STRATEGISING FOR PEACE AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN WEST AFRICA

An overview of the West Africa Programme

JANUARY 2004

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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 Gionne 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.

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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 that 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