



# Security Council

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*Provisional*

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*President:* Mr. De Rivière . . . . . (France)

*Members:*

Algeria . . . . .	Mr. Bendjama
China . . . . .	Mr. Dai Bing
Ecuador . . . . .	Mr. Montalvo Sosa
Guyana . . . . .	Mrs. Rodrigues-Birkett
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Mozambique . . . . .	Mr. Fernandes
Republic of Korea . . . . .	Mr. Hwang
Russian Federation . . . . .	Ms. Evstigneeva
Sierra Leone . . . . .	Mr. Kanu
Slovenia . . . . .	Mr. Žbogar
Switzerland . . . . .	Mrs. Baeriswyl
United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland . . . . .	Mr. Kariuki
United States of America . . . . .	Mr. Wood

## Agenda

Peace consolidation in West Africa

Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (S/2023/1075)

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*The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.*

### **Adoption of the agenda**

*The agenda was adopted.*

### **Peace consolidation in West Africa**

#### **Report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (S/2023/1075)**

**The President** (*spoke in French*): In accordance with rule 39 of the Council's provisional rules of procedure, I invite the following briefers to participate in this meeting: Mr. Leonardo Santos Simão, Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel; and Her Excellency Ms. Lori-Anne Thérault-Bénoni, Regional Director, Office for West Africa, the Sahel and the Lake Chad Basin, Institute for Security Studies.

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda.

I wish to draw the attention of Council members to document S/2023/1075, which contains the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel.

I now give the floor to Mr. Simão.

**Mr. Simão** (*spoke in French*): I have the honour to present today the report of the Secretary-General (S/2023/1075) on the situation in West Africa and the Sahel and the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS).

At the outset, let me to commend the French presidency for its leadership within the Security Council for the month of January in these troubled times.

Over the past six months, the situation in West Africa and the Sahel has been marked by contrasting developments. On the one hand, significant progress has been made in consolidating democracy, thus responding to the desire for change of an increasingly demanding young generation. On the other hand, the security situation and governance challenges remain major concerns that have a significant impact on the lives of communities and constantly threaten to reverse progress in other areas.

The presidential election in Liberia demonstrated the institutions' capacity to hold credible elections and to establish Governments that have constitutional

legitimacy. Indeed, on 15 November, following the second round of a hotly contested presidential election, the outgoing President, George Weah, congratulated his opponent and called for national unity. That was a defining political moment for a country in which the suffering of the civil war is still very present in people's memories. In Senegal, the enthusiasm around choosing the country's next leader in the presidential election to be held on 25 February, which could well be one of the most competitive, is also palpable. Ghana has also demonstrated its commitment to democracy by involving the two main parties in a transparent process and selecting their candidates for the highest State office in preparation for the general elections scheduled for December.

(*spoke in English*)

At the same time, however, both Sierra Leone and Guinea-Bissau saw confrontations pitting elements of the security services against each other. Those events, coming in the wake of electoral processes, recalled the need to build the credibility of institutions and processes of democratic governance in a sustained manner, failing which underlying fragilities are always likely to resurface one way or another.

In Sierra Leone, it is to be hoped that the spirit of the Agreement for National Unity signed in October 2023 between the Government and the main opposition party, as well as the ongoing reconciliation efforts of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), will help to overcome the current tensions. In Guinea-Bissau, intra-institutional tensions, culminating in the dissolution of Parliament for the second time, seemed to close a window of opportunity for much-awaited essential reforms. Going forward, a constitutional review that clarifies the division of powers is essential to definitively break the cycle of instability plaguing the country. In the Central Sahel, we also witnessed another unconstitutional change of Government in the Niger in July, creating a belt of military-led Governments in the Sahel and adding to the substantial governance, humanitarian and security challenges that we have been facing in that region. Arguably, respect of basic freedoms, notably those of assembly and expression, is indispensable for building trust between citizens and institutions. Regrettably, arrests of journalists and human rights defenders and restrictions to internet access and freedom of the press, among other concerns, again fuelled perceptions of a decline of the civic and political space in some countries.

On 14 November, the Malian armed forces recaptured the northern city of Kidal. While more consequential steps to bring basic services to the north are expected, reinstalling a governor after 10 years of the absence of the central State seemed to mark another important step in the terrain of Mali's overlapping conflicts. In that context, however, high levels of uncertainty surround the status of the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali and, crucially, of the political transition that has yet to see a date for its pre-agreed elections. Meanwhile, insecurity remains prevalent in large parts of the country, including attacks on military camps and civilians, with swathes of the country currently blockaded by terrorist groups and faced with rising humanitarian needs. While human rights groups in Burkina Faso denounce a forced enrolment of critics into the security forces, a large-scale attack on the northern city of Djibo after years of blockades and deprivation has again highlighted the challenges faced by the transitional authorities to re-establish security across the national territory.

Against that background, the humanitarian situation in the Sahel remains dire. Despite marginal improvements in some areas, the number of people in the entire Central Sahel region requiring humanitarian assistance and protection has increased by 8 per cent compared to 2022, now reaching 34.5 million people. Critically, the period saw a significant rise of refugees to Mauritania, where the screening capacities for arrivals are stretched, requiring a preventive approach as much as more support.

Allow me to echo the Council in paying tribute to the peacekeepers who paid the ultimate price in service of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and to the Malian people for their resilience. In the context of the withdrawal of the Mission, discussions are currently ongoing with United Nations Headquarters and Malian authorities towards a mutual understanding of the role of UNOWAS, in particular relating to residual political issues. Among other steps, an election support mission will soon be visiting Bamako. As we move into a post-MINUSMA Mali, we must take stock of that decade-long experience and draw lessons required to inform a fast-approaching future. As a legacy of MINUSMA, the United Nations will continue to maintain a key role in support of the Malian people. We remain committed to delivering that.

All the while, the closure of MINUSMA, the departure of foreign forces and the uncertainty about the Group of Five for the Sahel following the withdrawal of Burkina Faso and the Niger portend a reconfiguration of regional security coordination mechanisms. Conversely, coordinated operations under the Multinational Joint Task Force have contributed to some tenuous stabilization in the Lake Chad region.

At this juncture, I would also like to congratulate the Council for adopting a framework for assessed funding for African Union-led peace operations. This is imperative, as reflections are under way on how to reorient United Nations peace and security tools to meet contemporary threats and challenges. In that regard, the possible deployment of an African Union standby team as part of addressing regional security needs is to be welcomed. Therefore, it is my hope that the full implementation of resolution 2719 (2023) will happen soon. Moreover, I am encouraged that ECOWAS is taking steps to fully operationalize its priority action plan for 2020–2024 to eradicate terrorism in the region, using its own mandatory contributions to make a decisive move stemming insecurity in the Sahel, preventing more suffering and bringing children back to school.

As the number of children out of school remains disturbingly high, with thousands of schools closed owing to insecurity — compounding the deficits of education systems that were already thinly stretched — in November 2023, UNOWAS held a colloquium on the nexus between security, access to education and governance in the Central Sahel and West Africa, pursuant to Security Council resolution 2601 (2021). Going forward, the deliberations offered an entry point for a multi-stakeholder road map to provide emergency education as the most important lever for children to shape their future and build their countries.

As one example of UNOWAS's efforts to address the root causes of exclusion and bad governance, the conference of the West African Bar Association, held in August 2023 and organized with ECOWAS support, came at a time of proliferating allegations decrying a lack of independence of the judiciary, gravely affecting perceptions of the rule of law and the credibility of institutions. The event revitalized the long-dormant Association, setting in motion a revision of its statute and removing barriers to its functionality. In that spirit, we will equally continue engaging with ECOWAS

on the formalization of the Community's forum of Ministers of Justice.

While recognizing the commendable steps that the Gambia has undertaken to advance the implementation of recommendations of its Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission, the process of national healing will remain incomplete as long as the Gambia remains under the framework of its 1997 Constitution, which is currently the only one within ECOWAS that does not contain presidential term limits. As I call on partners to generously support the transitional justice process, I wish to urge political actors in the Gambia to ensure the adoption of a new Constitution, a process that has been on hold since 2020, before the end of the year, as foreseen by the Government.

Against the multiple challenges, UNOWAS will stay the course and deploy its capacities, using good offices, urging that humanitarian access be granted and promoting the observance of human rights and the rule of law. We are making deliberate efforts to enhance our collaboration with Resident Coordinators and United Nations country teams — as it is only when we are all speaking with one voice, interacting with Governments and partners, that we can have a meaningful and sustained impact. Allow me, at this stage, to commend our colleagues from the United Nations agencies, funds and programmes present in the field and delivering steadily in the face of extremely challenging circumstances.

Above all, as the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, we remain steadfastly focused on fostering dialogue. Amid the stalled transition processes, we have used our unique comparative advantage by effectively leveraging our communication channels with all parties, which has been greatly appreciated by major stakeholders. In that vein, we have contributed to creating an environment more conducive to overcoming the impasse, and I welcome the decision by the ECOWAS Authority of Heads of State and Government to resume dialogue with the respective transitional authorities and to consider reviewing sanctions. We will continue advocating for dialogue to accelerate a return to constitutional order, in line with citizens' aspirations, and to ensure transparency, inclusivity and respect for human rights in the management of transition processes.

A few weeks ago, the twenty-eighth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework

Convention on Climate Change ended, marking another step towards tackling climate change. As we all know, although they have contributed the least to global warming, the fragile ecosystems, especially in the Sahel band, are particularly affected. As evidenced by the situations in the Lake Chad Basin and the Liptako-Gourma region, the negative impact of climate change, such as prolonged drought and unpredictable rainy seasons that cause flooding, on peace and security in West Africa and the Sahel is a lived reality we cannot ignore. The findings of UNOWAS climate risk assessments indicate that climate change reinforces security risks by exacerbating intercommunal conflicts, increasing social tension, and has contributed to displacement, unfair distribution or unequal access to natural resources, rural-urban migration, violence and delinquency. Invited to dedicated events in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, UNOWAS has demonstrated how those phenomena often overlap with the spread of insecurity that we are currently witnessing.

As wells dry out and lands fall fallow — while floods devastate other areas — it is often women who are bearing the brunt of the vagaries of climate and conflict. It is imperative that women take their place in decision-making bodies. I therefore salute the effective application of affirmative action commitments and policies in elections last year in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone, which substantially raised the representation of women in legislative bodies. In that vein, I would like to call on parliamentarians, stakeholders and partners to advocate, as an important first step, for the passing of relevant legislation, notably in the Gambia, Ghana, Liberia and Nigeria.

*(spoke in French)*

Once again, I would like to thank the Council for its support in carrying out the mission of UNOWAS. In line with our mandate, we will continue to work with our regional and international partners to consolidate peace, security and democracy in West Africa and the Sahel.

**The President** *(spoke in French)*: I thank Mr. Simão for his briefing.

I now give the floor to Ms. Thérroux-Bénoni.

**Ms. Thérroux-Bénoni** *(spoke in French)*: It is a pleasure and a privilege for me to speak this morning at the Security Council's biannual meeting on the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, and I

would like to express the Institute for Security Studies' gratitude for the kind invitation extended to us.

The Institute for Security Studies is an African organization that aims to promote human security on the continent through independent research and various forms of technical support and capacity-building.

With the ongoing liquidation of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and the announced dissolution of the Group of Five for the Sahel and its Joint Force, this biannual meeting will remain one of the few forums for exchange on West Africa and the Sahel at the Security Council, even as the region continues to face growing political, security, environmental, climate, humanitarian and human rights challenges, as the Special Representative rightly reminded us in his statement.

At the start of the Malian crisis in 2012, if we had been asked to imagine scenarios, the situation in which the region currently finds itself would have been one of the worst-case scenarios. I am referring here to the rapid expansion of insecurity attributed to terrorist groups and to the succession and, in some cases, the recurrence of unconstitutional changes of government, particularly in the countries most affected by insecurity. I am referring to the gradual weakening of the dynamics of regional cooperation and to the calling into question of peace processes, particularly in Mali.

The current situation in the region should make us all question the choices made by the international community over the past decade. It invites us to draw lessons so that the next 10 years will not be a lost decade. Indeed, the people of the region will pay the highest price for those mistakes. This situation reminds us as well that there is no quick fix in the short term. Our immediate actions, therefore, must be part of a medium- and long-term approach to promote structural change for our West African societies.

In that regard, I would like to share with Council members some thoughts that my team in the Institute for Security Studies and I have been discussing on two of the trends I have just mentioned, namely, the growing insecurity and the management of military transitions, which we hope will be useful to Council members.

In the work conducted by the Institute for Security Studies, we have interviewed hundreds of people linked to terrorist groups in the affected countries of

the region, which has enabled us to establish that armed groups operating in the Sahel were already in 2012 obtaining supplies, primarily fuel, from some coastal countries and reselling stolen cattle or gold from illegal gold mining for financing purposes in certain coastal countries. That was long before terrorist attacks took place in those countries.

While reiterating the importance of continuing to invest in prevention, our work also shows that the current view in certain capitals that considers the Sahel to be lost and that the only thing left to do is to redirect efforts and resources to the coastal countries is misguided and incorrect and the repercussions of such thinking will have a lasting impact on the well-being of populations and on the security and stability of the region. We therefore must urgently rethink our responses, bearing in mind the connectivity and interdependence of those areas, and the multidimensional nature of the supply, financing and recruitment flows that fuel insecurity — a reality which the expression “spillover from the Sahel to the coast” does not do sufficient justice.

On the question of human resources, and to conclude with that first trend, I would like to stress the importance of anticipating the inevitable withdrawal of terrorist groups. I will explain. Sooner or later, people involved in or associated with terrorist groups active in the Sahel and coastal countries will try to leave them, as has been the case in the Lake Chad basin, where combatants from various Boko Haram factions have withdrawn following military victories by Governments in the region, dialogue processes, violent fighting between rival terrorist factions or simply because of they grew tired of violence.

States in the region, African subregional organizations and the United Nations should therefore start preparing for that possibility now. To do so, we must learn from the experiences — both positive and negative — of the disarmament, demobilization, repatriation, reintegration and resettlement processes in the countries of the Lake Chad basin. I am thinking in particular of calls for the withdrawal and coordination at the national and regional levels, addressing gender-specific issues and the needs of the community and the establishment of appropriate legal systems. Therefore, we must create additional spaces for exchanges where those experiences that have the potential to make a significant contribution to reducing conflicts in the region could be introduced, discussed, built upon and adjusted in different contexts.

Let me turn now to the second and last trend, namely, managing ongoing transitions.

Approximately 10 years ago, Mali, Burkina Faso, the Niger and Guinea were already in transition after such anti-constitutional changes of Government. That yo-yo effect and the fact in some of those countries those cycles are getting shorter and shorter means that we need to provide some kind of transition support, by adopting a preventive approach, to avoid the conditions for a subsequent coup d'état from being created. However, in order to optimize the results of ongoing transitions, we must look at their content by identifying the areas in which progress can be achieved, despite the context. To date, the Economic Community of West African States, the African Union, the United Nations and other external actors are at pains to put pressure on the military authorities to ensure those transitions are short and led by civilians. The military authorities in Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso have been in power for 40, 28 and 23 months, respectively. Those transitions, which have already been extended on numerous occasions, also seem to have become open-ended, with elections being postponed indefinitely. Perhaps the time has come for pragmatism.

That will require us to consider periods of democratic breakdown as periods full of challenges, certainly, and those challenges have been very clearly presented by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, but perhaps also as periods that offer certain opportunities. Those opportunities may be limited, but they must be identified and seized if we are to lay the foundations for addressing the fragilities that fuel recurrent insecurity and ensuring that there is no backsliding. That objective means that we must stay focused on the situation after the post-coup d'état elections and even reassess the preventive mechanisms that failed to avert the coups.

However, we must remember that the goal here is not to encourage lengthy military transitions. In a democracy, we all agree that the military's place is not in the presidential palace. A return to constitutional order must therefore remain a key objective, but it cannot be the only goal, nor the only criterion for success. I will stop here.

**The President** (*spoke in French*): I thank Ms. Thérroux-Bénoni for her briefing.

I shall now like to give the floor to those members of the Council who wish to make statements.

**Mr. Kanu** (Sierra Leone): I have the honour to deliver this statement on behalf of the African members of the Security Council plus one (A3+1), namely, Algeria, Guyana, Mozambique and my country, Sierra Leone.

Allow me to thank our briefers, Special Representative of the Secretary-General Leonardo Santos Simão and Ms. Lori-Anne Thérroux-Bénoni, for their important contributions.

The A3+1 welcomes the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) (S/2023/1075) and avails itself of the opportunity to commend the efforts of Mr. Leonardo Santos Simão in actively engaging with the countries of the region. We encourage and support his further efforts in the implementation of the UNOWAS mandate and sincerely thank him for his briefing to the Council today, as I already mentioned.

Since the last briefing to the Council (see S/PV.9384) and the renewal of the mandate of UNOWAS, we have seen the consolidation of democracy in Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, as well as the positive developments regarding transitional justice in the Gambia. We particularly wish to highlight the progress on women's representation and participation in the political space in Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone, with both countries implementing and exceeding the quotas in their affirmative action policies and legislations.

We underscore the need for countries undergoing political transition to adhere to their electoral timelines and ensure democratic consolidation and good governance, the rule of law, respect for human rights, gender equality, sustainable development and the inclusion of civil society in democratic processes. The A3+1 therefore welcomes the relevant and fruitful discussions on the issue of unconstitutional changes during the African Union (AU) High-Level Seminar on the promotion of Peace and Security in Africa, held on 17 and 18 December 2023, in Oran, Algeria.

We note that the referendum held in Mali in June 2023 set out a pathway for further efforts based on an inclusive process. We reiterate the centrality of the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, resulting from the Algiers process, and strongly urge all signatory parties to resume dialogue and commit to the implementation of the Agreement. We also call on Mali to remain engaged with regional organizations, such as the Economic Community of West African

States (ECOWAS) and the African Union, in order to realize peace and stability in Mali.

The A3+1 welcomes the revitalization of the Nouakchott process and reaffirms the importance of coordination of all efforts at regional and subregional levels, especially in the fight against terrorism and organized crime in the Sahel and other regions. In that regard, the A3+1 would like to underscore the roles of the African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism, the Committee of Intelligence and Security Service of Africa, the African Union Mechanism for Police Cooperation, the Joint Military Staff Committee and the Accra initiative.

We commend the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for his efforts to alleviate pre- and post-election tensions in Liberia and Sierra Leone, respectively, and call for the implementation of all agreed outcome documents. We are also encouraged by the individual visits of the Special Representative to two of the A3+1 countries, namely, Sierra Leone and Algeria, to address and develop solutions for sustainable consultative dialogue and pathways to development.

However, the A3+1 continues to express grave concern over the security situation in the region, especially in the Sahelian countries, where the occupation of territories by terrorist and criminal armed groups are leading to an increase in displacement and a deterioration in the humanitarian situation.

We further note with concern the growing disengagement with ECOWAS and the security vacuum created by the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). We also take note of the dissolution of the Group of Five for the Sahel. While taking this opportunity to strongly reaffirm our respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of all countries of the region, we call on those countries to engage in dialogue with ECOWAS in a bid to create inclusive solutions to the issues that affect the region.

Against that background, we would like to make several key observations.

First, on the political situation, we regret the rising political tensions caused by the shift from democratic to unconstitutional change of Government in some countries in the region. We encourage all countries to fulfil their obligations under regional arrangements such as the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and

Good Governance and the Lomé Declaration on the framework for an Organization of African Unity response to unconstitutional changes of Government, premised on a participatory approach to governance, including youth, women and all relevant stakeholders.

We welcome the commitment of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and his team, in close collaboration with regional stakeholders, to implement the decisions in the communiqué of the sixty-fourth ordinary meeting of the Authority of Heads of State and Government of ECOWAS, held on 10 December 2023.

We reiterate the need for the current transitional authorities to restore constitutional order while reiterating the need for continuous engagement between the United Nations, the AU and ECOWAS so as to ensure the required support for enhancing governance and the rule of law in those countries.

Secondly, on the security situation, we regret the growing incidence of terrorism and violent extremism in West Africa and the Sahel. The spread of terrorism from the Sahel to coastal States remains a major concern. We continue to unwaveringly condemn attacks by terrorist and violent extremist groups against civilians and security personnel in the region and pay tribute to those who lost their lives in those attacks. With the closure of MINUSMA, we urge coordinated action with the neighbouring countries in order to minimize any further adverse security impact on Mali and the region. The role of subregional and regional organizations, as well as UNOWAS and other United Nations agencies, therefore becomes even more critical in that context.

We note with concern the shrinking of civic and political space in the region and urge the scaling up of preventive mechanisms and diplomatic mediation measures to address that problem.

We are also seriously concerned about the reported upward trajectory of maritime insecurity incidents in the Gulf of Guinea, following years of decreased instances of piracy and armed robbery at sea. In that regard, we urge cooperation and collaboration in the implementation of the frameworks to address maritime insecurity in the Gulf of Guinea, including resolution 2634 (2022).

Thirdly, we regret the dire humanitarian situation in the region, particularly in the central Sahel areas.

The A3+1 calls for the attention of the international community on the situation which, according to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, has left more than 26.1 million people in the Sahel region in need of humanitarian assistance and protection in 2023 — a 24 per cent increase from the previous year. We are deeply concerned that reportedly 5.3 million people in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Niger are food insecure as of December 2023, while 1.8 million children in the region suffer from acute malnutrition.

Furthermore, school closures caused by insecurity have left children exposed to the risks of sexual exploitation and recruitment by terrorist and criminal armed groups. We continue to call for donor partners to prioritize the implementation of humanitarian response plans for countries in West Africa and the Sahel by helping to meet the \$3.5 billion target required to tackle the increasing humanitarian needs, of which only 36 per cent had been received as of December 2023.

On climate change and its adverse implications for the region, we reiterate the firm belief that the prevailing crises in the region are aggravated by that phenomenon, which has led displacement and competition over declining natural resources, for example between farmers and herders. We welcome progress made in the implementation of the Dakar Call to Action on climate change, peace and security, which calls for the United Nations system, including UNOWAS, United Nations country teams, the Climate Security Mechanism and ECOWAS, to continue working with regional and national partners to support regional Governments in that field.

We urge a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes and takes equal cognizance of the socioeconomic challenges in West Africa and the Sahel. That requires support to address the governance and development deficits and commitment to building a national consensus that will ensure meaningful participation by women and youth in decision-making and governance processes.

In conclusion, the A3+1 is prepared to engage with fellow Council members towards the issuance of a presidential statement on UNOWAS, given the significant developments in the subregion and the importance of the Council adopting a consensus approach to the relevant issues, as well as in order to demonstrate full support to the Special Representative's mandate.

**Mrs. Baeriswyl** (Switzerland) (*spoke in French*): I would like to welcome the Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Mr. Leonardo Santos Simão, for his briefing and the valuable work of his Office. I also thank Ms. Lori-Anne Thérroux-Bénoni for her briefing and valuable information.

I am encouraged by the signs of continued strengthening of democratic governance and the positive advances in transitional justice in some of the region's countries. My colleague from Sierra Leone has just mentioned a few such advances. However, today's briefing underlines that the security situation, particularly in the Sahel, remains worrisome. In addition, humanitarian needs continue to grow. On the political front, some transitional processes towards a return to constitutional order are not progressing as planned, and we faced a new coup d'état and several attempts in 2023.

According to the Charter of the United Nations, the Security Council is mandated to take measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace. Prevention is the most effective way to avoid new conflicts and the escalation of existing crises. That is why the Secretary-General placed great emphasis on prevention in his new agenda for peace.

Given the importance of stability and prosperity in West Africa and the Sahel, several areas require urgent preventive action by the international community in order to avoid another lost decade and to, instead, create a decade of opportunity.

First, in terms of governance, specifically through inclusive elections, a large number of elections took place in West Africa in 2023, most of them peaceful. In Nigeria, Switzerland supported national partners in reducing electoral violence during the campaign periods and elections, enabling a peaceful outcome. We also welcome the progress made in increasing women's representation in political bodies following the elections in Côte d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone. We support the Secretary-General's call to promote and implement legislation on women's empowerment and gender equality. We are also pleased that the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) is providing support to Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Mauritania, Senegal and Togo ahead of their elections this year. That important work includes institution-building, the promotion of democratic governance and general electoral processes and cycles.



Secondly, the security situation remains fragile in some regions, with recurring attacks on the civilian population by armed jihadist groups. With the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali and the dissolution of the Group of Five for the Sahel, the Security Council needs to pay more attention to the region. Now is not the time to disengage. It is crucial to better combine multinational, regional and bilateral commitments in order to mitigate the risk of a deeper regional crisis. That must be done in close collaboration with the African Union and subregional organizations.

Thirdly, we continue to witness a humanitarian crisis exacerbated by instability, conflict, forced displacement and climate change. The ever-increasing humanitarian needs, coupled with shrinking resources and challenges to access, often stemming from insecurity, are negatively affecting the peoples of the region. According to the Secretary-General's report (S/2023/1075), more than 26 million people in the Sahel require vital assistance, but the humanitarian response plan is funded to only 36 per cent. Switzerland has contributed to the plan, for example, by ensuring the food and nutritional needs of more than 1 million people in Mali in 2023.

Finally, climate change and its consequences for security in West Africa and the Sahel are a reality that cannot be ignored, and the region suffers disproportionately from them. As we highlighted during the press stakeout that preceded this briefing, Switzerland welcomes the progress made by UNOWAS in implementing the Dakar Call to Action. Ensuring the continued analysis of climate security risks and improving understanding of the link between climate and peace and security must be an integral part of measures towards a sustainable peace. That is especially important in order to help the most vulnerable countries adapt to the effects of climate change.

The Security Council must take seriously its responsibility to engage in preventive action. It must support the United Nations effectively in applying the full range of diplomatic, humanitarian, sustainable development and peacebuilding tools. As co-penholder, together with Sierra Leone, Switzerland will be intensifying its efforts to ensure the adoption of a draft presidential statement underlining the Council's strong interest in the region. In that regard, both Sierra Leone and Switzerland reiterate our joint support for the important work of UNOWAS in all areas of its mandate.

**Mr. Wood** (United States of America): I thank Special Representative Simão and Ms. Thérroux-Bénoni for their briefings.

The United States remains gravely concerned about the democratic backsliding across the region and strongly supports the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) and its instrumental role in preventing and mitigating conflict, addressing election-related crises and promoting inclusive dialogue processes in the region. We recognize the continued efforts of UNOWAS to help promote and sustain democratic processes.

The UNOWAS mandate is now even more important considering the drawdown of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). It is critical that the transition Government of Mali fully cooperate with the United Nations to ensure a safe and orderly liquidation of MINUSMA. That includes fully respecting its continuing obligations under the status-of-forces agreement. We strongly support the continuation of United Nations good offices in Mali and its support to mediation, the Algiers peace process and the political transition. We encourage the United Nations to continue working closely with the transition Government and to swiftly recommend an appropriate transfer of specific tasks formerly assigned to MINUSMA to UNOWAS and the United Nations country team.

We regret the dissolution of the Group of Five for the Sahel (G5 Sahel) owing to the withdrawal of Mali, Burkina Faso and the Niger. While we continue to support the Secretary-General's recommendation to terminate the reporting obligation on MINUSMA's support to the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel, we firmly believe that that should be balanced by an increase in the number of UNOWAS reports that the Security Council receives per year. The Council needs more, not less, visibility on a region that, as the Secretary-General notes, requires fresh approaches to its complex security threats and development needs.

The United States recognizes and appreciates the release of Salem Bazoum. We look forward to progress on the release of former President of the Niger Bazoum and others unjustly detained following the military coup d'état. We encourage negotiations between the Niger's National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and we look forward to an agreement

with actionable items for a quick and credible timeline to usher in democratic governance in the Niger and restore peaceful cooperation between the Niger and its neighbours. We welcome Sierra Leone's membership on the Council, applaud its actions to implement the terms of the Agreement for National Unity and support the speedy progression on that important process. We also want to underscore the need for United Nations Resident Coordinators in Burkina Faso and the Niger. Resident Coordinators lead the United Nations work to support development efforts and are vital to the delivery of much-needed humanitarian assistance to support all people.

We remain deeply concerned about the growing instability in coastal West Africa, exacerbated by internal political tensions and terrorism and violent extremism in the Sahel, which remains an epicentre globally for terrorism-related deaths. Terrorists know no borders, and instability in the Sahel cannot be addressed effectively without collaboration among States in the region. We look forward to the Secretary-General's African Counter-Terrorism Summit in Abuja, where we can discuss enduring solutions to those shared threats.

We cannot ignore the fact that the Wagner Group is committing human rights abuses and endangering the safety and security of civilians, peacekeepers and United Nations personnel. Its presence and operations are inhibiting the work of the United Nations and not only failing to address the immediate terrorist and violent extremist threat but also exacerbating popular grievances, contributing to the likelihood that that threat will grow.

Finally, the United States calls on the members of the Security Council to reinvigorate collective action to support our African partners in addressing the problems that cross borders. We applaud the efforts by the United Nations, UNOWAS, the African Union and ECOWAS to support the region and would support a draft presidential statement to reaffirm the Council's commitment to UNOWAS and West African security.

**Mr. Hwang** (Republic of Korea): I extend my gratitude to Special Representative Simão and Ms. Theroux-Benoni for their informative briefings today.

At the outset, in the light of the recent withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the

Republic of Korea commends the dedication of MINUSMA personnel, who tirelessly executed their mandate amid challenging conditions.

We also appreciate the work and efforts of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) and its active engagement in the region, particularly in executing its good offices and building bridges among regional and subregional organizations — the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in particular — and Governments of the region.

As the Secretary-General pointed out in his report (S/2023/1075), West Africa and the Sahel is a fast-evolving region with heightened political tensions and instability. The region faces overlapping challenges of violent extremism, trafficking, transnational organized crime and the adverse impacts of climate change, thereby aggravating an already dire humanitarian situation. In the light of those circumstances, I would like to emphasize three points.

First, establishing strong and inclusive democratic governance is essential to bringing about stability in the region. The Republic of Korea applauds the progress made in Liberia and the Gambia, where elections and transitional justice reforms were conducted peacefully. However, the slow restoration of constitutional order by the transitional Governments of several countries in West Africa and the Sahel are deeply concerning. We urge all countries undergoing political transitions to adhere to a timely return to constitutional order in collaboration with the Economic Community of West African States following its December summit. We expect UNOWAS to continue to play a significant role in that regard. Throughout the process, civic space and the full and meaningful participation of women should be ensured at all levels.

Secondly, widespread insecurity in the region remains deeply concerning. According to the 2023 Global Terrorism Index report, the Sahel is among the most affected regions globally, witnessing a twentyfold surge in terrorism-related deaths over the past 15 years. In recent months, heightened insecurity has been observed in the central Sahel countries, particularly against the backdrop of the withdrawal of MINUSMA and the disbanding of the Group of Five for the Sahel and its Joint Force.

That situation poses an imminent risk of insecurity spreading to the coastal States of West Africa. It is

important that the international community keep a close eye on the region to prevent a security vacuum and seek new and effective approaches to address security threats and terrorism. Therefore, it is imperative for the Security Council to sustain its continued engagement in the region.

The Republic of Korea encourages the countries of the region to strengthen cooperation and welcomes increased regional security coordination through initiatives such as the Accra Initiative. At the same time, in any military operation addressing insecurity, human rights and international humanitarian law should be strictly adhered to.

Thirdly, the humanitarian situation remains dire, with over 30 million people in urgent need of life-saving assistance in the Sahel. Addressing the root causes of conflict requires a comprehensive approach within the humanitarian, development and peace nexus and with a focus on prevention. The Republic of Korea has supported peacebuilding projects totalling \$20 million dollars over the past few years to the countries of the Sahel to help them build resilience against fragility. In that regard, Korea supports close collaboration between the Peacebuilding Commission and the Security Council.

In addition, climate change exacerbates existing vulnerabilities, further jeopardizing peace and security in the region. UNOWAS is uniquely placed to comprehensively address that transboundary challenge with wide-ranging partnerships. The Republic of Korea encourages its collaboration with the countries in the region, regional organizations, relevant United Nations entities, international financial institutions, the private sector and civil society. We also emphasize the need to continue and increase support for relevant expertise to the mission, including through a climate and security adviser.

In conclusion, the Republic of Korea reaffirms its unwavering support for the work of Special Representative Simão, UNOWAS and regional organizations in consolidating peace in West Africa and the Sahel. We also join the three African members of the Security Council — namely, Algeria, Mozambique and Sierra Leone, as well as Guyana — Switzerland and other members in calling for the adoption of a draft presidential statement to underscore our support for UNOWAS' mission.

**Mr. Dai Bing** (China) (*spoke in Chinese*): I thank Special Representative Simão and Ms. Thérroux-Bénoni for their briefings.

Since last year, the countries of West Africa and the Sahel have made considerable efforts to maintain peace and stability in the region. China is pleased to see that Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire successfully completed their elections, while Senegal and Togo are fully engaged in political dialogues that have yielded positive results.

However, the situation in the region continues to face multiple difficulties and challenges. The political situation in some countries remains volatile, with growing social tensions internally. This year, general elections are scheduled in several countries in West Africa. The political transitions and peace processes in Mali, the Niger and other countries have entered a critical phase.

China supports the countries of the region in bridging their internal differences through political dialogue so as to create conditions for peace and reconciliation. It is important to bring confidence and hope to the people through improved governance and strengthened State authority. The international community should support the countries of the region in independently choosing their own path of development, in accordance with their own national conditions. The imposition of external governance models and the attempt at democratic transformation has proven to be of no value when it comes to addressing the root causes of unrest and, in some cases, has led to new chaos.

China supports the constructive role that the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) continues to play in regional affairs. Efforts by the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) to support the political and peace processes in Mali and other countries should be carried out in line with the will of the countries concerned, while forming synergies with those deployed by ECOWAS.

Countries in West Africa and the Sahel have long been at the forefront of the international counter-terrorism struggle. Other countries, including the Niger, Mali, Nigeria and Burkina Faso, have been proactive in countering terrorism and maintaining stability and have made tremendous efforts and sacrifices in doing so. At its summit held last month, ECOWAS reaffirmed its commitment to accelerating the deployment of the regional standby forces and to conducting joint

counter-terrorism operations. Those efforts deserve our recognition.

However, at the same time, extremist and terrorist forces remain rampant, while cooperation on counter-terrorism in the Sahel region finds itself in a difficult situation at the moment. In the face of common challenges, the countries of the region should uphold the vision of common security, close ranks on counter-terrorism operations and fortify each and every link in the chain along the counter-terrorism front. The international community should take stock of the lessons learned in the past and, through a more pragmatic and effective approach, support the countries of the region in upgrading their counter-terrorism capacities and revitalizing regional counter-terrorism cooperation without delay.

Since last year, the countries in the region have been facing multiple challenges, such as slowing economic growth, high inflation, food insecurity and humanitarian crises. Those problems are acute in some countries, and their negative impact on the political and security situation must not be ignored. The report of the Secretary-General (S/2023/1075) calls for greater attention to those issues and for a holistic approach to addressing the root causes of conflict.

UNOWAS should strengthen its coordination with the relevant country teams, take an integrated approach to tasks related to peace and development and support the United Nations Support Plan for the Sahel and the Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy for Areas Affected by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region in order to achieve tangible results in the region. Meanwhile, the international community should provide financial and technical support to the countries of the region in terms of infrastructure development, employment and income generation with a view to enhancing people's livelihoods.

Through bilateral and multilateral cooperation under the framework of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation and the Global Development Initiative, China has been providing support to countries in the region to enhance capacity-building and towards achieving inclusive and sustainable development, which will help to gradually build the foundations for lasting peace and stability. China's Foreign Minister, Mr. Wang Yi, will visit the region next week, where he will pay a friendly visit to Togo and Côte d'Ivoire. The visit is a continuation of our good tradition over the

past 34 years wherein the Chinese Foreign Minister's first visit abroad in the new year will be to Africa and forms part of China's contribution to promoting peace and stability in the region.

**Mrs. Frazier** (Malta): I thank Special Representative Simão and Ms. Théroux-Bénoni for their insightful briefings today.

Malta welcomes the report of the Secretary-General (S/2023/1075) and expresses its gratitude to Special Representative Simão and the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) for their efforts in promoting democratic processes and mitigating crises in an evolving region.

We welcome the elections held in Nigeria, Liberia and Guinea-Bissau in 2023. Notably, we recognize the increased representation of women in political and appointed positions in Benin, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire, following their recent elections. Looking ahead to 2024, we anticipate elections in Senegal, Mauritania and Ghana. We call for free, fair and transparent electoral processes that allow for all eligible citizens to participate as voters, candidates and observers. For those countries under transitional Government rule, we urge them to commit to realistic plans of transition and to return to constitutional order without delay. Specifically, we reiterate our strong call for the immediate and unconditional release of President Mohamed Bazoum of the Niger, and we support the way forward proposed at the sixty-fourth ordinary summit of ECOWAS Heads of State and Government, held in December 2023, for the restoration of constitutional order in the country. On that note, we reaffirm our support for ECOWAS under Nigeria's current chairmanship as it continues to uphold accountability, while offering technical advice and support for transitional processes.

The dire humanitarian situation, compounded by other drivers of conflict, such as political instability, violent extremism and climate change, demands our urgent attention. The resulting large-scale displacement of populations in the region is extremely worrisome. We pay tribute to the humanitarian aid workers and journalists killed in the region, as well as those who persevere despite relentless challenges, including due to a shrinking civic space. We reiterate our call for strengthened protection for those in vulnerable situations, especially women and girls facing gender- and sexual-based violence, and children, who face heightened risks of recruitment, severe acute

malnutrition, lack of education, owing to school closures, and armed conflict. As signatories of the statement of joint pledges related to climate, peace and security, Malta recognizes the pivotal role of risk assessments and preventive measures in addressing climate-adverse impacts in the region. We fully support that pillar in the work of UNOWAS and encourage further collaboration with relevant subregional forums.

Malta would like to take this opportunity to highlight the situation in Mali, particularly following the closure of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali at the request of the Malian transition Government. The international community must continue to play its part in supporting and safeguarding the well-being of the Malian people, as the country is seeing a surge in terrorist attacks and hostilities among the parties to the Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali. We call on the transition Government to openly engage with the United Nations system and to define a new role for UNOWAS and the United Nations country team in transferring the Mission's tasks.

In conclusion, Malta believes in the power of transforming challenges into opportunities in West Africa and the Sahel, a region that holds great potential. It is for that reason that Malta supports increased reporting by the Secretary-General, supplemented by briefings to the Security Council on the region's multidimensional challenges. Our collective goal to overcome the challenges should also lead Council members to adopt the pending draft presidential statement under this item.

**Mr. Kariuki** (United Kingdom): I am grateful to Special Representative of the Secretary-General Simão and Ms Théroux-Bénoni for their briefings.

Let me make four points — on security, democracy, climate change and humanitarian needs.

First, as we heard, security across the Sahel is deteriorating. The United Kingdom is particularly concerned about the situation in Mali, where the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) has a crucial role after the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). We encourage UNOWAS, through its good offices, to help bring all signatories to the 2015 Algiers Accord back to the negotiating table. The United Kingdom welcomes ECOWAS' contributions to regional security and

supports the potential of the Accra Initiative. We also stand ready to support the region and the United Nations for the upcoming African Counter-Terrorism Summit. We reiterate that the region's security challenges are only exacerbated by the destabilizing chaos of the Russian mercenary Wagner Group.

Secondly, democracy is under pressure. Timelines for the restoration of constitutional Governments in Mali, Burkina Faso and Guinea continue to slip. We echo ECOWAS' calls for a return to constitutional order, and we encourage a recommitment to transition timetables. We call on the Niger to agree a transition timeline with ECOWAS, and urge for adherence to an inclusive and transparent transition in Chad. The United Kingdom congratulates Liberia on its recent peaceful transfer of power and welcomes the Peacebuilding Commission's role in supporting the process. We urge for redoubled efforts on UNOWAS' regional work to prevent election-related tensions.

Thirdly, the Security Council has recognized the adverse effects of climate change on security and stability in the region. We welcome UNOWAS' work in the climate-security nexus. The United Kingdom is supporting work in the region to build the resilience of those most vulnerable to climate change.

Fourthly, the humanitarian situation remains dire. Since 2019, United Kingdom aid has supported more than 15 million people in the Sahel with life-saving assistance, but humanitarian needs are still going unmet. We call on all actors to ensure safe and unimpeded access for humanitarian assistance.

In conclusion, in the light of the regional challenges that we have all brought up today, we should recommit to even closer work with UNOWAS and the regional organizations. We join others in calling for a draft presidential statement to reflect that commitment.

**Mr. Žbogar** (Slovenia): At the outset, I would like to thank Special Representative of the Secretary-General Simão and Ms. Théroux-Bénoni for their briefings and insights. Allow me to express my country's unequivocal support for the work of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS). We particularly welcome the Special Representative's good offices across the region. The Office's work in conflict prevention, mediation and advocacy has shown itself to be more important than ever.

I would like to reflect upon some important elements emphasized by today's briefers.

First, with regard to the importance of democracy, our own story of transition to a democratic society informs our understanding of the challenges that our partners in West Africa face in their efforts to consolidate democratic processes. But it is also our own experience that attests to how integral the support of regional and international partners is to ensuring that the road to transition is a successful one. Close coordination among UNOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States and the countries in transition processes is crucial for a timely return to constitutional order in compliance with the agreed commitments.

A great level of caution should be attributed the shrinking civic and political space in some parts of the region. Giving voices to all segments of society is key to building the trust necessary to sustain peace. We encourage the Governments and political parties in the region to embrace inclusive political dialogue, with the full, equal, safe and meaningful participation of women and youth. We value the insights of the Special Representative on good practices in Cote d'Ivoire and Sierra Leone and commend UNOWAS for its work on gender mainstreaming in electoral processes and the implementation of the Council's resolutions on women and peace and security in the region.

Secondly, concerning insecurity in the Sahel, unprecedented levels of insecurity and instability, exacerbated by the threat of terrorist and violent extremist groups and intercommunal violence, are a matter of great concern for us. With the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, it is essential that the Council consider reinforcing the United Nations efforts through UNOWAS and the United Nations country team. Now is not the time to turn a blind eye to the region, but a time to invest in prevention, peacebuilding and regional stabilization. We agree with the briefers that counter-terrorism efforts must go hand in hand with long-term investments in resilient societies and institutions. Slovenia denounces violations of international humanitarian and human rights law in counter-terrorism operations and calls for the investigation and accountability of all actors involved. In order to help to prevent the spillover of insecurity from the Sahel to the coastal States, about which we also heard today from the briefers, the European Union launched a new security and defence initiative

in support of the countries of the Gulf of Guinea. We also recognize the interconnectedness of the security situation in North Africa and the Sahel.

Thirdly, violence and the effects of climate change lead to dire food and water insecurity, waterborne diseases, forced displacement and a deepening of the humanitarian crisis for millions of people in the Central Sahel. Slovenia is alarmed by the impact of such struggles on the recruitment of children by armed groups, abductions of girls, school closures and sexual and gender-based violence. The region urgently needs our increased attention on the impact of climate change on peace and security. That need was reaffirmed in the landmark declaration on climate security recently adopted at the Sahel Climate, Peace and Security Forum in Bamako.

That leads me to my final point today. Experience from the region shows that only long-term engagement on the humanitarian, development and peace nexus can lead to durable solutions, which must be rooted in conflict-sensitive investments in sustainable development and unquestionable respect for human rights and human dignity. Slovenia joins other members in recognizing the work of UNOWAS in that regard, and we support the appeal of the African members of the Security Council and Guyana for a new draft presidential statement that would show the Council's support for the region and for the efforts of Mr. Simão's team.

**Mr. Montalvo Sosa** (Ecuador) (*spoke in Spanish*): I thank Special Representative Santos Simão and Ms. Thérroux-Bénoni for their informative briefings this morning. I would also like to thank the Secretariat for the detailed report on the latest developments in the region (S/2023/1075).

I would like briefly to touch on three main points: institutions, security and the humanitarian consequences of insecurity.

First, Ecuador believes that solid and stable institutions are crucial in order to improve the living conditions of the population and to effectively address the root causes of violence. In recent years, in the region, the breakdown in constitutional order has worsened, and the civic and political space has been reduced, with no reduction in violence or any improvement in living conditions. It is clear that instability is detrimental to security and development. We condemn any attempt to disturb the constitutional order and, in particular,

the coup d'état carried out in the Niger in July 2023. We join those who have called for a rapid return to democratic order. Ecuador congratulates the important steps taken towards consolidating their democratic processes and institutions by holding peaceful elections in recent months, particularly Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia. Furthermore, Ecuador values and supports the efforts of the Economic Community of West African States to restore constitutional order in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and the Niger. We must reiterate our call to honour the agreed commitments and respect the established time frames.

Secondly, regarding security, we are following with concern the continued deterioration of the security situation in the Central Sahel, particularly in Burkina Faso, the Niger and Mali, and the persistent danger of the spread of terrorist violence to the south. Ecuador reiterates its unequivocal condemnation of all acts of terrorism and its solidarity with the victims of violence, while recalling that, in combating terrorism, States must always respect international law, international humanitarian law, refugee law and international human rights law. The role of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) in the region is of vital importance. Therefore, in the case of Mali, we call on the Security Council to continue to coordinate with that regional body on the situation in the country once the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali has completed its work. The dissolution of initiatives such as the Group of Five for the Sahel is worrisome. Terrorism is a scourge that transcends borders and therefore requires international cooperation, which is why we appreciate the efforts being made in that regard. It is also necessary to continue efforts to maintain maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea.

Thirdly and finally, I would like to mention the humanitarian consequences of insecurity. In all contexts of violence, the most vulnerable sectors are disproportionately affected — women, young people, children and the elderly. The situation in the Sahel is no exception. Of particular concern is the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance, which reached 6.1 million in 2023 — a 24 per cent increase as compared to 2022. Ecuador reiterates its support for the work of the African Union, UNOWAS and the entire United Nations system, which makes it possible to mitigate humanitarian needs and plays a key role in coordinating with Governments, always bearing in

mind the principle of national ownership at all levels. The joint work of the countries of the region is essential to addressing the root causes of violence, thereby interrupting the vicious circle of discontent, moving towards development and building sustainable peace.

**Ms. Evstigneeva** (Russian Federation) (*spoke in Russian*): We thank Special Representative Simão for his briefing on the current state of affairs in the region and the activities of his Office in the past year. We also closely followed Ms. Théroux-Bénoni's remarks.

The situation in the Sahelo-Saharan region is not improving. First of all, that is because of the growing terrorist threat. The increasing combat capacity of the Islamic State in West Africa Province complicates the security situation in the countries of the Chad basin. The situation remains tense in north-eastern Nigeria and in Chad, where the authorities must not only address the problems of combating jihadists but also deal with the numerous refugees from neighbouring Sudan and their own internal issues. Terrorist organizations in the Sahel gradually expand their area of operation towards the Gulf of Guinea, including Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Togo.

The border areas of Mali, Burkina Faso and the Niger, located in the so-called Liptako-Gurma triangle, remain the epicentre of the tensions. Jihadists from the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara and the Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) are becoming more active. On 26 November 2023, a large JNIM formation attempted to seize a village in Djibo, in northern Burkina Faso. On 3 December 2023, fighters from both organizations launched a coordinated attack on military garrisons in four Malian towns in eastern and central regions.

Achieving long-term stability requires the international community's collective support for Mali, Burkina Faso and the Niger, which are at the forefront of countering trans-African terrorist groups. We welcome their coordinated efforts towards combating terrorists. We believe that it is destructive that external players persist in trying to topple the unwanted transitional leadership of those countries, including through the use of leverage in the region. It is important for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to establish a dialogue with the three States, overcome internal contradictions and address common threats in the region. We hope that the Community's lifting of the travel ban on the authorities

of Sahelian States will finally lead to the establishment of long-awaited cooperation in the region without the use of ultimatums and sanctions. We are particularly alarmed by the humanitarian situation in the Niger, and we believe that restoring economic ties is important both for the population of the country itself and for its neighbours in the region.

We are of the view that the leading role in maintaining peace and security in the Sahelo-Saharan region should be played by the States of the region themselves. In that context, we believe that the policy of comprehensive integration adopted by the authorities of Mali, Burkina Faso and the Niger is justified; an important element of that policy was the conclusion of an agreement among those States on mutual security obligations on 16 September 2023. The increased cooperation among the three Sahelian States is already yielding positive results. Their armed forces are conducting effective joint counter-terrorism operations. For Mali, a landmark event was the restoration of control over the city of Kidal. That result was achieved by the Malian military in the difficult context of the drawdown of the activities of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali and the dissolution of the Group of Five for the Sahel.

At the same time, it is important that the transitional authorities in Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali be committed to their obligations to comply with the agreed time frames for a return to constitutional order. Nonetheless, we understand the need to postpone the elections in Mali for technical reasons, from early 2024 to a later date. We note Bamako's efforts to conduct political and institutional reforms and adopt a new constitution.

The completion of the transitional period in these States must take place without imposing foreign prescriptions and must be based on sober and realistic assessments of the situation. Those are the principles that guide our country in providing bilateral assistance to those who require it. We believe that it is unnecessary to establish additional reporting on the situation in the Sahel or in its individual countries. We believe that the Secretary-General's reports on UNOWAS sufficiently cover the problems of the region at this stage. We support the activities of the Office in that regard.

For our part, we will continue to make a constructive contribution to the international community's efforts to achieve stability in the Sahelo-Saharan region. We will

continue to provide assistance to the Sahelian States on a bilateral and multilateral basis, including in the areas of enhancing the military capabilities of the national armed forces, training military and law enforcement personnel and providing humanitarian aid.

**Ms. Shino (Japan)** : I thank Special Representative of the Secretary-General Simão and Ms. Théroux-Béroni for their briefings.

Japan applauds the continued laudable work of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS). As we see persisting challenges in West Africa and the Sahel, UNOWAS's good offices and its work enhancing regional cooperation and promoting good governance, the rule of law, human rights and gender mainstreaming remain as important as ever. In that regard, it is high time for the Security Council to speak with one voice to support UNOWAS's mission through the adoption of a draft presidential statement.

For sustainable peace and stability in the region, Japan emphasizes again the centrality of democracy and good governance. We welcome some positive political developments in the region, including the conducting of a peaceful election in Liberia. At the same time, the region continues to be marked by heightening political tensions, shrinking civic and political space, and instability, such as the military takeover in the Niger last July. A timely and swift return to constitutional order in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali and the Niger is pivotal, and Japan encourages UNOWAS and the United Nations country teams to assist in that endeavour.

Further deterioration of the security situation in the region is gravely worrisome, as is its spillover effect to the littoral States of the Gulf of Guinea. Japan notes with concern the upsurge in clashes and violence in Mali and its impact on civilians in the wake of the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). In combating terrorism and violent extremism, Japan commends the concerted efforts by regional partners, including through the Accra Initiative and the Multinational Joint Task Force. As MINUSMA has completed its withdrawal, Japan takes this opportunity to applaud the dedication shown by its leadership and personnel over the past decade.

Continued insecurity is worsening the already dire human rights and humanitarian situation. Japan deplores the closure of many hospitals and schools. The closure of the latter not only robs children of their right



to education but leaves them vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups and to sexual exploitation. We must also tackle the adverse effects of climate change and environmental degradation, which are compounding the existing vulnerabilities.

In tackling the multiplying and deepening challenges the region is facing, adopting a humanitarian-development-peace nexus approach is essential. Inclusiveness is also key, while reflecting the voices of various actors, including women and youth, who are the most affected. For its part, Japan will continue to support the region, placing human security at the centre of our efforts.

Lastly, given MINUSMA's withdrawal and the announcement of the decision to dissolve the Group of Five for the Sahel, the Council is expected to have fewer opportunities to discuss the Sahel region. However, considering the challenges the region faces, now is not the time for the Council to lessen its attention and visibility, but remain actively engaged. Japan stands ready to work constructively with our fellow Council members to find the best way forward.

**The President** (*spoke in French*): I shall now make a statement in my capacity as the representative of France.

I thank the Special Representative and Ms. Thérèse Bénoni for their briefings.

West Africa and the Sahel faced a number of challenges over the past year, including political crises, the breakdown of constitutional order in the Niger and the departure of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali under difficult conditions after a 10-year presence. France has a particular concern for the populations made vulnerable by those situations, and in particular for the 26 million people in need of humanitarian assistance.

However, there have been some positive developments, notably in Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia, where elections were held in a transparent, inclusive and peaceful manner, with a significant increase in women's participation. In the Gambia, efforts have been made to set up a Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission.

France salutes the mobilization of the Economic Community of West African States, which is working tirelessly to promote democracy and a return to constitutional order in all the countries where it has been undermined. It encourages the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel to continue its work in support of regional organization to promote the rule of law, good governance and human rights.

National political situations should not blind us to the cross-cutting threats that continue to affect West Africa. I would in particular mention terrorism, maritime insecurity, food insecurity and climate change — challenges that we must tackle collectively. The declaration made by the Council members that signed the climate, peace and security pledge at the start of this meeting attests to that.

On all those aspects, France will continue to collaborate with those regional actors wishing to do so, within a framework respectful of international law and the Charter of the United Nations, and to advocate for the Council to remain seized of the matter.

I now resume my functions as President of the Council.

There are no more names inscribed on the list of speakers. I now invite Council members to brief informal consultations to continue our discussion on the subject.

*The meeting rose at 11.40 a.m.*