium ore, bauxite, iron ore, gold, chromites; Guinea-Bissau: fish, timber, phosphates, bauxite, clay, granite, limestone, unexploited deposits of petroleum; Liberia: iron ore, timber, diamonds, gold, hydropower; Côte d'Ivoire: petroleum, natural gas, diamonds, manganese, iron ore, cobalt, bauxite, copper, gold, nickel, tantalum, silica sand, clay, cocoa beans, coffee, palm oil, hydropower; Guinea: bauxite, iron ore, diamonds, gold, uranium, hydropower, fish.

iv UN doc A/59/2005, 21 March 2005.

v Ibid

vi Ibid

vii SC resolution 1620 of 31 August 2005.

viii UNGA resolution A/60/180 and SC resolution 1645/2005.

ix This includes the establishment of UNIOSIL to assist the Government of Sierra Leone to build the capacity of the National Election Commission to conduct a free, fair and credible electoral process in 2007; enhancing good governance, transparency and accountability of public institutions, including through anti-corruption measures and improved fiscal management; and strengthening the rule of law, including by developing the independence and capacity of the justice system and the capacity of the police and corrections system.

x The strategy sets out the steps the European Union will take to support African efforts in the areas of peace and security, human rights, democratization and rule of law, and economic and social development. It takes into account regional and country-specific needs and African countries' national strategies.