

# **Violent Conflicts and Civil Strife in West Africa: Causes, Challenges and Prospects**

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Violent Conflicts and Civil Strife in West Africa: Causes, Challenges and Prospects

Nancy Annan\*

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The advent of intra-state conflicts or 'new wars' in West Africa has brought many of its economies to the brink of collapse, creating humanitarian casualties and concerns. For decades, countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Bissau were crippled by conflicts and civil strife in which violence and incessant killings were prevalent. While violent conflicts are declining in the sub-region, recent insurgencies in the Sahel region affecting the West African countries of Mali, Niger and Mauritania and low intensity conflicts surging within notably stable countries such as Ghana, Nigeria and Senegal sends alarming signals of the possible re-surfacing of internal and regional violent conflicts. These conflicts are often hinged on several factors including poverty, human rights violations, bad governance and corruption, ethnic marginalization and small arms proliferation. Although many actors including the ECOWAS, civil society and international community have been making efforts, conflicts continue to persist in the sub-region and their resolution is often protracted. This paper posits that the poor understanding of the fundamental causes of West Africa's violent conflicts and civil strife would likely cause the sub-region to continue experiencing and suffering the brunt of these violent wars.

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## Introduction

The transformation from inter-state to intra-state conflict from the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century in West Africa brought a number of its economies to near collapse. As a result, the sub-region's security environment has often been viewed as one that continues to be precarious and unstable. Although conflicts are not always violent, those that have plagued West Africa at community, state and regional levels have been characterized by violence (Afisi 2009: 59–66). For decades, countries such as Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and Guinea-Bissau were crippled by conflicts and civil strife in which violence and incessant killings were prevalent (Afolabi 2009:

24). While violent conflicts are declining in the sub-region, recent insurgencies in the Sahel region affecting the West African countries of Mali, Niger and Mauritania sends alarming signals of the possible re-surfacing of internal and regional violent conflicts. More critical to add is the low intensity conflicts surging within notably stable countries such as the Casamance conflict in Senegal, the intermittent Dagbon chieftaincy crisis in Ghana and the Niger Delta conflict in Nigeria to name a few (Olonisakin 2011: 11–26). These conflicts have resulted in the 'destruction of lives and property, the internal displacement of people, a region-wide refugee crisis, poverty and disease, the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, human and drug trafficking, illegal exploitation of natural resources and banditry' (Afolabi 2009: 25).

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Ending violent conflicts in West Africa remains one of the main challenges of the sub-region. This is possibly attributed to the sudden shift from inter-state to intra-state conflicts that characterized most part of the late 1980s through to the 21<sup>st</sup> century posing a new challenge of intra-state peace consolidation and conflict prevention. Particular for a number of actors including the sub-regional bloc, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which was set up to build economic integration (Jaye et al 2011: 1–7). Nevertheless, over the years, states, the ECOWAS, Civil Society groups and the International Community have taken measures to resolve and end violent conflicts in the sub-region. Examples can be cited of ECOWAS' timely response to the violent civil wars that erupted in Liberia and Sierra Leone in 1989 and 1991 respectively through the deployment of the ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) (Jaye et al 2011: 1–7). Despite these efforts which have achieved some appreciable success, the cradle of peace and stability in the sub-region remains brittle and the possibility of a resurgence of seemingly ended conflicts is high.<sup>1</sup> Buttressing the latter is the example of West Africa's first Republic state, Liberia, where the country relapsed into a second civil war in 1999 after ECOWAS Cease fire intervention ended the first civil war in 1996.<sup>2</sup> In the period between 2010 and 2011, Côte d'Ivoire almost plunged back into civil war after its disputed November 2010 election led to violent confrontations between loyalists of then President Laurent Gbagbo and opposition Alassane Ouattara claiming the lives of over 3000 Ivoirians and displacing many (BBC News Africa 2011). These few examples raise questions on the capacity and mechanisms used to resolve conflicts in West Africa and the effectiveness of these mechanisms to ensure sustainable peace in the sub-region. The paper posits that failure to identify and thoroughly address the fundamental causes of West Africa's violent conflicts and civil strife would likely cause the sub-region

to continue experiencing and suffering the brunt of these violent wars. Against this background, the author attempts to support discourses on violent conflicts and civil strife in West Africa by first giving an overview of violent conflicts and civil strife in the sub-region; identifying and expatiating on the causes of these conflicts; elaborate on existing initiatives; identifying challenges impeding efforts towards ending conflicts in the sub-region; and finally concluding with prospects for future conflict resolution.

### **Conceptualizing Conflicts and War Ending in West Africa**

The conceptualization of conflicts and war ending is dynamic and constantly evolving particularly in the post-cold war era. With the paradigmatic shift from inter-state to intra-state conflicts, many literatures have different definitions and concepts of conflict and its resolution. To Bernard Mayer (2000) conflicts can be explained through a three-dimensional lens. That is 'conflict as perception,' 'conflict as feeling' and 'conflict as action.' As a perception, Mayer identifies that conflict is often the conviction that 'one's own needs, interests, wants, or values are incompatible with someone else's' (Mayer 2000). As a feeling, conflict can be expressed through several emotions including 'fear, anger, bitterness, sadness, hopelessness' or the combination of these (Mayer 2000). Finally, Mayer highlights that conflict involves actions which may be 'violent or destructive' (Mayer 2000). To the ECOWAS, conflict is defined as 'contradictions inherent in power relations and which manifest themselves in individual and group interactions with one another and with nature in the pursuit of limited resources or opportunities' (ECPF 2008). For the purposes of this article, conflict could be seen as a violent expression of disagreements and frustration often arising from unmet needs and aspirations. As indicated earlier, while conflicts are not always violent, the ones that have affected West Africa have been characterized by violence

and brutality. While the conceptualization of low intensity conflicts (LIC) remains unclear, this article refers to LIC as prolonged, subtle yet staid altercations between different groups often with socio-economic, political and military intentions. LIC has the potential of erupting into full-blown conflict if unresolved.

Invariably, conflicts in West Africa have been notably fuelled by multiple interrelated causal factors including poverty, human rights violations, bad governance and corruption, ethnic marginalization and small arms proliferation (Fithen 1999; Voz di Paz and Interpeace 2010; Vinck et al 2011; Keili 2008). While the above causes persist, some of the conflicts that have occurred in the sub-region have been linked to certain triggers which often ignite the uprisings. According to ECOWAS, as defined in its Conflict Prevention Framework 2008, these triggers are associated with sudden happenings that arouse tensions often leading to violent conflicts (ECPF 2008). For example, the 2012 coup d'état in Mali was reportedly triggered by the lack of support from the Traoré regime to the Malian army to handle the Tuareg rebellion in January 2012 which led to the death of several national soldiers (Chew 2012).

Ending war or conflicts especially in West Africa has been quite a challenge due to its complex multi-causal factors, multiple actors and the nature of the conflict; often contributing to prolonging the conflict. James Fearon (2002), in his article 'Why do some civil wars last so much longer than others?', identified that although coup-related civil wars are often brief, 'sons of the soil' (often led by insurgent and rebel groups) tend to be longer and difficult to resolve because they often hinged on ethnic fragmentation and undemocratic leadership. Furthermore, Fearon explained that the latter tends to be protracted because the belligerent groups expect to gain military supremacy or use violence to acquire favourable agreements (Fearon 2002). Evidently, the nature of civil wars in West Africa has taken the form of

either coups d'état or insurgency. While the former have often been short-lived (eg. Mali and Guinea-Bissau coups in 2012), the latter however have been protracted (eg. Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Northern Mali).

## **Violent Conflicts and Civil Strife in West Africa**

West Africa has been grappling with violent conflicts and civil strife for decades, however, the periods between the 1980s and the 1990s leading to the new millennium presented more violent and protracted conflicts which destabilized many of its economies (Aning and Bah 2009; UNSC Report 2011). Notable countries that plunged into violent conflict during that period include Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau and Côte d'Ivoire (Aning and Bah 2009).

### **Past conflicts**

Liberia plunged into its first violent civil war in December 1989 with the invasion of Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL).<sup>3</sup> Taylor's rebellion, which sought to overthrow the autocratic and repressive rule of then President Samuel Doe, not only succeeded with his ascension to power in the 1997 elections, but also resulted in the outbreak of a violent seven-year civil war (Vinck et al 2011). In 1996, with the support of the ECOMOG, violence was abated leading to a ceasefire. Nevertheless, this seeming peace was short-lived as longstanding and simmering ethnic tensions, corruption, subjugation and abject poverty of the people thrust the country back into a second civil war in 1999; two years after Taylor was elected into office as president (Kieh and Klay 2009). During the ensuing five-year civil war, the country was besieged by violent confrontations between Taylor's NPFL, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) and the Movement for Democracy in Liberia (MODEL) until the signing of a Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2003 led to the attainment of appreciable peace and stability in Liberia (Vinck et al 2011). By the end of the

second civil war, there were reported high cases of rape and torture, high death rates, destruction of basic infrastructure and services, malnutrition and about 21,000 child soldiers to disarm and demobilize (Vinck et al 2011). The 2009 report of the Liberian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) indicated that 250,000 people were killed in the almost 14-year conflict and one million displaced (LTRC 2009). Subsequently, in 2010, the country reportedly ranked 162 of 169 countries in the Human Development Index, making it one of the poorest countries in the world (Vinck et al 2011).

Two years after the outbreak of civil war in Liberia, violent civil conflict also erupted in neighbouring Sierra Leone in 1991 hinged on a coup led by Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel group against President Momoh's regime (Richards 2003). Clashes between the Ghaddafi and Taylor supported RUF and the incumbent resulted in over a decade long violent conflict which was officially declared over in February 2002. The conflict, arising from corruption, bad governance, social injustice, and breakdown of democratic institutions resulted in the killing of 50,000 people, and the destruction of infrastructure as well as other pertinent social services (Kargbo 2002). Similarly, Guinea-Bissau and Côte d'Ivoire experienced violent civil conflicts in 1998 and 2002 respectively. Like other West African states, Guinea-Bissau's history is characterized with periodic conflicts however; the '7<sup>th</sup> June War' in 1998 pushed the former Portuguese colony into a violent civil strife (Voz di Paz and Interpeace 2010). The 11-month conflict which ended on 7 May 1999, led by Brigadier Ansumane Mane, was supposedly caused by weapon trafficking in neighboring Senegal for the Casamance independence movement, corruption and human rights abuse. Like all violent conflicts, casualties were recorded as it claimed the lives of thousands and entrenched poverty in the country (Voz di Paz and Interpeace 2010). Despite enjoying turbulent peace over the past ten years after

the 1998 conflict, characterized by periodic political crisis, the coup d'état in April 2012 which led to the arrest of Prime Minister Carlos Gomes Júnior threatened the security and already fragile peace of this small West African state (Crisis Group 2012).

Furthermore, the civil conflict that plagued Côte d'Ivoire, the one-time economic power house and the beacon of stability in West Africa cannot be overlooked. Deeply rooted in ethnic-religious divisions and identity aggravated by politics of exclusion, the country erupted into full-fledged civil strife in September 2002 (Ogwang 2011).<sup>4</sup> Following the explosion of the civil strife into a violent conflict, several peace initiatives were adopted but failed to resolve the conflict in Côte d'Ivoire until the successful signing of the Ouagadougou peace accord in 2007 restored peace and stability in the country (Ogwang 2011: 6). With three years of relative peace in the country, Ivoirians were ready to take to the polls in November 2010, a critical election which was anticipated to consolidate the peace the country had enjoyed and unify its stratified population. Much to their chagrin, the country nearly relapsed back into a violent civil war after the disputed elections led to a violent confrontation between loyalists of incumbent Laurent Gbagbo and main opposition Alassane Ouattara (Ogwang 2011). The following five-month battle led to the death of over 3000 people and the displacement of many.<sup>5</sup>

### **Present and emerging conflicts**

Generally, even though there is a decline in large scale violent conflict and civil strife, pockets of simmering tensions, insurgency and the re-emergence of coups d'état continues to trouble the sub-region. For example the recent coups d'état in Guinea-Bissau and Mali; insurgency in the Sahel region affecting West African countries of Mali, Niger and Mauritania, as well as low-scale conflicts in notably stable countries like Ghana, Senegal and Nigeria further makes the sub-region capricious and prone to more violent

conflicts (Gilmour 2012; Olonisakin 2011). Since gaining independence in 1960 from the French, Mali, Africa's third largest gold producer suffered several coups and ethnic tensions until attaining multi party democracy in 1992 with the election of President Alpha Konare (BBC News Africa 2012a). Nevertheless, the democracy and relative stability in the country was not to last, as the resurfacing of violent conflict in the north by the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) Tuareg rebels and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM) in 2007 and the coup d'état in 2012 resulted in killings, mass forced displacement of civilians destabilizing Mali's political tranquillity (Gilmour 2012; BBC News Africa 2012a).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the recent Boko Haram insurgency in northern Nigeria, which hinged upon religion and economic deprivation, also poses security concerns in the sub-region. Since its emergence in 2002, the Boko Haram insurgency has taken many lives, displaced several thousand and destroyed state property (Walker 2012). Travelling to the south of Nigeria, the prolonged Niger Delta conflict over oil has further compounded the insecurities in West Africa's most populous nation. The Niger Delta conflict has led to several kidnapping of expatriates, casualties and the increased use of sophisticated weaponry in the region by militant groups such as the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) thereby heightening insecurity within the country and across the sub-region (Ejibunu 2007).

### **Causes of Conflicts in West Africa**

The root of violent conflicts and civil strife in West Africa is linked to several complex factors. In his article, 'Conflict and Peace in West Africa,' Cybil Obi identifies that:

The roots of conflict in West Africa are much deeper and complex, and are embedded in the interplay of historical factors, socio-economic crisis, legacies of authoritarianism and the

politics of exclusion, international forces, and local struggles (Obi 2012).

Admittedly, while the aforementioned constitute the broader causal factors, embedded within and related to them are bad governance and corruption, human rights violations, poverty, ethnic marginalization and small arms and light weapons proliferation (among others), which continue to serve as triggers and drivers of violent conflicts in the sub-region. Even though there are several other specific causes of violent conflicts and civil strife in West Africa, the paper will focus on discussing the aforementioned.

### **Bad governance and corruption**

Post-colonial rule of West African countries has been fraught with several challenges. Elemental among them are the issues of bad governance and corruption. Following independence, several regimes across the sub-region have mismanaged state resources and weakened governance institutions which has resulted in economic stalemate, political apprehensions and breakdown of social peace and stability. Today, these twin factors constitute a major cause of violent conflicts and civil strife in West Africa. Several scholarly works on conflicts in the sub-region have identified bad governance and corruption as the underpinning factors fuelling and renewing violence in West Africa. Conflicts in Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire and other West African countries notably hinge upon bad governance and corruption. For instance, in the Sierra Leonean war, it was identified that bad governance, corruption and poverty were the root causes of the conflict (Fithen 1999). Additionally, research conducted in Liberia by Patrick Vinck, Phuong Pham and Tino Kreutzer in 2011 indicated that majority of the population (64 per cent) identified, among other factors, greed and corruption as the cause of the Liberian civil war (Vinck et al 2011).

Corruption in West Africa's most populous nation, Nigeria, has been highlighted as one



of the underlining factors in the Niger Delta conflict and the more recent, yet very pronounced, Boko Haram insurgency (Ejibunu 2007; Brock 2012). Ironically, the Niger Delta region though blessed with the largest oil resource in Nigeria is also the poorest region in the country. This is perhaps attributable to the high corruption at the national level which does not give opportunity for oil wealth to trickle down to the ordinary 'Del-tarians' and the larger Nigerian population. In 2003 for example, the Nigerian Anti-Corruption Agency, the Economic and Financial Crime Commission (EFCC) reportedly estimated that 70 per cent of the oil earnings, constituting over US\$ 14 billion was stolen and wasted (Ejibunu 2007). Reportedly, the majority of the perpetrators of corruption in Nigeria include senators, ministers, commissioners and individuals with higher connections in the political playground (Ejibunu 2007).<sup>7</sup> In affirming the linkage between corruption and violence in Nigeria's Niger Delta, Hassan Tai Ejibunu (2007) indicates that 'seeing money coming from the Federal Government, on earnings on crude oil sales, with essentially none of it reaching the ordinary people, has created condition for insurrection' (Ejibunu 2007).

Likewise, in a small country like Guinea-Bissau, bad governance and corruption are deeply entrenched in the social, political, judicial and economic system leading to bitter pent-up feelings among the local population which are sometimes expressed through violence (Voz di Paz and Interpeace 2010). In their 2010 joint report on the 'Root Causes of Conflict in Guinea-Bissau: The Voices of the People,' Voz di Paz and Interpeace, international non-governmental and peace-building institutions, chronicled the voices of local citizens of Guinea-Bissau on issues of corruption and conflict. Some citizens were quoted saying:

The President steals. The Governor steals. The minister and even the Prime Minister steal. The administrator steals. Who will not steal? The country

is being destroyed by the President. It was there that the destruction began. If the President takes twenty-four billion (CFA), what is left? (Voz di Paz and Interpeace 2010: 52).

Another expressed that:

The health centres do not have anything; patients have no bed and no sheets. The leaders go to build buildings. It is not the people that are spoiling them. The people are united, but the State does not want our unity. They are pitting us against each other. We are told, 'That person is not worth anything. That lineage is not worth anything.' So we fight while they will sit and eat together, laugh and clap (Voz di Paz and Interpeace 2010: 52).

Clearly if the above mentioned persists and remains unresolved it could increase the likelihood for more violent conflicts and civil strife rather than ending them and building sustainable peace in the sub-region.

### Human rights violations

Incidences of human rights abuses and violations are numerous in West Africa and as such this forms the basis for the eruption and renewal of violent conflicts and civil strife in the sub-region. Across the sub-region, there are reported incidences of sexual and gender-based violence, reprisal killings, beatings, impunity for state officials and institutions, high social injustice, repressive and brutal leadership, and unequal distribution of state resources among others (HRW 2003). All these serve as both triggers and consequences of war. For instance in Nigeria, violations of the human rights of local citizens underscore as one of the factors causing the militancy in the Niger Delta region (Ejibunu 2007: 17). Many of the oil companies in the region are reported to be causing environmental pollution and economic marginalization while the state supinely looks on. A specific example is the 1992 killings of youth

from Bonny, a local community, during a peaceful demonstration against the ecological pollution and marginalization caused by Shell Company (Brisibe 2001). Unfortunately, the state security institutions support these oil companies to violate the rights of its own citizens as was the case in January 1993 when 300,000 Ogoni protestors who were harassed, arrested and killed by Federal government troops when demonstrating peacefully against Shell oil for environmental pollution and economic marginalization (Ejibunu 2007: 17).

In Guinea-Bissau as well, the impunity for human rights abuse by state officials in part led to the violent conflict that destabilized the country in 1998 (Voz di Paz and Interpeace 2010). Local authorities are often accused of engaging in beatings and oppression of the local citizens creating a culture of 'Matchundade'<sup>8</sup> (aggressive behaviours) which bred major conflict with brutal consequences (Voz di Paz and Interpeace 2010). Due to the continuous existence of these repressive acts against the citizens and among ethnic groups, even after the 1998 civil war, Guinea-Bissau seems to be sitting on a boiling pot of tensions which, unresolved, could explode into another violent conflict as was mildly witnessed in the 2010 mutiny and the recent April 2012 coup d'état (Zenoumenou and Okeke 2012).

Moreover, human rights violations in seemingly stable West African countries such as The Gambia and Equatorial Guinea are increasingly creating precarious situations for instability. Although these countries have not experienced large-scale violent conflicts in recent times as their neighbours have, the brutal, undemocratic, unequal and authoritative rule by incumbent regimes is creating tensions which, unresolved, could bring the countries to a boiling point of violent war and civil strife. The 2011 Freedom House report on the 'Worst of the Worst: The World's Most Repressive Societies' named Equatorial Guinea and Côte d'Ivoire as part of the 20 most repressed societies in the world (Freedom House 2011).<sup>9</sup> The Teodoro Obiang

Nguema Mbasogo regime in Equatorial Guinea for example, is not only accused of pervasive corruption but also rife human rights abuses including detention of political opponents, torture, extrajudicial killings, interference in the judicial system, disregard for rule of law, widespread violence against women and impunity of security forces (Freedom House 2011: 14; USDS 2011). Similarly, the government of Alhaji Yayha Jammeh of The Gambia is accused of similar human rights abuses and violations (USDS 2011). As stated earlier, although these violations have not resulted in violent conflicts in these countries, their linkages to political and internal tensions in both countries cannot be overlooked (McSherry 2006).<sup>10</sup> For instance, since 1994, Yayha Jammeh's 19-year regime has experienced over four attempted coups and several tensions (BBC News Africa 2012b).

### Poverty

Poverty also stands to be one of the major setbacks in West Africa and the continent of Africa. According to the 2012 UNDP Human Development report nearly half of sub-Saharan Africans live in poverty (UNDP 2012). Consequently, the poverty that many across the continent endure can be seen to be one of the major contributing factors to the occurrence of violent conflicts in Africa. Like the rest of Africa, the West Africa sub-region is neither immune to the poverty canker nor ignorant of its impact on their fragile peace and stability. With over 60 per cent of its population living below the poverty line of US\$1 a day, civil unrest and grievances, both recipes for conflicts, become widespread. These agitations sometimes take violent forms and are seen as channels for punishing governments for their failure to alleviate poverty (ECOWAS 2006). For instance, in research conducted by Vinck et al (2011), 30 per cent of the Liberian population indicated that poverty was one of the root causes of the Liberian civil war. Similar assertions have also been made with regards to the conflicts in Nigeria and Guinea-Bissau (Voz di Paz and



Interpeace 2010; Ejibunu 2007). In Voz di Paz and Interpeace's 2010 report, poverty was stated as one of the major cause of the Bissau-Guinean conflicts, citing food insecurity, lack of infrastructure and access to basic social needs as some of the poverty indicators in the country (Voz di Paz and Interpeace 2010). Emphasizing the connection between poverty and conflict, the Bissau-Guineans have an adage which states 'In homes where there is no bread everyone fights and no one is right' (Voz di Paz and Interpeace 2010). Indeed hunger, starvation, lack of economic growth and development create a high likelihood of violent conflicts and civil strife.

### **Ethnic marginalization**

Ethnicity by itself is not violent however the concept has been manipulated in 'societies polarized into two imbalanced divides with one faction feeling marginalized' (Annan and Danso 2013). Correspondingly, James Fearon and David Laitin (2003) also believe that 'a greater degree of ethnic or religious diversity... by itself' is not 'a major and direct cause' of violent civil conflict... (Fearon and Laitin 2003: 75–90). Nevertheless, to a larger extent, for a heterogeneous community like West Africa, ethnicity has become a dividing factor that continues to drive violent conflicts and civil strife within and among communities and states, destabilizing the peace in the sub-region. Research conducted across the sub-region identifies ethnicity and ethnic fragmentation as one of the root causes of violent conflicts in West Africa. Particularly for Liberia, this was prominent as 49 per cent of the population reportedly identified ethnicity and ethnic divisions as the root cause of the Liberian civil wars (Vinck et al 2011). More specifically, in the 10-year repressive rule of Samuel Doe, the Krahn and Mandingo ethnic groups were more favoured than the others which resulted in various ethnic tensions that saw the rebellious invasion of Charles Taylor, an Americo-Liberian, leading to the violent civil war that overthrew Doe's government in 1996 (Vinck et al 2011).

Currently, Liberians are still afraid of a potential renewal of civil war along ethnic lines when the United Nations (UN) Peacekeeping mission ends (Vinck et al 2011). Similar situations exist in other countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau and Nigeria (Voz di Paz and Interpeace 2010; Ejibunu 2007; Ogwang 2011). For a small country like Guinea-Bissau, ethnic divisions are so entrenched among the various communities and at the national level, resulting in constant fighting and violence (Voz di Paz and Interpeace 2010). Likewise, in a country like Ghana which is noted for stability and peace, ethnic division in its northern region, among the Andanis and Abudus has led to violent inter-ethnic strife that threatens the peace in the entire country.<sup>11</sup>

### **Small arms and light weapons proliferation**

Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) proliferation is one of the major challenges in West Africa. The sub-region remains an area of considerable SALW proliferation because of their affordability, accessibility and availability; and porosity of the borders and legal frameworks legitimizing their use (Keili 2008). As reported by Edeko Sunday (2011), West Africa hosts about 7 to 10 million of the world's illegal SALW as well as 8 million out of the 100 million circulating in Africa (Edeko 2011: 55–80; Kwaja 2012). Additionally, 77,000 of the small arms are allegedly within the control of West African insurgent groups (Ebo and Mazal 2003). The circulation of illegal arms within and across states has increased the proclivity of conflicts within the sub-region. Small arms proliferation has contributed to the mobilization for coups d'état, undemocratic overthrow of governments, increasing casualties and violent inter-communal and intra-state conflicts in West Africa (Ero and Ndinga-Muvumba 2004). Since the 1960s there have been over 37 successful military coups in almost all the countries in West Africa often resulting in violent wars; killing millions and displacing

many (Keili 2008). Furthermore, small arms proliferation notably fuelled the conflicts in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo (Keili 2008). For example, arms were supplied by governments to aid the civil wars in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire (Keili 2008). For instance, Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) was accused of supplying and distributing Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF) with arms to fuel the conflict in Sierra Leone.<sup>12</sup> The conflict led to the death of over 50,000 people; 30,000 amputations; and the sexual violation of over 257,000 women (Ploughshares 2002). Additionally, the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD) rebel group received weapons from the Guinean governments which they used to kill civilians in Monrovia during the conflict in Liberia (Keili 2008).

### **Initiatives towards Conflict Prevention and Resolution in West Africa**

The outbreak of violent conflicts and civil strife in West Africa has led to several actions and interventions played by different actors. These actors include civil society organizations (CSOs), ECOWAS, the African Union (AU) and the international community.

At the sub-regional level, ECOWAS' involvement and efforts in addressing critical security challenges have achieved some noticeable success. In Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea-Bissau and Côte d'Ivoire, the deployment of peacekeepers through ECOMOG and the key mediatory role played by the sub-regional bloc helped salvage peace and stability, bringing an end to the violent conflicts (Olonisakin 2011). Additionally, the involvement of ECOWAS can be witnessed through its lead on the process of drafting and signing numerous peace agreements that resulted in the attainment of peace in several countries in the sub-region (Aning et al 2010). These include but are not limited to the Linas-Marcoussis, Accra II & III, and Pretoria Agreements

on Côte d'Ivoire; the Accra, Cotonou and Abuja Peace Agreements on Liberia; and the Lomé Peace Agreement on Sierra Leone (Aning et al 2010). In terms of mediation, ECOWAS was involved in recent conflicts in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Guinea-Bissau to ensure that stability is restored. For instance, during the 2012 coups d'état in Mali and Guinea-Bissau, the ECOWAS Heads of States and Governments appointed H.E. Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso and H.E. Goodluck Jonathan of Nigeria as mediators for the respective countries (ECOWAS 2012). The ECOWAS has furthermore been collaborating with civil society organizations to implement its Early Warning Mechanism (ECOWARN) which seeks to prevent and monitor conflicts in the sub-region. For instance, for the past eight years since the operationalisation of ECOWARN, ECOWAS has been working with the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) to monitor elections in Ghana, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea Conakry and other countries on the continent (WANEP 2011). In addition, the adoptions of the Protocol, Relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security in December 1999 and the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Framework (ECPF) in 2008, among other protocols, have helped enhance and affirm ECOWAS' role as a key player in conflict prevention and resolution in West Africa (ECOWAS 2008; ECOWAS 1999).

The efforts of civil society and women's groups within the sub-region cannot be ignored. Throughout the various violent conflicts and civil strife that West Africa has experienced, these groups have played a pivotal role in building lasting peace within communities and states. The initiatives of groups such as WANEP, West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI), Mano River Union Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET), and Women in Peacebuilding Network (WIPNET), among others, have brokered peace and ended violent conflicts in West Africa. For example, to end the Liberian war WIPNET, through

its advocacy campaign, 'We want peace, No More War' forced Charles Taylor and the warlords of the LURD to attend the peace talks in 2003 resulting in the signing of the Agreement on Ceasefire and Cessation of Hostilities on 17 June 2003 (Jones 2011: 165). In a similar action, an advocacy campaign by MARWOPNET in 2001 brought together the presidents of Liberia (Charles Taylor), Sierra Leone (Tejan Kabbah) and Guinea (Lansana Conte) for a peace talk (Jones 2011: 166). This action marked the first time the three leaders had come together to discuss insecurity and peacekeeping along their borders (Jones 2011: 166). Other regional civil society affiliated institutions, like the Kofi Annan International Peacekeeping Training Centre (KAIPTC) in Ghana (since its inception in 2003), have trained various military, police and civilians in conflict prevention and peacekeeping. The KAIPTC has also created avenues for dialogue among civil society groups and other regional bodies on peacekeeping, peacebuilding, mediation and negotiation, and post-conflict reconstruction.<sup>13</sup>

At the continental and international level, the AU, UN and other bilateral and multilateral actors have taken several initiatives to support the consolidation of peace in West Africa. The African Union for example was instrumental in ending Côte d'Ivoire's post-electoral violence that occurred in 2010–2011. The continental body, among other initiatives, formed a five-member mediation group including Kenyan Prime Minister Raila Odinga, Presidents Robert Mugabe (Zimbabwe), Jacob Zuma (South Africa), Goodluck Jonathan (Nigeria) and Mohamed Ould Abdel (Mauritania) to broker peace between the two disputing factions (GNA 2011). Also in response to the April 2012 coup d'état in Guinea-Bissau, the AU at its 318<sup>th</sup> Council meeting placed a ban on Guinea-Bissau from participating in any AU activities until constitutional order and peace was restored.<sup>14</sup>

Beyond the borders of Africa, the UN and the European Union (EU) have also been key contributors to the consolidation of sustainable peace in West Africa. The UN for example

has been deploying peacekeepers into violent conflict territories in West Africa for decades.<sup>15</sup> Currently, the global body has peacekeeping missions in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) and Liberia (UNMIL); however its mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) ended in 2005 and was replaced with the UN Integrated Office for Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL).<sup>16</sup> Through these peacekeeping activities, the UN help protect civilians; disarm, demobilize and reintegrate ex-combatant; support post-conflict reconstruction processes; and establish peace and stable environment in these conflict zones.<sup>17</sup> More recently, the global governance body has also been supporting ECOWAS in addressing the crisis in Mali and Guinea-Bissau. For instance, the Secretary-General's Special Representative for West Africa, Said Djinnit, participated in the ECOWAS Mediation and Security Council meeting on Mali and Guinea-Bissau took place in Abidjan, la Côte d'Ivoire, on 19 May 2012.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the establishment of the UN Office for West Africa (UNOWA) in January 2002 has assisted the region to address, inter alia, issues of human rights abuse, election violence, cross-border insecurities, security sector reforms, drug trafficking and organized crimes as well as provide funding for the implementation of state and regional programmes.<sup>19</sup> The EU on the other hand, have been, among other activities, funding and supporting election observation and monitoring programmes across the sub-region. Since 2000, it has deployed 78 Election Observation missions worldwide including missions to 10 West African countries - Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Ghana, Togo, Guinea Conakry, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger and Senegal.<sup>20</sup> Through these missions, EU has been working with local communities and state institutions to monitor, prevent and resolve election-related violence in the sub-region.<sup>21</sup>

### **Challenges to Ending Violent Conflicts in West Africa**

Despite efforts made to prevent and end violent conflicts in West Africa, the region continues to experience sporadic violence and

volatile security challenges. The major challenge to ending conflict in West Africa can be attributed to the poor understanding of the fundamental causes of the conflict. For example in the current Malian crisis, the misplaced understanding of the international community that the root cause of the conflict is the terrorist activities by Islamists in the region; thus, placing it in the context of 'fight against terror' has in part hindered the process of finding lasting solution for the conflict (Taylor 2013). In that it has shifted the focus from the deep seated root causes of bad governance, corruption, discrimination, ethnic marginalization, and unstructured military governance) to terrorist activities which is mainly an offshoot of the conflict (Bourkhars 2013). Other challenges identified by scholars include weak institutional structures; language barrier (Anglo-Francophone-Lusophone); lack of skills and expertise in conflict mediation and dialogue; lack of resources; lack of political will; lack of coordination between and among ECOWAS agencies and its partners; and non-inclusive peace-building processes. These factors make ending violent conflicts in the region increasingly delicate and challenging (Afolabi 2009). In affirming the above, Aning and Bah (2009) identified a disjoint with regards to collaboration and coordination between and among ECOWAS institutions and its external partners (Aning and Bah 2009). This they emphasized is affecting the implementation of the ECPF which was designed to 'strengthen human security and incorporate conflict prevention activities as well as aspects of peace-building' (Aning and Bah 2009). This has in part is also affecting the work operation of the ECOWARN. For instance, recently, the regional early warning system was criticized for not detecting the signs that led to the April 2012 coup d'état in Guinea-Bissau as the early warning mechanism continued to grapple with internal and external coordination challenges (IPI 2012).

Lack of resources of states and the sub-regional body also hinders the resolution of conflicts in the sub-region. Financial, human

and material resources for conflict resolution have been some of the sub-region's challenges. For instance, most national security forces lack the requisite equipment and capacity needed to adequately disarm belligerent groups. For example, in the Malian conflict, lack of equipment and capacity of the national army has been noted as one of the challenges preventing successive governments from addressing the Tuareg rebellions since the 1960s (Chew 2012). In Liberia also, despite the acclaimed heroic intervention of ECOMOG in 1996, material challenges such as lack of equipment, arms, sea and airlift capacities, and machinery to some extent, affected the effective implementation of the ECOMOG mandate which in part contributed to the re-surfacing of the conflict in 1999 after peace was restored in 1997 (Isma 2001).

Additionally, lack of political will of governments of West African states to create transparent and accountable governance institutions, address human rights issues and implement signed peace agreements and resolutions is also a challenge hindering the resolution of violent conflicts in the sub-region.<sup>22</sup> For example, in the 2010 post electoral violence in Côte d'Ivoire, Laurent Gbagbo's defiance to the ECOWAS communiqué from the Abuja Summit on 24 December 2010, calling for him to step down, hindered the early resolution of the conflict; further fuelling the crisis as his loyalists continued to fight.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, limited involvement of women, local communities, grassroots organizations and civil society in peace-building and peacemaking processes perhaps contributes to the challenges impeding lasting resolution of conflicts in West Africa. Women play essential roles in peacemaking in their communities, homes and organizations however, when it comes to official negotiations and mediations, women's participation and representation remain nominal (Iwilade 2011). In West Africa, the primary organs for conflict mediation in the ECOWAS Member States are the Council of the Wise (CoW) and the Special Representatives and Special

Envoys of the President (Afolabi 2009). With the latter represented by only one female President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, many women are automatically excluded from participating in formal negotiations. The exclusion of women in this process often results in unresolved tensions. Melanne Verwee, Head of the US State Department's Office for Global Women's Issues, noted at the 2010 Conference on the *Role of Women in Global Security* that thirty-one of the world's thirty-nine conflicts relapsed back into violent wars after peace agreements because women were excluded from the peace process (USIP 2011). Moreover, lack of adequate expertise and skills of mediators also accounts for this persisting challenge (Afolabi 2009). Furthermore, effective peacemaking requires adequate mediation and facilitation skills which seem to be lacking among members of the CoW, and other mediators in the sub-region (Onwuka 2009).

### Conclusion

Ending violent conflicts and civil strife in the sub-region requires collaborative and collective efforts in (a) identifying the causal indicators of conflicts; (b) developing concrete strategies and programmes to prevent, manage and completely resolve these conflicts; (c) documenting, managing and disseminating information on lessons learnt and best practices of conflict prevention and resolution, and peacebuilding across the sub-region; and (d) harnessing indigenous conflict prevention mechanisms while leveraging with contemporary mechanisms to adequately address present and emerging insecurities and violent conflicts. Although the sub-region is increasingly volatile to vicious conflicts, its rich indigenous cultural and social values such as respect, protection of human life, freedom, cooperation and tolerance;<sup>24</sup> coupled with its diverse population and numerous civil society organizations are prospective strengths and, if well harnessed, could be a driving force for ending the preponderance of violent conflicts and civil strife in West Africa.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Obi 2012.

<sup>2</sup> After the deployment of ECOMOG to Liberia leading to the ceasefire which ended the first civil war (1989–1996), ethnic strife among groups loyal to Charles Taylor refueled violence resulting in the second civil war (1999–2003) until the signing of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement ended the second civil war in 2003. See Insight on Conflict 2012.

<sup>3</sup> See Insight on Conflict 2012.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Henri Konan Bedie's concept of 'Ivoirité' marginalized the non-Ivoirians and the predominant Muslim north.

<sup>5</sup> See France 24 2012.

<sup>6</sup> See UN Togo 2012 and Gilmour 2012.

<sup>7</sup> For instance a former Governor of Nigeria's oil elite Bayelsa State, DSP Alameiyesegha allegedly stashed millions of dollars in foreign bank accounts to procure mansions in the United States and send his children to private schools in London (Ejibunu 2007).

<sup>8</sup> It is a Bissau-Guinean culture where a man is measured according to his ability to be rough, bold, violent and arrogant.

<sup>9</sup> The report looks at political rights and civil liberties in various countries assessing indicators such as electoral process; political pluralism and participation; functioning of government; freedom of expression and belief; associational and organizational rights; rule of law; and personal autonomy and individual rights.

<sup>10</sup> Equatorial Guinea and the Gambia experienced attempted coups d'état in 2004 and 2006 respectively.



- <sup>11</sup> See Aapengnuo 2012.
- <sup>12</sup> See The Trial of Charles Taylor 2008.
- <sup>13</sup> For more information see [www.kaiptc.org](http://www.kaiptc.org).
- <sup>14</sup> See Ping 2012.
- <sup>15</sup> For example, UNAMSIL, see <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unamsil/>.
- <sup>16</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>17</sup> For more information see <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/issues/ddr.shtml>.
- <sup>18</sup> See UN Togo 2012.
- <sup>19</sup> For more information see <http://unowa.unmissions.org/>.
- <sup>20</sup> For more information see [http://eeas.europa.eu/eucom/missions/index\\_en.htm](http://eeas.europa.eu/eucom/missions/index_en.htm).
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> See Obi 2012.
- <sup>23</sup> For more information see <http://www.irinnews.org/report/91566/cote-d-ivoire-ecowas-searching-for-a-regional-solution-briefing>.
- <sup>24</sup> See Afisi 2009 who says in pre-colonial Africa, war was not celebrated but when it was bound to happen, there were traditional regulations that ensured that human lives were protected, fighting takes place outside of the communities, peace agreements were respected, the period and duration of war determined, type of weapons used, method of combat, and women and the aged were involved in peacemaking processes.

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