

**Ambassadorial-Level Meeting of the Peacebuilding Commission on the impact of
COVID-19 in West Africa and the Sahel**

**22 April 2020
Chair's Summary**

1. On 22 April, the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) convened an Ambassadorial-level meeting on the impact of COVID-19 in West Africa and the Sahel. The meeting was held on a virtual platform and chaired by H.E. Mr. Marc-André Blanchard, Permanent Representative of Canada and Chair of the PBC. The objectives of the meeting were two-fold, namely: (1) assessment of the peacebuilding priorities in the region which require attention in view of the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) identification of international support (including critical funding gaps) required for national and regional efforts to sustain peacebuilding gains and maintain the path towards sustainable peace and development.

2. In his opening remarks, the Chair underscored that the PBC was building on the momentum generated from its earlier meetings on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on peacebuilding and sustaining peace (held on 8 April 2020), and on the socio-economic situation in Liberia in the context of the pandemic (held on 15 April 2020). The Chair noted that these two meetings had built a strong consensus on the vital role of coherence and conflict sensitivity in multi-lateral responses, as well the importance of the Commission as a platform to marshal international support for peacebuilding efforts. The meeting on West Africa and the Sahel provided an opportunity to understand the dynamics on the ground and hear the voices and perspectives from the region.

3. The Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), Mohamed Ibn Chambas, briefed on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region, noting its multidimensional nature. He explained that, although the pandemic is primarily an acute health crisis with considerable effects on already weak systems, it has significant ramifications on socio-economic stability in the region, as well as implications for peace and stability. It is estimated that the economies in West Africa will contract by 5%, with an expected rise in fiscal deficits, decline in revenues and increase in inflation. SRSB Chambas indicated that the COVID-19 meeting was timely, as it happened right before the ECOWAS Heads of State virtual meeting on the impact of the pandemic in the region, on 23 April 2020. The crisis has exposed underlying governance gaps but is also a test of the capacity of national institutions to address the needs of the population. The SRSB therefore emphasised the importance of supporting governance structures and building community-level resilience to adequately respond to this challenge over the short, medium and long terms. On the political sphere, the pandemic is expected to severely disrupt the electoral processes planned for this year, notably planned presidential elections in Burkina Faso, Côte

d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea and Niger. He stressed the need for concerted efforts to ensure that there is consensus in addressing the implications of COVID-19 on electoral processes in the region. Another area of concern is the increasing insecurity caused by violent extremist and terrorist groups who are exploiting the pandemic to intensify attacks, most recently in Lake Chad Basin and the Sahel, further worsening the humanitarian crisis. The combination of all these factors will lead to increased unemployment, extreme poverty, and the likelihood of increased social discontent. SRSG Chambas amplified the calls by the UN Secretary-General for financial relief packages, including the suspension of interest payments on debts. It will be equally important for bilateral and multilateral partners to provide political and material support to humanitarian assistance, prevent and counter violent extremism and ensure coherence in border management. He stressed the need to support a whole-of -government approach in dealing with this pandemic, while ensuring meaningful participation of communities, particularly women, youth, persons with disabilities, traditional, religious and civic leaders in decision making processes.

4. The UN Assistant Secretary-General for Peacebuilding, Mr. Oscar Fernandez-Taranco, underscored that the pandemic is demanding of Member States, international and regional organizations, international financial institutions, civil society and businesses, and requires timely, multi-dimensional and cross-pillar responses, in line with the integrated logic of the SDGs. He noted that the PBC has adapted quickly to the impact of COVID-19 and is providing a unique platform for international solidarity, including through supporting predictable financing and strong partnerships for peacebuilding and sustaining peace in West Africa and the Sahel, which are priority regions for our peacebuilding investments. He informed of ongoing efforts of the UN system and related adjustment of the Peacebuilding Fund (PBF), in coordination with UNCTs and other partners in the region. He added that the PBF, in addition to its 2017-2019 portfolio of US \$ 137 million for the Sahel and Lake Chad, including US \$ 30 million for cross-border projects, is exploring in 2020 (in line with its new strategy for 2020-2024) how to work with local peacebuilding organizations as part of its cross-border portfolio to complement on-going efforts with a bottom-up peacebuilding approach. A first pilot is being rolled-out in the Liptako-Gourma region (covering border areas of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger).
5. There was a strong representation and active contribution from Member States in the region. Member States welcomed the informative briefings and made the following observations:
 - The immediate responses to COVID-19 pandemic (primarily focused on health and humanitarian sectors) should be balanced with medium- and long-term investments in basic social services, governance, socioeconomic (including private sector), agriculture, environment and development spheres.

- The necessity to mitigate the corollary consequences of unemployment, poverty, food insecurity, structural vulnerabilities and inequalities (supporting social safety nets), particularly in areas with refugees and internally displaced populations, which could trigger social unrest and tensions. The responses should be aimed at ‘untying the Gordian knot’ and sustaining peacebuilding dividends.
- They welcomed the calls by the UN Secretary-General and the African Union Commission Chair for global ceasefires to create space for peace and stability, as well as facilitate sectoral responses to the pandemic.
- They underlined the triple challenges of conflict (exacerbated by climate change, drought, food insecurity, locust infestation); creation of fiscal space (encouraged deferment of interest payments on debts); and opening of humanitarian and transport corridors (border closures, supplies, trade routes).
- The importance of enhancing coherence, coordination and partnerships amongst national, regional and international partners (the World Bank, IMF and AfDB) to avoid duplication of efforts and silos was noted, to ensure collective responsibility and comprehensive support tailored to specific contexts (country centred), optimizing different capacities and resources.
- They urged the utilization of regional groupings and mechanisms, such as the G5 Sahel and ECOWAS, which provide crucial entry points for synergetic linkages in political, financial, humanitarian and development aspects (in the case of the electoral processes, need to ensure constant attention and support to consolidate the democratic governance).
- They called for increased knowledge sharing on experiences between Member States, donors, regional and sub-regional organizations, and civil society organizations to inform peacebuilding interventions and support.
- Criticality of multilateral and multifaceted responses, with regionally driven strategies building on cross-border programming and PBF partnerships with UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes and civil society organizations was underlined.
- They placed emphasis on holistic approaches incorporating the gender dimensions in COVID-19 responses to address gender-based violence (especially against women and girls) and ensure equitable access to resources.

- They stressed the need to strengthen implementation of both the women, peace and security and youth, peace and security agendas, noting that youth represent both opportunities and threats to peace and stability, particularly in the propagation of hate speech, xenophobia and violence.
 - They underscored the need for confidence building and trust between the authorities and the population to enhance human security and development (vocational training, livelihoods), resilience, as well as empowerment of local communities to strengthen institutional capacity to address the myriad challenges.
 - They highlighted the security dimensions of the pandemic, and the need to adopt measures which mitigate violent extremist and terrorist groups, who are exploiting the situation (including the security vacuum) to intensify attacks on security entities and civilians, resulting in forced displacements and greater humanitarian needs.
 - They acknowledged the valuable role the Commission as a platform for the coherence and coordination of the mobilization of political support and resources for peacebuilding and sustaining peace efforts. They recognized the important catalytic and programmatic role of the PBF in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in cross-border projects.
6. In his closing remarks, SRSB Chambas noted the strong responses by Sahelian countries to violent extremist and terrorist groups, particularly Chad's operations against Boko Haram attacks (which killed 100 Chadian soldiers) and the efforts by the G5 Sahel Force to strengthen coordination and support in security sphere. In this regard, he noted Chad's continued participation in the MNJTF and G5 Sahel Force, and pointed out that Nigeria had relocated its Chief of Army Staff to Maiduguri in Borno State, to scale up efforts against Boko Haram. On elections, he noted the good faith efforts in the region (supported by ECOWAS) to respect the electoral calendar, foster dialogue and consensus with opposition parties, especially in Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire. He welcomed the continued opening of humanitarian corridors, pointing to the WHO and WFP initiative to establish regional hubs to expedite the movement of supplies. He stressed the importance of ensuring that humanitarian workers have unfettered access to vulnerable areas of needs.
7. ASG Fernandez-Taranco, noted the proactive efforts of Member States and WHO in the crisis response to COVID-19, particularly in the deployment of medical staff and equipment, as well as the utilization of the infrastructures of countries to complement health interventions in border areas. He reiterated the cross-border peacebuilding support in the Liptako-Gourma area to curb the increase in violence and build peace and stability. He echoed the importance of maintaining humanitarian corridors as lifelines to ensure effective responses to the pandemic. He thanked

the Chair for his leadership and the Commission for building upon the international solidarity and for its efforts to ensure COVID-19 response safeguards the peacebuilding gains and contributes to the national peacebuilding priorities.

8. In conclusion, the Chair welcomed the interactive and informative discussion on COVID-19 response, and outlining the following thematic areas ('buckets') for follow-up actions with the Vice-Chairs, Commission Members and the Peacebuilding Support Office: (1) Security issues (including violent extremist and terrorist groups); (2) Political and governance (noting the upcoming elections); (3) Local community level engagement; (4) Women, girls and children; (5) The fight against COVID-19 (resources and humanitarian assistance); (6) Economic aspects (poverty, unemployment, private sector/SME focus, youth engagement-noting they both represent an 'opportunity and a threat'); (7) Food security; (8) Stimulus package for the region. The Chair thanked the participants and closed the meeting.