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

I. Introduction

1. The present report covers the period from 30 June to 31 December 2023 and contains an overview of developments and trends in West Africa and the Sahel and the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS). It also highlights progress made in the implementation of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel and includes an update on the situation in the Lake Chad basin, pursuant to Security Council resolution [2349 \(2017\)](#).

II. Developments and trends in West Africa and the Sahel

2. The period under review was marked by a fast-evolving regional context with heightened political tensions and instability, as illustrated by the unconstitutional change of government in the Niger, the attempted coup d'état in Sierra Leone and an unstable security situation in the central Sahel. Delays were reported in the implementation of the respective transition agreements in Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali, as well as limited dialogue between the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the transitional authorities in those countries. In addition, civic and democratic space in all three countries has reportedly become increasingly restricted. Developments in the Niger following the military takeover on 26 July have, among other things, further affected relations with the regional bloc, as Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger strengthened their solidarity and cooperation in defiance of ECOWAS. Nonetheless, some countries continued efforts to consolidate democracy. Côte d'Ivoire held subnational and senatorial elections in September, Liberia held general elections in October and Nigeria held off-cycle gubernatorial elections in November. In Sierra Leone, an internationally mediated post-electoral dialogue, spearheaded by the African Union, the Commonwealth Secretariat and ECOWAS, secured the Agreement for National Unity, which resolved the political impasse that had ensued following the disputed outcome of the country's general elections held on 24 June.

3. On the security front, the progress witnessed in the Lake Chad basin as a result of the collective efforts of regional actors with support from the United Nations system and other partners, has been undermined by recent political developments in the Niger and the subsequent suspension of its participation in the Multinational Joint Task Force. Furthermore, the security situation in the central Sahel region has persistently deteriorated. In Mali, an upsurge of clashes between signatory armed



groups and the Malian Armed Forces has progressively unravelled the 2015 Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation, especially in the context of the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), which was concluded on 31 December. The establishment of a new military alliance between Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger and the announcement of the departure of Burkina Faso and the Niger from all Group of Five for the Sahel mechanisms, followed by the decision of Chad and Mauritania to dissolve the Group, have added new layers of complexity as international and regional responses are being reconfigured. Meanwhile, the coastal countries in the Gulf of Guinea have continued to enhance civilian-military cooperation and efforts to address the socioeconomic needs of concerned communities towards strengthening community resilience in the face of the spillover of terrorism, violent extremism and transnational organized crime.

4. The overall humanitarian context, especially in the Sahel region, remains extremely worrying, with more than 26 million people in need of life-saving assistance. Furthermore, human rights actors continued to decry the arrest, detention and intimidation of protesters and human rights activists amid shrinking civic space in several countries.

A. Politics and governance

5. In Benin, following a ruling by the Constitutional Court on 19 July, the parliamentary opposition party, Les démocrates, appointed its representatives to the National Assembly's standing committees, thereby ending a procedural stalemate that had been in place since the opening of the Assembly in February. Both the parliamentary majority and the opposition also renewed their respective leadership. At an extraordinary congress on 9 September, the pro-government party Bloc républicain elected Abdoulaye Bio Tchane, Minister of State for Development and the Coordination of Government Action, as its chair. At its congress held on 14 and 15 October, Les démocrates appointed the former President of Benin, Thomas Boni Yayi, as the party's chair. On 27 November, the President of Benin, Patrice Talon, met with Mr. Boni Yayi to discuss the opposition party's concerns about the electoral institutions and the voter register. During the exchange, the President agreed to the opposition's request for an audit of the voter register. Meanwhile, opposition figures Reckya Madougou and Joel Aivo remain in detention.

6. Faced with an unprecedented security crisis, the transitional authorities in Burkina Faso prioritized restoring security and territorial integrity. On 20 July, new tax measures were instituted, levying additional fees on telecommunications and land transfers to generate revenue to tackle insecurity. On 27 September, the authorities claimed to have foiled a coup attempt and proceeded to reshuffle the security services. Formal communication with ECOWAS on the transition timeline has yet to resume.

7. In Cabo Verde, the Government continued to implement the 2022–2026 national strategic development plan and intensified efforts to diversify the economy. In line with the country's energy transition policy, authorities channelled investments into a climate security and environment fund. On 25 September, marking Constitution Day, the President of Cabo Verde, José Maria Neves, called for renewed national efforts to consolidate democracy.

8. In Côte d'Ivoire, municipal and regional as well as senatorial elections were held peacefully on 2 and 16 September, respectively. The ruling party, Rassemblement des houphouëtistes pour la démocratie et la paix, secured 123 out of 201 municipalities, 25 out of 31 regions and 56 out of the 66 Senators elected. The opposition party, Parti démocratique de Côte d'Ivoire, lost ground, and the party of

the former President, Laurent Gbagbo, Parti des peuples africains – Côte d'Ivoire, failed to win any seats in the regions or in the Senate. After its boycott in 2018, this was the first time the opposition had participated in senatorial elections. Subsequently, on 17 October, the President of Côte d'Ivoire, Alassane Ouattara, appointed a new Government led by Robert Mambé Beugré, with six women appointed out of 31 ministers.

9. In the Gambia, progress was made in institutional reforms in several areas, particularly in the implementation of the recommendations of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission. The Government commenced preparations for the establishment of a hybrid court, in collaboration with ECOWAS, and a special prosecutor's office, while a monitoring committee established by the National Human Rights Commission started reporting to the National Assembly. Meanwhile, consultations continued on, inter alia, constitutional reform (ahead of the Government's planned referendum in 2024), the question of retroactivity of presidential term limits and the secular nature of the State, under the auspices of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. In November, the National Assembly passed key legislative bills, notably the Ban from Public Office Bill prohibiting public officials responsible for grave human rights violations from holding office, as recommended by the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission, and a Victims Reparation Bill to compensate victims, among others.

10. The Electoral Commission of Ghana undertook a three-week limited voter registration exercise in September in preparation for the 2024 presidential election. On 4 November, the ruling New Patriotic Party elected the Vice President, Mahamudu Bawumia, as its flagbearer, after Alan John Kyerematen, the former Minister of Trade and Industry, resigned from the party and launched his Movement for Change to contest the polls. Mr. Bawumia will face former president John Mahama, who is the presidential candidate of the main opposition National Democratic Congress party. Amid the prevailing economic challenges, several pressure groups and the National Democratic Congress have protested against the rising costs of living and, on 3 October, demanded the resignation of the Governor of the Central Bank.

11. In Guinea, uncertainties remained around the implementation of the transition road map within the timeline agreed with ECOWAS. In September, on the second anniversary of the 2021 coup d'état, four people were reportedly killed during protests called for by the group Forces vives de Guinée, while the 2022 ban on public demonstrations remained in place. On 4 November, a group of individuals attacked the prison in the Conakry district of Kaloum and extracted four individuals currently on trial for the events that took place in Conakry on 28 September 2009, including the former head of the 2009 military junta, Captain Moussa Dadis Camara. Three of them surrendered or were recaptured, while one, Colonel Claude Pivi, remains at large. Starting in November, access to social media and the signals of several private radio outlets were disrupted. Furthermore, in December, the High Authority for Communication requested the suspension of a group of media outlets from two broadcasting companies, Canal + and Star Times, for reasons of national security.

12. In Guinea-Bissau, new members of the People's National Assembly were inaugurated on 27 September and Domingos Simões Pereira, the leader of the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cabo Verde, was unanimously elected as Speaker. On 14 August, a new 19-member Government, led by the Prime Minister, Geraldo João Martins, was sworn in. Parliament's first ordinary session began on 14 November. However, tensions among political leaders soon emerged despite their having made commitments to peaceful political cohabitation. On 30 November, elements of the National Guard removed from their detention cells two government officials detained by the judicial police as part of an anti-corruption probe. On 1 December, armed clashes ensued between the Presidential Guard and the National

Guard over the latter's forceful removal of the officials, resulting in two deaths and several people being injured. On 4 December, qualifying the events as an "attempted coup", the President, Umaro Sissoco Embaló, dissolved Parliament, a move rejected by the Speaker of Parliament, the parliamentary governing coalition, Inclusive Alliance Platform-Terra Ranka, the National Human Rights Commission and several other political and civil society actors. On 12 December, Mr. Martins was reappointed as Prime Minister by the President, but was subsequently replaced on 20 December with Rui Duarte Barros. Furthermore, on 21 December, Mr. Embaló swore in a new Government of "Presidential initiative", comprised of 24 Ministers and nine secretaries of State, including four and two women respectively.

13. In Liberia, after a pre-electoral period marked by tensions and sporadic incidents of violence, presidential and legislative elections took place peacefully on 10 October. Voter turnout reached nearly 79 per cent. Following the 14 November runoff election, the incumbent President, George Manneh Weah, lost to Mr. Joseph Boakai. President Weah's concession on 17 November, three days before the announcement of final results, was widely commended by ECOWAS and the international community. A joint presidential transition team has been established for the transfer of power.

14. In Mali, on 21 July the Constitutional Court announced the final results of the constitutional referendum, with nearly 97 per cent in favour of the new Constitution, which provides for a presidential system including a two-term limit and strengthened powers for Parliament, among other things. On 25 September, the authorities announced they would "exclusively" organize the presidential election as an end to the transition period, delaying regional and legislative elections to "another timetable" to be established by the newly elected authorities. The presidential election, initially scheduled for 4 and 18 February 2024 according to the agreed timeline with ECOWAS, has been postponed by the transitional authorities due to "technical reasons". Meanwhile, on 17 September in Bamako the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger signed the Liptako-Gourma Charter establishing the Alliance of Sahel States to strengthen their collaboration and support each other in case of external aggression.

15. In Mauritania on 3 July, the President, Mohamed Cheikh El Ghazouani, reappointed Mohamed Ould Bilal Messoud as Prime Minister, after which a new 25-member cabinet, including five women, was announced. Concluding a series of government-sponsored dialogue efforts, on 21 September the opposition parties, Rassemblement des forces démocratiques and Union des forces du progress, together with the ruling El Insaf party, signed a "republican charter", in which they committed to defining a common road map before the presidential election to be held in June 2024. On 18 October, political parties that failed to secure 1 per cent of the votes during the last two municipal elections were dissolved. On 24 October, the prosecutor requested a 20-year prison sentence for the former president, Abdel Aziz, in relation to his trial for corruption that had begun in January 2023.

16. In the Niger on 26 July, General Abdourahamane Tiani, a former commander of the Presidential Guard, proclaimed himself Head of State and President of a newly formed Conseil national pour la sauvegarde de la patrie. The Presidential Guard detained the President, Mohamed Bazoum, along with his family and other government officials. In response, at an extraordinary summit on 30 July, the ECOWAS Heads of State and Government denounced the "attempted coup d'état", imposed economic and financial sanctions and threatened the use of force, if necessary, to restore constitutional order. While Mr. Bazoum remains unlawfully detained, on 7 August the National Council appointed Lamine Zeine Ali Mahamane as Prime Minister and, on 19 August, General Tiani unilaterally announced a three-year transition to civilian rule and a road map that foresees a national dialogue. In

addition, on 10 October, the National Council authorities ordered the United Nations Resident Coordinator to leave the Niger within 72 hours.

17. On 21 August, the President of Nigeria, Bola Ahmed Tinubu, swore in a 48-member cabinet, including nine women. Amid widespread disgruntlement and threats of strike action over the high cost of living, the Government announced measures, such as expanded financial support to vulnerable households, to mitigate the impact of the removal of fuel subsidies. On 6 September, in the wake of several disputes concerning the elections held on 25 February, the presidential election petition tribunal upheld the election of Mr. Tinubu. On 11 November, off-cycle governorship elections were held in Bayelsa, Imo and Kogi States with a low voter turnout across all three states. The Independent National Electoral Commission announced the victory of the ruling All Progressives Congress candidates in Imo and Kogi States and the opposition People's Democratic Party candidate in Bayelsa State.

18. In Senegal, the announcement by the President, Macky Sall, on 3 July that he would not be running in the February 2024 presidential election was commended by ECOWAS, noting that it had contributed to appeasing sociopolitical tensions. On 9 September, Mr. Sall designated the Prime Minister, Amadou Ba, as the ruling coalition's presidential candidate and, subsequently, on 11 October appointed a new cabinet. However, opposition parties and civil society groups continued to voice concerns about the inclusivity of the upcoming poll. Owing to his conviction on 1 June for "corruption of youth", the opposition leader, Ousmane Sonko, was removed from the electoral roll, rendering him ineligible. Following a series of legal proceedings, on 14 December a tribunal in Dakar ordered the reinstatement of Mr. Sonko on the electoral roll. On 25 December, the President of the Sénégal en tête party, Moustapha Mamba Guirassy, announced the party's decision to nominate Mr. Sonko as its candidate for the 2024 presidential election. Meanwhile, Mr. Sonko independently submitted his candidacy file to the Constitutional Council, despite not having the necessary sponsorship documents.

19. In Sierra Leone, on 18 October the Government and the main opposition All People's Congress party signed the Agreement for National Unity, ending the four-month, post-election stalemate, following a dialogue mediated by the African Union, the Commonwealth Secretariat and ECOWAS, under the auspices of the Independent Commission for Peace and National Cohesion. The agreement stipulated, inter alia, the end of the boycott by the All People's Congress of the country's governance structures and the establishment of a cross-party committee to review the electoral system and management bodies. The committee was launched on 21 November, under a trilateral leadership comprised of the Government, the All People's Congress and the United Nations. Efforts are still under way to develop the committee's terms of reference. Meanwhile, on 26 November unidentified individuals attacked military facilities and other locations in Freetown. Although government security forces repelled the attack and arrested some culprits, the assault resulted in at least 19 people killed, weapons and ammunition stolen and over 1,890 prison inmates freed. On 2 December, Mr. Bio qualified the events as a "failed attempted coup". The former president, Ernest Bai Koroma, and close associates feature in the ongoing investigations into the events.

20. In Togo, progress has been made in the preparations for the upcoming legislative and regional elections. On 20 July, the Independent Electoral Commission published the register of voters. On 22 July, the opposition Alliance nationale pour le changement, which had boycotted the 2018 legislative elections, announced its readiness to participate in the upcoming polls. On 15 November, the International Organization of la Francophonie declared Togo's electoral register as "sufficiently reliable" following an external audit conducted from 20 to 27 October. However, on 25 November the Government announced that legislative and regional elections,

originally scheduled for 2023, would instead occur before the end of the first quarter of 2024. On 28 November, the opposition party La Dynamique pour la majorité du peuple criticized the Government's decision to postpone the elections, warning that the delay risked creating an institutional vacuum. In other developments, on 8 September the President, Faure Essozimna Gnassingbé, reshuffled his government, with changes to key ministries such as Territorial Administration, Communication and Security.

21. Against this backdrop, the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government met on 10 December. In its final communiqué of the meeting, the Authority, *inter alia*, urged Senegal to continue prioritizing inclusiveness and transparency in view of the February 2024 presidential election, requested the timely implementation of the Agreement for National Unity in Sierra Leone and called for strict compliance with the Constitution and the rapid restoration of all national institutions in Guinea-Bissau. Moreover, the Authority extended the mandates of the ECOWAS stabilization missions in the Gambia and Guinea-Bissau for another year and decided to deploy an ECOWAS security mission to Sierra Leone to help stabilize the country. On the Niger, the Authority condemned the continued detention of Mr. Bazoum and his family and established a committee of Heads of State to engage with the Conseil national pour la sauvegarde de la patrie and other stakeholders and agree on a road map for the restoration of constitutional order. The Authority further exempted the presidents, prime ministers and ministers for foreign affairs of transition countries from the travel ban and other individual sanctions.

B. Security situation

22. The overall security situation in West Africa and the Sahel was marked by persistent attacks on military and civilian targets, notably by the Al-Qaida affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara operating in the Liptako-Gourma region (Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger), which is largely controlled by violent extremist groups, armed groups and bandits. The fragile security situation, the threat of terrorism spreading towards coastal countries and political instability, including due to the proliferation of unconstitutional changes of government in Mali (2020 and 2021), Burkina Faso (two coups in 2022) and the Niger (2023) are having far reaching consequences on peace and security in the West Africa region.

23. In the wake of the withdrawal of MINUSMA beginning on 1 July, Mali faced an upsurge in clashes between the Malian Armed Forces, supported by foreign security personnel, and the Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement, spearheaded by the Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad, over the handover of MINUSMA camps in northern Mali. This had a negative impact on the civilian population and the safety of MINUSMA personnel. With strengthened combat capabilities, on 2 October the Malian Armed Forces launched an offensive along the Gao-Kidal axis and, on 7 October, gained control of Anefis, previously under the control of Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad. Following the accelerated withdrawal of MINUSMA from its camps in Tessalit, Aguelhoc and Kidal, the Malian Armed Forces reportedly occupied the camp in Tessalit, while Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad reportedly occupied the Aguelhoc camp. On 31 October, Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad reportedly entered and looted the camp in Kidal shortly after the departure of MINUSMA. On 14 November, the Malian Armed Forces regained control of Kidal with the support of foreign security personnel and after days of reportedly intense fighting with the Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement, which subsequently retreated outside of Kidal and released a public statement calling on "all

components of the Azawad region to permanently mobilize". On 20 December, the Cadre stratégique permanent pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement reportedly decided to set up a total blockade of all products and all means of transport on the axes running from the border with Algeria to the towns of Ménaka, Kidal, Gao, Timbuktu and Taoudeni. Meanwhile, the authorities have appointed a new governor of the region of Kidal.

24. Burkina Faso remained the epicentre of attacks by violent extremists in the Sahel, with Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara principally staging assaults against defence forces and civil defence volunteers. Despite an intensification of military operations, more than 40 per cent of the territory remained outside the control of the State. According to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, from October 2022 to September 2023 overall fatalities almost doubled to 6,510, compared with 3,310 in the previous reporting period. Major attacks by militants were carried out on 5 July in Sorgia, East Region, and on 7 July in Kogossablogo, Centre North Region, killing 31 civilians and defence volunteers and triggering large population displacements; on 19 August in Sanga, Centre-East Region, killing 5 police officers; and on 4 September in Koumbri, North Region, killing 17 soldiers and 36 members of the civil defence volunteers.

25. In the Niger, the 26 July military takeover led to a reconfiguration of the country's military cooperation, notably the termination and suspension of military cooperation with, respectively, France and the United States of America. In addition, increased tensions between Benin and the Niger led to the suspension of their 2022 bilateral security cooperation agreement on 12 September. The Niger also suspended its participation in the Multinational Joint Task Force and withdrew from the Group of Five for the Sahel mechanisms. The number of attacks, mainly against military and government targets, claimed by Islamic State in the Greater Sahara has increased since the events of 26 July. On 2 October, the Conseil national pour la sauvegarde de la patrie announced that 29 soldiers had been killed and two others injured in an attack north-west of Tabatol, Tillabéri Region, near the border with Mali and declared a three-day period of national mourning.

26. Ongoing counter-insurgency operations by the Multinational Joint Task Force have contributed to an improvement in the security environment in the Lake Chad basin on the border with Nigeria, resulting in a decrease in the number of fatalities linked to terrorist attacks due to combined efforts with the armed forces of Nigeria. However, insecurity caused by criminal armed groups operating primarily in Nigeria's north-western states of Zamfara and Sokoto and, to a lesser extent, in the central and southern states of Benue, Plateau and Delta, remained high. On 3 December, a military airstrike, termed as "accidental" by the authorities, resulted in the killing of over 85 people in the village of Tudun Biri in the north-western state of Kaduna. The incident occurred as the Air Force was conducting counter-terrorism operations in the area.

27. Meanwhile, Benin continued to register attacks in the northern departments of Alibori and Atacora. An attack on 14 September, claimed by Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, resulted in the deaths of two soldiers and one ranger in the Dassari-Porga area of the Pendjari National Park. In neighbouring Togo, 12 soldiers were killed when a military convoy was ambushed in the prefecture of Kpendjal on 17 July. On 27 September, Benin and Togo launched a cross-border project to strengthen community resilience through cross-border community engagement, joint natural resources management and access to services.

28. After a decrease in instances of piracy and armed robbery at sea over the past years, during the reporting period incidents of maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea have been on an upward trajectory. In the West African maritime domain,

eight incidents of piracy and armed robbery at sea were recorded. In comparison, five such incidents were reported between July and December 2022. Further data collection, covering a longer time period, will however be required before the upward trend can be fully confirmed.

C. Socioeconomic context

29. The socioeconomic context of the region remained challenging. According to the International Monetary Fund, economic growth is expected to fall from 3.9 per cent in 2022 to 3.3 per cent in 2023, as inflationary pressure continues to have a negative impact on international demand, increase borrowing costs and affect regional exchange rates. Countries in the region continued to face moderate to high debt distress in 2023 owing to higher borrowing costs, decreased fiscal space and limited opportunities to access financial markets.

30. Amid the weak performance of the agricultural sector, the World Bank also noted adverse effects from the unconstitutional change of government in the Niger and forecasted a decrease from 6.9 to 2.3 per cent of growth in gross domestic product in 2023 if sanctions and a halt of development assistance were maintained. On 7 October, the Conseil national pour la sauvegarde de la patrie announced a 40 per cent cut in the 2023 budget, citing the impact of ECOWAS sanctions and the suspension of international aid. The ongoing transboundary conflicts in most parts of the region have also had dire consequences on the economy of the local communities, shrinking local economic activities and hindering formal and informal cross-border trading activities in the region, resulting in the loss of livelihood for millions of people.

D. Humanitarian context

31. The humanitarian situation remained extremely concerning and continued to deteriorate, especially in central Sahel areas, where political instability and violence against civilians have contributed to rising levels of humanitarian needs amid declining resources for humanitarian assistance and other operational challenges. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 26.1 million people in the Sahel region required humanitarian assistance and protection in 2023, a 23 per cent increase over the previous year. Approximately 5.3 million people in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger were food insecure as of December 2023, while 1.8 million children across the subregion were suffering from severe acute malnutrition.

32. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, as at 24 December 2023 the total number of refugees and asylum-seekers across the region stood at nearly 542,684. In addition, owing to the security crisis, a total of 104,870 refugees from Mali were registered in Mauritania, with an additional 3,276 Malians awaiting registration. As at 14 December, the number of internally displaced persons in Burkina Faso, Mali, the Niger and Nigeria stood at approximately five million.

33. Concurrently, serious challenges remained with respect to access to basic services. As at 14 December 2023, more than 8,400 schools and 470 health centres remained non-functional in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger owing to violence, insecurity and other challenges. The protection of the most vulnerable remained a key priority, as women and girls in some areas continued to face high risks of abduction and sexual and gender-based violence.

34. The operating environment for humanitarian agencies remained highly complex due to insecurity, logistical difficulties and other operational challenges. Since the beginning of 2023, seven aid workers have been killed while on duty in Burkina Faso, Mali, the Niger and Nigeria. Despite these challenges, aid agencies continued to deliver, reaching about 9 million of the 17.5 million people targeted with humanitarian assistance across the Sahel by the end of the second quarter of 2023.

35. Of the total funding requirement of \$3.5 billion for the 2023 humanitarian response plans for Burkina Faso, Mali, the Niger and Nigeria, only 36 per cent had been received as of mid-December 2023, resulting in serious aid delivery shortfalls and leaving millions, especially women and children, in need of vital support.

E. Human rights

36. Some positive developments regarding transitional justice were noted. In Guinea, the trial for crimes committed in Conakry during the 28 September 2009 stadium incident resumed on 3 October despite challenges, including strike action, funding shortfalls and concerns over the protection of victims and witnesses. However, human rights defenders continued to decry shrinking civic space in several countries. In Senegal, human rights organizations issued statements denouncing the frequent refusals by authorities to authorize public demonstrations and called for the release of individuals detained following the protests that occurred between March and June 2023. In the Niger, human rights actors denounced the continued unlawful detention of Mr. Bazoum and government officials, as well as the arrest and week-long detention of a female blogger and whistle-blower by security operatives on 30 September. In Mauritania, on 1 October, the Initiative pour la résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste criticized a police crackdown on its 27 September demonstration to protest the arrest of an anti-slavery activist and the lifting of parliamentary immunity and imprisonment of a member of parliament. In Guinea-Bissau, individuals arrested in connection with the failed coup of 1 February 2022 remain in prolonged detention without trial.

37. Concerns over press freedom and the arrest of journalists have increased. On 16 October, in Guinea, media actors carried out a protest demanding the lifting of restrictions on access to an online newspaper, which resulted in the arrest of 13 journalists. On 9 November, in the Gambia, Madi Jobarteh, a vocal activist, was charged with three counts of “seditious intention, incitement to violence and false broadcasting and information”. He has since been released on bail.

38. The prevalent insecurity continued to have significant human rights implications, especially on the right to education, heightening the vulnerability of out-of-school children to recruitment by non-State armed groups, sexual exploitation and abuse. In Mali, on 2 November, the President of the National Human Rights Commission presented the 2022 human rights report to the Conseil national de transition, highlighting human rights violations and abuses against civilians and the national forces and the situation of children, thousands of whom are being deprived of their right to education given that 1,000 schools have closed owing to insecurity.

F. Gender

39. Progress on women’s representation and participation in politics was registered in Côte d’Ivoire and Sierra Leone, in line with their respective affirmative action policies. In Côte d’Ivoire, women represented 32 and 34 per cent of candidates in regional and municipal elections respectively, exceeding the 30 per cent quota of the 2019 parity law. For the first time, a woman was elected President of the Senate, and

another woman was appointed as President of the Constitutional Court. Following Sierra Leone's 24 June parliamentary elections, women candidates secured 41 of the 135 seats available, and 22 women were appointed to the 64-member cabinet, in compliance with the January 2023 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Act.

40. Conversely, in Mauritania, despite sustained advocacy efforts by women's groups, the bill to combat violence against women and girls was not adopted. Following the military takeover in the Niger, the de facto authorities abolished the Ministry of Gender and Women's Affairs and merged the portfolio with the Ministry of Health.

III. Activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel

A. Good offices and special assignments of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel

41. Upon assuming his duties, the Special Representative conducted a regional familiarization tour, interacting with Heads of State and subregional organizations against the backdrop of the fast-evolving and complex situation. He also conducted good offices missions to support the holding of peaceful elections, accompany countries of the region in their efforts to undertake political reforms and tackle security challenges, as well as help to advance ECOWAS-led mediation initiatives in the transition countries.

42. The Special Representative participated in the ordinary sessions of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government on 9 July and 10 December, as well as in the ECOWAS extraordinary sessions on the situation in the Niger on 30 July and 10 August, during which he advocated dialogue and coordinated action. Given the lack of effective dialogue between ECOWAS and countries in political transition, the Special Representative pursued diplomatic engagements with regional leaders to identify avenues to break the impasse, resulting in a decision by the ECOWAS Authority to exempt the transition presidents, prime ministers and ministers for foreign affairs from the travel ban and other targeted individual sanctions. He met, inter alia, with the President of Ghana, Nana Akufo-Addo, on 31 July, with the President of Mauritania, Mohamed El Ghazouani, on 17 August and 23 October, with the President of Togo, Faure Essozimna Gnassingbé, on 14 September and with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Benin on 13 September to build consensus on regional responses. On 6 October, the Special Representative met with the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Burkina Faso, Mali and Togo and the Minister for Foreign Affairs appointed by the Conseil national pour la sauvegarde de la patrie of the Niger, and advocated resumed dialogue between the transition countries and ECOWAS and for a political solution to the crisis in the Niger.

43. To advance transition processes, the Special Representative visited Guinea on 17 and 18 July for consultations with the Prime Minister and other interlocutors. He reiterated the importance of an inclusive transition process and the key role of ECOWAS and the international community. Concerning the Niger, he maintained close contact with the Conseil national pour la sauvegarde de la patrie and visited the country on 18 and 19 August to pursue a peaceful solution to the crisis. On 5 and 6 October, the Special Representative visited Ouagadougou to facilitate dialogue with ECOWAS. Moreover, the Special Representative visited Nigeria from 29 to 31 July, on 10 and 11 August, from 25 to 29 September and from 5 to 11 December, meeting inter alia with the Minister for Foreign Affairs of Nigeria, Yusuf Tuggar, and the former President of Nigeria, Abdulsalam Abubakar, as the Chair of the National Peace

Council and as the ECOWAS Chair's Envoy for the Niger, as well as others for discussions on national and regional issues.

44. Following the Security Council's decision to terminate the mandate of MINUSMA, the Special Representative visited Mali from 2 to 4 August and from 28 to 30 August to exchange views with the Transition Government on a potential role for UNOWAS post-MINUSMA, including support for the implementation of the Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali. He reaffirmed the continued commitment of the United Nations to Mali, while encouraging the transitional authorities to resume dialogue with ECOWAS. He travelled to Algeria from 29 October to 1 November and called on national authorities to support diplomatic engagements with Mali and the Niger.

45. To promote peaceful and inclusive electoral processes, the Special Representative undertook several good offices and preventive diplomacy missions to Liberia and Sierra Leone. He remained engaged with ECOWAS and the African Union to resolve the political stalemate that followed the 24 June polls in Sierra Leone and deployed technical support capacity to the joint mediated dialogue. Ahead of the presidential election in Liberia, the Special Representative, in partnership with ECOWAS, conducted four good offices missions to Monrovia from 14 to 16 August, from 4 to 6 October and 9 to 12 October, and from 13 to 15 November. Against the backdrop of heightened tensions, he met with the presidential candidates and attended an election stakeholders' forum, where he appealed for a peaceful process and a resolution of grievances through legal mechanisms.

46. On 14 July, the Special Representative visited Cabo Verde, where he encouraged the President, José Maria Neves, and national stakeholders to continue to safeguard their democratic gains and accelerate achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. In his engagements across the region, the Special Representative commended Cabo Verde's democratic culture and commitment to good governance as a model for the region. Visiting the Gambia on 30 and 31 August, the Special Representative met with the President, Adama Barrow, and reaffirmed the continued support of the United Nations for the transitional justice process, through implementation of the recommendations of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission. The Special Representative also visited Guinea-Bissau, on 4 and 5 and from 8 to 10 July, on 4 and 5 September and on 16 November, where he also engaged with national stakeholders, calling for peaceful cohabitation to advance key reforms.

B. Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission

47. To advance progress on the three outstanding areas of disagreement, the Special Representative, in his capacity as Chair of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission, held bilateral meetings in Abuja and Douala on 28 and 29 September respectively, during which the two parties committed to pursue constructive dialogue towards a resolution. Planning for the physical demarcation of the boundary progressed, as preparations are being finalized for another lot of 262 pillars to be constructed in February 2024. This will leave a final 221 pillars to be erected thereafter. In terms of confidence-building measures, a rapid joint needs assessment in the health, water and energy sectors was carried out in October by the Mixed Commission in three regions in Cameroon with the support of the United Nations Network on Migration.

C. Enhancing regional and subregional partnerships to address cross-border and cross-cutting threats to peace and security

48. UNOWAS continued its collaboration with regional partners, including through its liaison cells to ECOWAS in Abuja and to the Group of Five for the Sahel in Nouakchott. Along with the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel, the Special Representative continued advocating support by partners to the Group of Five, including for its 2023–2033 Strategy for Development and Security and the 2023–2028 Priority Investment Programme, which were adopted at a ministerial meeting of the Group of Five on 9 July. In this regard, the Special Coordinator and the Special Representative also attended the fourth General Assembly of the Alliance of Sahel States in Nouakchott on 10 July, which called for strengthened regional dialogue and policy reforms to support development, among other things. From 26 to 30 September, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the UNOWAS Liaison Cell in Nouakchott conducted a joint mission to Mali and Chad, during which they shared experiences on the involvement of Mauritanian women Islamic scholars in sensitizing vulnerable populations in remote areas. As mentioned above, on 1 December Burkina Faso and the Niger announced their withdrawal from all Group of Five mechanisms, and on 6 December Chad and Mauritania issued a joint statement announcing the dissolution of the Group of Five for the Sahel.

49. During a desk-to-desk meeting on 16 October, UNOWAS and the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA) reviewed the implementation of their joint workplan and agreed on additional activities to enhance advocacy on the implementation of the Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy for Areas Affected by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region and the Code of Conduct concerning the Repression of Piracy, Armed Robbery against Ships and Illicit Maritime Activity in West and Central Africa (Yaoundé Code of Conduct), in addition to more joint activities in 2024 related to climate security and farmer-herder dynamics.

1. Dynamics between farmers and herders

50. UNOWAS maintained close collaboration with UNOCA and ECOWAS to address cross-regional challenges related to farmer-herder dynamics in West and Central Africa. On 31 October, a workshop held by UNOWAS with the contributors of case studies produced a report on progress and challenges in conflict-resolution best practices implemented by farmer-herder communities. The workshop was preceded by a session of the regional working group on farmer-herder dynamics organized by UNOWAS on 26 October. To showcase locally led best practices, on 28 November UNOWAS, UNOCA and practitioners from the two subregions reviewed and validated a report on good practices on farmer-herder dynamics in West and Central Africa and launched an online community of practitioners.

2. Lake Chad basin

51. As part of joint efforts to support countries in the Lake Chad basin address the multiple challenges in the region, on 27 September the Special Representative, together with the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Central Africa, participated in the fourth meeting of the steering committee for the Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy for Areas Affected by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region, in Abuja. While an improvement in the security situation in the region was noted, the Special Representatives called for a holistic approach and committed to leveraging their good offices to sustain the political will essential for the implementation of the Regional Strategy. A key outcome of the meeting was the extension of the Regional Strategy for one year and a directive for

the Lake Chad Basin Commission to consider an adjusted regional strategy for validation by the Council of Ministers in August 2024. UNOWAS, as co-chair of the governance cluster of the Regional Strategy, remains engaged in efforts to adjust the Strategy.

52. Following ECOWAS sanctions on the Niger, the de facto authorities in the Niger prohibited Multinational Joint Task Force troops based at Mallam Fatori, Nigeria, from crossing border, and the Force Commander of the Task Force from visiting the Niger. They also temporarily suspended some reporting to the Task Force headquarters.

3. Cross-border security strategy in the Mano River Union

53. To promote peaceful electoral processes, the Special Representative met with the Secretary-General of the Mano River Union in Freetown and Monrovia on 23 June and 16 August respectively. Following previous encounters, he advocated the resumption of statutory meetings of the Union and for more community dialogue activities, especially in the Yenga area disputed between Guinea and Sierra Leone.

4. Piracy and armed robbery at sea in the Gulf of Guinea

54. In connection with the tenth anniversary of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct in June 2023, UNOWAS continued to engage with partners on the review of the operationalization of the Yaoundé Architecture. On 25 and 26 July, UNOWAS participated in a follow-up meeting in Luanda, which tasked the Interregional Coordination Centre for the Implementation of the Regional Strategy for Maritime Safety and Security in Central and West Africa to develop action plans for the evaluation of the Yaoundé Code of Conduct and conduct an overall assessment on the operationalization of the Yaoundé Architecture. Subsequently, from 10 to 14 August in Dakar, UNOWAS, UNOCA and UNODC jointly provided a forum for the Interregional Coordination Centre, ECOWAS, the Gulf of Guinea Commission, the Regional Centre for Maritime Security in West Africa and the Regional Coordination Centre for Maritime Security in Central Africa, among other stakeholders, to finalize and adopt the proposed action plans.

5. Terrorism and violent extremism

55. At the invitation of Türkiye, the Deputy Special Representative attended on 26 and 27 October a meeting of the Working Group on Foreign Terrorist Fighters in Istanbul, co-chaired by the Kingdom of the Netherlands and Kuwait. She called for greater international support for the Sahel, notably on development and good governance. Participants recommended that efforts be multiplied in terms of cooperation, coordination, information and intelligence-sharing, and the adoption of a holistic approach.

56. On 21 and 22 November, UNOWAS organized an annual colloquium in Mbour, Senegal, which focused on Security Council resolution [2601 \(2021\)](#), with an emphasis on the nexus between security, access to education and governance in the central Sahel and West Africa. Participants, comprising representatives of ECOWAS, key actors from relevant partner and affected countries and United Nations entities, adopted a declaration that, inter alia, called on the Special Representative to leverage his good offices, in close cooperation with national, regional and international partners, to advocate prioritization of education by the Governments of the region, particularly in situations of emergency, as a political agenda.

6. Adverse implications of climate change

57. The reporting period saw some progress in the implementation of the UNOWAS 2022 Dakar Call to Action on Climate Change, Peace and Security in West Africa and the Sahel. On 5 September, UNOWAS and UNOCA organized a side event at Africa Climate Week in Nairobi to advocate a better understanding of the climate security nexus, strengthening dialogue and ensuring climate finance to support social cohesion and peacebuilding.

58. In line with the Dakar Call to Action, which called for evidence-based research, and complementing the earlier assessments in Mali, Mauritania, the Niger and Nigeria, from 24 September to 6 October UNOWAS and the Policy and Mediation Division of the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, at the request of the Resident Coordinator, undertook a field study in Mauritania to assess the interlinkages between climate change and peace and security. Its initial findings informed the high-level visit of Peacebuilding Fund partners to Mauritania from 22 to 27 October.

59. On 26 and 27 October, UNOWAS participated in an expert workshop on climate and peace and water security in N'Djamena, which resulted in the identification of external funding for the President of the Youth Climate Network in the Sahel to present Mali's experience at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Dubai. In addition, UNOWAS participated in the Sahel Climate, Peace and Security Forum in Bamako from 9 to 11 November, which helped to advance understanding of climate concerns.

7. Security sector reform, drug trafficking and transnational organized crime

60. UNOWAS continued its joint mapping exercise of security sector reform initiatives with the Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions of the Department of Peace Operations, the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, UNODC and the Development Coordination Office. On 3 November, UNOWAS and the Development Coordination Office organized a webinar to provide recommendations on United Nations support for regional approaches to security sector reform, to help identify new and innovative ways to strengthen trust between security sector institutions and the civilian population.

61. On 13 and 14 September, in Abidjan, the Deputy Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel participated in the official launch of the Integrated Border Stability Mechanism for West Africa, which is a new coordinating structure jointly managed by UNODC, the International Organization for Migration and the Office for Counter-Terrorism for internationally funded projects aimed at strengthening border governance.

D. Implementation of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel

62. Implementation of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel continued through the strengthening of partnerships between the United Nations and other actors working on the coordination of humanitarian, development and peace initiatives. The Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel, whose mandate was extended until 31 December 2024, continued to lead, alongside the Special Representative, efforts to coordinate the implementation of the integrated strategy for the Sahel within the United Nations and with key regional stakeholders. On 24 and 25 October, in Nouakchott, the Special Representative and the Special Coordinator attended the thirteenth meeting of Special Envoys to the Sahel. Urging partners to

persist in their engagements with Sahel countries, the Special Representative called for continued support for existing structures such as the Group of Five for the Sahel and the Multinational Joint Task Force to curb insecurity. On 14 December, the Assistant Secretary-General for Africa, the Special Representative and the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel attended the tenth meeting of the contact group of the Coalition for the Sahel in Brussels. During the meeting, participants acknowledged the evolving political dynamics, notably the withdrawal of Burkina Faso and the Niger from the Group of Five for the Sahel mechanisms, while emphasizing the imperative to capitalize on lessons learned and maintain a cohesive collaborative effort among regional actors.

63. In collaboration with the Development Coordination Office, the Special Coordinator supported United Nations country teams to ensure that policy and programming instruments incorporate the strategic pillars of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel and the priority areas of the United Nations Support Plan for the Sahel. In this context, several programmes were scaled up, notably regarding stabilization in the Lake Chad basin and Liptako-Gourma regions; integrated cross-border development initiatives between Mali, Mauritania and Senegal; and early warning and collaboration mechanisms between Benin, Burkina Faso and Togo. In expanding partnerships around the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, the Special Coordinator systematically involved other non-United Nations actors and, inter alia, held a training workshop from 6 to 9 November to exchange views on best practices. The Special Coordinator and UNODC introduced new data systems, which revealed an expanding “trafficking economy” undermining stabilization efforts, and initiated a pilot cross-pillar, inter-agency predictive analytics exercise.

E. Promoting good governance, respect for the rule of law, human rights and gender mainstreaming

64. UNOWAS continued assisting regional partners in enhancing good governance, respect for the rule of law and human rights and gender mainstreaming. On 1 and 2 August, UNOWAS supported the organization of a regional conference by the West African Bar Association in Accra chaired by the Minister of the Interior of Ghana. The Special Representative encouraged national and regional bar associations to play their role in consolidation of democracy.

65. Pursuing advocacy on mainstreaming gender and youth, from 13 to 15 July, in Mindelo, Cabo Verde, UNOWAS, in cooperation with ECOWAS and the Government of Cabo Verde, organized the third annual West Africa and the Sahel Youth Forum, which was attended by regional youth groups and organizations, United Nations entities and financial partners. Co-chaired by the Prime Minister of Cabo Verde and the Special Representative, the landmark event adopted the Mindelo Call to Action, which, inter alia, stressed the need for reforms in the education sector, access to start-up finance and the inclusion of young people in mediation processes.

66. On 10 August, in Dakar, UNOWAS participated in a joint meeting between the African Union and the Group of Five for the Sahel, at which a strategic workplan of the network of women community mediators of the Group of Five for the Sahel Women’s Platform was developed. From 18 to 22 September, UNOWAS held the annual meeting of the Working Group on Women, Youth, Peace and Security in West Africa and the Sahel, organized jointly with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), during which 121 women and young people adopted a common statement and decided to establish a rapid response team to assist in political dialogues and peace mediation in the region.

IV. Observations and recommendations

67. While West Africa and the Sahel's multiple and interlinked challenges call for greater international support and decisive action, I am encouraged by the continued strengthening of democratic governance in some countries, notably in Liberia, where citizens peacefully exercised their civic right to choose their next leader. The steady progress made in the Gambia on transitional justice reforms is encouraging but its full implementation will require support by international partners. I call on all political and national stakeholders in the Gambia to move swiftly and decisively to complete the constitutional reform process to usher in a new Constitution that truly represents the aspirations of its people.

68. The dissolution of Parliament in Guinea-Bissau, less than six months following the last legislative elections, is of concern. I urge all political stakeholders to engage in constructive dialogue towards the restoration of the national institutions and for the urgent completion of its constitutional review. Similarly, I call on political actors in Sierra Leone to engage constructively and in good faith towards the implementation of the Agreement for National Unity, to further consolidate peace and democratic governance in the interest of the people.

69. The slow pace of progress in restoring constitutional order in the transition countries is a concern. This is against the backdrop of increasing attacks by armed groups and the spread of terrorism and violent extremism from the Sahel into coastal States. The withdrawal of MINUSMA and the disbanding of the Group of Five for the Sahel and its Joint Task Force will require new and effective approaches to address the security threats and development needs in the Sahel.

70. Taking note of the outcome of the sixty-fourth ordinary session of the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government, I reiterate my call on countries undergoing political transitions to strengthen their collaboration and dialogue with ECOWAS and other regional and international bodies for the timely return to constitutional rule. My Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel will remain engaged with partners to support national and regional efforts towards a return to constitutional order for the benefit of affected populations and the long-term consolidation of democracy. I also call on all Member States and our regional and subregional partners to redouble their efforts and provide adequate capacities and resources to meet the rising needs in the subregion.

71. Widespread insecurity continues to have a negative impact on the humanitarian situation, further aggravating human suffering, with large-scale displacements of populations within and across borders. I call on the Governments of the region and international partners to support holistic approaches that address the root causes of insecurity and provide sustainable funding for the Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy for Areas Affected by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region. Security forces in the region must adhere to international human rights law and humanitarian law during counter-terrorism operations, and concerned countries must promptly establish independent mechanisms to investigate allegations of violations of human rights with a view to bringing perpetrators to justice, ensuring accountability and restoring trust. The United Nations will continue to support efforts to tackle insecurity and address the root causes of violent extremism and terrorism, human rights concerns and humanitarian needs, including through the implementation of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel and the United Nations Support Plan for the Sahel.

72. The increased representation of women in elected and appointed positions, notably following recent elections in Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone, is a welcome development. I call on all stakeholders, particularly Governments and political

parties, to promote legislation on women's empowerment and gender equality and ensure the effective implementation of existing instruments.

73. I welcome the continuous progress made by the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission and encourage all parties concerned to persevere in good faith in their efforts to enable the completion of the Commission's mandate.

74. The United Nations remains committed to enhancing its partnership with ECOWAS and other subregional entities in advancing the consolidation of peace and democratic governance in West Africa and the Sahel. I wish to express my appreciation to ECOWAS, the African Union and all the partners in the region, for their continued cooperation with UNOWAS. I would also like to express my appreciation to the Special Representative and to the staff of UNOWAS and the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission for their continuing efforts to advance peace and security in West Africa and the Sahel.
