

Preparing for elections and addressing root causes of conflict in West Africa

May I join others in welcoming you to the chair and welcoming you and your other co-elected members of the Council. We look forward to working with you.

In the context of this briefing, we also welcome particularly the delegation in Niger. We know from last month that you have suffered first hand the consequences of violence in the region. You have our condolences for the losses to your armed forces.

It's also very good to see SRSB Chambas back in the chamber to brief us. We welcome the very productive role that UNOWAS has played in the region. In particular, we welcome the role that you play, sir, through your good offices. People don't always see the result of that work because it is, by its very nature, diplomatic and quiet. But we know it goes on and we know it makes a difference, so thank you to you and your team for that.

We're also very grateful to the Secretariat and Secretary-General for their report on the trends in the region. As others have said, these continue to be of significant concern, particularly on the security side, but also on the humanitarian side. Because the security side is so bleak, the impact on the broader development opportunities in the region are also very affected.

We wanted to cover three areas today. The first is security and to talk about that in a little bit more detail. The second is elections, and we've heard a bit about that already today. And the third is to focus on the underlying causes of conflict and what we can do to address those once the security situation is addressed.

On the security and humanitarian side, as I said, we're continuing to be concerned about the damaging cycles of violence that we're seeing. And I think, Mr Chambas, you called them "unprecedented" and the spike between the year before last and what we saw last year was exponential. So a real cause for concern, particularly the deterioration in central Mali, an area where we're separately sees this council, and northern Burkina Faso, since the last report.

The increased violence is exacerbating an already perilous humanitarian situation, particularly in central Mali and Burkina Faso. The UK has just released a further 20 million pounds in additional humanitarian funding in the Sahel on top of the 50 million pounds we're already spending to help address this situation. I think we all need to think again about whether we're doing enough in this region to look at the humanitarian situation.

It's also worth just noting, as others have said, that we also need to ensure and states in the region need to ensure humanitarian access for those who do deliver that humanitarian response. We need to ensure that they're able to get to the regions they need to and given the protection they need, both

legally and in security terms.

I think the main point is that security needs to be this council's principal focus. We cannot help those who urgently need assistance unless we can help the states that they are in to bring the security situation there under control.

Like many others in this chamber, we heard the African Union talk in the middle of December, when we last touched on this issue, about the variety of regional initiatives that we now have on the security front. And I wonder if one thing that this council might want to consider is whether we can help bring some coherence, to those to look at how we map those, look at whether the current issues we have are addressing the concerns that we have, whether they're duplicative or complementary. So, I just think that's something we can consider in due course in line with the African Union advice.

Turning now to elections, again, I think it's useful to hear that there has been progress in the region and there are some upsides over the last year on the political front and on the election front. We agree with the emphasis, Mr Chambas, you're placing on helping states deliver credible elections over this next period. And from our perspective, freedom of assembly and expression are essential to that, so we hope in particular you will send that message to states in the region. But in the context of the deteriorating security situation we've already touched on, we have to help states avoid these elections becoming flash points of violence or enabling abuses of power, as this will only exacerbate conflicts and violence further. Citizens must be able to exercise their democratic rights to votes without fear of intimidation or retribution. We stand ready to do what we can with your advice to support those.

In terms of the underlying causes, the immediate humanitarian and security efforts to support the elections and the wider region are obviously critical, but we must also do what we can to address the root causes of these conflicts and violence. And I think one of the interesting things that we see in the report is that, in the countries themselves, there is a growing recognition of the need to address those underlying issues, but it's very difficult to do so in the absence of proper security that states can do something. They can work to address long-term governance issues by reducing abuses by security forces. We can help governments to build their legitimacy by providing inclusive and accountable basic services where they're able to do so – and that's something I think we should give more focus on. And it's good to see the report looking at giving UNOWAS the ability to help the UN in the region to think about the development assistance that it can provide when it can provide it. These kind of interventions will help build the foundations for stability that the region so desperately needs.

So, Mr Chambas, we thank you, we thank your team. This is an incredibly important region and you have a challenging year ahead, but you have our full support.

Thank you.