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West Africa: Prospects for Peace

October 10, 2003

Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo all have suffered greatly from violent conflict in recent years.

On September 23, 2003 the Institute hosted a [briefing featuring Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah](#), special representative to the United Nations secretary general for West Africa and former Institute grantee, in an examination of present and future UN activities in the region as well as prospects for peace and reconciliation. Moderated by [David Smock](#), Africa scholar and director of the Institute's [Religion and Peacemaking Initiative](#), Ould-Abdallah's presentation was followed by a general discussion period featuring questions from the floor.

Opportunity Lost: Understanding the Challenge in West Africa

Ambassador Ould-Abdallah opened the session with a reminder that while West Africa faces many challenges, it is a region with a lot of potential. Ould-Abdallah noted that the people of West Africa had been at the forefront of the African independence movement, with Ghana actually being the first nation in colonial Africa to gain its independence in the late 1950s. However, he lamented that the promise of West Africa had fallen short due to rampant political instability and virulent civil conflicts that have touched virtually every state in the region. This, Ould-Abdallah stressed, has decimated the social and economic backbones of many West African states, such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, where decades of conflict have destroyed most of the physical infrastructure. But can these challenges be met with the policy and economic initiative being led by the international community through organizations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), Ould-Abdallah asked?

Discussing his observations from his recent work with the United Nations, Ould-Abdallah stated that while ECOWAS and NEPAD initiatives were showing some promise, the overall capacity of such organizations was currently limited. For example, he noted that ECOWAS has limited staff resources that thereby restrict its ability to address the many issues resulting from ongoing conflict in the region. He also stressed that financial support for stabilization initiatives and reconstruction was a challenge for such organizations and that aid from donor countries such as the United States often takes a long time to reach the field. This, in addition to other resource challenges, Ould-Abdallah pointed out, serves to constrain how flexible organizations like ECOWAS can be in quickly responding to crises in West Africa.

Beyond Borders: Regional Challenges to the Peace

Complicating the situation in West Africa, Ould-Abdallah said, is the fact that many of the states in the region are attempting to combat a combination of internal and external threats. To illustrate the difficult nature of this problem, Ould-Abdallah explored three challenges that have daunted those looking to promote peace and political stability in the region:

1. *Regionalized civil wars.* Ould-Abdallah emphasized that support for rebel groups in Liberia by Cote d'Ivoire had exacerbated the ongoing instability in Liberia. Ironically, however, such involvement by neighboring states has resulted in an unintended ripple effect that has ended up having a

destabilizing effect on all of West Africa. While he believed that efforts at the United Nations to stabilize the situation in Liberia may help address the immediate security situation, now that president Charles Taylor has left, he underscored that the crises in Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire have deep roots and would not be easy to solve.

2. *Weak democratic institutions and corruption.* According to Ould-Abdallah, one of the most daunting ongoing problems in efforts to bring greater peace and stability to West Africa is the problem of weak democratic institutions and corruption. It is in many ways a chicken and egg problem. Political reform initiatives must address political corruption as well as build democratic and civil society institutions in the region. Without addressing the greed and corrupt practices that have plagued many West African regimes for years, Ould-Abdallah noted, it would be difficult to gain the popular support and public participation to build the foundations for healthy and stable democracies.
3. *Small arms proliferation and narcotics trade.* Noting that "West Africa and Africa [as a whole] are flooded with small arms," Ould-Abdallah cautioned the audience not to place the blame solely with Western nations manufacturing and exporting the weapons. Instead, he stated that the demand for small arms was clear and that leaders across the continent must look inward to examine this problem—along with advocating any supply side approaches. Ould-Abdallah also commented that many officials in West Africa have expressed concern to him in his travels about an apparent recent upsurge in drug trafficking and related activity. He indicated that while not yet a major problem, many officials were concerned about Latin American drug cartels becoming a potentially new and lucrative funding source for terrorists, rebel groups, and others.

Designing a Blueprint for Peace and Stability

Wrapping up his presentation, Ould-Abdallah revisited some of his primary themes and offered several suggestions that leaders in Africa as well as the international community may want to take into consideration.

- **Take advantage of the opportunities provided by new information and communications technologies.**

Discussing the changes that new information and communications technologies have had on state-society relations around the globe, Ould-Abdallah emphasized that these technologies make people more independent. He also pointed out that more public information not only allows people to become more involved in policy decisions, but also helps to combat corruption as news flows more freely.

- **Reconstruction of basic physical infrastructure is key in building stable states.**

Pointing to the devastation in states in West Africa such as Liberia and Sierra Leone, Ould-Abdallah underscored the importance of rebuilding the physical infrastructure within the region as part of any long-term stabilization efforts. This rebuilding would be key, he noted, in creating a foundation for economic security, an essential factor in any stable democratic society.

- **Flexibility is key for international organizations in addressing the crises in West Africa.**

Ould-Abdallah stressed that flexibility and the ability to respond rapidly to a quickly changing situation were vital to the ability of groups such as ECOWAS to be successful in its stabilization efforts. In addition, international donors such as the United States should consider ways to improve their ability to respond as delays in funding programs can be very detrimental to their implementation on the ground.

- **Good governance must be a priority.**

Ould-Abdallah noted that many West African regimes had become discredited, both at home and within the international community, due to corrupt practices. As the first step in any effective stabilization of the security, political, and economic environment in West Africa, Ould-Abdallah

stated, that political reform at home must occur, before these regions look for assistance from abroad to solve the region's stability problems.

Ould-Abdallah reminded the audience that, "the problem in West Africa is the same as all over [the world]—weak [democratic] institutions," to truly understand the current situation in West Africa and to draw a realistic blueprint for peace and stability in the region, we must address this problem.

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This USIPeace Briefing reflects the presentations and comments from "West Africa: Prospects for Peace"—a Current Issues Briefing held at the U.S. Institute of Peace September 23, 2003. The views summarized above reflect the discussion at the meeting; they do not represent formal positions taken by the Institute, which does not advocate specific policies.

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