



# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

Early last year, the situation on the ground in West Africa looked grim. War raged between Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front and Guinean forces in southern Guinea, and various armed groups staged incursions on both sides of the Liberia/Guinean border. In light of this fighting and the gloomy specter of a growing regional war in West Africa, the United States Institute of Peace formed the West Africa Working Group and convened groups of experts on these conflicts for four meetings between March and August.

The primary purpose of the working group was to bring together individuals from various national and international agencies and organizations to shed light on the nature of the conflicts in West Africa and recommend appropriate American responses. This report summarizes the most salient points of discussion and puts forth a dozen recommendations for American policymakers attempting to address the instability.

The working group was chaired by Chester Crocker, professor of strategic studies at Georgetown University, and coordinated by Timothy Docking, program officer in the Jennings Randolph Program for International Peace. The report was written by Docking.

**The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policies.**

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## Responding to War and State Collapse in West Africa

### Briefly . . .

- The past dozen years of warfare in West Africa have led to the death, injury, and mutilation of hundreds of thousands of people and the displacement of millions more.
- Conflict erupted in Liberia in 1989, Sierra Leone in 1991, and Guinea in 2000, but fighting in West Africa has not been confined to these states. Serious bloodshed also occurred in Guinea-Bissau (1999), the southern Casamance region of Senegal (ongoing), and Nigeria (ongoing) and conflict threatens to engulf Côte d'Ivoire.
- Working group members were divided over the future of the region: some were cautiously optimistic that Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) is finished as a military force; others believed that the rebel group will fight again to maintain control of the Sierra Leonean diamond fields.
- The group agreed that the causes of these conflicts are manifold. Internal factors include poverty, lack of economic opportunity, ethnic animosities, and a history of political abuse and corruption. External factors include the interventions of Burkina Faso, Libya, and a host of non-state actors.
- Underlying the proliferation of the so-called "soft threats" to U.S. national security is the growing phenomenon of state collapse in Africa. The cycle of state collapse now occurring in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea places the entire West African region at risk.
- In fiscal year 2000 the United States contributed over \$128 million to the United Nations Armed Mission to Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), a figure that grew to nearly \$190 million in fiscal year 2001. This accounts for a significant proportion of the U.S. humanitarian aid budget, funds that are desperately needed elsewhere.
- The key to future collaborative efforts in the region between the United States and its Western European allies will be to identify ways to harness France's considerable regional influence and elicit policies from Paris that are more compatible with our own.
- The administration has followed a three-prong approach in West Africa. First, the United States has continued to support UNAMSIL financially and through military training of African peacekeepers. The U.S. government has also worked closely with the United Kingdom and supported Britain's lead role in restoring peace in Sierra

Leone. Finally, the United States continues its military and financial support to the Conté government in Guinea. The main aim of the administration's policy is to increase regional stability while bringing about regime change in Liberia.

- UNAMSIL must be seen for what it is: a quick-fix, capacity-building effort that is not sustainable over the long run. Unless the profound socio-economic problems that grip the entire region are addressed, West Africa will remain fertile ground for future violent conflict.

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## The West Africa Regional War

For observers of the West Africa regional war, the recent calm in the war-torn Mano River Union (MRU) states—Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea—has given rise to optimism. Guarded as this optimism might be, the decrease in violence in West Africa during the second half of 2001 is an important development given the scope and intensity of fighting that gripped these states earlier in the year. While observers agree that the current absence of widespread violent conflict in the MRU is a much-welcomed development, it must not mask the profound cleavages within these societies, the tenuous nature of the UN-imposed peace in Sierra Leone, and the continued serious threat of renewed warfare in the region.

A brief overview of the horrendous and persistent conflicts that have engulfed the MRU over the past decade underscores the need for vigilance by the international community in its pursuit of lasting peace in West Africa.

The past dozen years of violent conflict in West Africa have led to the death, injury, and mutilation of hundreds of thousands of people and the displacement of millions more. Conservative estimates place the total number of war-related deaths during the seven-year civil war in Liberia (1989–1996) at 150,000, more than 5 percent of Liberia's estimated population (*SIPRI Yearbook, 1996*). But this number only begins to tell the story of the horror that civil war brought to this small nation of 2.8 million [United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Human Development Report, 1995*]. Hundreds of thousands more Liberians were injured, displaced, and terrorized by the conflict, and today the tiny state remains the hostage of its corrupt and brutal dictator, Charles Taylor.

After the war spread into Sierra Leone in 1991, it had a similarly devastating effect. As in Liberia, armed insurgents preyed on the rural populations, raping, pillaging, and forcefully inducting children into their ranks. During the eight years of warfare that followed, it is estimated (conservatively) that over 60,000 of Sierra Leone's estimated 4.2 million inhabitants were killed and hundreds of thousands more injured, mutilated, and displaced (*SIPRI Yearbook, 2001*; UNDP, *Human Development Report, 1995*). The 2001 UNDP *Human Development Report* ranks Sierra Leone last out of the 162 nations rated on the human development index (HDI), a composite measure based on life expectancy, education, and gross domestic product per capita.

Most of the refugees sought shelter in neighboring Guinea. By the end of the 1990s, over 500,000 refugees were housed in hundreds of camps and settlements in Guinea, one of the largest refugee populations in the world (U.S. Commission for Refugees, *Guinea: Country Report 1999*, [www.refugees.org/world/countryrpt/africa/1999/guinea.htm](http://www.refugees.org/world/countryrpt/africa/1999/guinea.htm)). While the destabilizing effects on Guinean society of large numbers of Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees was profound throughout the 1990s, sustained cross-border conflict did not break out between Guinea and her neighbors until 2000. Cross-border attacks into Guinea by Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and various Liberian-based rebel groups precipitated a harsh military response from the Guinean military, which led to thousands of militia and civilian casualties.

Of course, fighting in West Africa during the 1990s was not confined to the MRU states. Serious bloodshed occurred in Guinea-Bissau (1999), the southern Casamance



The West Africa region includes 14 states that belong to the Economic Community of West African States (shown in gray).

region of Senegal (ongoing), and Nigeria (ongoing) and conflict threatens to engulf Côte d'Ivoire. Sometimes referred to as "the arc of conflict" in West Africa, these wars escape simple classification. While the war that started in 1989 in Liberia has become regionalized in the rest of the MRU, the other areas of instability in West Africa are based on intra-state phenomena. Nevertheless, the broader and deeper that instability grows in West Africa, the greater the risk that conflicts will merge and spread, further exacerbating conditions that make West Africa the most impoverished region in the world.

## The Big Picture

In light of this fighting and the gloomy specter of a growing regional war in West Africa, the United States Institute of Peace convened a group of experts on the conflicts in West Africa and formed a working group to bring together individuals from various national and international agencies and organizations to shed light on the nature of the conflicts in West Africa and recommend appropriate American responses. In this way, the group endeavored to inform itself and support the Bush administration's new Africa team that was confronted with complex and difficult policy choices. This effort led to four gatherings of the West Africa Working Group (WAWG) between March and August.

From the outset, the working group adopted a "big picture" analytical focus. That is, the group quickly agreed that the series of conflicts in the MRU stretching over the 1990s and into the 2000s should be looked at as a whole. Conceptually, the MRU conflict was therefore seen as a regional war with regional dimensions. Thus, what started in Liberia in 1989 is related to the war in Sierra Leone and to the fighting that broke out in Guinea in 2000. And while different dynamics are responsible for the instability radiating beyond the MRU into other parts of West Africa today, these conflicts further menace regional peace and complicate efforts to find a lasting peace across the West African region.

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The working group attracted a diverse array of U.S. and foreign specialists that varied depending on the topic of the particular session. The group included representatives from Capitol Hill, British and French governments, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, intelligence agencies, International Peace Academy, Interaction, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), National Security Council, Pentagon, Physicians for Human Rights, State Department, United Nations, and United States Agency for International Development. The views expressed here represent a summation of issues examined by the WAWG, highlighting the most salient findings and policy recommendations.

There were few points of disagreement during the many hours of discussions, both over what has led to the current crisis in West Africa and how the United States should move forward in the region. Perhaps the most significant and sustained point of contention within the WAWG was the degree of optimism/pessimism shared over the current process of demobilization, disarmament, and resettlement (DDR) in Sierra Leone. While some WAWG members were cautiously optimistic that the RUF is finished as a military force, others believed that the rebel group will dig up its guns and resist expulsion from the diamond fields. These group members also concluded that the UN mission lacks the will to confront the RUF if such a scenario plays out.

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## **Causes of the Conflict**

The group quickly reached a consensus that there are many deleterious forces at play in the region, beyond Charles Taylor and the RUF, that have led to violent conflict in the MRU. Internal factors stemming from poverty, lack of economic opportunity, ethnic animosities, and a history of political abuse and corruption have fueled the brutal conflicts. External factors have also had a major impact on the duration and ferocity of the conflict, especially the interventions of Burkina Faso and Libya (states that have reportedly trained and armed Taylor and the RUF) and the activities of non-state actors, mostly profiteers such as diamond, timber, and arms traffickers.

Working group participants also reached the early conclusion that while the poor socio-economic factors in the region—West Africa contains 11 of the world's 20 poorest states—were exacerbating both the duration and intensity of the regional conflict, efforts to change the state of underdevelopment in West Africa will be fruitless until the security aspects of the problem are addressed (UNDP, *Human Development Report, 2001*). Accordingly, the group focused its analysis on containing and ending the fighting.

## **U.S. Interests in West Africa**

The working group agreed that underlying the proliferation of the so-called “soft threats” (non-traditional security threats to the United States, like the spread of contagion, international criminal networks, and terrorism) is the growing phenomenon of state collapse. In Afghanistan, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Indonesia, and Somalia, the deleterious effects of the crumbling state are plain to see. In each of these cases, instability and violence have ultimately led to the weakening, and in some instances the failure, of central government and to direct costs for the United States—economically, militarily, in terms of regional stability, and in humanitarian terms.

While each of the above cases has elicited a strong policy response from past and current administrations, U.S. policy toward the war in West Africa is still taking shape.

Yet state collapse in Liberia (1989) and Sierra Leone (1991) now threatens to spread to a number of West African states including the bordering nations of Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire. A review of what is at stake for the United States in West Africa illustrates the importance and urgency of developing a policy to stop the spread of the conflict in the region and to cut the legs out from under the war's two main vectors: Liberia's Charles Taylor and Sierra Leone's RUF.

The cycle of state collapse now occurring in the three member states of the war-torn MRU places the entire West African region at risk. Indeed, this area is home to numerous military dictatorships and simmering ethnic rivalries. And as we have already witnessed in other parts of the world, as fighting and instability spread in West Africa, so too does the growth of terrorist networks and international criminal organizations; the destruction of the environment; the spread of disease, refugees, poverty, and ethnic strife; and the general unraveling of living conditions for the region's nearly 240 million people.

Nowhere in West Africa is stability more important to the United States than in Nigeria, the continent's most populous nation (estimated to be 126 million in 2001, according to the *World Fact Book*, [www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ni.html](http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ni.html)) and our most important regional ally. Not only does the United States rely on Nigeria as a major source of oil (10 percent of U.S. imports in 2000), but Nigeria is also one of two (along with South Africa) focal points of American foreign policy in sub-Saharan Africa. The United States has strongly supported the democratic government of President Olusegun Obasanjo and has established a strong military cooperation program with Nigeria that has led to the training of five battalions of Nigerian soldiers. Moreover, the United States clearly has an interest in supporting the success of next year's important local elections (scheduled for April) and state and federal elections in 2003.

The partnership with Nigeria therefore presents an important test case for the United States: support for our friend will not only increase the chances for domestic and regional stability in West Africa, it will demonstrate to other friendly African states that the United States is engaged on the continent. Indeed, increased U.S. engagement in the region is also necessary to counter the deleterious effects of the activities of corrupt non-state actors, the potential growth of militant Islam, and Libyan expansionism in West Africa.

The United States should also maintain a keen interest in the success of the United Nations Armed Mission to Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). Since its near collapse in 2000, UNAMSIL has regrouped with the strong support of the British and today appears to be more coherent and effective. The success of this mission is essential to the strengthening of the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations—a development that is clearly in the interest of the United States. Moreover, the United States has invested heavily in the mission. In fiscal year 2000, the United States contributed over \$128 million to UNAMSIL, a figure that grew to nearly \$190 million in fiscal year 2001. This accounts for a significant proportion of the U.S. humanitarian aid budget, funds that are desperately needed elsewhere.

Finally, the intangible costs of American inaction in the region would be substantial. The marginalization of African crises from American foreign policy concerns perpetuates the perception within the international community that the United States does not care about the plight of Africans. This undercuts our status as the international leader for democracy, human rights, and peace and damages our national credibility abroad.

Just as the marginalization of West Africa jeopardizes U.S. interests, targeted American engagement in the region could bear ample fruit. U.S. engagement in the region in cooperation with our French and British allies could provide an important test case and perhaps a model of Western cooperation that could be called upon elsewhere on the continent (notably in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, DRC) to address war and state collapse. The working group agreed that the key to future collaborative

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efforts in the region between the United States and its Western European allies will be to identify ways to harness France's considerable regional influence and elicit policies from Paris that are more compatible with our own.

In addition to working more closely with our Western allies on the formation of Africa policies, U.S. cooperation with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) could also set an important precedent for future cooperative actions on the continent.

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## U.S. Policy toward the Region

According to administration sources, America's policy toward Africa is based on three goals: increasing peace and stability, spreading democracy, and increasing economic prosperity on the continent. Within this approach there are several substantive policy priorities: addressing disease (HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria), opening markets (Africa Growth and Opportunity Act, AGOA, and perhaps the creation of AGOA II designed to increase the number of items covered by the free-trade agreement), political liberalization, and ending wars on the continent (especially in the DRC, Sierra Leone, and Sudan). The government intends to do this while at the same time supporting African states such as Senegal, Mali, Ghana, Nigeria, South Africa, Mozambique, and Botswana, where socio-economic progress has been made.

In West Africa this policy undergirds a number of U.S. programs. First, the United States has continued to support UNAMSIL financially and through military training of African peacekeepers. The U.S. government has also worked closely with the United Kingdom and supported Britain's lead role in restoring peace in Sierra Leone. Finally, the United States continues its military and financial support to the Conté government in Guinea.

These efforts comprise part of a broader U.S. strategy in West Africa designed to support our regional allies and contain the spread of the war. The main target of this policy has been the Charles Taylor government in Liberia. The administration has thus attempted to break the link between the Taylor regime and the sale of conflict diamonds through the support of legislation in the United States and of UN sanctions on diamond exports and arms sales and a travel ban on Liberian government officials. In addition to its containment policy toward Taylor, the United States has also attempted to shore up regional allies like Presidents Kufour (Ghana), Konaré (Mali), Wade (Senegal), and Obasanjo (Nigeria). It is also clear that the United States has little choice but to work with President Gbagbo (Côte d'Ivoire), despite his contested rise to power, to preserve stability.

## Challenges to U.S. Policy

Beyond these policy thrusts, the working group identified several challenges to the administration's policy and important questions that have yet to be addressed.

### *Short-Term Issues*

- How can the United States best support the United Kingdom's lead role in Sierra Leone?
- What else should the United States do to bring about a more democratic regime in Liberia?
- How can the United States avert increased instability in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, and Côte d'Ivoire while fostering socio-economic liberalization in these states?

- How should the United States collaborate with the French to foster economic development and good governance in West Africa?
- How will the administration prepare the political terrain in Washington to win support for these initiatives on the Hill?

### *Long-Term Issues*

- What are our long-term commitments to UNAMSIL and how will the United States define an exit strategy?
- How does the U.S. government envisage moving from DDR to economic growth in Sierra Leone and the rest of the West African region?

## Conclusion

The working group agreed that the international community, striving to end the horror of West Africa's regional war, must begin by overseeing the successful resolution of conflict in Sierra Leone. Yet despite recent progress made in ending that war and the implementation of DDR, a number of unpleasant realities remain, making policy formation for the United States and the rest of the international community extremely difficult. UNAMSIL thus must be seen for what it is: a quick-fix, capacity-building effort that is not sustainable over the long run. The economies, political organs, and state institutions in Sierra Leone and Liberia are in a shambles and human capital is entirely depleted. The Kabbah government is a shell, and as one WAWG member put it, "There is no there there" in Sierra Leone.

Still more troubling is the possibility of further violence and destabilization in the region: the RUF continues to menace the peace process; the Conté and Gbagbo governments lack legitimacy at home and are threatened from within their own states; and tensions remain high between northern Muslims and southern Christians in Côte d'Ivoire after several years of divisive ethnic politics that have set the groups against one another. More broadly, profound socio-economic problems grip the entire West Africa region, making it fertile ground for future violent conflict.

This reality points to several fundamental questions for the U.S. government: have the events of September 11 given rise to a renewed appreciation of the dangers of collapsed states? Or, will the current war on terrorism continue to draw attention and resources away from the crises in West Africa? And finally, can the United States work with its European (especially French) and African allies to help manage conflict and build economic prosperity in the region?

## Recommendations

- Provide strong support to British leadership in Sierra Leone.
- Successfully marry the administration's West Africa program with the ambitious conflict prevention/development programs being articulated at the U.S. Agency for International Development.
- Consider Sierra Leone a model for learning how the United States should approach complex humanitarian crises, state collapse, and regionalized conflict in Africa.
- Increase U.S. domestic political will to engage in the region through public education and awareness building.
- Find a middle ground for working with the French on the role Liberia's Charles Taylor will play in the future of the region.

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For more information, see our website ([www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)), which has an online edition of this report containing links to related websites, as well as additional information on the topic.

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- f. Develop a mid- and long-term regional plan for West Africa that accounts for big-picture economic and human development trends.
- g. Implement the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act as soon as possible and draft and then implement AGOA II, thus extending the number of products covered by the legislation.
- h. Buttress socio-economic development in Nigeria, the most populous and perhaps most important U.S. ally in sub-Saharan Africa.
- i. Cut off financial resources to warlords who gain sustenance from non-state profiteers like diamond and timber buyers as well as from state actors intent on creating instability to further their own political and economic goals.
- j. Continue military assistance to the key regional armies to professionalize them and build linkages with the United States.
- k. Speed up debt forgiveness, especially for those countries that play by the rules and are in the process of socio-economic liberalization.
- l. Increase aid to the region as an investment in stability, socio-economic development, and the creation of new markets for the United States and to help prevent state collapse.



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