

SECURITY COUNCIL RETREAT ON WEST AFRICA

4 June 2004

Background note

1. The establishment and full operation of a UN Office for West Africa based in Dakar and the reports on the recent missions by the Security Council to West Africa (Documents S/2003/688 of 7 July 2003 and S/2000/992 of 16 October 2000), the Secretary-General's report on ways to combat cross-border and sub-regional problems in West Africa (Document S/2004/200 of 12 March 2004) and subsequent presidential statement of the Security Council (Document S/PRST/2004/7 of 25 March 2004) demonstrate the continued keen interest of the international community in helping address the many complex challenges confronting West Africa. The sub-region, which hosts a population of about 200 million inhabitants, is well endowed with rich natural resources, including large deposits of minerals, abundant rainforest and marine resources. These represent huge opportunities for socio-economic development and prosperity. However, there are high risks also hanging over the region as conflicts grow in number and magnitude in various parts.

2. Regarding opportunities, there is no doubt that a peaceful West Africa would bolster the sub-regions economic and political clout in Africa as a whole, restructuring the continent's entire geopolitical landscape and raising West Africa as a continent-wide power broker. The discovery of deepwater oil reserves is driving a boom in exploration and production in West Africa. Recent estimates by relevant experts place potential reserves in the Gulf of Guinea at between 20 billion and 30 billion barrels, which represent the largest single bloc of crude deposits in sub-Saharan Africa and is well situated in the South Atlantic to supply oil to the West.

3. Through its regional body, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), West Africa continues to promote cooperation and development in economic, social and cultural activity, particularly in the fields for which specialized commissions are appointed to raise the standard of living of the people of the member countries. Additionally, ECOWAS has a mandate to prevent, manage and support the resolution of conflicts in the region. It is under this mandate that the organization has played a mediating role and has contributed troops to peacekeeping operations in several West African countries, most recently in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire.

4. Unfortunately, the great opportunities of the West African sub-region have not so far been harnessed to the advantage of its people, as the region continues to face tremendous challenges in the form of protracted intra-state conflicts, bad governance and cross-border problems such as small arms proliferation. It is, therefore, encouraging that the sub-region has taken a centre stage, and the United Nations and its partners are devoting special attention to addressing the problems of the region with a view to promoting lasting peace and sustainable development. The recommendations contained in the Secretary-General report and in the Security Council's presidential statement of 25 March 2004 on cross-border problems represent a good basis for tackling the many challenges facing West Africa.