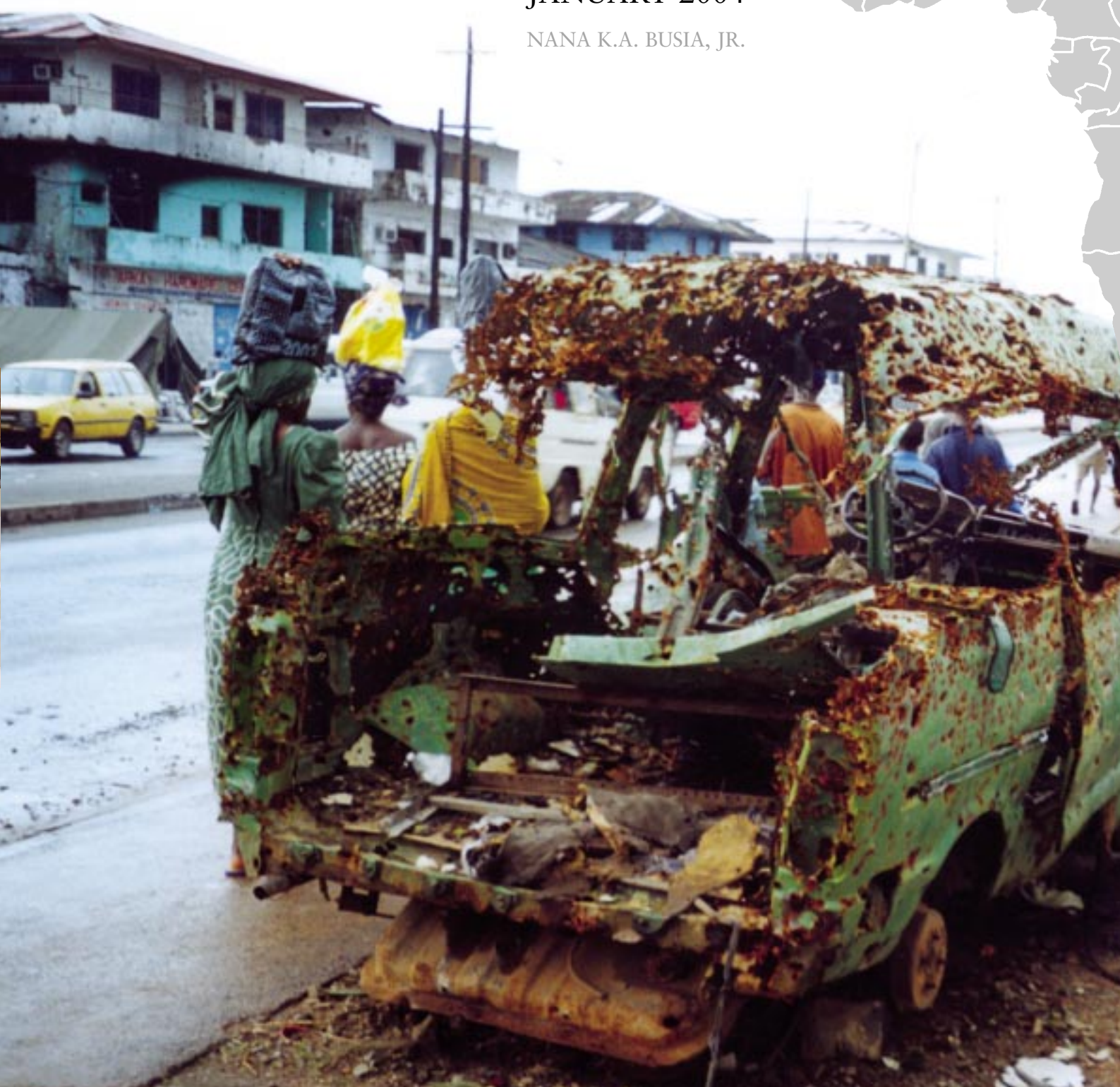


STRATEGISING FOR PEACE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN WEST AFRICA

An overview of the
West Africa Programme

JANUARY 2004

NANA K.A. BUSIA, JR.



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with editorial assistance from Elizabeth Drake

Contents

	Preface	3
1	Introduction to International Alert	4
2	Character and Causes of Contemporary Conflict in West Africa	5
	Map of West Africa	6
3	International Alert in West Africa	7
	Programme Objectives	9
4	Main Conflicts in West Africa	10
	Liberia	10
	Sierra Leone	11
	Guinea-Conakry	12
	Nigeria	13
5	Context for Engagement	14
	Schematic Description of the West Africa Programme	14
6	Liberian Projects	15
	Media Project	15
	Youth Project	16
7	Mano River Union Projects	17
	MRU Forum Project	17
	Mano River Union Forum Platform of Civil Society Groups	17
	MRU Media Project	19
	MRU Youth Project	20
	MRU Diaspora Project	20
8	Nigerian Projects	21
	Niger Delta Project	21
	Northern Nigeria Project	23
	Good Governance Project	24
9	ECOWAS Project	25
10	Achievements	27
11	Challenges to Our Work	30
12	Opportunities for Peace	30
13	Conclusion and Appreciation	30
14	Funders and Partners	31



Dedication

This overview is dedicated to all the people who have died in West Africa as a result of the resurgence of violent conflict in recent years.

Preface

The West Africa Programme at International Alert (IA) has been actively working with partners from the region for many years in seeking to transform conflicts in the area through projects that contribute to bringing about social justice and peace. We are very much aware that other actors have also played a role in conflict transformation in the region. This overview is designed to provide an insight into the history of IA's work there, particularly since the inception of the West Africa Programme in 1998. It provides the context for our engagement in the region, a summary of our projects and work in the area, and an overview of our current strategies. The work of the West Africa Programme would not be possible without the ongoing support of our national and international funders and the dedication and hard work of our partners. We are grateful to them, as well as to our colleagues at International Alert for their ongoing commitment towards achieving peace and social justice in the West African region. In particular, I wish to thank Gilonne D'Origny, Olu Arowobuyose and Agnes E'bo for their support in the challenging early stages of development of the Programme, the dynamic staff of the current Programme team and Elizabeth Drake for her extensive editorial assistance with this report. Finally, I extend my gratitude to my senior informal advisors Tajudeen Abdul- Raheem, General-Secretary of the Global Pan-African Movement, Thomas Jaye, Senior Researcher and Consultant at the Community Development and Advocacy Centre (CODAC), Zack Williams, Lecturer at Preston University, Zaya Yeebo of Minority Rights Group UK and Bibinae Mbaye, Consultant, Senegal.

Nana K.A. Busia, Jr., West Africa Programme Manager



1. INTRODUCTION TO INTERNATIONAL ALERT

International Alert works to build just and lasting peace in areas of violent conflict. A non-governmental organisation based in London, it was established in 1985 by a group of human rights advocates that included Martin Ennals, former Secretary General of Amnesty International, in response to the rise in conflict within countries and the subsequent abuse of individual and collective human rights.

Believing that the people who are involved in violent conflict are central to its solution, we work to enhance the capacity of individuals, networks and organisations to build sustainable peace and reduce the likelihood of war. We do this by analysing the causes of conflict, enabling mediation and dialogue to take place, setting standards of conduct to avoid violence and helping to develop skills to resolve disputes peacefully. We focus our work on specific conflicts, and, after in-depth analysis, design programmes that can respond at local, national, regional and global levels to the structural causes underlying them. Our work is complex, and we use a combination of approaches.

We currently work with partners in over forty projects in West Africa, the Great Lakes regions of Africa, the Caucasus region of the former Soviet Union, Colombia, Sri Lanka, Nepal and the Philippines with a particular focus on the control of light weapons, security sector reform, the impact of development and humanitarian aid and the roles of the private sector, gender and religion in building peace. Our high quality research into and analysis of these issues feeds into the development of long-term approaches to conflict prevention and peacebuilding based on practical, concrete and accountable initiatives and advocating for policy changes at government and UN levels.

Our Code of Conduct, based on the lessons learned and experience acquired during the course of our work, provides an ethical framework and guiding principles for conflict transformation work, discussion on issues relating to human rights and impartiality as well as guiding principles for the organisation and for the development of policies on human rights. It is available on our website www.international-alert.org

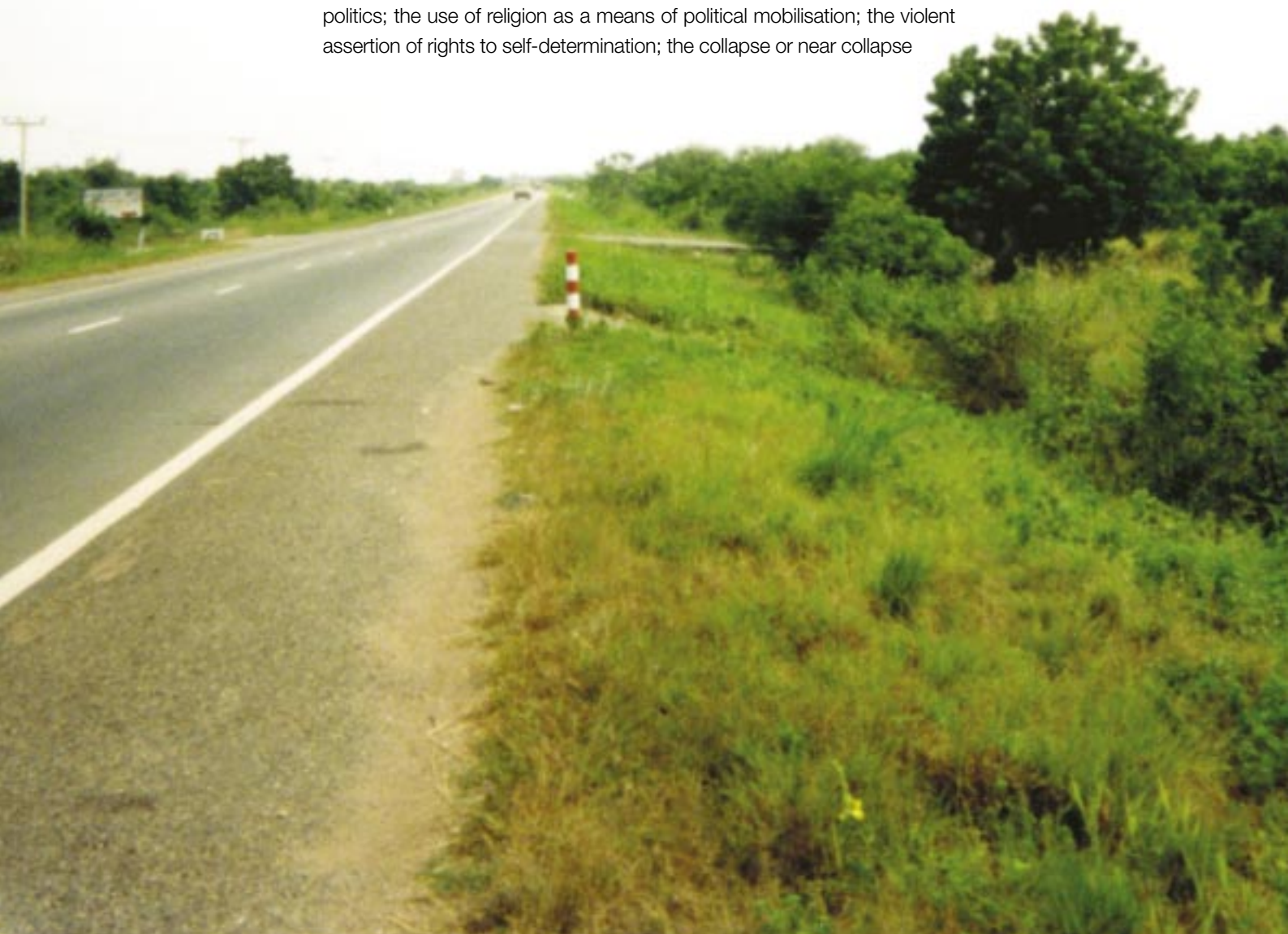
2. CHARACTER AND CAUSES OF CONTEMPORARY CONFLICT IN WEST AFRICA

The conflict dynamics of West Africa should be viewed as one integrated regional conflict system. Even after the post-independence power struggles of the second half of the last century, violent conflicts in West Africa have become more frequent since the end of the Cold War. While most of the conflicts originate in one country, they involve cross-border activities that overflow state borders to engulf other communities and states.

Although there is not one state in West Africa that has not suffered from some form of conflict in the past decade, there are four main conflict areas in the region: the Mano River Union (MRU), constituting Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea-Conakry, and the Côte d'Ivoire, which relates closely to the MRU conflict; Senegal and Guinea-Bissau; Mali and Niger; and Nigeria, whose conflicts are self-contained.

The impacts of war have had, and continue to have, catastrophic consequences for the people, communities and infrastructure of the region. Conflict in the Mano River area has created a severe humanitarian crisis, with over one million people killed in the last ten years, and the creation of more than three million internally displaced persons and refugees out of a sub-regional population of 30 million. Guinea alone has hosted close to 500,000 refugees from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire.

Conflicts in the region are typically expressed in several forms: the ethnicisation of politics; the use of religion as a means of political mobilisation; the violent assertion of rights to self-determination; the collapse or near collapse



of the state; resource conflicts and criminality through the trading of diamonds, oil and other precious minerals, arms, people and drugs in parallel markets.

The root causes of these conflicts in the region are multiple. The socio-political landscape is heavily influenced by the legacy of direct and indirect colonialism; the settler factor; the unfinished business of nation-state building; post-independence, militarised authoritarian governments and the Cold War legacy. Following independence, the avowed goals of most West African governments were to 'catch up' with the rest of the developed world. In this process, identity (ethnic or otherwise) was subjected to the grand objectives of nation-building and economic development, thus giving legitimacy to the imposition of one party states, life presidents and powerful executives. By the late 1960s, the military exploited the weaknesses of states and their poor governance through successive coup d'états. In turn, the military proved to be repressive, lacking legitimacy and the competence to govern. By the end of the Cold War, latent conflicts were finding open and manifest expressions in various countries throughout the region. The introduction of the neo-classical/liberal economic development paradigm, typified by structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) in the late 1980s also contributed to the conflicts by undermining the capacity of the state to provide for the basic needs of the population.

These structural causes, amongst others, are exacerbated by a politics of exclusion, coupled with assimilationist policies, which seek to suppress group identities (religious, ethnic or otherwise). In addition, rampant corruption, uneven distribution of resources, environmental degradation, the militarisation of societies through arms trafficking, the recruitment of unemployable youth, and the marginalisation and oppression of women all contribute to the exacerbation of violence as a survival strategy. As a result, many West African states have open or latent conflicts, which threaten to spiral out of control across the sub-region if not effectively managed. The West Africa Programme seeks to better understand the local, regional and sub-regional dynamics of conflict in the area, and facilitate peace by engaging actors throughout all sectors of society in conflict resolution and the promotion of human rights.

Map of West Africa



3. INTERNATIONAL ALERT IN WEST AFRICA

International Alert's work in Africa largely developed from a series of consultations and conferences that started in 1994 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The consultations brought together representatives from African civil society groups, governments and inter-governmental institutions to analyse the conflict situation and devise mechanisms for early warning and preventive diplomacy. This process of consultation resulted in specific IA programmes of work with a regional focus, initially in the Horn of Africa, then subsequently in the Great Lakes Region and West Africa. Our work in West Africa, however, had begun in Liberia in December 1993.

While working on the problems occasioned by armed conflict in Liberia we realised that there could be no viable solution to the protracted conflict without taking into account the sub-regional dynamics, especially the war in Sierra Leone. We began to prepare to work in Sierra Leone, making contact with one of the sub-region's most seasoned diplomats, Amara Essy, then foreign minister of Côte d'Ivoire and president of the UN's General Assembly, to explore his availability for facilitating talks in Côte d'Ivoire. We also consulted with the then Secretary-General of the Organisation for African Unity (OAU), Dr. Salim Ahmed Salim and his deputies, thus ensuring the involvement of the premier inter-governmental organisation in the continent in what was to be a long drawn-out undertaking. Then, in early 1995, representatives of International Alert met with representatives of the military government of Sierra Leone, which was itself concerned about the civil war that was escalating, with mounting civilian casualties and a refugee population that exceeded two million.

Our next step, with the assistance of the Nairobi Peace Initiative, of Kenya, was to organise a conflict resolution workshop in Dakar which enabled contact between a representative of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebel group, peace advocates from Sierra Leone and a delegate from the Commonwealth Secretariat. We then co-ordinated a 'Joint Action Peace Forum on Sierra Leone' attended by representatives of the West African diplomatic community and non-governmental organisations which recommended a negotiated settlement of the conflict, the creation of secure working conditions for humanitarian aid, and the provision of building blocks for peace within a regional context. During this period, we also consulted with the International Committee of the Red Cross which maintained that no dialogue would be possible unless hostages held by the rebels were freed; they thus offered their good offices in seeking their release, which was subsequently achieved.

The second phase of our engagement in Sierra Leone was based on the pre-negotiations (during the second half of 1995) and the formal negotiations (February - November 1996) which saw changes in the government (two military regimes, and the election of a civilian government led by President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah in March 1996). The formal talks were principally facilitated by Minister Amara Essy and led, finally, to the signature of the Accord on 30 November 1996.

The three guarantors of the Accord were the UN, the OAU and the Commonwealth Secretariat. However, the agreement broke down in February 1997, mainly on the refusal of the RUF to recognise the Mission and its aim of seeking the disarmament and demobilisation of the guerrillas. The RUF argued that other aspects of the comprehensive agreement needed to be put into place to build further trust before the demobilisation process could be completed.

Emerging Issues

Whilst our engagement in Sierra Leone was originally based on a multi-track approach involving facilitation of peace negotiations, assisting a national peace constituency and building an international support group, IA's interventions focused increasingly on the peace negotiations of 1996. Although

Guinea-Conakry

Guinea's involvement in the sub-regional conflict also goes back to the beginning of the Liberian war, when some of the warring faction leaders used Guinea as a base to launch attacks against the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL). The fighting in Liberia during the 1990s spilled over the border into Guinea on several occasions and border skirmishes continued after the civil war subsided in 1997. Guinea had taken sides against rebel leader Charles Taylor in Liberia's civil war and was part of the Nigerian-led ECOWAS forces that intervened in the crisis. Relations between Guinean President Conté and Taylor thus remained sour after Taylor became Liberia's President in 1997. Since 2000, fighting at the junction of Guinea's border with Sierra Leone and Liberia has increased. Guinea's army has been battling a variety of factions, including rebel Guineans and Liberians, and Sierra Leone's RUF. Guinea has been further dragged into the crisis by hosting over 500,000 refugees, some of whom were alleged to be RUF fighters from Sierra Leone and Liberian rebels. Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia have since been trading accusations against each other for supporting each other's dissidents and tensions are high between the three countries.

AN OIL FLARE ABOVE THE AKARA-OLU
COMMUNITY IN THE RIVERS STATE,
NIGER DELTA

Nigeria

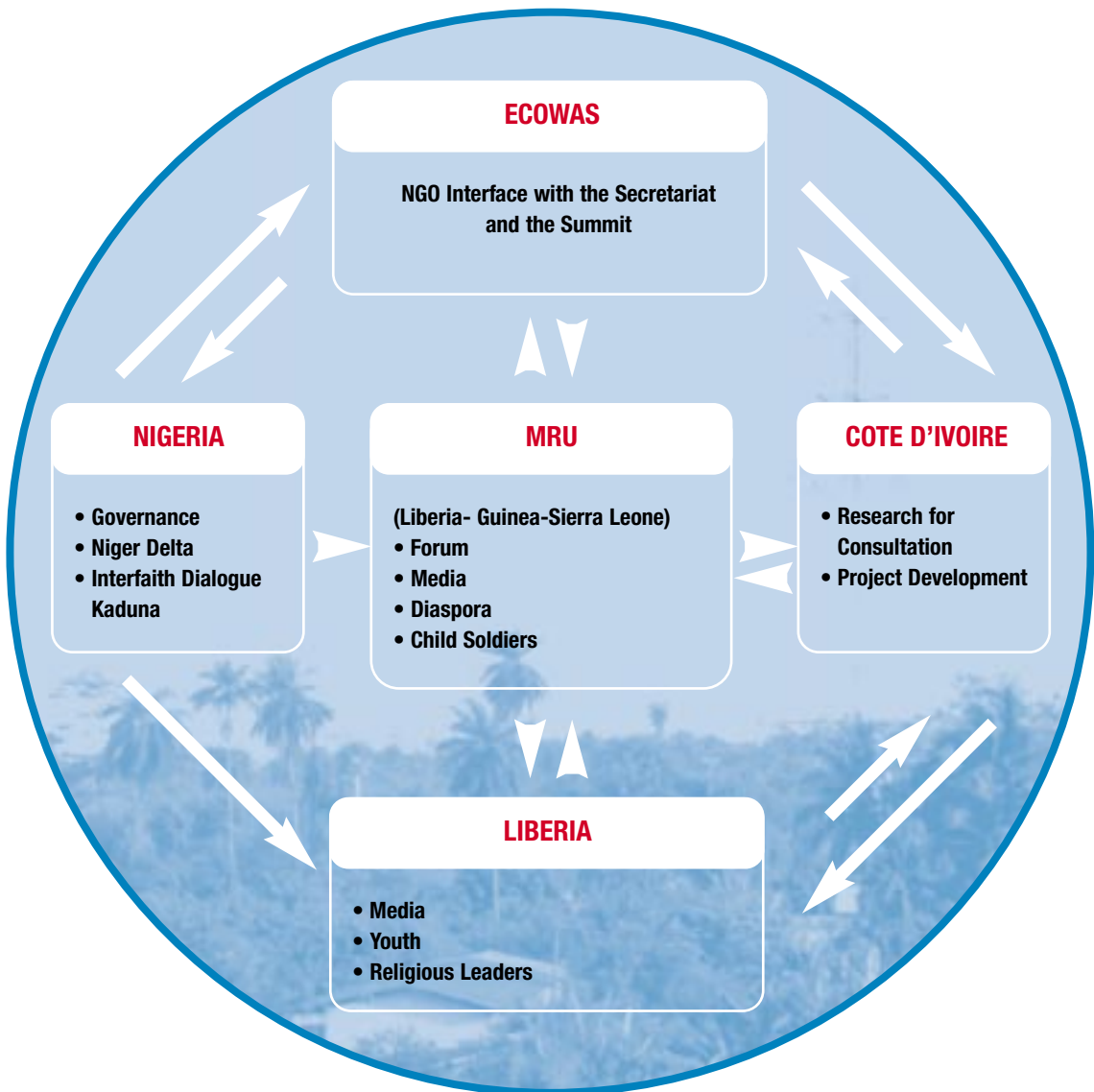
Paradoxically, since the elections of the current democratic government of President Obasanjo in May 1999, Nigeria has experienced more conflicts than under previous military authoritarian regimes. Unfortunately, democracy has offered an opening for long held grievances, previously suppressed by military governments, to find violent expressions. There has been a continuous perception that resources are not being distributed equally, and that the dominant group, the Hausa-Fulani, has used its control over military institutions to appropriate a disproportionate share of the country's natural resources. There are two major conflicts in Nigeria: a northern conflict based loosely on religious tensions between Christians and Muslims, and more deeply on economic differences; and a three-pronged conflict in the Niger Delta involving communities, governments and oil companies. Minority groups in the Niger Delta, where oil is being extracted, feel they have seen limited benefits from the oil wealth, which is accruing largely to the central government and foreign oil companies. Conflict in Nigeria has therefore been based not only on religious and ethnic tensions and differences, but also on the inequitable distribution of revenues from natural resources and regional disparities in wealth. These causes are not unrelated.



5. CONTEXT FOR ENGAGEMENT

The conflict in the MRU countries is highly interconnected with crisis in one country directly impacting the situation in the other countries. It is clear that any efforts to build peace among the three MRU nations must take into account these sub-regional dynamics. However, weak national initiatives by individual governments and organisations in the MRU area, working in isolation from other networks in neighbouring countries, have not provided sufficient capacity to sustain programmes for lasting peace in the sub-region. It is our firm belief that the involvement of civil society organisations in the promotion of local, national and sub-regional peacebuilding activities is crucial for the reduction of existing violence and the prevention of further violent conflict in the area. We are currently running four projects in the region in accordance with this strategy: a Liberian project, a Nigerian project, and two regional projects with ECOWAS and within the MRU Countries.

Schematic description of the West Africa Programme



6. LIBERIAN PROJECTS

The recent conflict in the Mano River Union area mainly originated from problems in Liberia. This is not to say that there were no home-grown problems in other countries. Liberia was the first country that the West Africa Programme formally engaged with, and the projects in Liberia have now expanded to form part of the Mano River Union Project. Two projects in Liberia form the core basis of International Alert's engagement there: a media project and a youth project.

Media Project

The media project was established in 1998 against the backdrop of a protracted civil war, the absence of an official opposition party, President Taylor's domination of the executive, legislative and judiciary arms of government, suppression of freedom of the press and, in the last years of Taylor's government, a strategy of intimidating outspoken human rights activists and journalists. Although there are many identifiable civil society groups with the potential to contribute to peacebuilding, the media is particularly crucial as it can act as a double-edged sword during times of conflict, either exacerbating discord or promoting peace. Strong, independent media can play a pivotal role in ushering in peaceful democratic change, while misconception of issues, non-verification of facts and lack of objective analysis can act to exacerbate conflict. It is therefore essential that media practitioners be sensitised to the need for responsible reporting and are able to report independently and transparently.

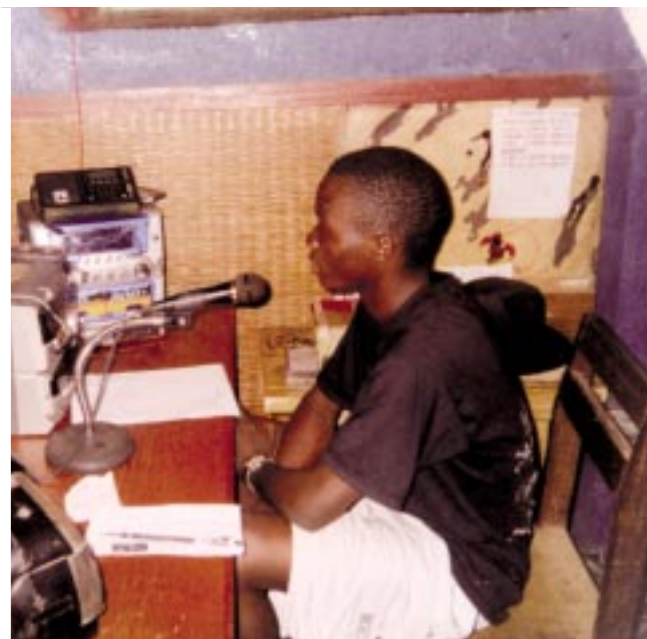
The repression of conventional communication mediums such as newsprint and radio in Liberia prevented groups and communities from articulating their concerns, needs and rights without fear and the threat of violence. IA and its local partners established the media project with dual intentions: to support conventional media practitioners and to develop conflict resolution skills among more traditional mechanisms for popular communication. This implies interacting not only with professional media practitioners, but also with alternative communicators such as local cultural sects, dance and drama groups, town criers and representatives from various age, gender and ethnic groups.

The media project has involved a wide range of training workshops targeting these different groups. Projects in the first year of the programme focused on training conventional media institutions and practitioners, such as journalists and editors, in professional journalistic practices and conflict transformation skills. The past two years have seen more capacity training for traditional media practitioners, especially in rural areas, helping to make their message part of mainstream Liberian discourse. In January 2002 a conference in Monrovia brought together media practitioners from all 15 counties of the country, along with government officials and representatives of peacebuilding NGOs. In the same month a radio station sub-project helped strengthen the capacity of four of the seven local FM radio stations in and around the Gbarnga area, including producing various programmes on peacebuilding, sex education, human rights and community development. Throughout these workshops and meetings, IA has co-operated extensively with our partners in Liberia including the Press Union of Liberia and the Centre for Justice and Peace Studies.

The Liberian media project has been successful on a number of levels. The workshops and encounters with traditional communicators have confirmed that the message of peace is better rooted in a social system and practices that have a legitimate traditional and cultural basis. In this regard, the project acknowledged the existence of rules, laws and practices in the traditional system that can be used to prevent and resolve conflict. Furthermore, there is a general



LEFT: ONE WEEK TRAINING WORKSHOP FOR REPORTERS 'PARTNERSHIP FOR MEDIA RECONSTRUCTIONS IN LIBERIA' AUGUST 4 - 9, 1999.



RIGHT: YOUTH AIRING PEACE MESSAGES OVER THE RADIO IN LIBERIA

consensus among government officials, the UN, international NGOs and civil society activists that the quality of Liberian journalism has improved, becoming more reliable and less sensational. The project has made possible the creation of a space for dialogue and opportunities for expression of views in a difficult context where media practitioners have always faced severe repression by the government. The participation of women has been an integral part of the project and there has been a good interface between rural and urban media. We are currently working to integrate the Liberia media project with the regional MRU Programme media project.

Youth Project

Our second project in Liberia began in 2000. Aimed at young people affected by war, particularly young ex-combatants, its work has been focused in the Bong and Lofa counties. A lack of education, dismal employment opportunities, minimal basic social services, child labour, drug abuse, sexual exploitation and a high incidence of child soldiers all negatively impact the future prospects for youth in Liberia. IA recognises that young people, whether literate or not, have the knowledge and skills to analyse their own problems and identify solutions. To this end, the youth project aims to empower young people to support their own peacebuilding activities, whilst also re-connecting them to their own communities and building links to income-generating programmes.

A series of participatory meetings has been held with young people in an effort to define their own needs and problems. The informal nature of the meetings created an environment for establishing a good working relationship with the young people and the members of the various communities. The youth groups have agreed upon a set of activities to embark upon including general agriculture projects, tailoring, building trades, metal works, arts and crafts, small business development and adult literacy schools. The project will be of particular importance in light of the recent Peace Agreement signed in Liberia in August 2003, as a large number of ex-combatants will be young persons.