

**STATEMENT BY THE  
UNDER SECRETARY-GENERAL FOR POLITICAL AFFAIRS  
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**Contemporary threats to peace and security in West Africa**

**Abuja, Nigeria, 10 June 2009**

Excellencies,

It gives me great pleasure to be in Nigeria today, and I am grateful for this opportunity to speak on some of the key challenges facing West Africa. The theme of my address is contemporary threats to peace and security in West Africa. But I would like to begin on a positive note. Over the past decade, West Africa has made great progress in breaking away from a past of violent conflicts that brought suffering to millions of its citizens. Liberia and Sierra Leone are now well engaged on the long and difficult path towards building resilient post-war societies. Security has largely been restored in Côte d'Ivoire and, with renewed commitment of the parties to move to elections in 2009, a sustainable resolution of the country's seven year-long crisis is now finally within reach. Your own country Nigeria and neighboring Cameroon provided the world with a new framework for resolving a sensitive and complex border conflict. There are also encouraging signs from Mali and Niger that a peaceful resolution of the complex and protracted crisis with the Tuaregs is possible.

Through its political vision and leadership, its contribution to peacekeeping and the wisdom and diplomatic skill of its mediators, **Nigeria** has been a driving force behind the

subregion's quest for peace and stability. Throughout its history, Nigeria has held Africa and West Africa at the heart of its foreign policy. Indeed, I recall when your past leaders told the world with pride and unusual confidence that Africa was the centre piece of Nigeria's foreign policy decision making. This is not merely sloganeering. This country matched its words with deeds. It spearheaded the efforts to transform ECOWAS from a structure designed to pursue market integration goals in the 1970s, to a cohesive regional framework and a key pillar of the African peace and security architecture, and a strong partner of the United Nations. Today, further strengthening ECOWAS' conflict prevention and early warning architecture is a key priority for the UN and as I pay tribute to your own General Gowon and his colleagues in West Africa, for the vision that informed this legacy.

In addition to playing its regional and international role to the full, Nigeria has had to deal with many challenges of its own since independence. With resilience and single-minded determination, we have watched this country strive to achieve consensus and a vision of its future and destiny. Nigeria, in spite of severe tension, division and violence within its ethnically, culturally and religiously diverse society has defied all the odds and persevered at building a strong nation. I think you all know that the crises that this country has survived could have led to the implosion of less resilient societies. But you must never underestimate the impact of conflict on the destiny of this country. With your neighbors, you have seen the face of conflict. You have survived a civil war. Your perseverance and courage in resolving your boundary dispute with Cameroon through peaceful means and respect for the rule of law has served as an example to the world and

to the rest of Africa, where the majority of borders are yet to be delimited and remain a potential source of dispute between neighbors.

In consolidating **democracy and the rule of law**, the sub-region has made considerable progress. Democracy and democratization are fine concepts, but incorporating them fully in a country's political life and culture is no small challenge. Most societies that have gone through the processes of consolidating democracy, whether in Africa or elsewhere, have experienced the challenges and contradictions of guaranteeing peace and security and accommodating the diverse needs of diverse peoples. Democratization is a process, not an event, and for it to be sustainable it has to be home-grown. This is where West Africa's vibrant civil society has been, and will continue to be, an essential ally and a powerful agent for change and peace. Just next door, Ghana's exemplary presidential elections in December last year served as a formidable example for the region and the continent and as a lesson in African democracy. But history has taught us that while elections are an important step towards the consolidation of democracy and peace, they can also reap instability and violence in fragile societies, and we must therefore be vigilant. I say this as you prepare for the next round of elections to choose your leaders. The United Nations stands ready to fully support the implementation of President Yar Adua's electoral reform package, if called upon to do so.

Despite progress that has been made in ridding West Africa of violent conflict, addressing the root causes of conflict cannot be accomplished overnight. And so, while the region is largely at peace, it remains vulnerable and the gains it has fought so hard to

achieve remain reversible. **Poverty and socio-economic challenges**, such as climate change, rapid urbanization, unemployment and food insecurity, remain the principal threat to human security and stability in West Africa. Poverty leads to desperation and desperation, in turn, leads to either revolt or departure to distant, more promising shores. Both can bear tragic human consequences. They also contribute to derailing development, weakening social fabrics and brewing instability. This region, like other parts of the world economy is feeling the effects of the latest global financial and economic crisis more and more each day. This also aggravates existing vulnerabilities.

While organized crime – in particular human and arms trafficking – has plagued West African societies for a long time, in the past few years the region has been confronted with a new and particularly devastating form of organized crime: **drug trafficking**. Taking advantage of porous borders and weak state and law enforcement institutions, criminal gangs are infiltrating all levels of the state, fueling corruption and contributing to the criminalization of government, the military establishment and security sector institutions. Organized crime experts believe that a few of the weakest states in the region are already on the verge of becoming narco-states.

In addition to derailing governance and institution-building efforts, the spread of drug trafficking also presents the region with a potential social and human emergency that is affecting its most precious resource, its youth. Unscrupulous drug traffickers exploit the joblessness and despair of the region's sprawling cities in search of domestic markets for

the lowest quality substances, creating a generation of drug consumers, depriving the youth of a future and condemning them to a criminal existence.

When the governments of the region gathered together in Praia last October, they knew that immediate, decisive and concerted action was needed to address this scourge. The adoption of a regional action plan to combat drug trafficking was an important first step. The United Nations stands ready to help the countries of the region as they turn decision into action, policy into implementation.

Finally, dear friends, I would like to raise what we, at the United Nations, consider to be one of the most important and challenging threats facing not just West Africa, but the continent as a whole: **the resurgence of military coups**. Mauritania, Guinea, Madagascar, and the tragic events that have unfolded in Guinea-Bissau; all served as wake-up calls in a continent that finds itself confronted by the return of a troubled past it hoped it had left behind for good. Because coups were not addressed in a decisive manner in the 1960s, the decade that followed was one that saw a succession of real or attempted coups and the militarization of politics across the continent. The continent must rise to the current challenge and protect the democratic gains it has fought so hard to achieve.

I know that I preach to the converted. Both the African Union and ECOWAS uphold as a fundamental principle the total rejection of military coups and I commend the leadership of Nigeria and President Yar Adua as ECOWAS Chair, in this regard. Although the UN

Charter does not afford us the legislative framework to adopt similar robust measures against perpetrators, military coups are nonetheless anathema to the UN, an affront to the fundamental principles, norms and core values of our Organization. But let us ponder on this question: after rejecting a coup and its perpetrators, what comes next? We, in the international community, all share the same dilemma. That is, the dilemma between firmness on principle and flexibility necessary to achieve our goals. Translating principles into action in the case of coups is no easy task. As recent cases have shown, careful but persistent engagements are required to make sure, not only that the transition to constitutional order is as short as possible, but also that it lays the grounds for a more prosperous and stable future for a country and its people.

International efforts to restore constitutional order in Guinea, which are spearheaded by ECOWAS and the African Union and include a role for the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for West Africa, have shown great dexterity in building a firm and united position, while at the same time securing concessions from the junta and engaging with all national stakeholders to push through key tasks of the transition. With elections now scheduled for the end of the year and the creation of a National Transitional Council, I honestly believe that our joint efforts and ‘carrot-and-stick’ approach are beginning to pay off.

Another view which I think we share is that **unconstitutional changes of government** do not occur in a vacuum, and neither are they limited to military coups only.

Although coups are the most extreme and radical manifestation, unconstitutional changes

of government take many, more subtle, forms. These include the practice of constitutional review to extend an elected leader's term in office or the failure to hold free, fair and transparent elections when they are due or the lack of respect for their outcomes. It is my firm belief that corrective or punitive action could only achieve so much; it must be complemented by preventive action.

I see **prevention** as a two-track process. First, prevention is about addressing the root causes of coups and unconstitutional changes of government: deficiencies in governance, disregard for human rights, grievances related to wealth and power-sharing, exclusion and marginalization, and the necessity to provide for the basic needs of a population. It is about establishing safeguards; building stronger, more resilient state institutions, ensuring adequate checks and balances, promoting the rule of law and working to establish effective democratic control over the armed forces through reform.

Beyond building modern republican armies, **reform of the defense and security sectors**, is needed also to improve security across the sub-region. In large parts of West Africa, ordinary citizens have lost confidence in those whose very responsibility it is to serve and protect them. The blurring of lines between defense and law enforcement and the indiscipline, lack of incentives and impunity that is characteristic of many of the region's armed and security forces result in a daily pattern of abuse of power against civilians. It also breeds insecurity and instability across the region. Through their important contribution to peacekeeping efforts worldwide, West African army and security officers have shown their commitment and ability to serving and protecting those that need it the

most. With your leadership and vision, let us ensure that a professional culture is built into these institutions so that they can care for all citizens. In addressing you here today in Abuja, I am reminded that this is the land that has produced great and outstanding statesmen. Nigeria must remain a beacon of hope for its people, the region and the continent. I have full faith and confidence in the ability of this country and this region to overcome current difficulties. As one of your leaders, the late Sir Ahmadu Bello, proclaimed in the early sixties, “Let us not try to hide our differences and problems, but let us try to understand them, in order to build and bequeath a lasting legacy to generations yet unborn”.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, in conclusion, let me note that these are challenging times for West Africa. And in these challenging times, there is need throughout the region for Nigerian leadership. A former Nigerian Minister once said that, “when there are crises, the countries have looked upon Nigeria to be an arbitrator”. To arbitration, I would also add courage, political vision and the ability to lead by example.

We at the United Nations will continue to work with Nigeria and all the countries in the region for a safer and more prosperous future.

Thank you.