



Situation Report

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A Critical Assessment of Security Challenges in West Africa

Introduction

West Africa, like all other regions of the African continent, has been faced with a multitude of security challenges since the end of European colonisation in the region in the early 1960s.¹ And as most West African countries celebrate 50 years of independence in the year 2010, which the African Union (AU) has proclaimed as the “Year of Peace”, many of these challenges remain acute. In fact, in the introduction to their 2005 publication, *Crisis of the State in West Africa*, Fawole and Ukeje contend that West Africa, perhaps more than any other sub-region in Africa, ‘has acquired the unenviable notoriety as a veritable theatre of violent conflicts, political instability and state implosions.’² Adekeye Adebajo concurs with this characterisation of the region, describing it as ‘among the world’s most unstable regions.’³

The security challenges in the region are wide-ranging, from governance-related issues to climate change and trans-national criminality. The challenges have led to both inter-state and intra-state wars, serious security breakdowns and miserable living conditions for the populations of the region. Indeed, since independence in the 1960s, the region has witnessed two inter-state wars, five full-scale civil wars with a regional dimension and over 40 successful military coups d’état and unconstitutional changes of government, as well as a number of protracted separatist/insurgent conflicts and countless attempted coups.⁴ Since the dawn of the new millennium, there have been five successful military coups and other forms of unconstitutional changes of government in the region.

This paper aims to appraise and map the security challenges that have faced West African countries since independence with a special focus on the period after 1990. It also assesses the efforts made by various national, regional, continental and extra-African actors and makes suggestions on how the shortcomings in these efforts could be improved. An effort is made to show the evolution of at least some of the challenges over the years, in the hope that this could contribute to a better formulation of policy responses.

The study is based on extensive review of existing literature, complemented by field research in the region undertaken in July and August 2010, in addition to general familiarity with the region from many previous research visits on related subjects.

Without neglecting other issues that could be considered as security threats, and without attempting any hierarchical ordering of these threats, the paper

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focuses on the following six major issues: i) armed conflict, ii) military coups and unconstitutional changes of government; iii) mismanagement of electoral processes; iv) transnational criminality, particularly drug trafficking, terrorism and maritime piracy in the Gulf of Guinea; v) poverty and illiteracy; vi) climate change and environmental degradation.

By armed conflict, reference is being made to inter-state wars and civil wars (also called intra-state wars). For the purpose of this paper, an inter-state war is defined as armed conflicts involving the regular armies of two internationally recognised sovereign states acting under the orders of their political principals. Civil or intra-state wars are defined as organised armed conflicts that challenge the sovereignty of an internationally recognised state with a political claim, occur within the recognised boundaries of that state, involve the state as one of the principal parties to the conflict, and rebel elements consisted wholly or mainly of nationals of the state.⁵ Both types of armed conflicts are considered below in some details.

Inter-State Conflicts

It is perhaps ironic that despite its reputation as a region prone to armed conflicts, almost all of the armed conflicts in West Africa have been within rather than between states. From independence to date, the region has seen only two inter-state wars, neither of which lasted longer than a week of active combat. Those are the December 1985 war between Mali and Burkina Faso, and the April 1989 war between Senegal and Mauritania.

The cause of the five-day war between Mali and Burkina Faso was a territorial dispute over the Agacher strip located between the two countries and thought to be rich in minerals. The two countries had been disputing the ownership of the strip since 1974. The trigger of the war came with the accession to power of a revolutionary leader in Burkina Faso in 1983 and the decision of the new authorities in Ouagadougou to conduct a census in some of the disputed villages, to which Mali objected. The decision of the Malian authorities to oppose the census could have partly been spurred by the fact that those conducting the census were accompanied by elements of the Burkinabè army as well as the then revolutionary defence committee (CDR).⁶

The Senegal-Mauritanian war began as a banal dispute between Mauritanian herders and Senegalese farmers. It is reported that Mauritanian border guards assisted light-skinned Mauritanian Moorish herders in their confrontation with Senegalese farmers on 19 and 20 April 1989, allegedly killing two farmers and taking some 13 of them hostage. When news of this – conveyed in various ways – reached Dakar, the Mauritanian embassy in Dakar was attacked as were many Mauritanian traders living in Senegal and their properties destroyed. When rumours reached Nouakchott that scores of “Arabs” were being killed in Dakar, hundreds of Senegalese expatriates and black Mauritians were chased and killed in Mauritania, and many more were wounded, prompting a mass exodus of refugees on both sides of the Senegal River. This led to the rupture of diplomatic relations between the two countries whose armed forces exchanged fire at border posts.⁷

This low rate of incidence of inter-state conflicts in the region calls for an explanation for such “relative inter-state peace” despite persistent territorial disputes in the region (e.g. between Côte d’Ivoire and Ghana; Benin and Burkina Faso, Guinea and Sierra Leone; Mali and Burkina Faso; Benin and Niger; Nigeria and Cameroon) and acrimonious relations between several states, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. What does this mean for the future of the region with regard to this security challenge? Part of the explanation for this seems to be the fact that West African states have respected territorial borders inherited from colonialism, which the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) made a sacrosanct principle of African unity. Thus, despite numerous border disputes between states and major interests at stake, often compounded by speculations about natural resources, there have been very few inter-state wars even in Africa as a whole. Another factor

might also be the structural weakness of several post-independence armies, which are less inclined to securing the state than to upholding their regimes or ensuring the security of their presidents.

An additional factor in explaining the low incidence of inter-state conflict in the region could be the presence, since independence, of various regional mechanisms, mostly in the form of collective security arrangements (e.g. *Conseil de l'entente*; Accord of non-aggression and assistance in defence matters; ECOWAS) that have been used for dispute resolution, while the role of Nigeria as a "benevolent regional hegemon" has constituted another stabilising factor.⁸

Since all of these factors continue to operate in the region, and given that conflict prevention and management capacities of ECOWAS have even strengthened, one could argue that the likelihood of future inter-state armed conflicts in the region is very low. In fact, West Africa, like most regions of the continent, shows a great deal of cooperation when it comes to resolving border disputes.

Civil Wars & Regional Insurgencies

Contrary to inter-state wars, West Africa has experienced a number of large-scale civil wars and several instances of insurgencies that have been more or less confined to specific regions in the countries concerned. Five large-scale civil wars have been recorded. These are the Nigerian civil war (also known as the Biafra war) from 1967 to 1970; the two phases of the Liberian civil war from 1989 to 1996 and again from 1999 to 2003; the civil war in Sierra Leone from 1991 to 2002; the short-lived civil war in Guinea-Bissau, 1998-99; and that of Côte d'Ivoire from 2002 to 2007.⁹ Added to those are the so-called Tuareg rebellions in northern Mali and Niger from 1991 to 1995, and the ongoing secessionist insurgency in the southern Senegalese region of Casamance, which began around 1981. As it can be seen here, other than the Biafra war and the Senegalese insurgency, all these conflicts happened at the end of the Cold War, and they often took a regional character through their regional dimensions of networks of supporters and victims.

Researchers and analysts have offered various explanations to the occurrence of these armed conflicts. Given the fact that most of them occurred after the Cold War, some have argued that the end of superpower rivalry denied many authoritarian regimes in Africa of the support they had hitherto enjoyed. Seeing their weaknesses exposed, dissident groups launched armed conflicts that challenged the authorities of the regimes in place. While this is true to some extent, it does not explain why some of the conflicts, such as the Ivorian and Guinea-Bissau ones, broke out many years after the end of the Cold War. This calls for more explanations.

Other explanations put forward include reaction to grievances felt as a result of exclusionary and patrimonialist governance, and greed on the part of self-enriching warlords. But these two explanations are not mutually exclusive. For example, in Liberia, the authoritarian system that the Americo-Liberian elites had established in the country under the banner of the True Whig Party (TWP) created resentments among the majority indigenous populations of the country. Yet the rule of Samuel Doe that followed the brutal change of the TWP regime in 1980 perpetuated the same autocratic and nepotistic system. Thus, although there is every reason to doubt that Charles Taylor was concerned about this when he waged his brutal war in December 1989, the nature of Doe's regime and the deep resentments it had created with some segments of the population partly provided Taylor with a pretext to wage his war.¹⁰

However, given the fact that similar conditions more or less exist elsewhere and do not result in war, these explanations are not sufficient, on their own, to explain the outbreak of war. Other contributing factors need to be considered. One such factor is the support that warlords obtain from various internal and external actors, as were the Libyan, Burkinabè and Ivorian supports for Charles Taylor.

Another important variable is the military and political strength of the regime in place, for it might be difficult to successfully wage war against a very powerful authoritarian regime, which is known to have the ability and willingness to crush any rebellion.

In the case of Côte d'Ivoire, some observers have pointed to the contribution of a foreign hand to some aspects of the conflict. While not entirely excluding this, many contend that the internal factors seem to carry more explanatory weight, particularly with regard to the initiation of the war. These internal factors include the discriminatory policies followed by successive governments since the death of the country's first president, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, in December 1993. These policies, epitomised by the concept of 'Ivoirité', targeted Ivoirians from the North.¹¹

In Sierra Leone, the Revolutionary United Front of Sierra Leone (RUF) launched their war in the name of justice, while engaging in massive looting of the country's natural resources and committing egregious atrocities.¹² In Guinea-Bissau, the 1998-99 civil war opposed soldiers loyal to the then President João Bernardo 'Nino' Vieira and those siding with his renegade Army Chief of Staff, General Ansumane Mane.¹³ While the conflict appears to have been triggered by disagreement between the two men, Agbu contends that 'the war basically concerned the distribution of institutional political power against the background of the perceived illegitimacy of President Nino Vieira's rule.'¹⁴ Adebajo adopts a similar line of argument, citing alleged acts of cronyism, nepotism and misrule by Vieira as factors that had created frustrations in the country, particularly among the majority Balante ethnic group that he had allegedly marginalised.¹⁵

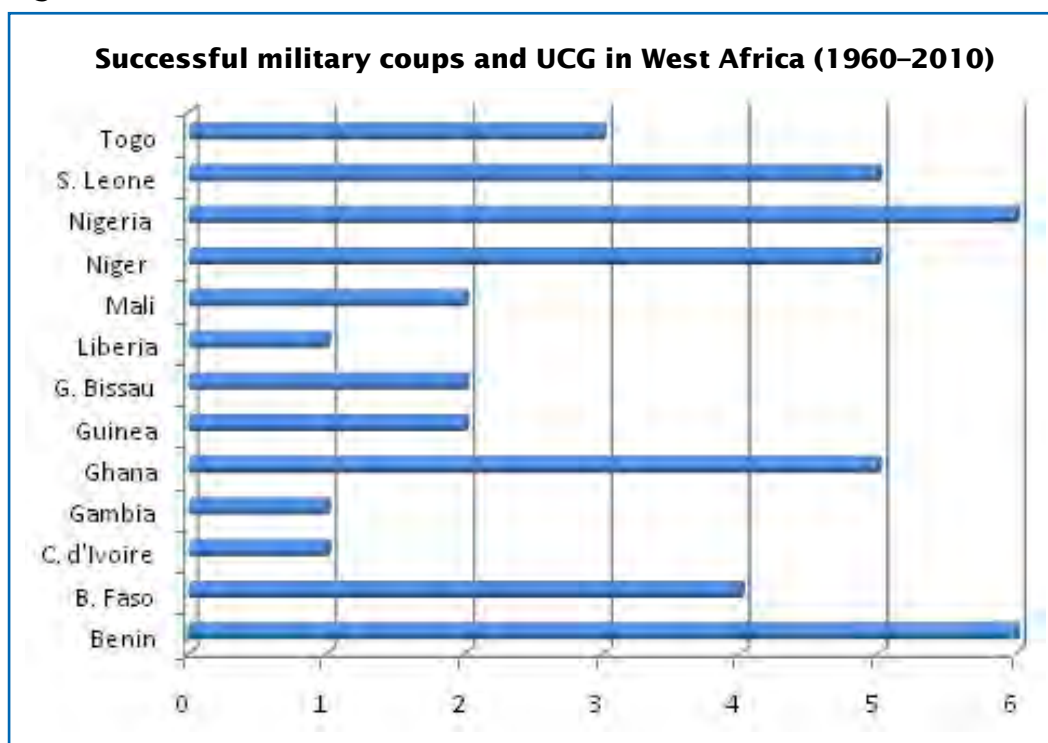
But as it can be seen here, intra-state wars in the region are also on the decline. Although still fragile and facing challenges, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau have all entered a post-conflict phase after multiparty elections that were hailed by most stakeholders. There has also been an effective ceasefire in Côte d'Ivoire since the March 2007 signing of the Ouagadougou Agreement. Indeed, at the time this paper was completed, intra-state conflicts were limited to sporadic instances of political violence in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria and parts of northern Mali and Niger, in addition to a 'no peace, no war' situation in Casamance.

An important factor contributing to this decline is the regional and international efforts in conflict prevention, resolution and post-conflict peace-building. Those include ECOWAS (aided by the OAU/AU) and UN interventions in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau and Côte d'Ivoire. Another factor could be attributed to "war fatigue" on the part of warring factions in countries like Sierra Leone and Liberia, which, combined with the realisation by the latter of their limitations which facilitate the role of mediators. More important, a good number of West African states, such as Cape Verde, Benin, Ghana and Mali, are moving away from exclusionary politics and becoming more respectful of the basic human rights of their citizens, striving to promote the rule of law while also showing respect for mechanisms that allow for peaceful changes of leadership. Against this background, and notwithstanding the presence of serious challenges, one could argue that the decline of intra-state conflicts, particularly major ones, is likely to continue in West Africa.

The first successful military coup d'état in post-colonial West Africa occurred on 13 January 1963 in Togo.¹⁶ The most recent one happened on 18 February 2010 in Niger.¹⁷ Between these two coups and inclusive of them, a total of 43 successful putsches and unconstitutional changes of government (UCGs) have been recorded in the 15 member states of ECOWAS. Benin and Nigeria top the list, with six successful coups each, followed by Ghana, Niger and Sierra Leone, with five each, while Burkina Faso has experienced four successful military coups (see Figure 1 below). Only Senegal and Cape Verde have been spared this experience in the region.

The high number of coups and UCGs in West Africa could partly be attributed to the size of the region, for there is no other geographic region on the continent

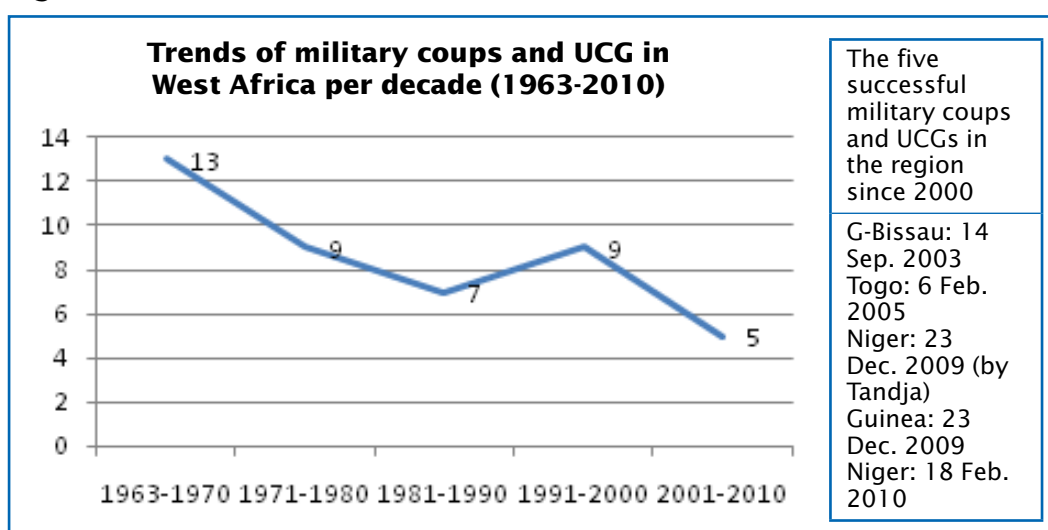
Figure 1



Source ©: Author's illustration

that counts as many as 15 countries like West Africa. But a cursory look at the distribution of the aforementioned military coups per decade suggests a dwindling trend (see Figure 2 below). The 1960s saw the highest number of successful military coups in the region (13), which declined in the following decade to nine, and declined further in the period 1981-90 to only seven cases. The decade of the 1990s saw a sharp rise in the occurrence of military coups, as it recorded nine successful coups. However, the phenomenon declined quite dramatically in the first decade of the new millennium, dropping to a mere five cases since 2000. Empirical evidence therefore suggests that coups d'état are in fact on the decline in West Africa, despite the recent spectacular cases of Guinea, Mauritania and Niger.

Figure 2



Source ©: Author's illustration

This calls for some explanations and there have been a number of theories developed over the years to explain trends in the occurrence of military coups. Some of these theories emphasise the influence of the 'social and political environments' in the countries affected,¹⁸ the politicisation of the army, geopolitical factors, contagion and the political ambitions of military officers involved.¹⁹

Although no single factor can, on its own, account for the occurrence of coups it would appear that, since the early 1990s, the way in which some sitting leaders manipulate constitutional rules pertaining to the maintenance or accession to power has played an important role in explaining the occurrence of military coups, which does not suggest a reductionist approach. Indeed, the wave of liberalisation that dawned on the continent in this period led to the coming to power, through constitutional means, of new leaders carrying high hopes of rapid economic upliftment. When some of these leaders failed to turn their economies around, they found themselves in a vulnerable position. Lacking the might of former military and long-time civilian leaders, some of them attempted to manipulate the very constitutional instruments that had brought them to power. This in turn led to political crises that were exploited by the military.

For example, the February 2010 coup in Niger is directly linked to the determination of President Tandja to manipulate the country's constitutional arrangements in order to hang on to power. In the face of growing opposition to his designs, Tandja dissolved Parliament, the Constitutional Court and the Electoral Commission. He then promulgated a new constitution through a highly controversial referendum that was boycotted by the opposition and the majority of Nigeriens.²⁰

This is at least partly why both the Lomé Declaration and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance – the two primary policy instruments guiding the actions of the AU on military coups – acknowledge that strict adherence to 'the principles of good governance, transparency and human rights' and the 'strengthening of democratic institutions' will considerably reduce the risks of unconstitutional changes of government on the continent.

Mismanagement of electoral processes has evolved into a security threat in that it often contributes to violent contestations and/or repression in which hundreds of people are killed or maimed. It is today one factor in increased election-related violence observed in many West African countries in recent years. Fisher defines election-related violence as 'any random or organized act or threat to intimidate, physically harm, blackmail, or abuse a political stakeholder in seeking to determine, delay, or to otherwise influence an electoral process,' whereas Sisk regards it as 'acts or threats of coercion, intimidation, or physical harm perpetrated to affect an electoral process or that arises in the context of electoral competition.'²¹

Electoral violence has occurred in various elections (presidential, legislative and local) in West Africa in recent years. Some countries have experienced widespread violence during presidential elections. This is largely because stakes are extremely high. They are high here because controlling the state in most African countries also means controlling the economy and, generally, all the privileges at the disposal of the state. This extends beyond the winning candidate to his entire community and networks. This generally translates into violence through the attempt by one party, often the incumbent regime but not always exclusively so, to rig the poll and the resistance of the other parties against this real or perceived practice.²² Suspicion about such practices is often fuelled by an intentional or unintentional lack of transparency in the electoral process.

In addition to the level of transparency of the electoral process, the type of elections and the stakes that political actors have in them, as well as their expectations from them, constitute factors that influence the likelihood of electoral violence in a presidential poll.²³ These include the following indicators:

(i) whether there is an incumbent president vying for re-election or not, (ii) how much stakes does the outgoing incumbent has in his succession, and (iii) how consensual – between the political actors – the electoral process has been.

With regard to the first factor, recent cases in West Africa show a low likelihood of violence in situations where there is no incumbent vying for re-election, which happens when elections are held after a transitional period in which the leaders of the transitional government have either not been allowed to stand or were not in a position to control the electoral process, which had been entrusted to an internationally supervised independent electoral commission. The most recent examples of this in the region are the 1999 presidential elections in Niger, the 2005 presidential elections in Guinea-Bissau and Liberia, and the anticipated 2009 presidential election in Guinea-Bissau.

This scenario could happen also when the president has served the maximum number of constitutional terms and had not meddled with the provision of term-limit to extend his or her tenure. In most such cases – such as in Mali in 2002 (for Alpha Oumar Konaré), in Benin in 2006 (for Matthieu Kérékou), in Sierra Leone in 2007 (for Ahmed Tejan Kabbah) and in Ghana in 2000 and 2008 (for J. J. Rawlings and John Kufuor, respectively) – the outgoing leader is ‘generally neutral’ in the process and is more concerned about his own legacy. In these situations, the state security services and the state bureaucracy tend to play by the rules, which minimises the likelihood of electoral violence. But if the incumbent leader is vying for re-election or, as in the second scenario, has high stakes in choosing his/her own successor (and he wants to ensure the victory or the failure of a particular candidate) and is facing a strong opposition, then the likelihood of vote-rigging and thus violence is high.

Perhaps the most illustrative example of this scenario in recent times was seen during the April 2007 general elections in Nigeria, as outgoing president Olusegun Obasanjo had high stakes in choosing his own successor. He had failed to amend the country’s constitution to allow himself a third term, due partly to the opposition of his own vice-president who later joined an opposition political party and stood for the presidency. Obasanjo and the ruling party were thus determined that their chosen candidate, the now late Umaru Musa Yar’Adua, should win the poll at all costs. As a result, not only was the electoral process marred by widespread irregularities, but hundreds of people perished due to the violence and inter-party clashes that characterised it across the country.²⁴

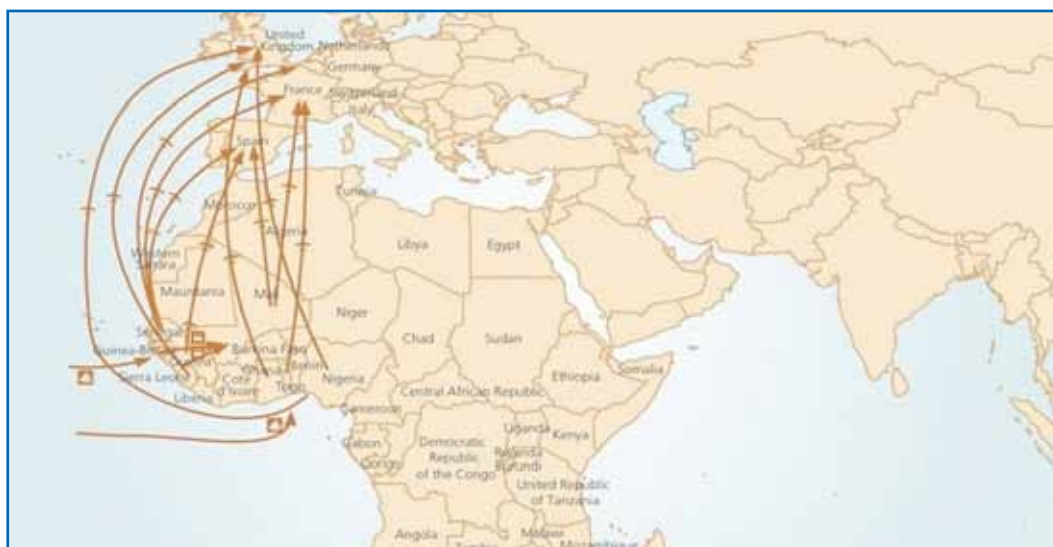
Transnational criminality in West Africa is generally thought to consist of (i) drug and human trafficking; (ii) smuggling of various items, particularly arms; (iii) terrorism and violent crime; (iv) maritime piracy, particularly in the Gulf of Guinea; and (v) money laundering and currency counterfeiting. The focus here will be on the first four categories. It should be noted however that there is a paucity of *concrete* evidence to dissociate ‘terrorist acts’ from general criminality in the region.

Drug trafficking

It is widely believed that most of the world’s cocaine comes from three South American countries: Colombia, Peru and Bolivia. Traditionally, traffickers from these countries have smuggled drugs to the most lucrative markets in North America, particularly the United States, via Central America and the Caribbean, and directly across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe.²⁵ Over the past few years, however, the coastal states of West Africa (particularly Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Cape Verde, Nigeria, Ghana, The Gambia and Senegal) have become major transit routes used by South American drug barons shipping their loads to southern Europe (see Figure 3 below).²⁶

In a 2008 report on drug trafficking and the security threat it represents in West Africa, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) noted: ‘The crisis of drug trafficking in West Africa is gaining attention. Alarm bells are ringing

Figure 3: Cocaine trafficking routes from South America to Europe via West Africa



Source: UNODC, *Transnational Trafficking*, 2009, p. 13.

about the volume of cocaine transiting the region (roughly 50 tons a year). West Africa ... has become a hub for cocaine trafficking ... worth almost \$2 billion a year. This is more than a drugs problem. It is a security threat.²⁷

The choice of West Africa as a transit route can be explained by three intertwined factors. First, there seems to be a shift in global cocaine consumption from North America to Europe. In countries such as Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, Portugal and France, the rate of cocaine use is thought to have doubled or even tripled in recent years, whereas in the United States, it is thought to have diminished by almost 50 per cent compared to the situation in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The relative strength of the Euro vis-à-vis the US dollar since 2003 may have also contributed to the attractiveness of the European market for drug traffickers.²⁸

Secondly, as the European states have realised the seriousness of the threat that drug consumption poses to their societies, they have implemented more rigorous controls of suspected shipments, which seems to have made it difficult for drug cartels to sustain direct flights to Europe, albeit some drugs are still being directly shipped to Europe. This has made West Africa an attractive transit point.²⁹ Thirdly, the geographic location of West African coastal states and their closeness to South America contributed to their choice. The presence of many sparsely inhabited islands in the archipelago of Bijagos off Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde adds to this geographic attraction. Finally and most importantly, state weakness epitomised by widespread corruption, weak surveillance and anti-crime response capabilities and political instability in most of the above-mentioned countries allow the quasi-free transit of drugs through the region.³⁰

Drug trafficking constitutes a serious security threat in West Africa given the wide range of its implications on governance and human security.³¹ Politically, it is a threat because drug barons need a safe passage, so they strive to compromise government officials and security agents. This results in a higher incidence of corruption within law enforcement agencies and a consequent undermining of the rule of law.³² As their influence over policy-makers grows, the state becomes a hostage of criminal networks. Indeed, corrupt security agents have in recent years been arrested in several West African countries for collaborating with drug barons and, even in some cases, for being directly involved in drug trafficking and money laundering.³³ The sacking of Sierra Leone's Minister of Transport and Aviation in 2008 following the seizure of a 'cocaine plane' at the country's main airport was a testimony to this worrisome situation. Another was the spectacular arrests of disgruntled state officials, including the son of the former president Lansana Conté by the military junta that seized power in Guinea in December 2008 after Conté's death.³⁴

Another negative political effect of drug trafficking can be seen when drug barons support rival political parties or candidates in legitimate state elections with a view to affecting the outcome of the poll and/or controlling 'elected' state institutions. Some political developments in Guinea-Bissau over the last few years are illustrative of this.³⁵

Drug trafficking can also pose a serious threat to the social fabric of the region when the drugs begin (as it has in some instances) to be consumed locally. Cape Verde, notwithstanding its image of a model of political stability and democratic rule in the region, provides a poignant case illustrative of this threat. As revealed by a recent report of the Inter-Governmental Action Group Against Money Laundering in West Africa (GIABA), in Cape Verde, 'the rise of drug trafficking has been accompanied by a relative surge in violence between rival gangs and criminality in general. In Praia [the capital] this has been particularly acute. The rise of violent crime has even brought some gangs into direct confrontation with the authorities.'³⁶

Arms smuggling and proliferation

Arms smuggling and the resulting proliferation of small arms and light weapons is another security challenge in the region. In situations of armed conflict and growing insecurity, states and non-state actors purchase large quantities of weapons to ensure their own security. But the presence of these weapons often frustrates demobilisation efforts and negatively affects post-conflict stability in countries emerging from armed conflict. Their presence in the hands of private individuals, including criminals, often contributes to the growth and gravity of criminal activities during peacetime, including armed robbery, hijacking and murder.³⁷

To some, although small arms are widely assumed to be a significant factor in armed conflict situations, there has been no scientific research or investigation to prove their impact in terms of outbreak, sustenance, and escalation of civil wars. Yet, the United Nations acknowledges that it is 'disturbed by the destabilising and destructive effects of the illicit arms trade, particularly for the internal situation of affected States and the violation of human rights.'³⁸ Indeed, it is a fact that before launching into action, groups seeking to overthrow or forcefully challenge the state engage in serious calculations about their chances of success. One of the factors that ultimately influences their decision is whether or not they can acquire the weapons necessary for the planned action. Thus, if these groups were unable to access weaponry, their ability to engage in violent actions would greatly be limited.³⁹

Yet, the West African region seems to be awash with small arms and light weapons as a result of years of instability in the region. So much so that continued trafficking from outside the region may not be necessary to sustain their availability, given that firearms are durable goods, particularly if the owners take good care of them.⁴⁰ According to a 2009 report of UNODC:

Between 1998 and 2004, more than 200,000 small arms were seized or collected in the [West Africa] region, at least 70,000 of which were subsequently destroyed. While impressive, these numbers are small in proportion to the estimated number of small arms present in West Africa (estimated at between 7 and 10 million), and only a fraction of these need fall into the wrong hands to pose a security threat. In Côte d'Ivoire, there are said to be at least "tens of thousands" of weapons circulating while a peace deal stalls, exacerbating crime and threatening upcoming elections.⁴¹

The impact of readily available weapons on the rate and extent of violent attacks in the Niger-Delta region in southern Nigeria is palpable. As the West African Action Network on Small Arms (WAANSA) rightly notes: 'The proliferation and misuse of small arms continue to threaten the security of people and nations in West Africa. Small arms are the main weapons used in armed robberies, drug

trafficking, local wars, terrorism, violation of human rights, etc.⁴² Another aspect of the security threat posed by small arms is the corruption of many security agents (state or private) in the region, some of whom are directly or indirectly involved in violent crimes and robberies.

Based on this, one could conclude that small arms and light weapons, whether legally traded to conflict zones or illicitly acquired by rebel movements and criminal groups, constitute one of the major threats to stability in West Africa, both through the sustenance and escalation of armed conflict and through the growth of violent criminal activities.

Transnational crime and terrorism

Perhaps a more worrisome feature of transnational crimes is when traffickers ally with rebel movements and other criminal gangs for mutual benefits. Two cases can illustrate this, one generally thought to be 'actual' and the other one 'hypothetical', but both constituting serious security challenges in the region. The actual one is the widely reported activities of the so-called Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in the Sahelo-Saharan band of West Africa. AQIM is a band of violent criminals that specialise in hostage-taking and terrorising tourists and travellers in the Sahel while (mis)using the name of Islam.

The origins of AQIM can be traced to the Algerian civil war (1992-99), as it is an avatar of the so-called Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which was accused of many terrorist attacks during the war. The latter came about following the annulment, by the military authorities of Algeria at the time, of the results of the 1992 legislative elections that the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was thought to have largely won. At the end of the war, and following an amnesty deal initiated by President Abdoulaziz Bouteflika, many members of GSPC opted for the deal but others vowed to continue fighting. It was in 2007 that some elements of the group adopted the name of AQIM and declared their adherence to the purported cause of Al-Qaida.⁴³

The same region is the theatre of activities by the so-called 'Tuareg rebels' in northern Mali and Niger. The attacks started by Ibrahim Ag Bahanga in mid-2006 against Malian troops in the northern region of Kidal is disowned by many Tuaregs who consider him and his group as fringe elements that do not represent the community or its interests. In interviews conducted with various Malian citizens, journalists and officials as well as members of the Tuareg community (including former rebel elements of the war in the early 1990s), it became apparent that the majority of those interviewed suspect Ag Bahanga of engaging in criminal activities, particularly drug trafficking. The demand by Ag Bahanga during peace talks in Algeria in late 2006 that Malian troops evacuate the region of Kidal lent more credence to this suspicion.⁴⁴

Given the convergence between some of their activities, not least hostage taking, drug and cigarette smuggling, and the difficulty for the countries of the region to effectively police the Sahelian band, it is thought that AQIM, Bahanga's gangs and elements linked to rebels in northern Niger have engaged in a marriage of convenience, guaranteeing each other 'right of passage' and aiding each other to escape the law.⁴⁵

But most of these criminal activities are not new in the region. Travellers and would-be migrants have for decades been the prey of armed robbers in the Sahelian strip, which stretches from northern Mali to Darfur in Sudan via Chad. The region is difficult to police because of at least three interlinked factors: (i) the desert nature of much of it; (ii) the fact that many parts, particularly in the Timbuktu and Kidal regions of Mali, and the southern parts of Algeria, are so sparsely if at all populated; (iii) the lack of adequate financial and logistical resources at the disposal of governments of the region. Some observers have added an apparent complicity of some local communities and even some government agents with the rebels and traffickers, a factor which may not be excluded, even if there is little concrete

evidence to substantiate it. Such complicity may be justified by the lucrative nature of some of the activities in question, while family links to members of the groups concerned could explain the complicity (understood here as lack of cooperation with government officials in identifying or reporting them) of others.

Clearly, the description of a violent/criminal group as terrorist is often a matter of subjective appreciation, which may change over time. As a GIABA report aptly puts it, 'simple banditry and kidnapping for personal gain can become confused with actions carried out for terrorist purposes and politically related killings'.⁴⁷ This does not however make acts carried out by such groups or individuals less criminal or threatening, although there might be a danger in such labelling as far as subsequent policies are concerned.

In any case, whether described as criminal or terrorist groups, AQIM's activities in the region and those of Ag Bahanga's men highlight the security threat posed by transnational criminality, both in itself and as a contributing factor to more serious security threats.

There is likewise a hypothetical threat that drug traffickers operating in Guinea-Bissau might infiltrate the Casamance region in southern Senegal, or that some elements of the separatist Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) might embrace this 'business', at least for survival purposes.⁴⁸ Since a 29 November 2004 peace accord between the Senegalese government and the leadership of MFDC, there has been a long period of relative stability in the region. However, a few skirmishes between the two parties have been reported in recent months, which has led many observers to describe the situation there as one of 'no peace, no war'.⁴⁹

There is no evidence so far that suggests any activities of drug-barons in Casamance and the separatist movement there is even believed to be against drug dealings.⁵⁰ But the sophistication of drug-cartels and the huge financial profits involved in the business, combined with the need of the separatists to survive and sustain their actions, means that the proximity of Bissau and Casamance does make the eventuality of a marriage between the two a matter of concern. This could pose a serious security threat not only to Senegal, but also to other countries in the region.

Oil, Militias and Insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea

The Gulf of Guinea is a geo-strategic region spanning several Atlantic coastal countries in western, central and southern Africa. Because it is a geo-strategic region, the number of countries thought to belong to the region varies in different studies. In general terms, however, the following seven countries feature in most considerations: Angola, Cameroon, Congo (Brazzaville), Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Nigeria, and Sao Tome e Principe (see Figure 4 below). Some demarcations include the Democratic Republic of the Congo as well as other West African countries up to Ghana.⁵¹ The region has, in recent years, become not only an important strategic region for both African and non-African actors; but it is also, perhaps because of this, faced with serious actual or potential threats to security.

It should first be noted that apart from Chad and Sudan, almost all the oil-producing countries in Sub-Saharan Africa are located in the Gulf of Guinea.⁵² These countries rely heavily on oil for their national revenues, much of which is offshore. Any threat therefore to the oil production in their territorial waters is not only a security threat to these states, it is also an important threat to their socio-economic development and thus to the human security of at least a portion of their populations. As Vreÿ notes in comparison to the Horn of Africa, where the threat is mainly to some foreign entities, 'the maritime threats in the Gulf of Guinea hold real dangers for the countries [of the region] and their dependency on the resources and commerce originating from the Gulf'.⁵³

In addition, global powers such as the United States and China (but also India, Brazil and many European countries) are becoming more and more reliant on oil

Figure 4: Map of the Gulf of Guinea



Source: Delano (2009, p. 30)

and other natural resources produced by the countries of the region.⁵⁴ Indeed, the US is thought to be currently importing about 15 per cent of its oil from the region, a share that is forecast to grow to about 25 per cent by 2015.⁵⁵ With its decades-long presence in the region, France has secured important shares in the oil production of Gabon, Congo, Cameroon and Nigeria.

At least three main factors explain this strategic shift in the case of the USA and China. The first is the growing volume of oil deposits and new discoveries in the region. This development coincides with the second factor, which is the growing need of these powers for more energy sources to match their industrial needs, particularly China. The third factor, which is of particular relevance to the US, is the need to diversify their energy sources, and reduce reliance on the Middle East, which is viewed as unstable, particularly since September 2001. The relative geographic proximity of the Gulf of Guinea countries to the US – all located on the Atlantic Ocean – and thus the cost-effectiveness of importing their oil further adds to the attractiveness and the strategic importance of the region to the US.

The main source of security threat in the Gulf of Guinea region stems from the insecurity in the oil-producing Niger Delta in southern Nigeria. To explain this insecurity, Ukeje argues that the inhabitants of the Niger Delta have, since the late 1980s, been expressing grievances against the Nigerian state. He contends that the articulation of these grievances was initially peaceful and focused on an assertive demand for greater political and administrative autonomy. He however notes that these demands have, in recent times, taken the form of a 'vociferous demand for greater fiscal allocations based on a reworked revenue allocation formula [which would grant the local] communities larger shares of oil revenue and resource control.'⁵⁶ Because the region is the source of much of the oil wealth of the Nigerian federation, and given the poor living conditions of the majority of local communities, which he partly blames on corruption by government agents, the author concludes that there are 'some justifiable grounds for these increasingly assertive demands'.⁵⁷

Indeed, most observers and analysts of the recurrent violence in the oil-rich region explain it in terms of injustice, state neglect of the region, marginalisation and

exclusion of the people despite the fact that their region contributes substantially to the wealth of the Nigerian State. As a result, militias have blossomed in the region, spearheaded by the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND), the Niger Delta Liberation Front (NDLF), and the Niger Delta Volunteer Front (NDVF). These groups and others often launch attacks on the state authority and oil installations and carry out regular kidnappings of foreign workers. This is further complicated by the fact that some criminal elements seem to have either infiltrated these politically motivated groups and/or set up their own movements to cause more violence in the region. According to Okonta, 'there is a distinction between [MEND] and the slew of copy-cat youth gangs that emerged in mid-2006 to exploit the new situation in the region for personal benefit.' To him, MEND 'is a disciplined armed movement that has clear political goals, even if it utilises unorthodox methods to raise money to fund its project.'⁵⁸

It is these 'unorthodox methods' used by MEND and other groups that partly constitute a security challenge in the Gulf of Guinea. Perhaps the most daring attack claimed by MEND is the June 2008 one on Nigerian oil installations offshore as well as carrying out frequent kidnappings of oil workers who are only released after the payment of heavy ransoms. Perhaps one of the most daring of these attacks was the June 2008 one on Shell-operated Bonga offshore oil platform located deep into the Atlantic Ocean.⁵⁹ As a result of these kinds of attacks, Nigerian oil production has dramatically dropped over the years since 2006. The country's Central Bank (CBN) reported a 4.9 per cent drop in crude oil production in the first half of 2007, which it blamed on 'youth restiveness in the Niger Delta area of the country'. As of 2008, after the closure of many oil production facilities by the affected companies, Nigeria lost about a third of its total production capacity and Angola overtook Nigeria as the top African oil producing country. By mid-2009, Nigeria's production capacity fell further to half its pre-2006 level.⁶⁰

At this stage, the majority of the maritime attacks in the region emanate from Nigeria. But there is a danger that like-minded groups in other countries of the region might emulate the Nigerian example. This danger is all the more serious given that a number of the countries are host to dissident groups (such as those in Angola's Cabinda enclave) or are home to dissatisfied local populations who could express their anger in a militia-type organisation.

The combination of relative poverty and illiteracy could be exploited by political entrepreneurs to wage violent conflicts. The argument is that high poverty and illiteracy rates in a society, especially amongst the youth who usually constitute the bulk of violent groups, is a pivotal recruitment tool for political entrepreneurs, including warlords. This is all the more obvious given that uneducated youth, finding themselves in conditions of abject poverty and without any socio-economic perspective, are susceptible to make simple calculations without taking much heed of their consequences. With the prospect of looting opportunities and the like, such young men and women may see little or nothing to lose in causing violence and chaos. In fact, some may have high expectations of profiting from forcible appropriation and control of productive assets, and may therefore view violence and instability as an opportunity rather than an undesirable situation.⁶¹ This makes poverty one of the major fuelling factors of political violence in the region, albeit it is also one of its consequences.⁶² The argument here is not that these factors 'inevitably' lead to violent conflict; it simply means that they contribute to its likelihood in combination with other factors.

A high level of illiteracy is another crucial factor that provides a fertile ground for fortune-seeking warlords and political entrepreneurs to be able to launch their violent actions. Again, this is a relative description, and it does not mean that educated people are not also involved in either fomenting or carrying out violence. In fact, the organisation and mobilisation for violence is usually the work of opinion leaders, who are generally educated.

For example, religious intolerance that is said to be the cause of much violence nowadays, particularly in Nigeria in the West African context, can largely be

explained in terms of these two factors. For religious intolerance tends to become a source of violent conflict when people adhere to a specific interpretation of their religion – often misguided by a real or perceived religious authority – and want to impose that interpretation on others or even engage in provocative ‘preaching’ in the direction of others. The ‘other’ here can be either co-religious fellows or adherents of other religions or belief systems.

One could argue that, to a large extent, this is the factor that explains recurrent violence in northern and central (Middle Belt) Nigeria, for religious intolerance seems to be very prevalent among *some* Muslims (especially those purporting a puritanical approach or having a literary reading of the Koran) and Christians (particularly *some* followers of *certain* Pentecostal and Evangelical churches). Of course political manipulation and economic hardship, sometimes combined with criminality, often serve as combustible material for religious intolerance to turn into large-scale violence.⁶³

During interviews in Nigeria in July/August 2010, respondents, after discussing crises in northern and central Nigeria, were asked to identify other parts of the country where people of mixed religious and ethnic backgrounds live side by side in relative harmony.⁶⁴ The answer given was almost always the South-West, with the explanation that there is a high level of education and ‘enlightenment’ in that part of the country. Not surprisingly, this is the part of Nigeria where the ratio of Muslims and Christians is almost equal.

Environmental degradation due to climate change and other natural disasters such as droughts and heavy flooding have often had severe impacts on human security in West Africa, particularly in the Sahel region, causing poverty and massive population displacements. Environmental degradation, when combined with other factors and poor government handling, can easily trigger or fuel violent conflict, particularly between nomads and farmers, but also within groups in the same communities.

In fact, the origins of the Tuareg rebellions in Mali and Niger in the early 1990s can be traced, at least partly, to the severe droughts that afflicted both countries in the 1970s. These droughts had led to massive displacements of Tuareg populations who moved both within their own countries and into neighbouring countries, particularly Burkina Faso, Algeria and Libya, which also have indigenous Tuareg communities. Against the backdrop of earlier discontent linked to perceived or real marginalisation and conflicts in the early years of independence, particularly in Mali, many of Tuaregs who found themselves in Libya were enlisted in Kaddafi’s revolutionary wars in Chad, Lebanon and Palestine.⁶⁵ Although it is not clear whether they received direct material support from Kaddafi to wage war against their own countries, the rebellions were launched and spearheaded mainly by some of those who were demobilised in these Libyan wars after acquiring military training and support in Libya and other countries, apparently from individuals.⁶⁶

Meanwhile, some authors and observers have sought to explain many of the recurrent ‘inter-communal’ clashes in Nigeria in terms of the environmental factor. For example, Fasona and Omojola contend that ‘many communal clashes (often mis-interpreted or mis-represented as ethnic and religious clashes) are actually struggle over either the control of land or mineral resources or both’.⁶⁷ Referring to some recent cases of climate-related disasters in the region, Musah highlights the devastating effect of some natural disasters since 2003, including increased breeding by desert locusts which devastated thousands of hectares of crops in Senegal, Mauritania, Mali and Niger in 2004.⁶⁸

While most of these cases are due to natural factors, some are indeed man-induced, particularly in the Niger Delta region of southern Nigeria. In this region, oil production and exploration have led to much environmental degradation while government at best caresses oil companies rather than protecting the rural communities whose livelihoods are being destroyed.

It is evident from the foregoing that much of the security threat of environmental degradation and natural disasters emanate from the way governments handle such threats, particularly actions taken or omitted to prevent them, mitigate them or caring for the victims. For without proper and timely action on one or more of these aspects, conflicts may easily break out between victims trying to survive and other groups overwhelmed by the added pressures of the latter on scarce resources.

This section looks at the various efforts being made at national, regional and continental levels to deal with the aforementioned security challenges in West Africa.

National efforts

Although success rates are varied, attempts are being made by various West African countries to deal with at least some of these challenges. With regards to governance, and despite attempts at constitutional manipulation by authorities in some states, several countries are making great strides to improve their governance systems and practices. As noted above, leaders in Benin, Cape Verde, Ghana, Mali and Sierra Leone have served their countries and respected their constitutional term-limits by duly leaving power without attempting to manipulate the constitution. Former Nigerian president Obasanjo had to be forced by a vote of the National Assembly in May 2006 to abandon his designs to change the country's constitution, but the fact that he abided by the ruling of the country's legislature was an encouraging sign.

Some countries are going beyond mere respect of existing laws to enacting new ones with a view to further improving the rule of law and their governance system in general. One such case is the constitutional reform bill proposed by the authorities in Mali in April 2010. This bill extends the systems of checks and balances of the country's polity, institutionalises the status of the political opposition and strengthens press freedom, in that media professionals are no longer to be jailed for defamation and press offenses.⁶⁹

Concerning the management of electoral processes, many countries are making efforts to improve their electoral processes, mainly through the improvement of the legal and financial standing of the electoral management body (EMB). In a comprehensive study on electoral management bodies in West Africa, Hounkpe and Fall found that although such provisions might not always be reflected in the actual work of the EMB, they have contributed, in some cases, to the EMB organising very credible elections. This is so particularly when such provisions are combined with a bona fide political will from the country's leadership and commitment of members of the EMB to uphold their rights and duties under these provisions. Such outcomes have been quite evident in the cases of Cape Verde, Ghana and Sierra Leone in recent years.⁷⁰

Even in Nigeria where the deadliest election-related violence in the region in recent years was seen in 2003 and 2007, efforts undertaken by the late president Yar'Adua and his successor Goodluck Jonathan are susceptible to lead to better election processes in future, starting with the 2011 general elections in the country. Yar'Adua initiated a process of profound electoral reform but was unable to see it through due to his ill health and subsequent death in June 2010. But his successor has taken this process further by appointing a new chairperson of the electoral commission and by providing the latter, in early August 2010, with close to US\$600 million, as the necessary funds that the new leadership of the Commission had requested for the electoral process.⁷¹

But while the role played by national governments is very important, the significant contribution of civil society organisations (CSOs) cannot be overstated, particularly with regards to the promotion of good governance where the State is less than a neutral player. The role that Guinean CSOs have played in the country since mid-2006 is a good example. Also, Nigerian CSOs, particularly the National

Civil Society Coalition Against Third Term Agenda (NACATT), made a major contribution in the defeat of Obasanjo's third term plan. At a more grassroots levels, civil society and religious movements are involved in various forms of civic education and so contribute to the domestication of values that sustain democratic norms.

Regional and international efforts

As at the national level, regional efforts to mitigate threats to human security in West Africa are also attributable to both non-state and state actors. The work of regional and continental bodies in this regard is supplemented, and in some cases strengthened, by the efforts and actions of certain regional civil society organisations.

ECOWAS and the AU are the main regional and continental inter-governmental bodies whose efforts have the biggest bearing on security challenges in West Africa. Both institutions have developed structures aimed at improving the governance systems of member states, and detecting deficiencies at an early stage so as to prevent deterioration and conflict. At the ECOWAS level, the 1999 Protocol Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping, and Security, and the 2001 Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance merit special mention here. As far as the AU is concerned, the Lomé Declaration on Unconstitutional Changes of Government (July 2000), the Protocol establishing the Peace and Security Council (2002), and the African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (2007) are the key instruments of relevance.

But clearly, the mere establishment of these structures could amount to nothing if they did not have a set of guidelines to inform their actions and, if necessary, punish those that breach their obligations under these guidelines. And because these instruments have different levels of legal value and relevance to specific cases, they complement one another, which often leads to better results.

For example, it was on the basis of Article 2 (1) of its Supplementary Protocol that ECOWAS engaged with Mamadou Tandja's regime in Niger from mid-2009 with a view to dissuading Tandja from amending the constitution in a unilateral manner less than six months before the presidential elections in which he was not to take part. The AU followed the lead of the regional organisation in this instance. When Tandja ignored the efforts of both ECOWAS and the AU, ECOWAS suspended Niger's membership from the regional organisation 'until constitutional legality is restored in the country'.⁷³ The AU endorsed this decision and commended 'the efforts deployed by ECOWAS towards finding a speedy and consensual solution to the crisis in Niger'.⁷⁴ Although these actions did not force Tandja out of power (he had to be overthrown in a military coup), the principled stance taken by both organisations in this matter is commendable because short of military intervention, they did all that they could in accordance with their *prerogatives* and *constraints*.

But an important lesson to be learned from the Niger case is the need to strengthen some of these instruments for better and timely results. At it turned out, none of the AU's legal instruments could have been used against Tandja. The closest to this would have been the African Charter on Democracy, but this instrument is yet to be ratified by the requisite number of states before its entry into force. The AU therefore had no choice but to follow the lead of ECOWAS. But even under the ECOWAS Supplementary Protocol that was used, it has to be admitted that fortune sided with the regional organisation due mainly to a technicality, in addition to fierce local opposition to Tandja's design. The technicality was found in the timeframe of Tandja's constitutional manipulation. Had Tandja been 'smart' enough to engineer the change outside the six-month window provided for by the Protocol, as many others have done, ECOWAS might have found it very difficult to adopt the decisive stance it did in this matter.

Other regional efforts include ECOWAS' efforts to combat the illicit trade and proliferation of small arms and light weapons. As regards transnational criminality, perhaps the most noticeable efforts being made at the regional level are done through GIABA, which ECOWAS established in 2000. The main aim of this structure is to promote and facilitate regional efforts to combat money laundering and terrorist financing in West Africa and the body has been very active in this realm for the past few years.⁷⁵ GIABA works very closely with and benefits from the work of other structures, particularly the UNODC, which has a regional office in close proximity with GIABA's headquarters in Dakar.

Last but not least, mention should also be made of the efforts of the United Nations (including specialised agencies like the UNDP, UNESCO, UNHCR and UNICEF) in tackling security challenges in West Africa. This is done through various country missions in addition to a regional office recently established in Dakar, the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA). This office is mandated since 2002 to enhance the contributions of the UN towards the achievement of peace and security in West Africa.⁷⁶

This paper has looked at the main security challenges in West Africa since independence, with a focus on post-1990 cases. It has identified armed conflicts, mismanagement of electoral processes, transnational criminality, poverty and illiteracy as well as environmental degradation as being the main security challenges in the region.

Owing to the centrality of 'political power' – either to retain it or accede to it – in most conflicts in the region, good governance of sitting leaders seems to be an important factor that could contribute to the prevention of most such conflicts. Good governance here means respect of constitutional arrangements, particularly with regard to the retention of and access to political power, a policy of equal distribution of political and socio-economic opportunities between the various segments of society, and refraining from instrumentalising group and cultural identities for political aims.

In general, this report points to the centrality of agency and leadership at local, national and supra-national levels in confronting the security challenges in West Africa. The substantial reduction of violent conflicts in the region has not been followed by a subsequent decrease in poverty levels. This indicates the fragility of current dispensations and the need to strengthen regional and local mechanisms. In any case, the challenges posed by the complex transnational crimes in the region (illegal trafficking, terrorism, piracy and rebels without borders) call for a broader cooperation between West African and international stakeholders.

However, security being more than just the absence of violent conflicts, governments and state security agencies would be well advised to confront these threats with additional means to the traditional law-enforcement instruments, which seem to have regained credence since the launch of the US-led 'war on terror'. The involvement of parliaments, civil society organisations and even religious movements and authorities in the development discourse is likely to add value to these efforts.

Regarding transnational criminality, one can only urge the national and regional authorities in West Africa to continue with existing policies while redoubling efforts in combating criminal activities. Given the thin line between terrorism and criminality, care must be taken by policy-makers to avoid labelling pure criminal activities as terrorism, particularly when the latter takes on religious connotations. Most importantly, the over-militarisation of the anti-terrorism strategies of most Western countries should be avoided, as this could be exploited by authoritarian regimes in the region that are seeking to entrench themselves and suppress genuine oppositions in the name of fighting terrorism, in much the same way as the labels of 'communism' and 'counter-revolutionary' were misused during the Cold War.

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