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

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report covers the period from 31 December 2022 to 29 June 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. Some Member States in West Africa and the Sahel took steps to further consolidate the democratic process. Benin, Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania held legislative elections in January, June and May, respectively. Nigeria held presidential and federal parliamentary elections in February, as well as governorship and state legislative elections in March. The Gambia also held local elections in March. Preparations advanced for elections in Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Togo. The implementation of new affirmative action legislation increased women's parliamentary representation in Benin. In Liberia, the National Elections Commission and political parties signed a memorandum of understanding in May whereby political parties committed to having a minimum of 30 per cent women on their candidate lists. In several countries, concerns remained over persisting sociopolitical tensions and a shrinking civic and political space.

3. Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali, which were undergoing political transition, requested the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to lift the sanctions imposed on them following their respective unconstitutional changes of government. However, the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government decided to maintain its existing sanctions and imposed new travel bans on members of Government and other senior officials of those States. ECOWAS also reiterated the need to open the political space and ensure inclusive political dialogue. The three States have proposed to establish a permanent coordination framework among themselves to facilitate trade and tackle insecurity.



4. Whereas a decline in terrorist attacks and insecurity-related fatalities in and around the Lake Chad basin regions of the Niger and Nigeria was reported, the security situation in the central Sahel continued to deteriorate and insecurity continued to expand southward to coastal countries. In response, coastal countries have sought to strengthen their bilateral security engagements while reinforcing their internal security capabilities.

5. The region's humanitarian situation continued to worsen amid rising prices of food and other essential commodities. The humanitarian situation in the central Sahel remained particularly dire. While economic growth was sustained in certain Member States, slowing economic activity, greater challenges to accessing international capital markets and rising inflation had a negative impact on the region's overall growth trajectory.

6. On 19 May, the new Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel, Leonardo Santos Simão, took up his duties and travelled to New York for induction meetings with United Nations senior officials and representatives of Member States and regional and subregional organizations.

A. Politics and governance

7. In Benin, peaceful legislative elections were held on 8 January. The pro-Government Bloc Républicain and the Union Progressiste le Renouveau won a combined total of 81 seats in the 109-seat unicameral National Assembly, while the main opposition party, Les Démocrates, obtained 28 seats, marking the return of the opposition to Parliament after a four-year absence. As a result of the 2019 constitutional reform, whereby 24 seats in the National Assembly were reserved for women, 28 women were elected to Parliament, representing the highest ever proportion of women representatives in the body since the reinstatement of multiparty elections in 1991. Prominent opposition leaders, including Reckya Madougou and Joel Aivo, remain incarcerated.

8. In Burkina Faso, the transitional authorities prioritized strengthening military efforts to address the security situation, allocating 28 per cent of the national budget to the defence and security sector in 2023, representing an increase of 72 per cent compared with 2022. On 25 January, Burkina Faso adopted a stabilization and development action plan for 2023–2025, outlining priorities in the areas of security, humanitarian challenges, governance, national reconciliation and social cohesion. A visit by the ECOWAS mediator for Burkina Faso, the former President of the Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou, which was planned for 31 January, was cancelled. Since then, ECOWAS has not made any significant advances on validating a transition timeline. At a meeting in Ouagadougou on 8 and 9 February, the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali agreed to strengthen tripartite relations, including to address security, economic and humanitarian challenges.

9. In Cabo Verde, national authorities and stakeholders focused on implementing the 2022–2026 national strategic development plan, which, inter alia, is aimed at addressing challenges linked to post-coronavirus disease (COVID-19) recovery and the socioeconomic impact of high inflation. In that context, the authorities had put in place measures to promote the digital economy and boost environmentally sustainable tourism.

10. In Côte d'Ivoire, preparations for the September 2023 local and regional elections continued. On 22 February, the President, Alassane Ouattara, implemented one of the recommendations of the national dialogue held in 2022 by nominating three additional members to the Independent Electoral Commission, including one from the opposition party of the former President, Laurent Gbagbo, Parti des peuples

africains – Côte d’Ivoire. On 30 March, the Parti démocratique de Côte d’Ivoire – Rassemblement démocratique Africain confirmed the former President of Côte d’Ivoire, Henri Konan Bédié, as its president. On 2 May, the Front populaire ivoirien, led by Pascal Affi N’Guessan, and the ruling party, Rassemblement des houphouëtistes pour la démocratie et la paix, signed a partnership for national reconciliation, social cohesion and democracy. Concerning regional relations, following a pardon by the President of the transitional Government of Mali, Assimi Goita, the Ivorian soldiers who had been detained in Mali since July 2022 returned to Côte d’Ivoire. On 22 and 23 March, an Ivorian delegation travelled to Bamako to participate in the joint technical commission, which met for the first time after 19 years.

11. The Gambia held peaceful elections of local councillors and mayors on 15 April and 20 May, respectively. The ruling National People’s Party and its allies won a total of 51 per cent of all local council seats. Eighteen of the 58 women who contested local council seats were elected, and women now comprise 15 per cent of local councillors, marking an increase from the 7 per cent women’s representation resulting from the 2018 local elections. In the mayoral elections, the National People’s Party and the opposition United Democratic Party each won in four of the eight local government areas. To advance the transitional justice process, on 12 and 13 May, the Government convened a donor stakeholder conference in Banjul to mobilize international support for its white paper on the implementation of the recommendations of the truth, reconciliation and reparations commission.

12. In Ghana, debates continued over the use of the national identity card as the sole identification document to update the electoral register ahead of the general elections in 2024, owing to concerns over the potential disenfranchisement of voters who do not yet possess the card. In a parliamentary vote on 24 March, the opposition party, National Democratic Congress, rejected the appointment of two of the four Supreme Court justice nominees put forth by the President, Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo. The opposition, however, endorsed the appointment of six nominees to ministerial positions. Efforts by the Government to increase domestic revenue mobilization to restore macroeconomic stability and increase debt sustainability continued with the promulgation of three new tax bills.

13. In Guinea, on 28 April, the Minister of Territorial Administration and Decentralization, Mory Condé, called for the support of the international community to mobilize approximately 6 trillion Guinean francs (\$600 million) for the implementation of the transition plan. Following persistent calls for an inclusive national dialogue, religious leaders attempted to facilitate dialogue between the transitional authorities and Forces vives de Guinée, a group of political parties and civil society organizations. The talks initially led to a suspension of demonstrations in March; these resumed on 10 May as Forces vives de Guinée expressed its dissatisfaction with the process. The transitional President, Mamadi Doumbouya, dissolved two battalions and carried out a minor reorganization of the Government.

14. In Guinea-Bissau, on 29 March, the Bissau regional military court referred for the third time to the Bissau regional court the case of the individuals who had been arrested for their alleged involvement in the attempted coup of 1 February 2022, arguing that it did not have the legal competence to hear the case. On 9 May, ahead of the legislative elections set for 4 June, the National Electoral Commission decided that its Executive Secretary would exercise the functions of acting President of the Commission until the election of a new Executive Secretary by the new Parliament. The same day, the Executive Secretary of the National Electoral Commission, in his capacity as acting President, swore in 22 non-permanent members. On 10 May, the Supreme Court of Justice issued a list of approved candidacies for the legislative elections, comprising 20 political parties and two coalitions. These included the

coalition comprising the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cabo Verde, which was renamed Inclusive Alliance Platform – Terra Ranka, at the request of the Supreme Court, to avoid confusion with the party. The legislative elections took place on 4 June without major incidents. On 15 June, the National Electoral Commission confirmed that the Inclusive Alliance Platform – Terra Ranka coalition had secured an absolute majority of 54 out of 102 seats in Parliament.

15. In Liberia, preparations for the presidential and legislative elections scheduled for 10 October continued amid political tensions, notably in relation to the voter registration process. On 4 April, under the auspices of National Elections Commission, and in the presence of ECOWAS and the United Nations, 26 registered political parties signed the Revised Farmington River Declaration 2023, in which they committed to refrain from incendiary rhetoric and electoral violence, especially against women, and to respect the outcome of the election results.

16. In Mali, progress was made in the operationalization of the Independent Authority for Election Management. The constitutional referendum, which was initially planned for 19 March, was rescheduled for 18 June. Despite international mediation efforts, which included the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the parties have not met within the framework of the Agreement monitoring mechanisms since 11 October 2022. However, some of the institutional reforms under way as part of the political transition are aligned with the Agreement.

17. In Mauritania, peaceful municipal, regional and legislative elections were held in two rounds on 13 and 27 May. According to data published by the Independent National Electoral Commission, voter turnout reached 71.5 per cent and 64.5 per cent, respectively, a level comparable to that of the 2018 elections. According to preliminary results, the ruling El Insaf party received a majority of the votes. Several opposition parties contested the results and called for a rerun of the elections. The number of women parliamentarians slightly increased, with women obtaining 41 seats in the 176-seat National Assembly, an increase from 30 women in the previous 157-seat Parliament.

18. In the Niger, on 24 February, a military court sentenced 27 people for their participation in the attempted coup of 31 March 2021. Five people received life sentences and the other 22 individuals received prison sentences ranging from 4 to 10 years. On 14 April, the High Court of Niamey sentenced the coordinator of the opposition coalition Mouvement M62, Abdoulaye Seydou, to nine months in prison for “the dissemination of information disturbing the public order”. On 23 March, the Council of Ministers adopted a report on the performance of government action during the period 2021–2022 and the implementation of the seven strategic directions of the presidential programme, Renaissance III, which recognizes the persistence of the terrorist threat and criminal acts against civilians. On 24 March, the Prime Minister, Ouhoumoudou Mahamadou, chaired an extraordinary session of the National Council for Political Dialogue, which was attended by representatives of the majority, the opposition and non-affiliated parties.

19. In Nigeria, presidential and federal parliamentary elections were held on 25 February. Bola Tinubu of the ruling party, All Progressives Congress, was declared the winner by the Independent National Electoral Commission with 36.7 per cent of the vote. He was followed by Atiku Abubakar of the main opposition party, the People’s Democratic Party, who received 29.9 per cent of the vote, and Peter Obi of the Labour Party, who received 26.1 per cent of the vote. Voter turnout was 27.05 per cent, the lowest since the country’s return to democracy in 1999. The presidential election was marked by some violent incidents, while the Independent National Electoral Commission experienced technical challenges in uploading the results on

the website of the Commission. For the elections of the federal House of Representatives, All Progressives Congress emerged in the lead and had similar results in the Senate. Elections to governorships and state Houses of Assembly were held on 18 March, and supplementary elections for polls that were inconclusive or postponed due to insecurity were held on 15 April. The candidates, Mr. Abubakar and Mr. Obi, challenged the outcome of the presidential election, and other petitions were filed by various actors challenging some results of the Senate, House of Representatives, gubernatorial and state Houses of Assembly elections. On 29 May, the President-elect, the Vice-President-elect, Kashim Shettima, as well as the newly elected and re-elected state governors were sworn in.

20. In Senegal, preparations for the February 2024 presidential election began with the exceptional revision of the voter register from 6 April to 6 May. The reporting period was marked by speculation that the President, Macky Sall, was considering running for a third presidential term. On 30 March, the leader of the opposition coalition Yewwi Askan Wi, Ousmane Sonko, was convicted of defamation and handed a two-month suspended prison sentence in addition to a fine of 200 million CFA francs (about \$300,000). On 8 May, a court of appeal hardened the ruling against Mr. Sonko by increasing the penalty to a six-month suspended prison sentence. On 1 June, Mr. Sonko was sentenced to two years in prison for “corruption of youth” but was acquitted of allegations of rape and death threats. This conviction renders him ineligible to run in the 2024 presidential election. The verdict triggered protests in Dakar and other cities across the country. According to the authorities, the demonstrations led to 16 fatalities and more than 500 arrests.

21. The 24 June general elections in Sierra Leone took place in a generally peaceful environment, although some incidents of violence were reported. On 27 June, the Electoral Commission for Sierra Leone published the certified results of the presidential election, which confirmed the incumbent, Julius Maada Bio, as the winner, with 56.17 per cent of the vote. The main opposition candidate, Samura Kamara, rejected the outcome. Election observation missions, including those of ECOWAS and the African Union, expressed concerns about the transparency of the process and urged that disputes be resolved through dialogue and legal channels. On 27 June, Mr. Bio took office.

22. In Togo, ahead of regional and legislative elections, 56 local branches of the Independent National Electoral Commission covering were created by presidential decree, while the voter registry was updated from 29 April to 3 June. Several opposition parties have declared their intention to participate in the electoral process. The opposition under the party *Dynamique pour la majorité du peuple* (formerly called *Dynamique Monseigneur Kpodzro*), continued its advocacy for the release of detained political actors.

B. Security situation

23. The security situation remained precarious, notably in Burkina Faso and Mali, owing to persistent attacks on military and civilian targets by Al-Qaida-affiliated *Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin* and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara. In both countries, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara continued to engage in confrontations with *Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin* over access to resources and influence, with civilians caught in the crossfire. The southward expansion of terrorism towards coastal countries continued with renewed incursions in Benin and Togo. Coastal countries have deployed efforts in response to the growing insecurity, including by reinforcing bilateral cooperation. The situation in the Lake Chad basin region, however, showed signs of stabilization owing to increased security operations

by regional security forces and the impact of internal dissension on the operational capabilities of Boko Haram-affiliated groups and splinter groups.

24. In Burkina Faso, Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara carried out large-scale attacks against civilian and military targets throughout the territory. On 28 February, Burkina Faso ended its military assistance agreement with France and requested the departure of all French military personnel serving in Burkinabe military administrations. Conversely, the bilateral military cooperation between Burkina Faso and Mali was reinforced, as exemplified by several high-level visits, including by the Minister of Defence of Mali to Ouagadougou on 16 March and a joint military operation in the Boucle du Mouhoun Region. On 19 April, the transitional authorities announced by decree a general mobilization of auxiliary civilian army personnel for 12 months to support the fight against terrorism.

25. In Mali, the Gao and Ménaka Regions remained the epicentre of hostilities between Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, resulting in territorial gains for the latter in the Ménaka Region and in the significant displacement of populations. In central Mali, according to MINUSMA, 126 attacks were recorded between 6 January and 1 March, killing at least 206 people, including 84 civilians. The Malian armed forces strengthened their combat capabilities and regained ground in some areas, resulting in the return of communities to Bankass and Koro cercles in Mopti Region and Niono cercle in Ségou Region. However, several attacks targeting Malian security forces were reported, including one on 22 April targeting the Malian air force base in Sévaré, resulting in the death of 38 people, including 10 civilians. On 8 February, the Coordination of Azawad Movements, which had signed the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali in 2015, announced the merging of their components to establish a common security framework for the northern regions.

26. In the Niger, insecurity persisted in the Lake Chad basin area and the Tillabéri Region, although there were signs of improved stabilization in the south-east, near the border with Nigeria. While the Agadez region remained less affected, five soldiers were killed on 9 April while escorting a gold mining convoy between Tchibarakaten and Arlit. In addition, on 11 February, at least 10 soldiers were killed in an attack on an army convoy in Bani Bangou, Tillabéri Region. On 13 April, at least three soldiers were killed during a patrol in Djalori, Diffa Region. Military capabilities of the Niger armed forces have been reinforced, including through international support, to address the insecurity.

27. In Nigeria, the number of terrorist attacks and fatalities decreased owing to the counter-insurgency operations of the armed forces of Nigeria and the Multinational Joint Task Force against Boko Haram, the demobilization of Boko Haram ex-combatants and supporters, and recurrent fighting between Boko Haram and Islamic State in West Africa Province. Nevertheless, large-scale attacks continued to take place. Armed militias also continued to operate in the north-western States of Zamfara and Sokoto, and to a lesser extent in the central and southern States of Plateau, Benue and Delta.

28. In northern Benin, several attacks were reported, including one on 31 January targeting a primary school in Gimbagou, Alibori Department, during which the village chief was murdered. On 10 March, the Minister of Decentralization and Local Governance imposed night-time curfews on four municipalities in the north-western region of the Atacora Department and three municipalities in the north-eastern Alibori Department. In northern Togo, 31 civilians were killed when the villages of Tola and Gningou, in the Savanes Region, were attacked on 10 February. Several incidents involving the use of improvised explosive devices were also reported. On 6 April, the state of emergency, which had been initially declared in June 2022 for a period of

three months and subsequently extended, was unanimously prolonged by Parliament for another year. In Ghana, a foiled attack on 6 February on a bridge near Bawku, close to the Burkina Faso border, led authorities to deploy an additional 1,000 defence and security forces along the border.

29. Members of the Accra Initiative continued to enhance their security cooperation to counter and prevent further spillover of terrorism, violent extremism and transnational organized crime. From 31 January to 2 February, security agencies of members of the Initiative met in Abidjan to strengthen information-sharing and cooperation. While the Multinational Joint Task Force of the Accra Initiative is not yet operational, discussions are ongoing between the secretariat of the Accra Initiative and ECOWAS on ways to strengthen their collaboration. During a working visit to Ghana on 15 and 16 May, the ECOWAS Commission and the secretariat of the Accra Initiative agreed that actions under the Accra Initiative and the ECOWAS strategy for addressing terrorism and transnational organized crime should be carried out in synergy. The ECOWAS delegation also visited the Multinational Joint Task Force of the Accra Initiative in Tamale to assess the current state of its operational capabilities and preparedness.

30. The maritime security situation in the Gulf of Guinea continued to improve. In West Africa, five incidents of piracy and armed robbery were reported in the first quarter of 2023, compared to six in the same period in 2022. Nevertheless, risks remain. On 11 March, a Singapore-registered tanker was boarded by unidentified persons 550 km off the coast of Côte d'Ivoire. On 25 April, the President of Ghana hosted the third extraordinary session of the Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the Gulf of Guinea Commission. Deliberations focused on the possible expansion of the Commission's membership to include all coastal states of West and Central Africa.

C. Socioeconomic context

31. According to data released by the International Monetary Fund on 14 April, economic growth in West Africa and the Sahel is expected to moderately decrease from 3.9 per cent in 2022 to 3.8 per cent in 2023, driven by a decline in national demand following an increase in borrowing costs and a decrease in aid flows. Rising food prices had a negative amplifying impact on the purchasing power of already vulnerable households. Governments also faced more difficulties accessing credit and had to raise bond rates. The situation, however, varies significantly within the region. For example, while economic growth in the Niger in 2023 is expected to be 11.1 per cent, it is projected to decline in other countries as inflation remains high. Amid increasing debt levels, Ghana is seeking to restructure its external and national debts.

D. Humanitarian context

32. The humanitarian situation remained dire across the region, particularly in the Sahel, owing to instability, violence, forced displacement and food insecurity. As of February, approximately 10,000 schools across Burkina Faso, Mali, the Niger and Nigeria were closed or non-operational owing to violence. Women and girls also faced high risks of abduction and being subject to sexual and gender-based violence.

33. The number of displaced persons across the Sahel and coastal countries remained high, at 6.3 million. In the past six months, some 30,000 Malian refugees fled to Burkina Faso and the Niger, while more than 11,500 persons from Burkina Faso crossed into Mali and the Niger. Approximately 8,450 people from north-west Nigeria fled to the Niger to escape violence. In addition, a significant increase in the

number of refugees and asylum-seekers has been recorded in coastal countries. As of February, of 66,090 people fleeing from Burkina Faso alone, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo hosted about 3,400 and 8,500, respectively. As of March 2023, about 1,500 people had fled from Togo to Benin owing to increasing attacks.

34. According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs of the Secretariat, in 2023, the Sahel region will require humanitarian assistance and protection for 37.7 million people, of whom 41 per cent are women. Such projections also include support for 21.8 million people who are expected to experience severe food insecurity during the lean season. The need for humanitarian assistance and protection in 2023 reflects an increase from the previous reporting period.

35. Humanitarian response plans for 2023 have been developed for Burkina Faso, Mali, the Niger and Nigeria, with a total funding requirement of \$3.5 billion, of which 21 per cent had been secured as at 13 June. Humanitarian access remained limited, preventing vulnerable people from receiving critical assistance. While physical access remained challenging owing to security concerns, poor infrastructure and administrative requirements, humanitarian actors were also increasingly targeted. In the first quarter of 2023 alone, eight incidents against humanitarian workers were reported.

E. Human rights

36. Some positive developments were noted regarding accountability and transitional justice. In Burkina Faso, on 16 February, the Transitional Legislative Assembly amended the Military Justice Code of 1994, strengthening measures to promote accountability for human rights violations in counter-terrorism operations. In the Gambia, preparations continued for the establishment of an independent reparations commission and a special prosecution unit and consultations with ECOWAS advanced on the creation of a hybrid court to prosecute crimes committed during the tenure of the former President, Yahya Jammeh. Moreover, on 27 and 28 March, respectively, the Prevention Against Torture Act and the Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Act were adopted by Parliament. In Guinea, the trial for crimes committed in Conakry during the 28 September 2009 stadium incident continued, with victims and witnesses giving testimony. In Guinea-Bissau, the Council of Ministers revised the statute of the National Human Rights Commission, although additional progress is required to ensure its conformity with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles). In Nigeria, the National Human Rights Commission established the Special Independent Investigative Panel on Human Rights Violations in the Implementation of Counter Insurgency Operations in the North East, in response to media reports in December 2022 alleging a series of gross human rights violations by the Nigerian armed forces during counter-insurgency operations in the region. In Senegal, with technical assistance from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Government initiated a reform of the Senegalese Human Rights Committee to ensure its adherence to the Paris Principles.

37. Nonetheless, human rights actors continued to denounce the shrinking civic and political space resulting from new restrictive legislation and acts of intimidation against media professionals, lawyers, civil society actors and human rights defenders. In Burkina Faso, the 2022 ban on public demonstrations and political activities has yet to be lifted. In Guinea, where the 2022 ban on public demonstrations also remains in place, protests organized by civil society organizations and political parties resulted in several civilian deaths. In Burkina Faso, the Niger, Senegal and Togo, the suspension of media entities and the prosecution of media professionals,

demonstrators and/or human rights activists threatened to impinge freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly. The arrest and prosecution of political actors in Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Senegal and Sierra Leone fuelled perceptions of instrumentalization of the judiciary. The death of a human rights activist in custody at a police station in Mauritania on 9 February highlighted challenges relating to detention conditions.

38. Allegations of violations and abuses of international human rights law and violations of international humanitarian law were documented in the context of counter-terrorism operations, as were cases of extrajudicial killings and abductions, with a majority attributed to non-State armed groups. In Burkina Faso, human rights actors have called on national authorities to investigate the killings, allegedly by security forces, of: (a) 39 civilians, including 9 women and 3 children, between 30 January and 2 February in Boungou, Gourma Province; (b) 20 civilians in Toéssin-Foulbé, Bam Province, on 8 March; and (c) over 100 civilians in Karma, Yatenga Province, on 20 April.

39. Concerning the human rights of migrants, between January and May 2023, close to 8,000 migrants coming from Algeria arrived in the village of Assamakka in the Niger, 15 km from the border. As at 1 May, over 3,600 of those migrants remained stranded, without access to water, food and other basic services.

F. Gender

40. Efforts to strengthen women's representation and participation in politics achieved some notable progress in Benin, where the number of women in Parliament reached 25 per cent, the highest level to date, as a result of the January legislative elections. The increase in the number of women parliamentarians resulted primarily from the application of a quota on women's representation enshrined in the 2019 Constitution. Likewise, in the Gambia, the percentage of women represented in local councils more than doubled, increasing from 7 per cent in 2018 to 15 per cent in 2023.

41. In Liberia, the draft law on election reform, which is currently in Parliament for further review, establishes a 30 per cent quota for women's representation in candidate listings for political parties. Pending the promulgation of the law, political parties have committed to voluntarily implement the quota.

42. There were, however, setbacks to women's representation and political participation in Nigeria. The number of women in the National Assembly decreased by 19 per cent, with women occupying 3 per cent and 4 per cent of seats in the Senate and the House of Representatives, respectively. Furthermore, only 48 out of the 1,019 women, or 4.7 per cent, who ran in elections for state Houses of Assembly were elected. The only woman to run for a governorship position, in Adamawa State, lost the election to the incumbent Governor.

43. At the regional level, on 15 and 16 March, ECOWAS held the inaugural meeting of the ECOWAS women, peace and security steering group and adopted a monitoring and evaluation framework to gauge progress by Member States in implementing Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#).

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

44. In her capacity as Officer-in-Charge of UNOWAS, the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel engaged extensively with national, regional and international partners to promote democratic governance and peaceful electoral processes. She frequently consulted with the President of the ECOWAS Commission, Oumar Alieu Touray, and collaborated with the United Nations country teams to maximize the impact of United Nations support for peace consolidation processes.

45. From 14 to 16 February, the Deputy Special Representative, along with the Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding Support, participated in a mission to Guinea-Bissau led by the Chair of the Guinea-Bissau configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission. The delegation met with the President of Guinea-Bissau, Úmaro Sissoco Embaló, political actors and national stakeholders and called for constructive dialogue to resolve political differences, while highlighting the need for governance reforms. On 13 March, at a meeting of the Guinea-Bissau configuration of the Peacebuilding Commission, the Deputy Special Representative called for sustained international support for the country's peace consolidation process.

46. In Nigeria, from 20 to 27 February, the Deputy Special Representative held discussions with national authorities, political and civil society leaders, the National Peace Committee, as well as diplomatic partners and heads of election observation missions. During the signing of the second national peace accord by presidential candidates on 23 February, she called for peaceful elections and urged candidates to resort to legal means to settle disputes. She also participated in events at the state level. On 18 January, she attended a stakeholders' forum in Kano. To support a conducive electoral environment and the peaceful resolution of differences, UNOWAS offered support to the National Peace Committee to convene three additional state-level stakeholders' forums, in Cross River on 7 February, in Enugu on 11 February and in Oyo on 14 February.

47. From 27 to 29 March, the Deputy Special Representative travelled to Mauritania, where she met with the President, Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani, and national stakeholders. She advocated for peaceful and inclusive municipal, regional and legislative elections.

48. On 4 April, ahead of the October general elections in Liberia, the Deputy Special Representative participated in the signing ceremony of the Revised Farmington River Declaration 2023, which was concluded with facilitation support from the United Nations and ECOWAS. In her meeting with the President of Liberia, George Manneh Weah, and other stakeholders, she reaffirmed the support of the United Nations for peace and democracy in Liberia.

49. From 10 to 12 May, representatives of UNOWAS accompanied the Assistant Secretary-General for Africa in the Departments of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations, on a visit to Freetown where she met with the President of Sierra Leone and other government officials, as well as political leaders, representatives of women in politics and members of the diplomatic community. In her exchanges she highlighted the importance of dialogue and reaffirmed the United Nations commitment to continue working with the Government and people of Sierra Leone to consolidate peace, democracy and development. The Deputy Special

Representative maintained close contact with the President of the ECOWAS Commission and the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Sierra Leone to combine efforts to foster a peaceful and inclusive electoral process.

50. In relation to the ongoing transition processes, the Deputy Special Representative worked closely with ECOWAS to engage the authorities of the concerned countries to uphold their commitments to an agreed timeline and inclusive process. On 5 January, the Deputy Special Representative led a joint mission with the Development Coordination Office to Burkina Faso. National interlocutors reiterated their commitment to the timelines agreed with ECOWAS for a return to constitutional order and made appeals for additional support from partners for the country's multidimensional needs. Subsequently, from 29 January to 1 February, UNOWAS participated in a joint ECOWAS-African Union technical assessment mission to Burkina Faso.

51. On 19 and 20 January, the Deputy Special Representative conducted a mission to Guinea to participate in consultations on the implementation of the transition calendar agreed with ECOWAS. She also participated in the closing ceremony of a social cohesion initiative spearheaded by the United Nations, during which she reiterated her appeal for a timely return to constitutional order in full respect of fundamental rights and freedoms.

B. Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission

52. Despite the referral of the three outstanding areas of disagreement back to the International Court of Justice in order for the Court to clarify its 2002 judgment regarding those areas, as decided by the thirty-fourth session of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission in August 2022, progress on the physical demarcation of the boundary continued. Some 221 pillars were erected, leaving 475 pillars to be completed. During a tripartite working session in Douala, Cameroon, from 4 to 9 March, the parties agreed on the finalization of 62 of 131 map sheets.

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

53. 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 (G5 Sahel) in Nouakchott. In a meeting in Abuja on 23 February, the Deputy Special Representative and the President of the ECOWAS Commission discussed the prevailing peace and security challenges. UNOWAS continued to support efforts by ECOWAS to review Protocol A/SP1/12/01 on Democracy and Good Governance Supplementary to the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security, which had been adopted by ECOWAS in 2001. In this regard, on 15 March, UNOWAS participated in a virtual workshop on ECOWAS normative frameworks on conflict management, which raised awareness of the Supplementary Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance and other relevant frameworks. From 8 to 10 February, UNOWAS participated in a retreat held in Lomé, the purpose of which was to review ECOWAS National Early Warning and Response Mechanisms, and identify activities to operationalize national peace infrastructures and decentralize early warning and response structures to the community level.

54. Following a meeting of the Ministers of Defence of the G5 Sahel countries on 10 January, and an extraordinary summit of the G5 Sahel Heads of State on 20 February, both held in N'Djamena, on 28 March in Nouakchott, the Deputy Special

Representative met the incoming Chair of the G5 Sahel, the President of Mauritania. They discussed, inter alia, the withdrawal of Mali from the G5 Sahel structures as at 30 June 2022, including the Joint Force, and a revitalization of the Sahel Defence College. The Chair reiterated his resolve to safeguard the cohesion of the G5 Sahel and appealed for sustained support by the international community. UNOWAS continued providing logistical support to the Independent High-Level Panel on Security and Development in the Sahel, led by the former President of the Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou.

55. UNOWAS pursued its multi-sectoral cooperation with the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA). The two Offices agreed on a joint workplan around initiatives pertaining to maritime security, farmer-herder dynamics and stabilization of the Lake Chad basin. On 16 and 17 March in Libreville, UNOWAS participated in the annual meeting of heads of United Nations presences in Central Africa, chaired by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Central Africa, which recommended that United Nations entities strengthen their cooperation while leveraging their respective comparative advantages.

1. Dynamics between farmers and herders

56. From 8 to 10 February, UNOWAS participated in a methodology workshop in Abuja, convened by the United Nations Development Programme, on a new research agenda on farmer-herder dynamics. The Mission presented joint efforts by UNOWAS, UNOCA and the Office of the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel. UNOWAS, UNOCA and the Office of the Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel are continuing to implement a cross-regional project on enhancing local-level governance responses to farmer-herder conflicts in West and Central Africa.

2. Lake Chad basin

57. From 27 to 31 March, in N'Djamena, UNOWAS military advisers met with the force commander of the Multinational Joint Task Force of the Accra Initiative and the leadership of the Lake Chad Basin Commission on the implementation of the Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy for Areas Affected by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region. During the exchanges, UNOWAS was briefed about ongoing operations and security challenges, as well as on progress in the implementation of the Strategy.

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

58. On 3 March, the Deputy Special Representative met with the newly appointed Secretary-General of the Mano River Union secretariat, Maria Harrison. They discussed steps to revitalize the Union, and the Deputy Special Representative advocated for the resumption of the statutory meetings of the Mano River Union at the technical, ministerial and summit levels. Subsequently, from 6 to 10 March, UNOWAS undertook a technical mission to the Union's secretariat in Freetown and discussed a new draft cooperation framework for the period 2023–2025, as well as coordinating the support of the United Nations, ECOWAS and the Mano River Union for both the transition in Guinea and the electoral processes in Liberia and Sierra Leone.

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

59. Ahead of the tenth anniversary of the Yaoundé Architecture in June, UNOWAS intensified its consultations with partners regarding a review of the operationalization of the Yaoundé Architecture. On 15 January, on the margins of the fifty-fourth meeting of the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions

in Central Africa, UNOWAS organized, in collaboration with UNOCA, a meeting with ECOWAS, the Economic Community of Central African States and the Inter-regional Coordination Centre for the Implementation of Regional Strategy for Maritime Safety and Security in Central and West Africa. Follow-up meetings were held on 7 February with Germany, the co-chair of the Group of Seven Group of Friends of the Gulf of Guinea, and on 30 March with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and Côte d'Ivoire, which both co-chair Group of Seven Group of Friends of the Gulf of Guinea with Germany. During these meetings, the entities exchanged views on priorities and agreed on activities to commemorate the tenth anniversary of 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).

5. Terrorism and violent extremism

60. From 28 February to 2 March, UNOWAS organized a conference in Dakar on the prevention of violent extremism in West and Central Africa, in collaboration with the Governments of Switzerland and Senegal. Senior representatives of Governments and security forces, as well as religious, women and youth leaders, emphasized the need to mobilize political will to address the root causes of violence to complement military responses. On the margins of the meeting, the Deputy Special Representative met with the executive secretary of the Accra Initiative secretariat, who updated her on the status of implementation of decisions taken during the summit of Heads of State of November 2022 and on the meeting of Ministers of Security and Defence held on 2 February.

61. From 13 to 17 March, UNOWAS participated in the first country assessment visit to Benin by the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate of the Security Council. The assessment covered all relevant Security Council resolutions, including [1373 \(2001\)](#), [2178 \(2014\)](#) and [2396 \(2017\)](#), and participants engaged with national and local government authorities, civil society organizations and international partners.

6. Adverse implications of climate change

62. As part of its implementation of the Dakar Call to Action on Climate Change, Peace and Security in West Africa and the Sahel, UNOWAS carried out technical visits to Mali, from 12 to 16 March, and to Mauritania, from 19 to 25 March. In Mali, in collaboration with MINUSMA, the United Nations country team and government institutions, UNOWAS engaged with actors working on social cohesion, women's empowerment and access to land. In Mauritania, UNOWAS visited the refugee camp in Hodh ech Chargui, where it observed the multiplier effect of climate change on tensions between refugee groups and local communities, which were further amplified by farmer-herder dynamics and other conflict factors in the region.

63. As the secretariat of the United Nations Regional Working Group on Climate Change, Security, Environment and Development in West Africa and the Sahel, UNOWAS, in collaboration with ECOWAS and the climate security mechanism of the United Nations, held six discussion sessions to help build synergies around the Dakar Call to Action.

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

64. As part of its efforts to enhance coordination of United Nations and international efforts in support of security sector reform processes in the region, UNOWAS, together 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, launched a joint mapping exercise of security sector reform initiatives carried out in the region in the past 10 years in order to develop recommendations for further action.

8. Joint civilian project to address intercommunal violence in the region

65. From 16 to 17 February, UNOWAS participated in a workshop organized in Ouagadougou by the Liptako-Gourma Authority aimed at developing a regional stabilization strategy. Participants, which included representatives of local and national political authorities in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger, as well as external partners, called for the strengthening of inter-community dialogue and the reinforcement of communication between civilian populations and security forces of the three countries.

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

66. 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 humanitarian-development-peace nexus. The Deputy Special Representative pursued high-level engagements aimed at promoting inter-institutional partnerships. On 3 March, she met the Executive Secretary of the G5 Sahel, Eric Tiaré, in Dakar. They agreed to enhance synergies between the integrated strategy and the Priority Investment Plan of the G5 Sahel.

67. On 16 February, the 14th meeting of the steering committee of the United Nations integrated strategy for the Sahel was held in Dakar. Participants called for enhanced advocacy on good governance, regional security architecture, access to education in conflict zones and the management of farmer-herder dynamics, including in border areas. The steering committee agreed on the development of a Sahel regional action plan on water and to incorporate water into the next iterations of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks for Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, the Gambia, Mauritania and Senegal.

68. The Special Coordinator for Development in the Sahel established an informal policy dialogue of the Sahel regional nexus platform, comprising non-governmental organizations, financial partners and United Nations entities, to strengthen cooperation on peace, development and humanitarian assistance. Three dialogue sessions were held on 12 thematic areas including analysis, funding and capacity-building.

69. On 17 and 18 April, the Deputy Special Representative attended the twelfth meeting of the Special Envoys for the Sahel, held in The Hague, Kingdom of the Netherlands, which brought together representatives of regional organizations and think-tanks as well as youth representatives from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and the Niger. On this occasion, the former President of the Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou, gave a briefing on the work of the Independent High-level Panel on Security and Development in the Sahel. The meeting also included discussions of how to better support counter-terrorism efforts, help stem the spread of instability to coastal West African States and improve aid effectiveness in the Sahel given the current international geopolitical context impacting on the region.

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

70. UNOWAS continued its engagements supporting regional partners in enhancing good governance, respect for the rule of law and human rights. On 24 April, UNOWAS, in collaboration with OHCHR, the Office of Rule of Law and Security Institutions, ECOWAS and the West African Human Rights Defenders' Network, organized a regional consultation on the instrumentalization of the justice system. Participants called for the sustained political engagement of ECOWAS and the United Nations with national authorities, the scaling-up of support to promote exchanges between countries in the region and support for regional platforms to respond to the instrumentalization of justice systems, including legal practitioners, judges and civil society.

71. Moreover, from 29 April to 1 May, UNOWAS supported the organization of the consultative forum on the participation of non-governmental organizations in the ordinary session of the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights. During the forum, UNOWAS, together with OHCHR, facilitated a session on protecting civic and political space as a precondition for democratic consolidation.

72. Regarding gender and youth mainstreaming, on 8 February, ahead of the elections in Nigeria, UNOWAS organized a town hall dialogue with the Nigerian chapter of the Working Group on Women, Youth, Peace and Security in West Africa and the Sahel, during which representatives of political parties, the Government, security forces and women and youth organizations discussed their contributions towards a peaceful electoral process.

73. On 27 February, UNOWAS, in collaboration with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), hosted a virtual exchange session with representatives of 16 West African countries to review the implementation of the women and peace and security agenda, and the youth and peace and security agenda. Key recommendations included increasing collaboration with religious leaders and raising awareness of Security Council resolution [2250 \(2015\)](#) in schools. Another session with young women and men, organized by UNOWAS on 30 March, included calls for increased advocacy to promote the implementation of Security Council resolution [2250 \(2015\)](#).

74. On 16 March, UNOWAS facilitated a thematic exchange session of the working group on the role of women in preventing violent extremism. In addition, from 20 to 22 March, UNOWAS and UN-Women organized a capacity-building workshop in Accra for members of the Working Group on Women, Youth, Peace and Security in West Africa and the Sahel and other participants on gender-sensitive conflict analysis and political analysis skills in programme design.

IV. Observations and recommendations

75. Despite the multiple challenges facing West Africa and the Sahel, the resilience of democratic governance in several countries of the region is encouraging. In Nigeria, the holding of elections that led to an orderly transfer of power after the incumbent Head of State concluded his two terms in office is commendable. I am also encouraged by the holding of general elections in Sierra Leone, as well as the holding of peaceful legislative elections in Benin, Guinea-Bissau and Mauritania. In this regard, I wish to further encourage political parties and other stakeholders in Liberia to strictly adhere to their commitments made in the Revised Farmington River Declaration 2023, thereby allowing the country to further consolidate peace and democracy.

76. I note the continued underrepresentation of women across the region in political processes and decision-making. I reiterate the importance of promoting the full and meaningful participation and representation of women in all political processes. I call upon all stakeholders, in particular Governments and political parties, to promote legislation on women's empowerment and gender equality and ensure the effective implementation of existing relevant instruments.

77. As opposition parties and civil society organizations in the region continue expressing concerns over growing restrictions on civil liberties, including bans on peaceful demonstrations and the detention of political opponents in some contexts, it is crucial that national authorities fully promote, protect and respect human rights and the rule of law.

78. The progress made in the Gambia on transitional justice is a testament to the country's commitment to the process. I call on international partners to step up their support for social cohesion and national healing and urge political parties, the Government and all national stakeholders to prioritize the constitutional reform process.

79. It is crucial that the countries undergoing political transitions strengthen collaboration with ECOWAS and other regional and international bodies for the timely return to constitutional rule. I invite partners to support these countries for the benefit of affected populations and the long-term consolidation of democracy.

80. Despite improvements in some areas, the continued insecurity in the central Sahel and growing threats of its spread to coastal countries remain deeply concerning. I therefore reiterate my call for enhanced partnerships and a collective response backed by adequate resources.

81. Reports of human rights violations against civilian populations in the conduct of counter-terrorism operations remain of serious concern. Security forces in the region should adhere to international human rights law and humanitarian law during counter-terrorism operations. I call on all concerned countries to promptly establish independent mechanisms to thoroughly investigate alleged violations with a view to bringing perpetrators to justice and restoring trust.

82. The humanitarian consequences of the prevailing insecurity remain highly worrying, as it further aggravates human suffering, drives large-scale displacement and deprives children of education. I call on Governments of the region and international partners to support holistic approaches and to honour their commitments under the ECOWAS plan of action to combat terrorism for the period 2020–2024, and the Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy for Areas Affected by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region.

83. The United Nations will continue to support efforts aimed at tackling insecurity and addressing 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. In this regard, I look forward to the recommendations of the Independent High-level Panel on Security and Development in the Sahel led by the former President of the Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou.

84. I welcome the continuous progress made by the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission, which is moving towards a resolution of the few remaining areas of disagreement. I encourage all concerned parties to persevere in good faith in their efforts to enable the completion of the Commission's mandate.

85. 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 the Governments of the ECOWAS region, the African Union, the ECOWAS Commission, the G5 Sahel, the Mano River Union, the Gulf of Guinea Commission, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, the Accra Initiative and the African Development Bank for their continued cooperation with UNOWAS. With much appreciation to the Deputy Special Representative for leading UNOWAS for the past few months, I would also like to welcome the new Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel, Leonardo Santos Simão, and thank him for taking on this assignment. I further thank the staff of UNOWAS and the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission for their unrelenting efforts to advance peace and security in West Africa and the Sahel.
