

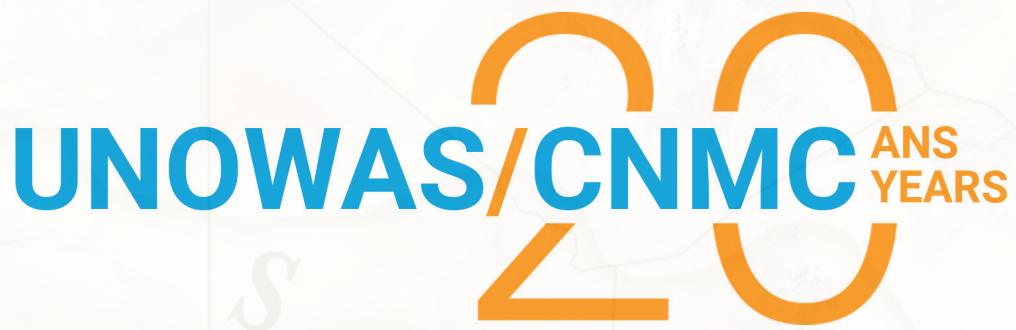


UNOWAS Magazine

Together for Peace

Quarterly Magazine of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel

For a prosperous and
peaceful West Africa



*20 years of commitment for the promotion
of peace and conflict prevention*

In this issue



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Leonardo Santos SIMAO
Special Representative of the United Nations
Secretary-General for West Africa and the Sahel
and Head of UNOWAS/CNMC

For a prosperous and peaceful West Africa

Last June, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, entrusted me with the task of being his Representative for West Africa and the Sahel. It is an immense honour for me. It is also a great responsibility that I intend to carry out with enthusiasm, following the commitment of my predecessors, and in close collaboration with all the regional and international players and partners.

The first stage of my regional contact tour, which I have just completed with visits to Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone, and Niger, has enabled me to grasp the need to strengthen the coordination of efforts between the countries of the sub-region in order to deal coherently and effectively with the increasingly complex challenges that are slowing

down West Africa's progress towards sustainable peace and development.

Indeed, the many weighty and pernicious challenges facing the countries of the sub-region have been further exacerbated in an increasingly unstable and unpredictable global political and economic context, marked by the consequences of the war in Ukraine and the continuing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

But the commitment and determination shown by the leaders of these countries, as well as the players of the civil society, combined with the natural and human assets available in the sub-region, are an opportunity. They constitute solid capital for investing in a better future.

My recent visits have also enabled me to appreciate the extraordinary work carried out by the agencies, funds and programs of the United Nations system which, in close collaboration with the national authorities, contribute on a daily basis to improving the living conditions of the people of the sub-region.

It is more vital than ever to strengthen all efforts aimed at consolidating peace and development in order to curb the various challenges that stand in the way of people's aspirations for a better life.

In coordination with regional and international partners, and national actors, UNOWAS will continue its commitment to a prosperous and peaceful West Africa.

Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission in Action

Activities	Achievements
Facilitating the withdrawal of troops and transfer of authority in Lake Chad area, along the land boundary and in the Bakassi Peninsula	The CNMC facilitated the peaceful transfer of authority over Bakassi to Cameroon through the Greentree Agreement, in accordance with the judgment of the International Court of Justice.
Demarcation of the land boundary and delimitation of the maritime boundary between the two countries	<p>2,050 kilometers of demarcation have been surveyed and approved by Cameroon and Nigeria out of a total of approximately 2,100 kilometers</p> <p>Delineation of the maritime boundary in accordance with the Judgement of the International Court of Justice</p> <p>Out of a total of 2696 pillars to be built, 1673 pillars have already been built and placed</p>
Addressing the situation of local populations in boundary areas affected by the demarcation activities	The CNMC, in liaison with partners, has developed confidence building programs to mitigate the impacts caused by the demarcation.
Making recommendations on confidence-building measures aiming at promoting peaceful cross-border cooperation	The Mixed Commission also approved the recommendations for crossborder cooperation on hydrocarbon deposits straddling the maritime boundary

Launch of the United Nations Interagency Group on the youth, peace, and security agenda



UNOWAS officially launched, on 27 June, the United Nations Interagency Group on the youth, peace and security agenda in West Africa and the Sahel. The event was chaired by Deputy Special Representative Giovanie Biha, in the presence of the Executive Secretary of the G5 Sahel Mr. Eric Tiare. This UN Interagency Group was established with the goal of strengthening coordination, and ensuring harmonization of UN entities' youth, peace and security interventions and efforts in the region. The goal of this Interagency group, which has been developed in collaboration with regional UN entities, is to provide a more cohesive regional UN approach to the youth, peace, and security agenda.

CNMC demarcation process continues despite security concerns



The Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission (CNMC) is continuing its activities despite security concerns. Pillar emplacement process along the Cameroon-Nigeria border, and pillar construction in Lot 7 in the Beka region are currently underway following several missions conducted by the Project Steering Committee (PSC) representatives, aiming at sensitizing local authorities, traditional leaders, and high-level military commanders. Significant progress has been achieved in the demarcation process. The CNMC works tirelessly since its establishment for the consolidation of peace and the strengthening of fraternal ties between Cameroon and Nigeria. To date, the CNMC has succeeded in demarcating close to 2060 km of an estimated 2100 km border.

UNOCA and UNOWAS joint technical mission to Boko Haram affected countries



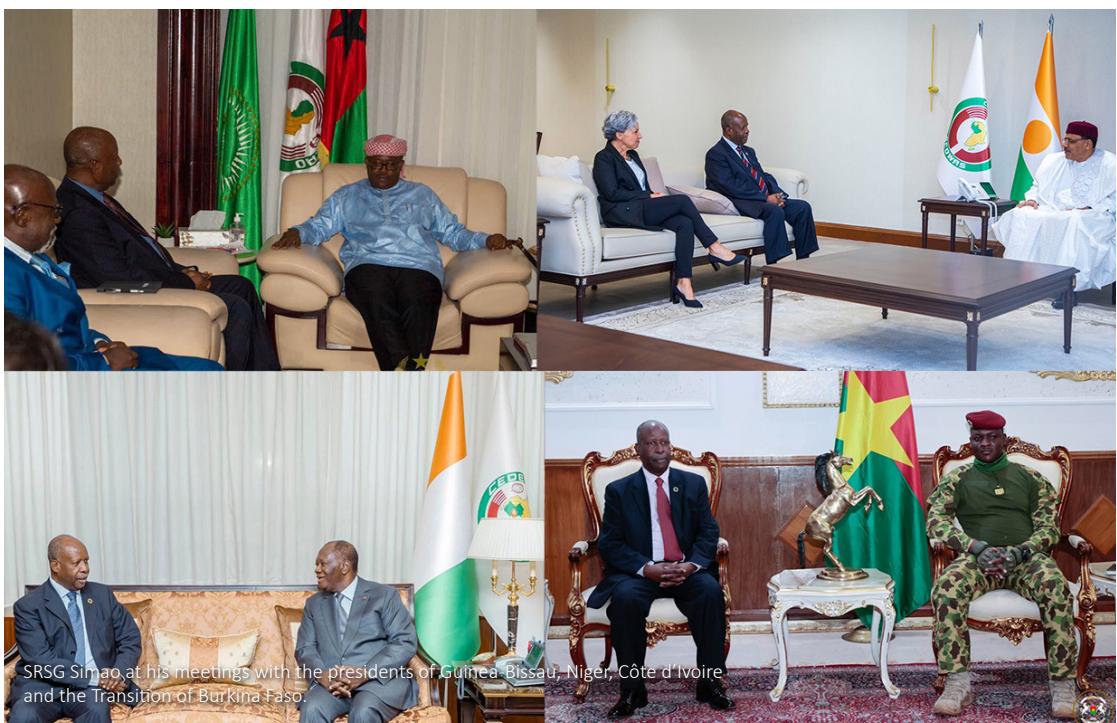
As part of the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2349 (2017), the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy, and the system-wide UN strategy on the Lake Chad Basin crisis, UNOCA and UNOWAS undertook, in June, a joint technical mission to Boko Haram affected countries of the Lake Chad Basin. The aim of the mission was to assess security challenges and the humanitarian and human rights impact of the Boko Haram insurgency. The delegation successively visited Chad, Niger and Nigeria where it held discussions with national officials, UN Agencies, partners, civil society organizations, humanitarian actors and Human Rights Commissions. The technical mission visited the Diffa (Niger) IDP camp and Maiduguri (Nigeria), especially the Giwa barracks harboring captured Boko-Haram/ISWAP elements, the Bulumkutu and Hajj camps hosting surrendered elements. In Maiduguri they also had meetings with the Theatre Command of Operation Hadin Kai.

UNOWAS

- ◆ UNOWAS, United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, was established in 2002 as a regional special political mission of the United Nations Department of Political Affairs and Peacebuilding (DPPA).
- ◆ UNOWAS is headed by a Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel. Ms. Giovanie BIHA is the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Officer in Charge of UNOWAS/CNMC.
- ◆ UNOWAS is mandated by the Security Council to act for the prevention and resolution of crises and conflicts through an active role in preventive diplomacy, good offices, and political mediation.
- ◆ UNOWAS implements its mandate in 16 countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cabo-Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo and (Chad).
- ◆ UNOWAS works closely with the various United Nations entities including regional and international partners such as the Economic Community of West African States, the Mano River Union, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, the Gulf of Guinea Commission, the Group of Five for the Sahel and the African Union, to consolidate peace and prevent conflicts.
- ◆ UNOWAS supports the 16 countries in their efforts to consolidate good governance, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and gender mainstreaming in conflict prevention and management initiatives.
- ◆ UNOWAS contributes to the analysis and assessment of the impact of climate change on security and stability in the sub-region. UNOWAS also supports sub-regional institutions and States in their efforts to address cross-border and cross-cutting threats to peace and security in the sub-region.
- ◆ UNOWAS contributes to the implementation of the United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS) to support the countries of the Sahel facing multiple challenges such as, security, development, the management of the effects of climate change and the promotion of sustainable development.
- ◆ Special Representative of the Secretary-General is also the Chairman of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission (CMCN), created to facilitate the implementation of the judgment rendered in 2002 by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the border dispute between Cameroon and Nigeria.
- ◆ CNMC supports the work of border demarcation between Cameroon and Nigeria. It also supports the response to the needs of populations affected by the demarcation. Since its creation, CNMC has been able to demarcate 2050 km out of an estimated borderline of 2100 km.

Leonardo Santos Simão, new Special Representative, calls for a stronger partnership to tackle the multiple challenges in West Africa and the Sahel

As soon as he takes office in June 2023, the new Special Representative of the Secretary-General and Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel, Leonardo Santos Simão, embarked on a regional familiarization tour. The first leg took him to Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Sierra Leone and Niger, where he met with local authorities and regional and international partners.



A seasoned diplomat with 30 years' experience in international affairs, diplomacy and mediation, Mr. Leonardo Santos Simão, appointed on 2 May 2023 by the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, takes over the reins of the Dakar-based UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel. He also serves as Chairman of the Cameroon-Nigeria Mixed Commission (CMNC), set up in November 2002 to oversee the implementation of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling

on the maritime and land border dispute between Cameroon and Nigeria.

From his very first days in office, Mr. Simão set about his task in a region marked by an upsurge in violence, political tensions and the transition processes underway in Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali. From 16 to 26 June, he completed the first leg of his regional familiarization tour, which took him successively to Guinea-Bissau, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso,

Sierra Leone and Niger. Renewing the United Nations' ongoing support for peacebuilding and good governance in West Africa and the Sahel was the primary objective of this series of courtesy and listening visits.

Mr. Leonardo Santos Simão held talks with heads of state and members of government in most of the countries he visited. He was able to listen to their expectations and seek their views on the political, security and so-

cio-economic situation in the sub-region. Among others, he met with H.E. Umaro Sissoco Embaló, President of Guinea-Bissau and current Chairman of the Economic Community of West African States, H.E. Alassane Ouattara of Côte d'Ivoire, H.E. Julius Maada Bio, President of Sierra Leone, and H.E. Mohamed Bazoum of Niger. To all his interlocutors, the Special Representative renewed the commitment of the United Nations in general, and of UNOWAS in particular, to play its role as an active and mobilized partner in supporting the countries of the sub-region in their efforts to promote peace and development.

In Burkina Faso, Mr. Simão reaffirmed the continued commitment of the

United Nations, in coordination with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), to support the efforts of the Burkinabe people in their quest for stability, peace and development.

Visiting Sierra Leone during the 24 June 2023 general elections, Mr. Simão reiterated the United Nations' support for peaceful, transparent, and credible presidential and legislative elections. Seizing the opportunity of these elections, the Special Representative called for a strengthened partnership to preserve stability and consolidate peace and development in the country.

The meeting with ECOWAS officials, a key partner for the United Nations in

West Africa, was an important stage in the regional tour. It was therefore natural for the Special Representative to meet the President of the Commission, Dr. Omar Alieu Touray, in Abuja, with whom he discussed various issues relating to the political, security and humanitarian situation in the sub-region. They recognized the need to strengthen the partnership between UNOWAS and ECOWAS.

The special Representative Simão renewed the UN's commitment to supporting ECOWAS's tireless efforts to consolidate peace and democracy. He called for a strengthened partnership to address the multiple challenges facing the West African region.



Sierra Leone : Elections and Challenges

Three million Sierra Leonean voters cast their ballots on Saturday June 24 to choose their new president, parliamentary and municipal representatives. They all hope that this fifth election since the end of the civil war in 2002 will foster the consolidation of peace and development.



Despite ongoing political tensions, notably the dissemination of hate messages on social networks against certain ethnic groups, and a difficult economic situation marked by high youth unemployment and inflation approaching 43%, three million Sierra Leonean voters, according to the National Electoral Commission of Sierra Leone (CENSL), actively participated in the fifth general elections organized since the end of the civil war 21 years ago! This demonstrates Sierra Leoneans' commitment towards peace, development and democratic governance.

To support Sierra Leoneans in their efforts, and to raise awareness among the various national stakeholders on the importance of peaceful elections, the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), in coordination with regional and international partners, undertook several missions to Freetown, with the aim of reducing tensions and encourag-

ing candidates and their supporters to mobilize against hate speech that can lead to irreversible violence. "I congratulate the people of Sierra Leone for their active contribution and participation in the elections. I urge all political actors to maintain a peaceful atmosphere during the process," said the new Special Representative and Head of UNOWAS, Leonardo Santos Simão, during his visit to Sierra Leone from 22 to 25 June. Echoing the Special Representative's call, the UN Resident Coordinator in Sierra Leone, Babatunde Ahonsi, points out that through multi-donor-funded electoral support projects, the UN is working in partnership with electoral management bodies, the judiciary, security sector institutions, the media and civil society organizations to create the conditions for peaceful, inclusive and credible elections (see interview).

According to the Electoral Commission, voting took place in a "relatively peaceful manner", but also reported

isolated incidents and acknowledged logistical problems linked to the late distribution of electoral material in some places. "Any citizen who has legally voted may submit challenges to the Supreme Court within seven days of the proclamation of the election results," said Electoral Commission Chairman Mohamed Kenewui Konneh, who, in a statement released on Tuesday 27 June, announced that incumbent President Julius Maada Bio, 59, had been re-elected with 56.17% of the votes cast on Saturday.

The consolidation of peace and democracy through peaceful and credible elections will help mobilize Sierra Leoneans to tackle economic and development challenges. According to the World Bank, the economic recession has dampened hopes of recovery, and youth unemployment is one of the highest in West Africa.



Bo, Sierra Leone - Photo by Joshua Hanson - Unsplash

“Conducting peaceful and credible elections whose results reflect the will of the people would thus be a strong indication of democratic consolidation in Sierra Leone”



Babatunde Ahonsi
United Nations Resident Coordinator
in Sierra Leone

Babatunde Ahonsi has been the United Nations Resident Coordinator in Sierra Leone for the past three years. He talks to us about the challenges and opportunities facing a country holding its fifth free general elections since the end of the civil war in 2002. Interview.

You have been serving as the UN Resident Coordinator in Sierra Leone since 2020, what can you tell us about this country?

Sierra Leone is a low-income, post-conflict country with many development challenges as well as opportunities. It is a youthful country with more than three-quarters of its population aged under 35 years. While life expectancy at birth is approaching 60 years, about 60 percent of the population

still lives on less than \$1.9 a day, and a similar proportion of all households are food insecure with stunting among under-fives being recorded as 38%, compared to the developing country average of 25%. Yet, the country presents many opportunities for accelerated progress towards sustainable development including the fact that its Medium-Term National Development Plan 2019-2023 is strongly rooted in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs.).

Moreover, its abundant natural resources if well-managed could lift the country up to a middle-income country status by 2035. Vast opportunities exist for driving rapid, green, and inclusive economic growth through the development of specific agricultural value chains (including rice and cassava), the blue economy, eco-tourism, renewable energy, and intra-regional trade. In addition, the country is renowned for its high level of inter-religious harmony. This fact along with

the enactment of progressive laws in the last five years that are supportive of universal access to basic education, freedom of expression, gender equality and women's empowerment, equitable and sustainable land use, and climate-smart mining constitute additional assets for supporting the country's recovery from economic stagnation and its return to a path of green, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth.

On 24 June 2023, Sierra Leone will conduct its general elections. Can you explain the importance of these elections for the people of Sierra Leone and the support the UN is providing?

The general elections on 24 June 2023 would be the country's fifth presidential election since the end of the brutal 11-year civil war in 2002. During this period, the country has witnessed two peaceful transfers of power from the ruling party to the opposition party. The 2023 electoral cycle is the first time in the country's post-war history that the government is providing the largest share of the funding for the conduct of general elections. Conducting peaceful and credible elections whose results reflect the will of the people would thus be a strong indication of democratic consolidation in Sierra Leone. However, partisan politics in the country is highly ethno-regionally polarizing and is driven by a 'winner-takes-all' and 'tit-for-tat' ethos. The UN is therefore through a multi-donor-funded Elections Support Project partnering with election management bodies, the judiciary, security sector institutions, the mass media, and civil society organizations to help create conditions for peaceful, inclusive, and credible elections to take place. High-level preventive diplomacy efforts are also undertaken in collaboration with development partners to foster inter-party dialogue

on contentious issues to reduce political tensions that could undermine the conduct of peaceful elections.

The UN has had a longstanding presence in Sierra Leone. How do you see the UN's role in the country today and what are some of its main achievements?

As a result of the civil war, which ravaged Sierra Leone during the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the country saw a succession of UN missions- United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL), United Nations Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL), and the UN Integrated Peacebuilding Office in Sierra Leone (UNIPSIL) – the last of which closed in 2014, which also marked the end of direct Security Council engagement in the country. UN operational activities transitioned to a more "traditional" UN Country Team setting, focusing on development and with an United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) being in effect from 2015 to 2019. Owing to the long-standing presence in Sierra Leone, the UN system continues to enjoy an excellent standing and broad-based goodwill in the country.

The UN development system today strives to be a development partner of first choice to the government, donor agencies, CSOs, and other institutions in supporting and accompanying the country in its quest to achieve the SDGs and become a middle-income country by 2035. We provide integrated policy support, capacity building, technical assistance, and social and behavior change interventions that address the root causes of the key development challenges facing the country. The main challenges include food insecurity, limited access to basic services and energy, high levels of vulnerability to natural disasters and health emergen-

cies, weak public service institutions, and huge socio-economic disparities affecting young people, women, and persons living with disabilities.

Among our main achievements have been distinct contributions to the 40 percent reduction in under-five and maternal mortality in the past decade and a half, and the massive expansion in access to basic education for boys and girls in the last five years. Also, notable is our role in the establishment and capacitating of the National Disaster Management Agency, the design, and roll-out of an effective national Covid-19 response, and the expansion of access to justice through legal aid and broader spread of judicial services. The UN has also been associated with a high and increasing number of youth empowerment initiatives, a significant increase in access to renewable energy in rural areas, enhanced protection of the rights and empowerment of persons living with disabilities, a diverse range of peace-building interventions, and a strengthened national response to sexual and gender-based violence.



Among our main achievements have been distinct contributions to the 40 percent reduction in under-five and maternal mortality in the past decade and a half, and the massive expansion in access to basic education for boys and girls in the last five years.



Babatunde Ahonsi visits a steel production plant employing women, Sierra Leone - December 2021

It is particularly noteworthy that given that nearly 80 percent of the population is under 35 years of age, we have for the first time in Sierra Leone established and activated a 'One UN' Youth Advisory Group. This group serves as the main mechanism through which the UNCT is accountable to young Sierra Leoneans and Sierra Leonean youth are in turn accountable to the UNCT in our collective efforts to support the achievement of the SDGs in Sierra Leone.

What are your priorities for 2023/2024?

For 2023-2024, my topmost priority will be to support efforts at ensuring the conduct of peaceful and credible

elections on the 24th of June 2023. In addition, the UN country team (UNCT) and I will be focused on six strategic intervention areas to accelerate the implementation of our ongoing UN Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework, 2020-2024 (UNSDCF).

These are robust national SDG implementation, results tracking, and monitoring; operationalization of the UN Secretary-General's Prevention vision (to prevent and manage risks, strengthen resilience); engaging key stakeholders and high-level actors on Climate Action (post-COP27) and for post-Global Summit implementation of national roadmaps for food systems and education systems transformation; leveraging the humanitarian-de-

velopment-peace nexus to ensure that early recovery and conflict sensitivity are embedded in emergency responses; centralizing Leaving No One Behind, Human Rights and Gender Equality in supporting Sierra Leone's pursuit of the 2030 Agenda; and business innovation as part of the UNCT's implementation of the Business Operations Strategy.

A complete Common Country Analysis will be done and the current United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF) will be evaluated to guide the roadmap and inform the design of the next UN-SDCF (2025-2029).



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

1 NO POVERTY 	2 ZERO HUNGER 	3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING 	4 QUALITY EDUCATION 	5 GENDER EQUALITY 	6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION 	8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH 	9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE 	10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES 	11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES 	12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION 	13 CLIMATE ACTION 	14 LIFE BELOW WATER 	15 LIFE ON LAND 	16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS 	17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS 	
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“Liberia is greater than our personal interests.”



Signing of the Farmington River Declaration for peaceful, transparent and credible elections in Liberia. - April 4, 2023

Ahead of the presidential election, Liberian political parties committed themselves on April 4 in Farmington to ensure peaceful, transparent, and credible elections. But at the ceremony, it was the voice of a young Liberian woman who gripped the attention of all and left a profound impact.

During the signing ceremony, the Coordinator of Naymote’s Young Political Leadership School, Alphaia Faith Kemokai delivered an impassioned speech on behalf of the youth, calling on political leaders to abide by the principles signed in the Farmington Agreement and ensure that electoral laws are respected to ensure a violence free election.

Liberia, as Africa’s oldest independent nation has served as a beacon of hope for many African countries, particularly in the West Africa region. The presidential and general elections in October 2023 will be the first to be primarily organized and administered by Liberia, since the drawdown of United Nations Mission in Liberia (UN-

MIL). This background reemphasizes the crucial nature of these elections and brings responsibility not only on the government, but also on political stakeholders, opposition and ruling, civil society, the media, and the citizens of Liberia to recognize the necessity to deliver a credible, inclusive, and peaceful election process.

In Liberia there is an increasing number of idle and unemployed youths, in particular young men, who have become ideal recruits for criminal and other illicit activity involving violence during elections. In her speech, Alphaia condemned the use of young people as “instruments of violence” and encouraged young people to exercise their constitutional right to vote,

emphasizing the need to do so peacefully. An extension of this is the need for political leaders to caution their supporters against the use of violence, reflecting the commitments enshrined in the Farmington Declaration.

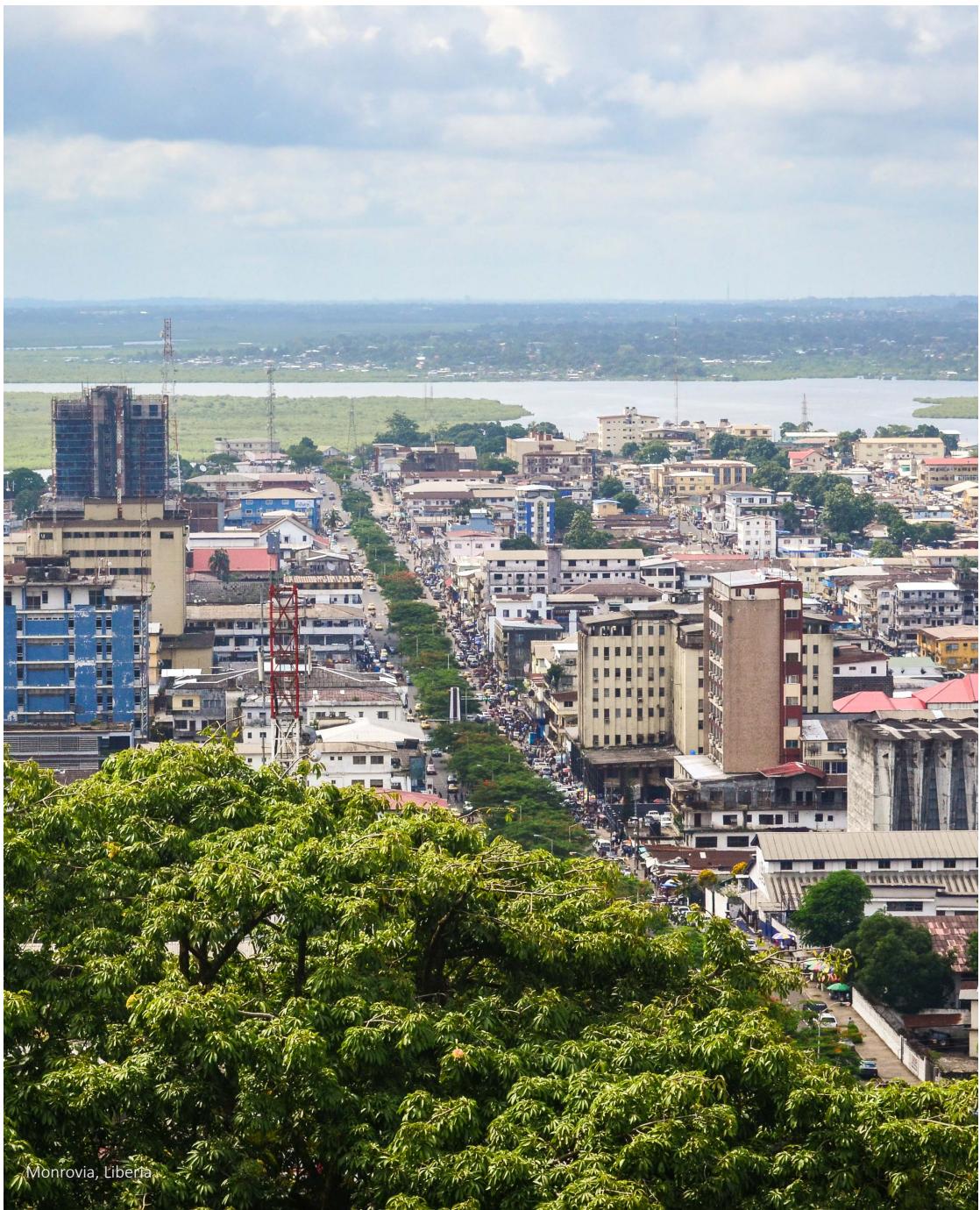
Alphaia also issued a stark message to the media of Liberia, known to hold great influence when it comes to information disseminated during election time. “The media should not be in politician’s pocket” lamented the young Liberian. In this country, like many others, the media are responsible for a significant amount of voter awareness and sensitization to elections issues, including crucial issues of inclusion. Therefore, it is paramount that the Liberian people receive credible and ba-

lanced information conducive to exercising their right to vote in an unbiased and fair manner.

In her remarks at Farmington, having listened to Alpha represent the young people of Liberia, Deputy Special Re-

presentative of the United Nations Office of West Africa and the Sahel, Giovanie Biha implored leaders to, “Create spaces for youth and women to channel their creativity towards building resilience and growth for their country; that is the key for sustainable

development”. Young people in Liberia have enjoyed peace for the most part – that is something that should be protected. As Alpha Faith Kemokai said, “We believe that democracy should deliver”.



Monrovia, Liberia

Davidetta Browne LANSANAH, Chairman of the National Election Commission's (NEC) of Liberia



Davidetta Browne Lansanah

Chairman of the National Election Commission's (NEC)
of Liberia

What does the signing of the Farmington River Declaration mean to you- and what is its objective ?

The Farmington River Declaration means a lot to me because it once again proves to the world that Liberia's political actors understand the consequences of electoral violence. The fact that they committed themselves to a violent-free 2023 election, strengthens the National Election Commission's (NEC) resolve to ensure upcoming 10 October 2023 elections are carried out with integrity and credibility. The objective of the Farmington River Declaration is to ensure that the 2023 General Elections are free from all forms of violence, including violence against women.

Overall, what was the NEC's role in this initiative and beyond?

The NEC works closely with the United Nations (UN), the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)

in Liberia, international and regional partners as well as the political parties, coalitions and alliances and all other key actors in the electoral process e.g., Ministry of Justice (Joint Security) to monitor compliance on the overall implementation of the Farmington River Declaration 2023.

Regarding the upcoming elections, how is the United Nations supporting the work of the NEC in Liberia?

The UN, through UN the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) is providing integrated technical assistance to strengthen electoral institutions and processes in Liberia. The UNDP Electoral Support Project (LESP) 2020 -2024 focuses specifically on inclusion and transparency, capacity building and the prevention of electoral violence. This is further supported by the Peace Building Funds (PBF) project and the UNDP-UNWOMEN projects, UNDP-OHCHR-IOM Peaceful Electoral Environment Project.



Monrovia, Liberia

National Human Rights Institutions Call for Strengthened Regional Cooperation



During the Fifth Regional Consultation of National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs)- Banjul, Gambia.

Between the 7-9 June 2023, the Fifth Regional Consultation of National Human Rights Institutions took place in Banjul, The Gambia. During these three days, fourteen representatives from West Africa met to share their experiences and strengthen regional cooperation in order to effectively promote Human Rights in the sub-region.

In West Africa and the Sahel, National Human Rights Institutions (NHRIs) play an important role in promoting and protecting human rights. Through strategic partnerships with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Commission, the African Commission on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR) and the United Nations primarily through the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UN-

OWAS), NHRI's work towards improving and the respect for human rights.

This year the fifth edition took place in Banjul, the capital of The Gambia where various partners discussed the independence and institutional development of NHRIs, the strengthening of their role in the prevention, promotion and protection of human rights, how to strengthen the independence of judiciaries in the region, and resource mobilization strategies. Within this

context the multiple challenges facing the region were mentioned, including, terrorism, intercommunal, gender-based violence, increased spread of hate speech and the need for promotion and the protection of the rights of vulnerable groups, including women, children and migrants.

In response to these challenges that have remained consistent in many countries of the region, a strengthened regional cooperation is neces-

sary. In this regard, participants recommended strengthening the capacity of the regional network of NHRIs in West Africa, and its members through the establishment of a framework to enhance monitoring and promotion of a more effective response to human rights violations in terms of terrorism and violent extremism.

The past and upcoming elections in the region also dominated the discussions. Participants saw it pertinent

that NHRIs should continue to monitor electoral processes and collaborate with relevant stakeholders to ensure that processes are inclusive, peaceful, transparent, and respectful of human rights and the rule of law. In this respect, UNOWAS stressed the importance of stability and security to enable national human rights institutions to play their full role in promoting inclusive electoral processes in West Africa and the Sahel. In this re-

gard, participants specifically called for the creation of a regional instrument to reinforce the independence of the judiciary in the sub-region.

This year marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). With NHRIs rooted in the core values of the UDHR, participants discussed the progress made, as well as the challenges and prospects ahead.



In the Sahel region, climate change is adversely affecting the guarantee of a wide range of human rights. - Photo: Anouk Delafortrie

Senegal: UNESCO and UNOWAS celebrate 30 years of World Press Freedom Day



Some sixty stakeholders from the media sector took part in a discussion forum organized on 3 May 2023, in Dakar, to take stock of the state of freedom of expression in Senegal, and to assess the challenges and opportunities facing the media sector.

UNESCO Dakar, in collaboration with the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), organized the celebration of the World Press Freedom Day on 3 May 2023. Conducted in partnership with Senegalese media organizations (Coordination des Associations de Presse, Maison de la Presse, Réseau International des Femmes, etc.) and regional and international organizations (ARTICLE 19, Institut Panos, Reporters Sans Frontières), the event was held, in Dakar, under the global theme: "Shaping a Future of Rights: Freedom of expression as a driver for all other human

rights". Representatives of public institutions, experts, managers and members of professional media organizations, media regulatory and arbitration bodies, representatives of civil society, trade unions, media owners and journalists, attended the event.

Acknowledging that "arrests of media players are always regrettable" and insisting on the need to operate in compliance with the rules of ethics and deontology, Fatou Bineta Ndiaye, Secretary General of Senegal's Ministry of Communication, Telecommunications, and the Digital Economy,

encouraged journalists to "always defend press freedom and protect the profession through heightened professional standards and constructive reflection on the challenges facing the sector". These challenges include the use and enforcement of libel laws, the fight against misinformation, the safety of journalists, media development, and public access to information (SDG 16.10). For several years now, UNESCO has been carrying out monitoring work, regularly identifying the main trends in freedom of expression and media development. Its 2021/2022 report was presented to stakeholders in

Senegal and the West African sub-region on the occasion of the 2022 World Press Freedom Day celebrations.

For this 2023 edition, the focus is on the central role of freedom of expression in the realization of all other human rights. Indeed, freedom of expression and of the media helps to verify and disseminate facts, making complex subjects intelligible to the general public. It also fosters the development of professional journalism, which helps to expose wrongdoing that indiscriminately violates human rights. In his speech, Mr. Dimitri Sanga, Director of UNESCO Dakar, praised “the work of journalists and professionals in public, private and community media, both online and offline, who work every day, even at the risk of their lives and those of their families, to provide reliable information to help guarantee human rights in our society.

Recalling the United Nations General Assembly's proclamation of 3 May 1993 as World Press Freedom Day, the UN Secretary-General's Deputy Special Representative for West Africa and the Sahel, Ms. Giovanie Biha, noted that “the right to inform and be informed is essential to our freedom as individuals and as a society. In shaping a future of rights for all, it is imperative to remember that freedom of expression is a key element of democracy and citizen participation.”

In Senegal, “this celebration of World Press Freedom Day comes at a difficult time for the media, with the arrest of journalists”, lamented Mamadou Thior, President of the Comité d'Observation des Règles d'Ethique et de Déontologie and representative of the Coordination des Associations de Presse (CAP). Referring to article 3 of the Senegalese Journalists' Charter, which calls for “the independence and freedom of the press to be defended in all its aspects, particularly with re-

gard to freedom of information”, he welcomed the theme chosen for this celebration, considering that “if freedom of expression is respected as the driving force behind all other human rights, Senegal, like the world, will be all the better for it.”

The meeting provided a forum for the various stakeholders to take stock of the state of freedom of expression in Senegal, and to assess the challenges and opportunities facing the media sector in the country in particular, and in West Africa in general. Presentations and exchanges focused on three specific themes: the use of libel laws to restrict press freedom; the safety of journalists, the stakes in the fight against disinformation and access to information in Senegal in the pre-electoral period; and the safety of journalists and human rights defenders in a context of increasing digital surveillance.

The participants agreed on the concerns that remain major at national level. These include the precariousness of the media, physical and psychological violence against journalists in the performance of their duties, and disinformation with the rise of social networks, all of which need to be addressed effectively at a time when the law on access to information, waited for several years, is about to be fine-tuned. To promote a free, strong, protected, independent and resilient press, and combat all forms of abuse, the various stakeholders recommended, among other things, the harmonization of all texts (press code, access to information law, defamation law, etc.) with the participation of journalists and civil society to ensure that their content complies with international standards and promotes respect for human rights.



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Fatou Fall, Senegal's first female General: "Gender is not an obstacle to success".



As the first female military doctor and the first female officer in the Senegalese Armed Forces. Mrs. Fatou Fall is a pioneer. In April 2023, she made the Senegalese army's history, following her appointment as General medical officer, making her the first female General. Mrs. Fall is an inspirational figure for young women in Senegal and in the sub-region. Portrait.

Who is Fatou Fall? Can you tell us about your background and childhood?

I was born on 18 January 1965 in Dakar, where I spent most of my childhood until the age of 11. I then followed my parents to Foundiougne and then to Kaolack following a transfer by my father, an elementary school inspector. The frequent changes of school linked to my father's successive transfers to different regions of the country led me to the Lycée Malick Sy in Thiès, where I was able to continue my studies from 5th grade to the baccalaureate. I entered the École Militaire de Santé (EMS) in 1985 to study medicine at the Faculty of Medicine and Odontostomatology of the Université

Cheikh Anta Diop de Dakar (UCAD). My military training begins with the Basic Combat Training (BCT) an initiation to the military profession in Bango, a small town in the Saint-Louis region. It lasts 45 days and combines theoretical courses, physical endurance tests and weapons firing. The end of the BCT marks the effective integration of the students into the EMS and their enrolment at UCAD.

Life at EMS is punctuated by academic activities and military internships lasting 3-4 weeks at the end of the school year. I was able to adapt to this rigorous organization and defend my doctoral thesis in Medicine in 1992 at UCAD. I was the first female medical officer to graduate from the school,

and the first female officer in the Senegalese Armed Forces.

How did you come up with the idea of pursuing a military career?

The army wasn't my main motivation; I wanted to study medicine first. It's a profession that I found exhilarating even before I took it up, especially as it's one of the few professions that can offer the dual role of medical practitioner and teacher. Being a doctor gives me the opportunity to be close and useful to people. Teaching is a way of passing on knowledge to younger generations of students.

The army appeared to me as the path that offered the best opportunities for

success in a formal working environment combining rigor and discipline. Moreover, the prestigious École Militaire de Santé (EMS) recruited the best high school students after a highly selective entrance exam. For all these reasons, I decided to take the entrance exam for the medical option at EMS in 1985.

I quickly decided to take the competitive examination to become a military hospital assistant, after having worked as a garrison doctor for the first 3 years of my career. Passing this examination in 1996 opened the door to a career in hospital medicine, specializing in hepato-gastroenterology. I then prepared and passed the competitive examinations for military hospital specialists in Dakar in 2003, and for associate professors at the Val-de-Grâce in Paris in 2012. I also hold a Certificat d'Etudes Spécialisées in hepato-gas-

troenterology from the Cocody Faculty of Medicine in Abidjan (Côte d'Ivoire).

You were appointed to the rank of doctor General on April 25, 2023, making you Senegal's first female general. What is your feeling ?

I welcome this appointment with humility and great satisfaction. It's the culmination of many years of effort in providing health support to the defense and security forces, which is the primary vocation of a military doctor. I am also aware of the magnitude of the responsibility it represents.

What added value do you intend to bring to this status of General as a woman?

As a female General, I have the opportunity to raise awareness among the authorities of the importance of

strengthening and expanding the recruitment of women in all branches of the armed forces. I also intend to actively promote female leadership in both the armed forces and the civilian world.

What is your message to the younger generation, especially young girls?

I have just one message for young girls: gender is not an obstacle to success. I encourage those who wish to embark on a military career to find out about the competitive entrance examinations to the top military schools, so that they can choose a profile more suited to their ambitions. I urge all girls to cultivate the values of perseverance at work and to believe in themselves so they can develop their human potential and position themselves as women leaders.



Hôpital Principal de Dakar- Photo : Kaicedrat