



Security Council

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The situation in Central Africa and the activities of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to the statement of the President of the Security Council dated 10 August 2018 ([S/PRST/2018/17](#)), in which the Council requested me to keep it informed about the activities of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa (UNOCA). It provides an assessment of the major political and security trends in Central Africa since my report dated 29 November 2019 ([S/2019/913](#)), and an update on progress in the implementation of the mandate of UNOCA, as adjusted following the strategic review of UNOCA, the conclusions of which had been welcomed by the Council in the statement of its President dated 12 September 2019 ([S/PRST/2019/10](#)). The report also provides an update on the situation in the Lake Chad basin region, pursuant to Council resolution [2349 \(2017\)](#).

II. Major developments in the Central Africa subregion

A. Political, peace and security developments and trends

2. Political developments in the subregion have become further framed by the electoral cycles taking place in 2020 and 2021 in 8 of the 11 Central African countries. Several countries continued to grapple with underlying political tensions resulting from both economic stagnation and political and social frustrations that emerged during past elections. Non-State armed groups continued to operate in or near various countries, fuelling insecurity and displacement. Maritime insecurity, specifically piracy in the Gulf of Guinea, continued to present a growing challenge for the region, while commanding renewed attention from international partners. The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic placed abrupt constraints on freedom of movement within the subregion, as mounting economic, social and humanitarian pressures challenged the capacity of States to respond. My appeal for an immediate global ceasefire in the face of COVID-19, consistent with a similar appeal made on 27 March 2020 by the Chairperson of the African Union Commission, was accepted by one armed group in Cameroon. Nonetheless, in some countries, violence continued unabated.



3. A milestone was achieved with the adoption of the institutional reform package for the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) at the ninth extraordinary session of its Conference of Heads of State and Government, held in Libreville from 16 to 18 December 2019. The agreement provides for the transformation of the ECCAS secretariat into a commission, the unification of key peace and security institutions under a common regional framework and the expedition of national ratification processes with a view to convening an ordinary session of the assembly during the first half of 2020. On 7 February 2020, ECCAS ministers met on the margins of the thirty-sixth ordinary session of the African Union Council of Ministers to advance the process and, on 20 March, ECCAS ambassadors met in Libreville to present candidates for commissioner posts.

Political developments and trends

4. Following the announcement made on 6 March 2020 in Cameroon of its first confirmed case of COVID-19 infection, a gradual increase in the number of infections continued to be registered across the subregion. States moved swiftly to prevent the spread of the virus, including by imposing travel bans, closing land borders, prohibiting mass gatherings, shutting down schools and places of worship, ordering confinement and curfews and declaring states of emergency. By May, Angola, Cameroon, Congo and Gabon were considering ways to ease or end confinement measures. Countries undertook steps to strengthen coordination and response mechanisms and alleviate the economic and social impacts of the pandemic.

5. The subregion continued to make progress towards improved relations between member States. Angola made significant efforts to advance the implementation of the memorandum of understanding signed in Luanda on 21 August 2019, between the President of Uganda, Yoweri Museveni, and the President of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, on normalizing bilateral relations between their countries. On 2 and 21 February 2020, the President of Angola, João Lourenço, convened meetings of the Heads of State of the parties, which were also attended by the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Félix Tshisekedi. The meetings resulted in an agreement on a prisoner exchange, an extradition treaty and commitments to continue the normalization process, while exercising full respect for international humanitarian law.

6. In Angola, anti-corruption efforts drove political developments, as several high-profile figures were formally charged with major financial crimes. On 5 January 2020, the Presidents of Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo held a meeting in Benguela, Angola, and issued a joint statement committing themselves to cooperating on anti-corruption investigations and to continuing institutional reforms. In the face of COVID-19, the Government of Angola issued a declaration of public calamity, which took effect on 26 May, replacing a previous six-week state of emergency. The declaration is aimed at authorizing certain restrictive measures, while explicitly upholding civil and political rights.

7. In Cameroon, despite facing the heaviest COVID-19 caseload in the subregion, the Government took initial steps towards implementing the recommendations of the national dialogue, while violence continued in the Far North, North-West and South-West Regions. On 10 December 2019, the National Assembly adopted a law on the promotion of bilingualism, which is aimed at affirming the equal status of French and English and protecting the rights of citizens to access government services, including education and judicial services, in both languages. On 20 December, the National Assembly granted special status to the North-West and South-West Regions on the basis of linguistic particularity and historic heritage, including measures specific to the educational and judiciary systems of those regions. On 23 March 2020, a follow-

up committee was set up under the Prime Minister to monitor the implementation of the recommendations of the national dialogue.

8. Legislative and municipal elections took place on 9 February 2020, with several violent incidents reported in the North-West and South-West Regions. Tensions flared as separatists announced plans on social media to disrupt the vote. The Cameroon Renaissance Movement, led by the former presidential candidate, Maurice Kamto, boycotted the elections. On 28 February, the Constitutional Council annulled the results in 11 constituencies, representing a total of 13 National Assembly seats, in the North-West and South-West Regions. Following subsequent legislative by-elections on 22 March, the ruling party, the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement, secured 316 of 360 municipalities and 152 of 180 seats in the Assembly, followed by its ally, the National Union for Democracy and Progress, with 16 municipalities and 7 Assembly seats. The opposition party, the Social Democratic Front, won four municipalities and five Assembly seats. The newly established Cameroon Party for National Reconciliation won seven municipalities and three Assembly seats. Overall, women represented almost 34 per cent of deputies in the Assembly, 26 per cent of senators and 10 per cent of executive heads of municipalities.

9. The security situation in the North-West and South-West Regions of Cameroon continued to deteriorate, with reports of attacks against civilians, including extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary arrests, property destruction, retaliatory attacks, abductions, rape and other forms of sexual violence, disproportionately affecting women and children. On 14 February 2020, the reported killing of 23 civilians, including 15 children, by armed attackers in the village of Ngarbuh, North-West Region, triggered broad international condemnation and calls for an independent investigation into the violence. On 27 February, the Government appointed a joint commission of inquiry to conduct an investigation and announced, on 21 April, that members of security forces would be held accountable for the incident which, according to the investigation, had resulted in the death of 13 civilians. Meanwhile, separatist armed groups increased attacks on defence and security forces, including for the first time outside the North-West and South-West Regions. On 7 March, several dozen assailants attacked a gendarmerie post and a police station in Galim, West Region, killing eight people, including two female gendarmes, two male police officers and four civilians, and took away weapons and military equipment. On 8 March, a homemade bomb exploded during the International Women's Day parade in Bamenda, North-West Region, killing one Cameroonian soldier and injuring seven people.

10. On 17 February 2020, I called on armed actors to refrain from attacks against civilians and to respect international humanitarian and human rights law. I also called on the Government of Cameroon to conduct an investigation into the Ngarbuh incident and to ensure that those responsible were held accountable. I reiterated the readiness of the United Nations to work with all stakeholders towards achieving a political solution to the crisis in the two regions through meaningful dialogue. On 21 February, my Special Representatives for Children and Armed Conflict, on Sexual Violence in Conflict and on Violence against Children and my Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, issued a joint statement deploring the continued reports of human rights abuses committed against civilians, including women and children, in the South-West and North-West Regions and calling for the Government to discharge its primary responsibility to protect its population by addressing the root causes of violence and enhance protection of civilians.

11. After my appeal on 23 March 2020 for a global ceasefire in the context of COVID-19, the only party in Cameroon to respond was the Southern Cameroons Defence Forces, an armed wing of the African People's Liberation Movement, by

announcing a temporary ceasefire on 25 March that was later extended. I called on other groups to follow suit.

12. On 20 and 21 December 2019, Chad hosted the fourteenth session of its joint bilateral commission with the Central African Republic. Held in N'Djamena, it was the first meeting of that forum since 2013. The new Ambassador of Chad to the Central African Republic assumed his responsibilities on 24 March 2020. His predecessor had left the post in November 2018.

13. In Chad, violence in some border areas seemed to abate. A state of emergency, decreed in mid-2019 for the eastern provinces of Ouaddaï and Sila, along the border with the Sudan, and in the northern Tibesti province, along the border with Libya, ended on 10 January 2020. In the east, intercommunal tensions, predominantly between Arab herders and non-Arab agricultural communities subsided; however, the number of refugees fleeing from Darfur into Chad owing to intercommunal tensions continued to increase. Civilians, especially women and girls, were especially exposed to violent attacks, including conflict-related sexual violence. The recent displacements brought the overall number of refugees from Darfur in Chad to over 360,000. The security situation remained tenuous in areas of the country bordering Libya. On 19 February, in Tibesti, the national army reportedly repelled incursions from the Libya-based Chadian rebel movement, the Conseil de commandement militaire pour le salut de la République. On 2 March, the President, Idriss Déby Itno, met with traditional leaders and representatives of the self-declared Miski self-defence committee to discuss the implementation of a November 2019 peace agreement that had ended a year-long local rebellion. On 2 April, N'Djamena and several other localities were placed under curfew as part of the Government's COVID-19 response, which was later extended into May.

14. On 14 February 2020, the National Independent Electoral Commission of Chad announced that legislative elections postponed since 2015 would be held on 13 December 2020. The United Nations is supporting the process through a project for electoral assistance, signed with the Government in mid-2019 and which is to receive financial support from the European Union. The presidential election is scheduled for April 2021.

15. In the Congo, on 31 December 2019, the ruling party, the Parti congolais du travail, unanimously nominated the current President, Denis Sassou Nguesso, as its candidate for the presidential election scheduled for March 2021. Several political actors from the fragmented opposition have declared their intention to contest the election. Planned political dialogue has not started, owing to continued divergences among political actors about the format for, and focus of, such dialogue. Opposition members welcomed the Government's response to COVID-19. On 30 April, the President announced measures to mitigate the spread of the virus, while addressing its socioeconomic impacts through the creation of a national fund. On 12 May, the Government held a public debate with political parties and civil society to discuss the COVID-19 response and, on 16 May, the Prime Minister announced the Government's plan for a gradual easing of restrictions.

16. In the restive Pool Region, the critically important reintegration phase of the Government's disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme has not begun, owing to a lack of government funding, which was seen as a prerequisite for broader donor support. In the meantime, dialogue, social cohesion and economic revitalization activities, funded by the Peacebuilding Fund, have contributed to mitigating tensions and consolidating peace in the Pool Region, but long-term peace requires the implementation of a comprehensive disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programme. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) continued to

suspend the disbursement of the second instalment of its support programme, owing to shortcomings in its implementation.

17. In Equatorial Guinea, steps were taken toward political rapprochement as the Government released seven detained members of the opposition party, the *Convergencia para la Democracia Social*, following an agreement made with the President, Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, on 14 February 2020. However, on 29 April, the party spoke out against the COVID-19 response led by the Government, as the country began experiencing an increase in the number of confirmed cases.

18. On 3 March 2020, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon exchanged notifications of fulfilment of domestic procedures to allow for the entry into force of a special agreement between the two countries to submit their long-standing border dispute to the International Court of Justice. The special agreement, signed by the respective Heads of State of the parties on 15 November 2016, had been made possible through a United Nations mediation that had lasted for over two decades. The parties can now seek adjudication from the Court.

19. In Gabon, the Prime Minister, Julien Nkoghe Bekale, announced a new cabinet on 2 December 2019, composed of 30 senior ministers, ministers and deputy ministers, including 9 women. From 25 November to 15 December, the Government resumed its political dialogue on human rights, fundamental freedoms, democratic governance and election transparency, which had been launched with the European Union in December 2016 and suspended in October 2017. On 25 February 2020, the *Conseil national de la démocratie*, a permanent consultative platform for promoting political dialogue and consolidating multiparty democracy, held its first ordinary plenary session in five years. On 4 March, the Ministry responsible for women's affairs approved the country's first national action plan for the implementation of resolution 1325 (2000) on women and peace and security. The plan will be submitted to the National Assembly for adoption. On 6 March, in his capacity as head of the ruling party, the *Parti démocratique gabonais*, the President, Ali Bongo Ondimba, announced a reshuffle, including changes at the top of the party leadership. On 3 April, the President reshuffled the country's top security leadership. On 10 April, the Government announced a COVID-19 response plan that included a general lockdown for Libreville and a broader set of economic, social and health measures. Despite extending the lockdown on 25 April, the Government ultimately ended the most restrictive measures on 27 April, given public opposition and risks of social instability.

20. In Sao Tome and Principe, the process aimed at restoring confidence between political stakeholders, based on a national commitment to judicial reform, continued. The President, Evaristo Carvalho, convened a meeting with key members of the Government on 5 March 2020, to assess progress in the implementation of the initiative, which was led by the Prime Minister and supported by the United Nations. Meeting attendees acknowledged the need to complement the ongoing judicial reforms with a political dialogue. On 15 March, the President, the Prime Minister and the President of the National Assembly, along with the leaders of the political parties, jointly agreed on measures to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, including the declaration of a state of emergency.

Security developments and trends

Boko Haram/Lake Chad basin

21. Boko Haram attacks increased by more than 70 per cent compared with the period covered by my report of 24 May 2019 (S/2019/430) and shifted significantly into Cameroon. Between 1 December 2019 and 15 April 2020, there were 250 reported Boko Haram-related security incidents in Cameroon, with 180 civilian

fatalities, and 40 incidents in Chad, with 65 civilian fatalities. Similar to trends throughout 2019, some 90 per cent of all attacks during the current period were against civilians, and the number of fatalities was increasing. Women and girls faced a heightened risk of conflict-related sexual violence, including abduction, rape, sexual slavery and forced marriage. On 4 January 2020, Chad announced that it had withdrawn all of its 1,200 troops from Nigeria, where they had been part of the Multinational Joint Task Force operations against Boko Haram for nine months.

22. My call for an immediate global ceasefire was not heeded by extremist groups, who, instead, called upon their followers to intensify attacks while security forces were being redeployed as part of the COVID-19 response. On 23 March 2020, the Boko Haram faction known as “Islamic State’s West African Province” launched a massive attack on a Chad army base in Boma, Lac Province, killing at least 98 soldiers in what was the deadliest attack by Boko Haram on Chadian territory to date. On 26 March, the Government decreed a state of emergency in the two departments of Foulï and Kaya until 16 April. From 29 March to 9 April, the national army conducted a military operation, referred to as “Wrath of Boma”, to eliminate Boko Haram from the province. The army announced that 52 of its soldiers and 1,000 jihadists had been killed in the operation.

23. In recent months, the Boko Haram faction known as Jama’atu Ahlis Sunna Lidda’Awati Wal-Jihad was responsible for the spike in activity in the Far North Region of Cameroon, which included an especially high rate of abductions. According to the Multinational Joint Task Force, increased military responsiveness to those attacks limited or prevented large-scale civilian casualties.

Lord’s Resistance Army

24. According to the non-governmental organization (NGO) Invisible Children, a series of attacks was reported in the Democratic Republic of the Congo throughout March 2020, in which more than 50 persons were abducted, the majority of whom were conscripted into forced labour and then released into the bush. Of those abducted, 16 have not been released to date, including 4 children. It was reported that 15 women and children had successfully escaped captivity by the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) during the first quarter of 2020.

25. Since January 2020, there appeared to be an increasing number of defections in the areas near Mboki and Zemio in the Central African Republic, where presumed LRA groups had approached local communities for forgiveness and reintegration.

Maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea

26. According to the 2019 annual report of the International Maritime Bureau, issued in January 2020, over 90 per cent of global crew kidnappings at sea were now occurring in the Gulf of Guinea. Even though piracy incidents around the world had declined in 2019, there had been an increase in crew abductions across the Gulf of Guinea. Attacks off Libreville on 22 December 2019, which had claimed the life of one Gabonese national, and on 22 March 2020, placed maritime security at the top of the national security agenda of Gabon. On 4 March, Gabon and the United States of America assumed the joint secretariat of the Group of Seven Group of Friends of the Gulf of Guinea until the end of 2020.

27. On 27 February 2020, in Libreville, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Equatorial Guinea discussed maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea with the Prime Minister of Gabon. They acknowledged the importance of sustained bilateral cooperation in addressing the threat posed by piracy to coastal States.

Effects of climate change, ecological changes and natural disasters on the stability of Central Africa

28. The effects of climate change, including shifts in rainfall patterns, higher drought intensity and the increased incidence of extreme weather events, continued to adversely affect human security and livelihoods in Central Africa, including transhumance patterns. Severe flooding occurred in parts of Angola, the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, triggering displacement and exacerbating the current challenges involved in responding to COVID-19. At the forty-ninth ministerial meeting of the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa, held in Luanda on 29 November 2019, the need to systematically integrate dimensions related to climate change and natural resource management into conflict prevention, mediation, peacebuilding and development processes was emphasized, and, to that end, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and UNOCA were requested to strengthen their engagement within the framework of the Committee.

B. Humanitarian developments

29. In Cameroon, continued violence in the North-West and South-West Regions resulted in increased abuses against civilians, forced displacement and hampered humanitarian access. By April 2020, more than 679,000 people had been displaced and faced significant protection risks in those two regions. An additional 58,000 people had sought refuge in Nigeria. High rates of sexual and gender-based violence went unaddressed in the face of limited capacity to respond. More than one third of the health facilities were seriously affected, disrupting immunization, measles prevention and other essential treatments, including critical sexual and reproductive health services for women. While school attendance had improved throughout the last quarter of 2019, more than 70 per cent of children in the North-West and South-West Regions were still out of school. Over 80 per cent of health and education services in the two regions were not functioning.

30. On 30 November 2019, an aid worker with a local NGO and United Nations partner was abducted while carrying out a humanitarian assessment and later killed by armed individuals in the Donga-Mantung Division, North-West Region. No armed group claimed responsibility. The United Nations Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator issued a statement condemning the killing and recalled that the deliberate targeting of aid and aid workers constituted a war crime. On 30 January 2020, four staff members of a local NGO were kidnapped from their offices in Bamenda for ransom and tortured by a gang aligned with an armed group. In a separate incident on the same day, three staff members of a different local NGO were kidnapped on the outskirts of Bamenda, by a different group. All seven people were subsequently released after engagement by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

31. On 9 March 2020, the Minister of Territorial Administration of Cameroon publicly alleged that NGOs and human rights associations had emboldened armed separatists by refusing to cooperate with national authorities and distorting security and humanitarian conditions in the North-West and South-West Regions. The Government ordered NGOs to fully comply with national administrative and financial statutes within 60 days. Since December 2019, the Government has continued to impose restrictive procedures on the United Nations Humanitarian Air Service, resulting in the grounding of all aircraft. The Executive Director of the World Food Programme and the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator formally approached government authorities to request that blanket clearances be granted to the Air Service

and services restored to the humanitarian community, including in the context of the national response to COVID-19.

32. As at 31 March 2020, Cameroon was hosting more than 384,000 refugees and asylum seekers, including over 272,000 refugees from the Central African Republic. The country also had almost 977,000 internally displaced people and over 354,000 returnees, mainly in the North-West, South-West and Far North Regions.

33. In Chad, concurrent crises continued to affect several parts of the country, exacerbating malnutrition, food insecurity and an ongoing measles epidemic. Humanitarian partners estimated that 5.3 million people would need assistance in 2020 and planned to target 3 million of the most vulnerable, a steep increase compared with the 2 million people targeted in 2019. The United Nations consolidated humanitarian response plan required \$545 million for 2020, of which only 12 per cent had been received by the beginning of May 2020. As at 31 March 2020, Chad was hosting more than 468,000 refugees and more than 208,000 internally displaced persons.

34. In the Congo, unprecedented flooding in the Congo River basin in the departments of Likouala, Cuvette, Sangha and Plateaux destroyed homes, vital public infrastructure and livelihoods. About 170,000 people were affected across the country, including 30,000 refugees from the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The subsequent humanitarian crisis led the Government to declare a state of emergency in the three most-affected departments.

Boko Haram/Lake Chad basin

35. The Lake Chad basin crisis continued to affect civilians and displace thousands of people in Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria. The resurgence of attacks and ongoing insecurity in the region has led to the internal displacement of almost 300,000 Cameroonians and some 208,000 Chadians, as well as the flight of more than 100,000 Nigerian refugees to Cameroon and Chad. People in the Lake Chad basin continued to suffer from epidemics, including of cholera, measles and polio, as well as destruction due to heavy flooding.

36. In the Far North Region of Cameroon, Boko Haram activities, compounded by chronic vulnerability and the growing impact of climate change, left 1 million people in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. Cameroon was the second most-affected country in the Lake Chad basin, after Nigeria. As at 31 March 2020, there were about 112,000 refugees, 297,000 internally displaced persons and 117,000 returnees in the Far North Region, who faced significant protection risks. Local communities were also significantly affected.

37. As at 31 March 2020, there were almost 14,000 Nigerian refugees, some 208,000 internally displaced persons and more than 33,600 Chadian returnees recorded in the Lac Province of Chad. After the President declared the Lac Province departments of Fouli and Kaya war zones on 26 March, an additional estimated 20,000 people fled the military operation areas and were displaced in and around Diameron. The number of food insecure people in the Lac Province was expected to reach over 240,000 by June 2020, the start of the next lean season, if the necessary food assistance and livelihood support was not provided.

C. Human rights trends

38. Chad, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon released a number of high-profile political figures and activists from detention during the reporting period. At the same time, other members of opposition parties in the subregion and persons sought in

connection with widespread anti-corruption and national security campaigns were remanded into custody, sometimes serving long periods of pretrial detention. Many central prisons did not meet the United Nations Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules). Prison overcrowding was identified as a significant vector of transmission for COVID-19 and, on 25 March 2020, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights urged Governments to reduce overcrowding to prevent catastrophic rates of infection.

39. Some States took extraordinary measures to manage the risk of the spread of COVID-19. In Gabon, the President pardoned 680 detainees in order to decongest prisons. Those subject to the pardon had less than six months remaining on their sentences and did not include those convicted of serious crimes, including sexual violence. In Cameroon, it was reported on 13 April that three detainees had died from COVID-19 in Kondengui prison in Yaoundé. Following an announcement made on 15 April by the President of Cameroon, Paul Biya, the Government reportedly released about 3,400 prisoners. The former President of Chad, Hissène Habré, was granted two months' leave from prison in Senegal, where he was serving a life sentence for crimes against humanity, when the jail he was being held in was designated for decongestion. On 30 March, the President of Chad signed a decree remitting the sentence of 1,540 prisoners whose remaining sentences were less than 9 months, those over 70 years of age and those considered vulnerable.

40. In a communiqué issued on 21 April 2020, the Government of Cameroon released the outcomes of the investigation into the incident that had taken place in Ngarbuh (see para. 9 above). According to the communiqué, several military officers will be held responsible for deploying groups of armed vigilantes, failing to control troops, burning down houses and falsely reporting on the incident. The Government advised that disciplinary proceedings would be undertaken against the battalion commander in charge of the infantry battalion that participated in the Ngarbuh operation, while orders were issued for the arrest of a sergeant, a private first class and 10 members of the vigilante group. Measures are also to be taken to ensure the proper reburial of victims, compensation for their families and the protection of civilians. In the North-West and South-West Regions, armed separatists reportedly kidnapped dozens of candidates, the majority of whom were members of the Social Democratic Front, prior to the legislative and municipal elections. Most of the candidates were subsequently released. The United Nations received information that voting centres and the houses of those involved in the election campaign were also attacked by separatists.

41. In Chad, the official swearing-in ceremony of the 11 commissioners, including 5 women, of the new National Human Rights Commission and the official election of the Commission's Executive Bureau took place on 12 and 13 February 2020, respectively. These events marked the culmination of a long process, with assistance by the United Nations, for the establishment of the Commission in accordance with international standards. On 16 April, 44 detainees, allegedly members of Boko Haram, were found dead in their cells from an apparent mass poisoning. Investigations by the authorities are ongoing. On 28 April, the National Assembly unanimously voted to abolish the death penalty for acts of terrorism.

42. In the Congo, the Congolese Human Rights Observatory documented the overcrowding of prisons in various locations across the country. In addition, remand prisons faced challenges in meeting the requirements of the Nelson Mandela Rules. On 8 May, the Council of Ministers announced that 365 detainees would be released as a COVID-19 mitigation measure, including mainly detainees awaiting judgment, those in situations of prolonged pretrial detention and non-violent offenders.

43. Labour issues raised by public sector trade unions figured high on the agenda in several countries. On 9 January 2020, Chad negotiated an end to a brief public worker strike by agreeing to gradually reinstate full salaries, end a freeze on promotions and establish a social dialogue mechanism. From 3 to 11 February, Gabon held consultations on revisions to the labour law, thus narrowly averting a strike that would have disrupted essential public services.

44. Conflict-related sexual violence continued to be perpetrated in rural and remote locations, where women and girls undertook essential livelihood activities across Central Africa. Those violations were perpetrated primarily by non-State armed actors and often occurred in areas most affected by humanitarian access restrictions and poor security service coverage.

D. Socioeconomic trends

45. A key trend affecting Central Africa was the decline in global oil prices by half, sharply reducing revenues for countries such as Angola, Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. The Economic Commission for Africa warned that ECCAS countries, many of which were net exporters of fuels and characterized by high external dependence, were especially exposed to economic downturn. Whereas forecasts for the entire continent projected a 1.4 per cent contraction in growth in 2020, the economies of Central African States could shrink by much more.

46. On 27 March 2020, the Bank of Central African States announced a series of measures aimed at maintaining financial and monetary stability in the context of COVID-19, including the injection of more than \$800 million of liquidity, and recommended that countries update their economic perspectives in order to take appropriate budgetary measures and seek additional support from IMF and the World Bank.

47. On 28 March, in Brazzaville, ministers from the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) held the third extraordinary session of the steering committee of the Economic and Financial Reform Programme. At the meeting, participants assessed the economic and financial impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the subregion and approved a \$150 million credit line to support the emergency response and strengthen national health-care systems. They also called for external debt relief for CEMAC countries.

48. On 13 April, the Executive Board of IMF approved immediate debt service relief to 25 member countries, including the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Rwanda and Sao Tome and Principe, to support their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. The relief provides grants to cover debt obligations for an initial period of six months, allowing countries to channel more resources into emergency medical and other relief efforts.

III. Activities of the United Nations Regional Office for Central Africa

A. Good offices, preventive diplomacy and mediation

Cameroon

49. From 19 to 23 January 2020, my Special Representative for Central Africa and Head of UNOCA, together with the Secretary-General of ECCAS, undertook a joint mission to Yaoundé ahead of the legislative and municipal elections to be held on 9 February. They met with government officials and major electoral stakeholders, including the Electoral Commission, the National Council on Communication,

political parties, women's groups, civil society organizations and key partners. On 24 January, the eve of the beginning of the official campaign period, the delegation issued a joint communiqué urging all Cameroonians to play their part in quelling hate speech and incitement to violence.

50. From 1 to 3 March 2020, my Special Representative visited Yaoundé, where he met with the Prime Minister and the Secretary-General and Chief of Staff of the Presidency to discuss the urgency of achieving a peaceful solution to the crisis in the North-West and South-West Regions. My Special Representative stressed that the escalation of violence threatened to reverse hard-earned gains achieved through dialogue and to foreclose on opportunities to implement decentralization. He echoed my call for an independent and credible investigation into the killing of civilians in Ngarbuh and exhorted the Government to protect civilians living adjacent to military operations. Subsequently, the Government officially requested United Nations participation in investigations into the Ngarbuh attack. On 13 March, my Special Representative offered to facilitate the provision of technical assistance to the Government's national commission of inquiry, including through the Subregional Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Central Africa. On 13 May, my Special Representative met with the President in Yaoundé to discuss the fight against COVID-19, regional cooperation and integration and recent developments in the country and the subregion.

Central African Republic

51. In partnership with the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic, UNOCA continued to promote the sustained implementation of the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic at the regional level. My Special Representatives for Central Africa and for the Central African Republic held regular consultations and agreed to carry out joint initiatives, such as visits to neighbouring countries in support of the creation of an enabling environment for peaceful presidential, legislative and local elections in the country towards the end of 2020 and the facilitation of high-level communications within the subregion. On 4 February 2020, a meeting was held between senior-level representatives of UNOCA and the ECCAS secretariat in Libreville to develop an updated common assessment of the situation in the Central African Republic in the lead-up to the elections, as a basis for renewing joint efforts in the subregion.

Chad

52. From 22 to 24 January 2020, UNOCA facilitated an ECCAS workshop in Chad for approximately 50 members of the press, on preventing electoral violence in conjunction with the country's electoral and communication authorities.

Congo

53. From 13 to 18 March 2020, a UNOCA-ECCAS joint exploratory mission, supported by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), visited Brazzaville to meet with national and international partners to assess political, security, human rights and socioeconomic developments with a gender perspective. The mission provided entry points for joint political facilitation with national stakeholders, including women's organizations and youth organizations, in the lead-up to the 2021 presidential election.

Equatorial Guinea

54. As Equatorial Guinea prepared to assume the rotating presidency of the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa,

UNOCA supported the Government with a communications strategy highlighting the Advisory Committee as an instrument for permanent consultation and stability in Central Africa. From 24 to 26 February 2020, the Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate conducted an initial visit to Equatorial Guinea, at the request of the Government and on behalf of the Counter-Terrorism Committee. The visit was focused on legal and criminal justice issues, international cooperation, counter-financing of terrorism and law enforcement-related issues. The human rights aspects of the counter-terrorism response, as well as its gender dimensions, were also discussed. The Executive Directorate will facilitate the provision of technical assistance, in line with Security Council resolution [2395 \(2017\)](#).

Gabon

55. On 26 and 27 November 2019, UNOCA held a capacity-building workshop for members of the National Human Rights Commission, with the participation of women, young people and civil society representatives. On 5 December, as part of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign, UNOCA partnered with civil society to hold a capacity-building workshop for more than 80 members of the national police and penitentiary services. On 12 March 2020, my Special Representative for Central Africa donated human rights-related books and materials provided by OHCHR to the Ministry of Justice and Keeper of the Seals, the courts and tribunals, the National School for the Judiciary and the National Human Rights Commission.

Rwanda

56. From 27 to 31 January 2020, my Special Representative for Central Africa visited Kigali to discuss relations between Rwanda and Uganda, the situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, relations with Burundi and the ratification of the Central African Convention for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons, Their Ammunition and All Parts and Components That Can Be Used for Their Manufacture, Repair or Assembly (Kinshasa Convention). He participated in the annual diplomatic gathering hosted by the President, who reiterated his country's determination to support peace, security, stability and investment in Africa.

Sao Tome and Principe

57. UNOCA mobilized the United Nations system to support the process on modernizing the justice sector, which had been launched at a high-level meeting held on 17 September 2019. From 14 to 20 December, UNOCA undertook a mission to meet with a broad cross section of political leaders and civil society organizations, including women's groups, and to explore options for inclusive dialogue around issues of governance and justice reform. From 20 to 31 January 2020, the United Nations Development Programme deployed a technical advisor to Sao Tome to draft an action plan for implementing justice reform.

B. Support to the United Nations, regional and subregional initiatives on peace and security

United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa

58. In its capacity as secretariat to the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa, UNOCA worked with the Government of Equatorial Guinea to organize the fiftieth meeting of the Committee in Malabo, which was originally scheduled to be held from 25 to 29 May 2020, but was postponed at the request of the host country owing to prevailing COVID-19 travel restrictions.

Collaboration with regional, subregional and intergovernmental organizations

59. From 8 to 10 and 15 to 17 January 2020, UNOCA participated in ECCAS-led capacity-building workshops on preventing electoral violence and curbing hate speech. Held in Yaoundé, the workshops were tailored to electoral officials and members of the Cameroonian press.

60. On 3 and 4 March, UNOCA provided support to ECCAS in the holding of an interregional workshop with the civil society coalition for peace and conflict prevention in Central Africa. On 11 March, UNOCA and the ECCAS secretariat held a workshop to review modalities for cooperation and update their joint action plan for 2020, prioritizing conflict prevention and institutional capacity-building.

Boko Haram

61. On 4 December 2019, my Special Representative for Central Africa briefed the Peacebuilding Commission on regional approaches to peacebuilding in the Lake Chad basin. He called for strengthening international partnerships to support the implementation of the Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy for Areas Affected by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region. He urged all actors to apply a climate security perspective to conflict prevention, mediation and peacebuilding efforts.

62. On 16 and 17 January 2020, UNOCA participated in a workshop, held in Addis Ababa, to develop a regional action plan for the above-mentioned Regional Strategy. Representatives from the African Union, the Lake Chad Basin Commission and ECOWAS were joined by women's and youth representatives, local authorities from the Boko Haram-affected areas, United Nations entities and other partners.

Regional integration

63. From 16 to 18 December 2019, my Special Representative for Central Africa attended the ninth extraordinary session of the Conference of ECCAS Heads of State and Government and made a statement on my behalf. UNOCA and ECCAS established a joint working group to help manage the transition and coordinate support for the new ECCAS structure, in full consultation with international partners.

Maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea

64. From 4 to 8 February 2020, my Special Representatives for Central Africa and for West Africa and the Sahel visited the Interregional Coordination Centre for Maritime Safety and Security in the Gulf of Guinea in Yaoundé and the Gulf of Guinea Commission in Luanda. Discussions were focused on harmonizing regional approaches in the Gulf of Guinea maritime zone.

65. UNOCA held a series of consultations with the Government of Gabon and international maritime security experts based in Libreville, to promote coherent approaches to maritime security and enhance coordination of existing regional structures in the fight against piracy and organized crime in the Gulf of Guinea.

66. On 26 and 27 February, UNOCA participated in an ECCAS-led capacity-building workshop for Gabon law enforcement and judicial personnel on the implementation of a legal framework for maritime security by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.

67. On 28 February, my Special Representative for Central Africa discussed maritime security in the Gulf of Guinea with the Minister of National Defence of Gabon, highlighting the need for strengthened cooperation between the countries of West and Central Africa to address the challenges of piracy.

Regional strategy and plan of action on counter-terrorism and the non-proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Central Africa

68. From 9 to 12 December 2019, in Kinshasa, UNOCA participated in a workshop organized by ECCAS for national arms control experts to review the five-year plan to support the implementation of the Kinshasa Convention.

Coordination of the implementation of the Regional Strategy to Address the Threat and Impact of the Activities of the Lord's Resistance Army

69. On 4 and 5 December 2019, in Entebbe, Uganda, UNOCA organized the eleventh meeting of LRA focal points, which was attended by representatives of LRA-affected countries, ECCAS, development partners, relevant NGOs and United Nations entities. Noting the emergence of security gaps in LRA-affected areas, participants recommended that the African Union convene the Joint Coordination Mechanism to provide guidance on the way forward for the Regional Cooperation Initiative for the Elimination of the Lord's Resistance Army, including the issue of transferring authority over the African Union Regional Task Force to ECCAS.

Transhumance and farmer-herder conflicts

70. UNOCA continued to advocate regional endorsement of the draft regulatory framework on the regional management of pastoralism and transhumance. Although a joint UNOCA-ECCAS workshop on preventing and managing conflict through the regulatory framework was postponed owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, the framework remains a key deliverable of the 2020 joint action plan.

C. Enhancing United Nations coherence and coordination in the subregion

71. On 3 and 4 February 2020, my Special Representative for Central Africa attended the thirty-fifth high-level meeting of heads of United Nations peace missions in West Africa, held in Dakar and hosted by the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS). Meeting participants took stock of political, socioeconomic and security dynamics in West Africa and the Sahel and their impact on Central Africa. My Special Representative addressed the ongoing coordination between UNOCA and UNOWAS to implement the Lomé Declaration on Peace, Security, Stability and the Fight against Terrorism and Violent Extremism, adopted in 2018. On 5 and 6 March, at a political coordination meeting held in Nairobi and hosted by my Special Envoy for the Great Lakes Region in Nairobi, he presented a briefing on shared approaches between mission and non-mission settings and on enhancing support to cross-regional gender initiatives.

72. On 11 and 12 February 2020, UNOCA hosted a desk-to-desk exercise with UNOWAS in Libreville to review progress made in supporting synergies across mandated activities, including on institutional capacity-building, on strengthening early warning and analysis and on enhancing regional efforts for maritime security and the fight against terrorism and organized crime.

73. On 7 April 2020, my Special Representative held a videoconference with the United Nations Resident Coordinators in Central Africa as part of efforts to coordinate political initiatives and good offices. Participants assessed the political and socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 and stressed the need to work closely with ECCAS.

IV. Observations and recommendations

74. I am deeply concerned about the impact of COVID-19 in Central Africa. I commend all countries of the subregion for taking swift measures to prevent the spread of the virus; however, I worry that inadequate health systems, dependence on informal economic sectors for sustained livelihood by large segments of the population and the impact on the large number of displaced people will pose significant challenges for the subregion. Should the infection spread dramatically, it is likely to have devastating effects in countries already disproportionately affected by infectious diseases. Nevertheless, the majority of countries acted quickly to strengthen regional coordination, deploy health workers and impose quarantines, building on experience gained in the fight against HIV/AIDS and the Ebola virus disease. I continue to urge authorities to promote robust coordination at the national, regional and subregional levels. I also encourage them to implement gender-sensitive policies for a more effective response to the pandemic. I reiterate my call for an immediate global ceasefire to enable peaceful cooperation to fight this disease. International financial institutions have exhibited rapid and effective responses to country needs, with a particular focus on mitigating socioeconomic impacts and reaching those furthest behind. I call on the international community to generously support the efforts made by individual States, the subregion and the continent to address the pandemic.

75. I reiterate my call for Governments to discharge their primary responsibility to protect their populations and ensure that victims of violence are provided with adequate protection and assistance. The balance between maintaining stability and meeting increasing demands for social change is an immense challenge. Meeting that challenge will require increased political engagement and coordination at the subregional level to mitigate the impact of potential social and political tensions. Stronger subregional institutions will be key to those efforts, and in that regard, I congratulate ECCAS on formally adopting its institutional reform package, which will enable it to play its peace and security role in full, going forward. I am encouraged by the demonstration of political will to implement the reforms in a timely manner, even as the subregion grapples with COVID-19, and to underscore that renewed political and financial engagement will be essential to revitalizing the institution.

76. I commend Member States for showing strategic resolve to help to address instability and strengthen relations between countries in the Great Lakes region. I welcome the initiative spearheaded by the Presidents of Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo in that regard and urge the parties to include women in their cooperation and peacebuilding efforts.

77. I note that the subregion is entering another electoral cycle. Partnerships between Governments and various political and social actors, including civil society, are essential to credible and peaceful elections. I urge Member States to work with the United Nations, the African Union, ECCAS and other relevant partners, so as to strengthen their capacity for conflict analysis, including with a gender perspective. I also urge them to invest in partnerships with civil society and to solicit my good offices when needed, through my special envoys and representatives in the subregion. I likewise call upon Central African leaders to use the upcoming elections as an opportunity to forge more inclusive societies and sustain peace.

78. I am encouraged by the steps taken by the Government of Cameroon to implement the recommendations stemming from the national dialogue and I welcome the recent announcements by the Government of the results of its investigations into the Ngarbuh attack. However, I continue to be concerned by the ongoing violence in

the North-West and South-West Regions. Achieving tangible results would require greater efforts and commitment on the part of the Government, political actors and relevant stakeholders. I deplore the persistence of forced displacement, human rights violations and abuses and attacks against humanitarian workers and civilians. I am also concerned by continued impediments to humanitarian access. I welcome the establishment of a committee to follow up on recommendations of the national dialogue, led by the Prime Minister, and encourage the committee to swiftly implement those recommendations, with a view to addressing the core issues raised by the dialogue.

79. Sustained regional support is essential to achieving lasting peace in the Central African Republic. I welcome efforts to advance the implementation of the Political Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in the Central African Republic and call for continued support of the guarantors and facilitators to the peace process. I welcome the resumption of the joint bilateral commission between the Central African Republic and Chad and am encouraged by the deployment of the Ambassador of Chad to Bangui, which will be instrumental to strengthening the relationship between the two countries, supporting implementation of the Political Agreement and addressing cross-border security issues. The holding of credible elections is indispensable to ensuring lasting peace and strengthening democratic institutions. I call upon all partners, including countries of the subregion, to support the electoral process, including by facilitating the participation of refugees in the elections.

80. While I welcome the improvement of the security situation in eastern and northern Chad in recent months, persisting tensions, combined with challenging conflict dynamics in neighbouring countries, continue to pose significant risks to sustainable peace in the country. I welcome the recent steps taken to enhance parliamentary oversight through increased dialogue in the National Assembly. It remains important for Chad to continue to address domestic drivers of tensions, including by investing more in development and public service delivery, in particular in border areas. It is equally important to reinstate an effective and inclusive border security strategy with the Central African Republic, Libya and the Sudan that allows for recovery and for a transition to sustainable development. I call on bilateral and multilateral partners to constructively accompany Chad towards sustainable peacebuilding.

81. I wish to express my condolences to and solidarity with the Governments and people of Cameroon and Chad for the vicious attacks carried out by Boko Haram. The threat posed by Boko Haram requires an accelerated implementation of the Regional Stabilization, Recovery and Resilience Strategy for Areas Affected by Boko Haram in the Lake Chad Basin Region. The United Nations will continue to support its implementation, and I strongly encourage the affected countries and national and international partners to do likewise. I commend the commitment of countries contributing troops and resources to the Multinational Joint Task Force. I urge all stakeholders to address the Boko Haram crisis in full conformity with international humanitarian, human rights and refugee law.

82. I welcome the initiative by ECCAS and UNOCA to coordinate efforts in helping to sustain peace in the Congo in the lead-up to the presidential election. I encourage the Government to send a positive signal for open and frank dialogue that will ease tensions with opposition leaders, who also need to demonstrate that they can be trusted partners in the political process. I likewise encourage the authorities to include women in their discussions with the opposition to seek consensus regarding electoral governance.

83. I welcome the exchange of notifications of fulfilment of domestic procedures between Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, which allows for the entry into force of the

special agreement to submit their long-standing border dispute to the International Court of Justice. The two countries have set a good example on the use of legal instruments to peacefully settle disputes.

84. Despite the commitment of the United Nations and the African Union to silencing the guns, the subregion remains under threat from cross-border armed groups. I encourage partners to coordinate their efforts to implement the decision of the Peace and Security Council of the African Union to maintain the Regional Cooperation Initiative for the Elimination of the Lord's Resistance Army, pending the development of a strategy to progressively phase out the Initiative without leaving a security vacuum. I likewise call for the immediate convening of the Joint Coordination Mechanism overseeing the Initiative.

85. Mitigating the adverse effects of climate change, including related intercommunal tensions arising from conflicts between farmers and herders, remains a priority for UNOCA. I welcome renewed cooperation between Governments and multilateral institutions towards the application of a climate security perspective to conflict analysis, as well as the planned adoption of a regional protocol on pastoralism and transhumance. More capacity is needed to tackle the impacts of climate change on sustaining peace in Central Africa. I will ask UNOCA and UNEP, among others, to work closely with ECCAS in that regard.

86. I would like to express my appreciation to the Governments of the subregion, the African Union, ECCAS, CEMAC, the Lake Chad Basin Commission, the Gulf of Guinea Commission and other regional and subregional institutions for their continued collaboration with UNOCA. I would also like to express my appreciation to the Multinational Joint Task Force and troop-contributing countries for their dedication and commitment to the service of peace and stability. I am grateful to the Government and people of Gabon for their generous hospitality to and support for UNOCA. I would like to thank the various entities of the United Nations system working in Central Africa, including the heads of United Nations peace operations, regional offices, country teams and other entities, for their support for and cooperation with UNOCA. Finally, I would like to thank my Special Representative, François Louncény Fall, and the staff of UNOCA for their continuing support for regional efforts to advance the cause of peace and security in Central Africa.
