Regional seminar on the prevention of violent extremism and the management of conventional weapons in West Africa

Lomé, Togo, 5-7 December 2023

SUMMARY OF CONCLUSIONS

More than 60 participants took part in the “Regional seminar on the prevention of violent extremism and the management of conventional weapons in West Africa” in Lomé from 5 to 7 December 2023. This seminar was organised by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), the United Nations Centre for Peace and Disarmament in Africa (UNREC) and the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research (UNIDIR). It has gathered participants from some fifteen countries – senior officials in public administrations responsible for the management of conventional weapons or the prevention of violent extremism (PEV), representatives of national human rights commissions, national and local members of parliament, representatives of the United Nations and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), as well as members of civil society and research institutions, think tanks and individual experts.

Participants examined ways of preventing violent extremism by acting on its causes through a holistic approach to conventional weapons management, inspired in particular by (i) the New Agenda for Peace, proposed by the UN Secretary-General in July 2023, which prioritises prevention and encourages Member States to integrate the control of small arms and light weapons into development and violence reduction activities, as well as into national prevention strategies; (ii) the African Union Vision 2063 “An integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa, driven by its own citizens, representing a dynamic force in the international arena”; and (iii) the ECOWAS Vision 2050 “ECOWAS of the Peoples: Peace and Prosperity for All”.

The overall observation is that the proliferation of conventional weapons, particularly small arms and light weapons, and violent extremism are spreading and continuing to have a negative impact on West African States. These two phenomena contribute to the deterioration of security in the region, which in turn aliments them, generating a vicious circle. Despite efforts made at all levels, preventing the proliferation of conventional weapons and violent extremism sustainably remains a major challenge. This challenge is exacerbated by new weapons-related threats – such as improvised explosive devices – and the expansion of violent extremist groups from the central Sahel to the coastal States.

At the end of the rich exchanges between high-level experts, participants reached the following conclusions and recommendations, which they address to the States of the region, to regional, continental and international organisations, to civil society and to research entities:

1. There is an urgent need to prompt a change of approach in responses to armed violence: a holistic approach to the management of conventional weapons, focused on prevention and centred on people and human security. To this end, it is essential that all relevant stakeholders engage in a concerted manner and at all levels to address the root causes of such violence, i.e. the motivations underlying the use of weapons (“the demand”). For example, action can be taken to strengthen equality, social justice, good governance, effective management of natural resources, protection of people's diverse livelihoods, respect for human rights and access to fair justice, security of communities, respect for diversity and social cohesion, as well as development. This perspective on the demand for weapons complements responses to address their origin and availability (“the supply”).

2. To address armed violence effectively and sustainably from a prevention perspective, more documented information is needed – from research, civil society and the institutions responsible for conventional weapons management and PVE – both on the “supply” of and “demand” for weapons.
3. Fora dedicated to multi-stakeholder dialogue and the exchange of good practice, at local, national, regional, continental and international level, should be promoted to foster a common understanding, among the various relevant stakeholders, of a holistic approach to conventional weapons management and its implementation. Relevant stakeholders include representatives from national institutions, parliamentarians, political parties, civil society, representatives of local communities – in particular religious and traditional leaders – researchers, media, as well as representatives of regional, continental and international organisations.

At the national and local level
4. It is essential to strengthen and institutionalise cooperation and information sharing between national institutions in charge of conventional weapons management and those in charge of PVE, with the contribution of other relevant public entities and other stakeholders such as civil society. These institutions have a pivotal role to play in promoting linkages between the two fields of action, in view of holistic and inclusive interventions.

5. National strategic documents, such as those addressing small arms and light weapons proliferation or PVE, are key tools for articulating, promoting and operationalising the linkages between conventional weapons management and PVE. Relevant national stakeholders are invited to act more systematically on these linkages when developing or revising these documents, and to include therein integrated implementation measures.

6. It is vital to ensure and re-establish the State's regalian role as guarantor of the people's security and its monopoly of legitimate violence. At the same time, citizens and local communities, particularly in the outskirts of national territories, also have a role to play in the co-production of their security, although this does not mean arming them. Local security committees, civil-military dialogue and grassroots consultation are all ways of fostering both this co-production and trust between the State and its people.

7. It is important to consider the management of conventional weapons also in relation to security sector governance, in particular to prevent human rights violations and to improve the conditions of defence and security forces in relation to their professional exercise and social security, retraining and retirement, including through relevant laws (in particular military programming laws).

8. Adequately securing national weapons stockpiles is key to prevent the diversion of weapons to unauthorised users. Actions such as reinforcing armouries and bringing them up to standards, strengthening marking, record-keeping and tracing capacities, or training and valorisation of specialised personnel, are essential.

9. The role of women in the prevention of armed violence and violent extremism, acknowledging their roles and specificities within communities, is essential. Taking into account the gender dimension in the prevention of armed violence, harnessing women’s strength as agents of change and including them meaningfully in decision-making and the formulation of implementation measures are actions that need to be strengthened in conventional weapons management and PVE.

10. Particularly in relation to youth, it is essential for both the national institutions responsible for conventional weapons management and those responsible for PVE to work on a culture of peace and offer alternatives to the use of weapons. This is key to address the root causes of violence, through dialogue, awareness raising of the risks associated with weapons, education and vocational training, socio-economic integration into society, the implementation of deradicalisation programmes and the transmission of civic values.

11. Parliamentarians are important players in the formulation of policies and legislation on the management of conventional weapons and PVE, and in promoting therein more systematically the links between these two fields of action. It is key that parliamentarians make full use of their oversight role and ensure all relevant stakeholders’ accountability.
12. Frameworks and measures should be envisaged to enable the State to control and oversee self-defence groups, where they exist, including their positioning in legislative and structural frameworks at national level, their training in respect for human rights and international humanitarian law, the management of their equipment, and the demobilisation and retraining of their members, including through alternative economic opportunities or the employment of the most capable in local paramilitary security forces (community police, park rangers for water and forestry, security auxiliaries or private surveillance companies).

13. Training on the link between conventional weapons management and PVE should be developed for the various relevant stakeholders, such as national institutions in charge of weapons management and PVE, parliamentarians, civil society and the media. A holistic approach to weapons management and PVE should also be integrated into training curricula of the defence and security forces and civil servants.

14. While national ownership is fundamental, technical and financial support to operationalise the linkages between conventional weapons management and PVE is essential. This support must be aligned with national and local needs and priorities.

15. Local and national action must be at the heart of preventing violent extremism and the proliferation of conventional weapons. Given the cross-border threat, regional action is also essential.

At the regional, continental and international level

16. Regional, continental and international organisations have an active role to play in more systematically promoting a holistic, prevention-focused approach to conventional weapons management across regional, continental and international frameworks, policies and strategies on weapons management and PVE. Support and advocacy efforts from civil society are also key in this regard.

17. Practices from the West African region should be instilled into regional, continental and international normative, political and strategic processes on conventional weapons management and PVE, such as the forthcoming Review Conference of the United Nations Programme of Action on Small Arms and Light Weapons.

18. This seminar should be considered as the starting point for a broader process, anchored in the region and aimed at alimenting a community of practice to promote the exchange of experiences and good practices in including conventional weapons management in PVE and vice versa, as well as to strengthen capacities. It could also prompt, within ECOWAS, the establishment of a formal framework for regular meetings between the national institutions responsible for the management of conventional weapons on the one hand and those responsible for PVE on the other. On the basis of an assessment of the existing national and regional frameworks for conventional weapons management and PVE and their interconnection, it would be desirable for ECOWAS to explore, in particular, the opportunity of initiating a process for elaborating regional guidelines to guide ECOWAS Member States in taking account of weapons management in PVE and vice versa. It is subsequently desirable for ECOWAS Member States to take ownership of and incorporate these potential regional guidelines into their respective national legal frameworks.

The participants invite the States of the region, regional, continental and international organisations as well as civil society and research entities to take ownership of the conclusions and recommendations of the seminar.

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