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Perspectives

E-BULLETIN

RETHINKING REGIONAL STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THE THREAT OF VIOLENT EXTREMISM IN THE COASTAL COUNTRIES OF WEST AFRICA

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1.0 Introduction

The West African region, has in recent years, continued to face unprecedented violence with the upsurge in terrorists' activities and violent extremism posing major threats to peace and security in the region. With relentless attacks on civilian and military targets, largely concentrated in central Mali, northern and eastern Burkina Faso, western Niger and northern Nigeria, extremist groups continue to development. Terrorist groups are taking advantage of the precarious humanitarian conditions and growing frustrations of citizens, due to inequalities, poor governance and unemployment, among others, to mobilize strong support, especially among young people to perpetuate their nefarious activities with devastating consequences.

Faced with this growing threat and in an attempt to curb the violence trend, the region has developed bilateral and multilateral responses, which mostly focused on the military approach. However, the continued rise in extremists' attacks and the expansion of their activities over the years, particularly towards the coastal areas, reveal their willingness to step up their actions throughout the region. This brings into question, the effectiveness of the various counter terrorism responses and calls for a review of the regional strategy to deal with violent extremism in a sustainable way and reverse its escalation in the region.

The United Nations Resolution 2250 and the African Union Continental Framework on youth, peace and security both recognize young people as key partners in conflict prevention and particularly in the fight against violent extremism. The two instruments call on States to strengthen partnerships with young people for sustainable solutions to violent extremism. This suggests that deliberate efforts should be made for youth inclusion in peace processes through policy development and implementation, inclusive platforms for continuous engagement and support to youth peacebuilding initiatives. The reality however is different. Young people are still side-lined in formal peacebuilding processes and less attention is given to them. In the midst of those challenges, young people continue to build resilience to violence by promoting peace, social cohesion, inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. Some of them have been using social media to raise awareness among their peers on hate speech, non-violence, and forgiveness as a strategy to counter the narrative used by extremists' groups for radicalisation and recruitment.

Against this backdrop, the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) organized on December 13, 2021, the 5th edition of its 'Youth Perspectives' Webinar Series on the theme: Rethinking Regional Strategies to address the Threat of Violent Extremism in the Coastal Countries of West Africa. The objective of the webinar was to support regional efforts towards preventing violent extremism in West Africa. Specifically, the webinar aimed to deepen reflections on strategies to prevent the expansion of violent extremism in the coastal countries of West Africa and raise awareness among young people on their role and contribution to preventing violent extremism in the region. Sixty-Six (66) participants were in attendance, comprising youth leaders and analysts in violent extremism prevention.

Major points of discourse at the webinar covered the following topics: dynamics of violent extremism in the region; responses by various actors at national, regional and international levels and their limitations; threat of violent extremism in coastal areas and the opportunity offered by the Accra Initiative to mitigate its spread; and finally, lessons Learnt from counter-terrorism strategies in West Africa and recommendations to prevent the expansion of violent extremism in the costal countries. In a nutshell, participants identified some gaps that limited the effectiveness of the various responses to violent extremism. These include, the lack of inclusion, non-collaboration among stakeholders and a strong reliance on the military approach. Putting more emphasis on building community resilience to violence extremism and enhancing community ownership will go a long in addressing or preventing violent extremism in the region, according to participants.

2.0 Dynamics of violent extremism in West Africa

Participants of the webinar underscored that the landscape of violent extremism in West Africa has become increasingly complex with significant consequences on the stability of states and human security. In 2012, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQMI) was the main group operating in Mali. Six years down the line, about 10 extremists' groups have been operating in the Sahel region, in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger[1]. This development demonstrates the rapid spread

of terrorists' activities in the region. Participants further explained that across the Sahel region, the attacks by terrorist groups including Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Ansarul have also exacerbated the multi-layered security crisis in the West Africa-Sahel region. In the North-East region of Nigeria, the attacks of Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) have equally expanded to destabilize other communities in the Lake Chad Basin countries – Niger, Mali, Chad and Cameroon. Compounding this challenge is the involvement of terrorists and armed groups in organized crimes, particularly, piracy and illegal mining which have become operational tools for resource mobilization to sustain their activities in the region.

The threat profile of this insecurity, according to participants, has both external and internal implications for littoral states that border Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, including Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin. The external relates to current trends in regional security dynamics including, the return of foreign terrorist fighters, irregular migration, Internally Displaced Person (IDPs) and refugees flow, with their attendant impact on resources such as food, water and land. The internal threats include political disputes, unresolved local conflicts, weak regulation of manufacturing and exportation of arms, increasing criminal activities, enduring porous borders and weak state presence in border communities. The situation has generated a growing concern among stakeholders and called for various responses.

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[1] https://reliefweb.int/report/world/ecowas-struggles-address-violent-extremism

Participants underscored that the multi-dimensional character of violent extremism in the region has necessitated various responses by multi-stakeholders, at national, regional and international levels.

3.1. National responses and limitations

National responses to violent extremism are primarily the responsibility of States, as stressed by the United General Assembly in its resolution A/RES/70/291. As such, various responses have been developed by States to prevent or counter violent extremism.

In Burkina Faso, a national strategy for the prevention of radicalization and the fight against violent extremism was adopted in May 2019 with focus on building community resilience and addressing some contributing factors to violent extremism such as poverty and unemployment. Mali equally adopted some legal frameworks on preventing and countering violent extremism including the 2008 Law 08-025 for the repression of terrorism which integrates a range of offences listed in the international instruments against terrorism, such as hostage-taking, financing of terrorism and nuclear terrorism, etc. Similar to Burkina and Mali, Niger also adopted in October 2020, a national strategy for the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism. The strategy is centered around four (4) strategic orientations including i) mitigating

factors conducive to radicalization and violent extremism: ii) developing an information system for the prevention of radicalization and violent extremism; iii) strengthening community resilience against radicalization and violent extremism; iv) Promoting partnership and coordination for effective implementation of the strategy.

If the development of national strategies against violent extremism is commendable, participants however deplored the fact that their late development did not allow better coordination of interventions to repel the threat of violent extremism in the region in its early stages.

This gap would have benefited terrorist groups to gain ground over the years. Also, the state centric and the top-down approach in the design and implementation of the national strategies against violent extremism, continue

Photo Credit: The Economist

to sideline community actors, especially, traditional authorities and religious leaders whose agency in community peace architecture could be useful in addressing the root causes of violent extremism, as well as ensure ownership and sustainability of the various interventions. Participants also underscored that youth are equally critical stakeholders in efforts to prevent violent extremism, as they can be preparators, victims or peacebuilders. Mostly perceived as victims or beneficiaries, rather than partners, they have been hardly involved in the design and implementation of various responses to violent extremism. The United Nations Security Council Resolution 2250, precisely under Pillar 3 on Partnership, urges Member States to partner with the youth to develop strategies to counter violent extremism. This involvement according to participants is key due to the fact that young people better understand what drives recruitment at the community level and the programs and policy necessary to address it.

Another observation by the participants was the fact that although majority of the national strategies focus on building community resilience by addressing some contributing factors to radicalization and violent extremism such us poverty and unemployment, there is still limited evidence of the impact they have made in that regard. In most Sahelian countries, unemployment is still high, especially in Burkina Faso. Data from the world bank indicates an increase of the unemployment rate in the country, from 2.6 % in 2001 to 5 % in 2020 with an average annual rate of 3.85%[2]. Another challenge raised was the unrealistic timeframe of some national action plans on violent extremism, which makes it impossible to meet expected outcomes within the stated period, due to the depth of the issues to be dealt with. In Mali, for instance the national action plan deriving from the national strategy was planned from 2018-2020. Two years after the implementation of the action plan, there are still many issues unaddressed and the threat of violent extremism is still persistent. In Niger, the country continues to face serious threat of extremists' attacks recording about 10 attacks with over 611 deaths[3] in 2021. The January 2, 2021, attack in the villages of Tchombangou and Zaroumdareye was the deadliest one ever with about 100 civilians killed. This is evidence of inadequate response, pointing to the poor implementation of the national strategy against violent extremism and terrorism.

Overall, the impact of the various national responses to violent extremism is still difficult to demonstrate, despite the huge investment. In its 2020 report titled "Measuring the Economic Impact of Violent Extremism Leading to Terrorism in Africa", UNDP estimates to US$84 billion per year the economic costs of securitization and the fight against terrorism on the continent. Also, the heavy financial dependency of countries on external partners, did not allow them to take ownership of the implementation of their national strategies. In addition, the lack of transparency in the

[2] https://knoema.com/atlas/Burkina-Faso/Unemployment-rate
[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2021_Niger_attacks
[4] file:///Users/josaine/Downloads/undp-rh-addis_Measuring_the_Economic_Impact_of_Violent_Extremism_Leading_to_Terrorism_in_Africa.pdf, page 7
[5] Idem, "The costs of fighting terrorism in the focus countries are not borne solely, or even primarily, by the affected countries themselves, but by the international community also."

management of the counterterrorism funds was a major challenge to the effective implementation of the national strategies. The scandal linked to the overcharging of military equipment in Mali, which created controversies in recent years, was cited by participants as an example.

The national strategies against violent extremism equally suffer a lack of collaboration among stakeholders, which led to duplication of efforts and inefficiency in the management of resources. Collaboration with the private sector has also been limited, despite their important contribution to the fight against violent extremism, especially on seeking digital transformation solutions to support intelligence services for border control, providing job opportunities for the youth, fighting online radicalization processes and supporting training and socio-professional reintegration of ex combatants.

The contribution of civil society organizations and the youth in preventing violent extremism: Participants also underscored the important role civil society organizations play in complementing efforts of various governments at national and community levels. Part of those interventions include awareness creation, community dialogue, advocacy, capacity building, economic empowerment, peace education, etc. Some regional civil society organizations like the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) for example, developed a teaching manual to build resilience to violent extremism through education. The pilot phase of the manual, conducted from 2020 to 2021, in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria created an opportunity to raise awareness among students on the challenges, causes and consequences of violent extremism to enable them to make responsible and informed decisions and develop appropriate strategies for tackling violent extremism in their environments.

In 2021, Nigeria Youth4Peace Initiative launched, #OurDiversityOurPride Campaign to

Photo credit: Nigeria Youth4Peace Initiative.
Group picture of a community sensitization

promote peace through cultural diversity[7]. Young people, community and religious leaders held series of dialogues to discuss ways they can leverage on their cultural diversities to prevent violence and radicalisation in the country. In Mali, the Platform for Youth Engagement in Security Sector Reform and Disarmament and Demobilization (PEJ/RSS-DDR) utilizes social media platforms to create awareness around the national strategy to mobilize their peers for

6 https://www.jeuneafrique.com/919889/societe/contrats-darmement-surfactures-au-mali-des-proches-dibk-dans-loeil-du-cyclone/
7 https://twitter.com/NGYouth4Peace/status/1428307714732707851

collective action against violent extremism. Acknowledging the nexus between climate change, deforestation and poverty and the risk factors they present for radicalisation among youth and communities, 'Association Jeunesse Verte', a youth civil society organization in Niger, employs community outreach on deforestation to fight poverty and build economic resilience to violent extremism.

3.2 Regional and international responses and limitations

In addition to the national strategies, participants of the webinar acknowledged the contribution of regional and international actors to the fight against violent extremism in the region. These include among others at regional levels, the ECOWAS 2016-2020 strategy developed with the aim to consolidate the regional responses to the long-term development and security challenges of the Sahel-Saharan zone and promote strong political dialogue with both North and Central Africa; and the G5 Sahel Joint Force (FC-G5S), a framework for cooperation among five Sahelian countries (Chad, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Mauritania), established in 2017 to respond to the expansion of armed and violent extremist groups and to ensure a favourable environment for the socio-economic development of the region.

At international level, some responses to violent extremism, identified by participants include the United Nations 2013 Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (UNISS) aiming to address the root causes of the Sahel crisis with special focus on Women and Youth; the 2011 European Union Strategy

(EU) for security and development in the Sahel, reviewed in 2015 as part of the Sahel Regional action plan (2015- 2020), providing financial and technical support to governments; the African Union strategy for the Sahel operationalized through its Mission for Mali and the Sahel (MISAHEL), launched in 2014 with the objective of encouraging cooperation and better coordination among stakeholders in charge of security in the region and finally, the Alliance Sahel launched in July 2017 by France, Germany, and the European Union with the intention to help Sahelian States restore the foundations of stable societies capable of sustaining development and peace in the region. The French Operation Barkhane, launched in August 2014 is a key player in the Alliance Sahel with the main responsibility to support governments' efforts to combat violent extremism.

Participants however, underscored that despite the fact that regional and international strategies were relatively adopted earlier, as compared to national strategies, there is still less evidence of their impact. Terrorist activities in the region are evolving in number of attacks and fatalities. A comparative analysis of terrorists' attacks over the past three years, from WANEP's early warning system, reveals an increase from 655 in 2019 to 709 in 2020 and 115 only in the first quarter of 2021. This brings a high record of 1,479 attacks in the last 3 years[8]. Also, between 2019 and 2020, the fatality rate in the region increased by 28% (4,385 to 5,606)[9]. Globally, Burkina Faso recorded the highest number of deaths in 2019. i.e., 507 people compared to 86 in 2018. (See graph below)[10] with majority of the

[8] *Number of Attacks and deaths related to terrorism in the Region (2019-2021) Source: WANEP NEWS*
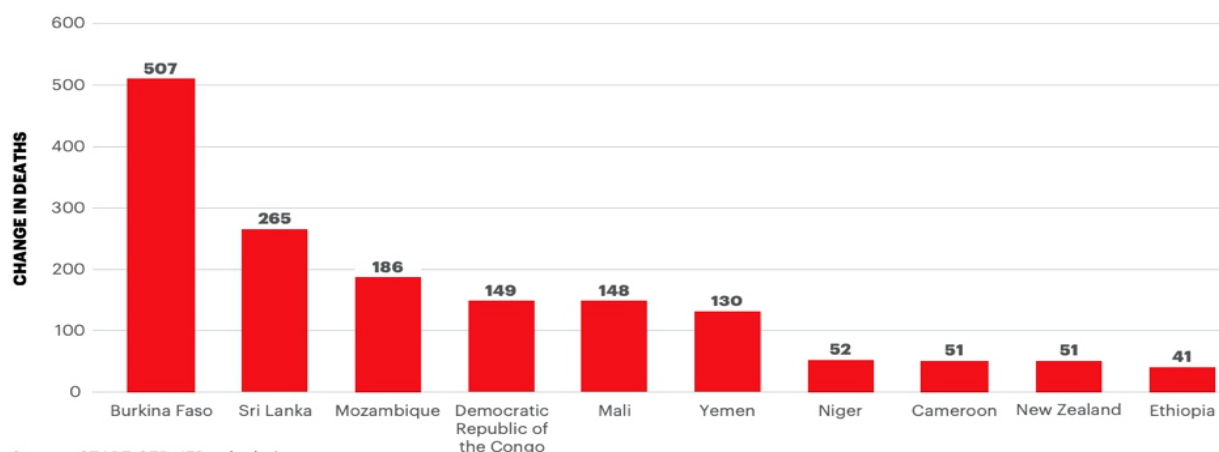[9] *Idem*
[10] *Global Terrorism Index 2020, page 16*

victims being civilians. This spillover of terrorists' attacks, according to participants, raises critical questions about the effectiveness of all the counter-terrorism strategies..

those strategies i.e. the EU strategy have placed focus on women and the youth, in reality, they have not benefited much from their implementation. Some participants attributed

FIGURE 1.4
Largest increases in deaths from terrorism, 2018–2019
Deaths from terrorism in Burkina Faso increased sixfold in 2019.

Source: START GTD, IEP calculations

In its report on ''The limits and pitfalls of regional strategies to the security challenge in the Sahel, WANEP identified among others, the lack of coordination and synergy as critical gaps in the various regional and international responses. This resulted in an overlap and duplication of efforts without much achievements. Also, the short timeframe in the implementation of some of the interventions, compounded with political instability, from participants' views, impedes on the ability of partners to deliver on their mandates and sustain the gains.

Similar to national strategies, participants criticised the fact that young people have not been carried along in the development and implementation of the regional and international strategies. Also, despite the fact that some of

that to the misuse of resources by some governments' agencies, through which part of the strategies were implemented. This has limited the ownership and effectiveness of the regional and international strategies. The expansion of extremists' activities to the coastal areas of West Africa is another evidence of the limitations of the counter-terrorism strategies in the region.

4.0 Threat of violent extremism in coastal areas and mitigating factors

Participants expressed concerns about the threat of extremists' attacks southwards. Some extremists' groups are increasingly using Benin,

Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo as sources or transit zones of funding and logistics. A study of the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) reveals that livestock stolen from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger is sold in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana at below market prices and the profit, ploughed back through the networks of accomplice dealers to buy arms, fuel, motorbikes and food[11].

Aside using the coastal countries as transit zones, extremists' groups have demonstrated interests to expand their attacks to those areas. In 2020, there were five (5) deadly attacks of the Ivorian military posts by insurgent groups on the border area with Burkina Faso and Ghana, in addition to the March 2016 attack in Grand-Bassam. Benin has also been in the rearview mirror of terrorist groups in recent years. In 2019 there was a kidnapping of two French tourists in Pendjari National Park at the Benin-Burkina Faso border and the murder of their Beninese guide. Already in 2022, more than four (4) deadly attacks in Benin, on February 8 and 10, April 11 and June 26, to name a few, claimed the lives of a dozen people[12]. Other countries such as Togo and Ghana have also experienced a threat to extremists' groups attacks. These incidents, according to participants, confirm terrorists' groups attempts to gain a foothold in the northern borders of coastal states. Faced by this threat, coastal countries have been strategizing to prevent further spread of the phenomenon.

5.0 Opportunity offered by the Accra initiative

In September 2017, Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Togo, launched the 'Accra Initiative' with the aim to prevent a spillover of terrorism from the Sahel to coastal areas. The Initiative is anchored on three pillars: information and intelligence sharing; training of security and intelligence personnel; and conduct of joint cross-border military operations to sustain border security.

Photo Credit: Reuters

Some participants shared the opinion that the 'Accra Initiative' could be a good prospect to counter terrorism in coastal areas. It is funded by member states and does not rely on external funding. This can guarantee ownership and boost the political commitment needed for its success. It also contributes to improve on the long-awaited regional collaboration to tackle the violent extremism effectively. Although the initiative is a military-focused response, it is complemented by national strategies that

[11] https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/war-26-eng.pdf
[12] https://www.africanparks.org/update-incidents-w-national-park-benin

incorporates provisions to address the root causes of violent extremism. The Ghanaian government has adopted a national counter-terrorism framework that provides strategic orientations on national initiatives. Côte d'Ivoire is also developing a national counter terrorism strategy. In Togo, the government has put in place an inter-ministerial committee for community resilience to violent extremism.

In sum, the Accra Initiative is an innovative mechanism for the prevention of violent extremism in coastal areas of the West African countries, according to participants. However, factors limiting its effective operationalization, such as the short-term interventions of the border military operations and the ineffectiveness of the information sharing mechanisms, have not allowed timely and proactive responses to the threat of violence extremism in some coastal countries, e.i Benin and Togo. Equally, funding challenges need to be addressed for the operationalization of the Accra Initiative.

6.0 Lessons Learnt from counter-terrorism strategies in West Africa and recommendations to prevent the expansion of violent extremism in the coastal countries

Participants stressed the fact that strategies to prevent violent extremism in the coastal areas of the West African States, should rely on lessons learnt from existing counter-terrorism strategies. The following lessons and recommendations emerged from the conversation:

- Although the military approach to violent extremism is important, it is not enough to address the issue in a sustainable way. Preventing violent extremism in the coastal areas, will require a holistic approach that addresses factors of vulnerabilities of community members, including socio-economic dividends, youth employment, inclusive governance, etc;

- The down-to-top approach through community engagement in the design and implementation of the counter-terrorism strategies has the likelihood to speak to the real concerns of the community members, ensure ownership of the interventions and build resilience to violent extremism;

- The lack of trust between government and citizens has contributed to create a conducive environment to radicalization. Addressing governance deficit and fostering dialogue between governments and citizens could help restore the trust and build resilience to violent extremism;

- The lack of employment opportunities in the region accounts for widespread poverty in which violent extremism takes root. Collaboration with the private sector for an investment in job creation, especially for youth is necessary to complement governments' efforts in tackling youth unemployment;

- Effective coordination of the various responses is necessary to capitalize on achievements, share lessons learnt and good practices and minimize costs;

- The development of a regional multi-stakeholders' strategy to violent extremism is required for effective coordination of various interventions;

- A strong accountability system is needed to ensure Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) funds are adequately utilized to support effective implementation of the various responses; Political instability in the Sahel countries have been explored by extremists' groups to divert governments attention and focus as far as PVE strategies are concerned. Reducing political tensions could help redirect focus on implementation of the counter-terrorism strategies;

- Building capacity of border communities, especially, women and youth on early warning signs could help in timely response to the spread of violent extremism in the coastal countries;

- Technology has been one of the means of radicalization by extremist groups, especially among young people. This raises the need for further education of the youths on the use of technology to minimize risks of radicalization and counter terrorists propaganda;

- Peace education is an important tool and a long-term strategy to building resilience of young people to violent extremism; Its incorporation in schools' curriculums is beneficial to groom a new generation of youths who employ non-violence in disputes resolutions and promote peace;

- The peer-to-peer engagement is important to mobilize a critical mass of youth against violent extremists. Governments and development partners should increase funding support to youth groups/organizations for continuous awareness creation among their peers on the causes, consequences and strategies to prevent violent extremism;

- As women can be both victims and perpetrators or allies to extremists' groups, Gender consideration should be incorporated in the design, implementation and assessment of all counter terrorism strategies;

- Promoting youth inclusion in governance and peace processes and creating space for multi-stakeholders dialogue could pave way for youth engagement in devising sustainable solutions to peace and security challenges in the region.

7.0 Conclusion

Violent extremism in west Africa is still on the rise despite efforts by national, regional and international actors to address it. Its continuous spread from the Sahel to the coastal countries as with the case of Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Togo has exposed the limitations of the counter terrorism strategies and the need to rethink the regional strategies to prevent its further

expansion. Reflecting on the issue, participants of the webinar underlined that though the military response is important in the fight against violent extremism, its gains can only be sustained when vulnerability factors to radicalization, such as governance deficits, youth unemployment, inequalities and injustice are equally addressed. Participants were also of the view that community resilience and ownership in an inclusive and coordinated approach is key for sustainable solution to violent extremism.

Preventing further spread of terrorists' activities in the coastal countries, according to participants, will require a good application of lessons learnt from the counter terrorism strategies in the Sahel and in Nigeria over the years. The Accra Initiative, from participants' views is a promising mechanism to prevent further spread of violent extremism in the region. There is therefore an urgent need for its effective operationalization, five years after its adoption. Moreover, its interventions need to be scaled up in the face of the growing number of attacks in coastal countries. Intelligence gathering as well as information sharing between member countries need to be improved for timely and proactive responses.

Also, the short-term interventions of the border military operations should be addressed to allow continuity of actions and prevent a resurgence of terrorists' attacks during off-peak periods of the military operations in order to sustain the gains over time. This of course, calls for a robust financial and human resources mobilization and above all, the political will without which the fight against violent extremism cannot succeed.

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