

**PRESS RELEASE: ECOWAS EARLY WARNING & EARLY RESPONSE
(ECOWARN) SYSTEM, SENSITISATION WORKSHOP
Ange Hill Hotel, Accra, March 27, 2007**

Violent conflicts in Africa have been attributed to generalized poverty, ethnic tensions, corrupt governments, mass unemployment, social exclusion, population implosion and competition for scarce resources. The destructive nature of these conflicts constitutes a severe threat to socio-economic development and sustainable livelihoods. In West Africa, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea Bissau witnessed civil unrest that have brought untold hardships to millions of people, destruction of property and infrastructure. Inter-communal violence in Nigeria and chieftaincy disputes in Ghana, and the Tuareg rebellion in Niger and Mali constitute a worrisome challenge for peace and security in West Africa.

These successive outbreaks of conflicts and other emerging security challenges led to the call for the creation of a sub-regional peace and security framework in the 1993 ECOWAS Revised Treaty. In December 10, 1999 at Lomé in Togo, the Protocol relating to the Mechanism for Conflict Prevention, Management, Resolution, Peacekeeping and Security (otherwise known as the Mechanism) was signed. In December 2001, ECOWAS adopted a specific Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance as supplement to the December 10, 1999 Protocol which set out guiding principles for intra-state relations that would help foster participatory democracy, good governance, the rule of law, respect for human rights and a balanced and equitable distribution of resources.

Chapter IV of the 1999 protocol established an Early Warning System that would detect, monitor and analyze signs of threats or breakdown in relations within or between member states (conflict indicators) in accordance with Article 58 of the ECOWAS Revised Treaty and make reports for use by the Executive Secretariat now transformed into Commission.

The Observation and Monitoring Centre (OMC) located at the ECOWAS Commission, with four zonal information and reporting bureaus in Cotonou (covering Benin, Nigeria and Togo); Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso, Cote d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger); Monrovia (Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Ghana); and Banjul (The Gambia, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal) was established. At the headquarters in Abuja, the Director of the centre directs a team of staff that comprises analysts, management staff and other support staff (including a civil society liaison officer).

The need for a paradigm shift from reaction to prevention of violent conflicts in West Africa cannot be over-emphasized. The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has in recent years embarked on concrete programmes and activities aimed at rendering functional the Early Warning System for the purpose of eliciting early response to violent conflicts in West Africa. It is believed that with reliable and evidence based early warning reporting, ECOWAS, together with the rest of the international community would mobilize prompt and adequate responses to imminent or ongoing conflicts and other threats to sub-regional peace and security.

Though the process of transforming the idea of an early warning system from a paper concept into reality has been slow and challenging, it is yielding remarkable progress. In 2001, the European Union gave a grant that was able to kick start the process with the

recruitment of Zonal Bureau officers and the purchase of limited office equipment. The capacity deficit remained a major challenge as the grant was not entirely used. In the backdrop of this challenge, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) after a series of consultations provided a grant for a two year project aimed at increasing the capacity of the ECOWAS Conflict Prevention Mechanism through partnership with existing network organizations on ground. The West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP), a network organization with knowledge of early warning and peacebuilding was chosen to partner with ECOWAS through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to reinforce the capacity of ECOWAS in operationalizing the early warning system. WANEP is therefore the lead civil society organization and implementing partner in the ongoing operationalization.

Phase one of the operationalization of the Early Warning System was successful and inspiring. Consultations between Member States and civil society organizations including think tanks and research institutions, review workshops and development of indicators were organized by the West Africa Network for Peacebuilding (WANEP) and ECOWAS proved to be landmark developments. Data base collection, processing and access; and exchange of information modalities have been laid down. A system with pre-determined indicators has been developed.

One of the major outcomes of these consultations was a bulk data of salient indicators of conflict and peace in West Africa. A computer based data base for systematic tracking and monitoring of conflict and peace trends was designed and has been in its testing phase since June 2006. In addition to these developments, an information exchange bulletin has also been created to allow for comments, suggestions and additional input and information from key stakeholders. ECOWAS insists that its early warning drive is focused on human security and open source information to avoid the temptation to assimilate or equate early warning with the traditional intelligence gathering.

A remarkable development is that ECOWAS decided to broaden the data collection base by eliciting the services of 15 focal points in the 15 Member States whose task would be to input data into the early warning system (EWS) henceforth to be known by the acronym ECOWARN. In addition, we also have recruited 15 civil society focal points (monitors) that are also feeding the system with information. A total of 30 staff would embark on the monitoring process, in addition to the four Zonal Bureau Heads and four civil society Zonal Coordinators who would play the role of quality control of data and analysis. It is apparent that these designated staff cannot do effective monitoring without developing their respective network of grassroots monitors.

Today's workshop is a second in a series grouping Member State and Civil Society focal points (Monitors) to sensitize and inform one another of the importance of this endeavour. Many strategies for further sensitization are envisaged and the media is one of the privileged partners in this endeavour.

Thank you for your kind attention.