

**Report on the first consultative meeting of the United Nations
Country Teams in the Mano River Union Countries and Cote d'Ivoire**

Freetown, Sierra Leone: 15-16 February 2005

Overview

The United Nations Country Teams in the Mano River Union (Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone) as well as Cote d'Ivoire held their first joint consultative meeting in Freetown, Sierra Leone on 15th and 16th February 2005. Other participants included, the Mano River Union Secretariat and the UNDP Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery (BCPR) in Geneva. The Office of National Security of the Government of Sierra Leone and representatives of resident donors in Sierra Leone also participated.

The main objective of the meeting was to exchange experiences and lessons learned and to examine the common challenges facing the sub region with a view to identifying and agreeing on possible joint actions to address them.

The meeting was officially opened by Hon. Momodou Koroma, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Sierra Leone, and chaired by Mr. Victor Angelo, UN Resident Coordinator in Sierra Leone, and co-chaired by the UN Resident Coordinators of Guinea and Liberia. In a message to the meeting, the SRSG for Sierra Leone, Ambassador Daudi N. Mwakawago, stressed the importance of promoting sub-regional cooperation among the MRU countries and Cote d'Ivoire, and extended UNAMSIL's full support for such efforts.

During the two-day meeting, the respective country teams made presentations, and participants were able to exchange experiences and best practices. The meeting also benefited from a presentation by the Acting National Security Coordinator of the Government of Sierra Leone, highlighting the country's experience in the reform of the security sector.

The meeting noted that the reform of the security sector in the MRU countries is a challenge that needs to be addressed. The UNCTs also recognized the important role they could play in this respect. With regard to the role of the MRU Secretariat, the presentation by Dr. Abdulai Diallo, Secretary General of the MRU, highlighted the challenges in the areas of DRR, small arms and human trafficking in the MRU region and the need for strengthening the capacity the MRU secretariat to coordinate efforts to address these challenges.

Another important area discussed relates to the issue of post conflict transition and peace building in the MRU. In this respect, the participants benefited from a presentation by H.E Ambassador Thomas Hull, Ambassador of the United States to Sierra Leone, who outlined the policy of his Government on the matter and on the importance of regional approach in dealing with the complex challenges facing the countries in the Mano River Union and Cote d'Ivoire.

Situation in the MRU Region and issues of common Concern

The presentations by the UNCTs and subsequent discussions made it clear that despite some country specific problems, there were very similar and interconnected challenges across the sub-region.

These include: Reform of the security sectors; promotion of good governance; building the capacity of national institutions; promoting economic recovery; disarmament and reintegration of ex-combatants; addressing poverty and unemployment; HIV/AIDS and other epidemic prone diseases affect all countries; achieving food security; addressing the plight of refugees, returnees and internally displaced people; ensuring stability of border areas and prevention of cross border transnational crimes including human trafficking, illicit trade in small arms, drugs and mineral resources.

In view of the strong interrelations of the challenges facing the countries of the MRU and Cote d'Ivoire, participants agreed on the imperative need for a regional approach. In this respect, they acknowledged the important role that the UNCTs could play in coordinating United Nations support to the countries concerned.

The way forward and joint actions

The Country Teams agreed on the following actions.

Youths: The situation of youth in the MRU requires an urgent attention. The Governments in the region and their international partners should be actively engaged putting in the youth issues at the top of the agenda. To that end, the UNCTs agreed to prepare country concept papers, which shall include short-term and medium-to-long-term strategies and responses, to be used for dialogue with the Government and development partners. The Guinea UNCT was tasked to initiate consultations with ILO in all four affected countries to seek advice and input. Additionally, each UNCT will take steps to promote youth dialogue in each country.

Small arms trafficking: The proliferation of small arms was viewed as one of the major concerns in the MRU and Cote d'Ivoire. In this regard, the UNCTs agreed to start immediately to work on the MRU small arms project. The meeting of the UNDP Resident Representatives from Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone further agreed on the modalities of implementation of the MRU project with the USD \$960,000.00 already made available. It was also resolved that the MRU project will be integrated into the broader ECOWAS small arms programme, while the MRU secretariat playing a lead role in its implementation.

Human trafficking: Human trafficking is an emerging challenge that could have serious socio – economic and political consequences. It could also affect donor funding if not addressed. To identify the extent of the problem and the measures to be taken, it was agreed that each UNCT prepares, by May 2005, a national assessment on human trafficking, including institutional capacity and constraints in each country. In addition, each UNCT will consider mobilizing support for the training of national law enforcement institutions, to combat human trafficking and related transnational crimes.

HIV/AIDS and other major public health challenges, including Malaria and Tuberculosis: The gravity of the challenges in these areas is enormous, and the UNCTs in the sub-region should continue the work in progress and make further progress. To that end, the meeting underscored the need for a sub regional strategy, and the UNAIDS Country Coordinator for Sierra Leone and Liberia was tasked to convene a consultative meeting to discuss the issue and prepare a common strategy. Such strategy would ensure a coordinated response and support by the UNCT, including in the implementation and monitoring process. A work plan on the management of the ADB-funded HIV/AIDS program is also to be finalized.

Polio eradication and epidemic preparedness and response: While sub-regional coordination is already in place (MOU between Liberia, Sierra Leone and Guinea on polio eradication efforts, Lassa fever), it was agreed that the four Country Teams should intensify their support to the existing initiatives and harmonize approaches as much as possible. The MRU Secretariat will be kept involved/ informed.

Food security: The sub-region is richly endowed with natural resources including arable land, minerals, forestry, marine and water resources, and yet it has a serious problem of food shortage. Thus the food security problem seems to be a policy issue that the UNCTs should dialogue with the governments to keep the matter high on their agendas. There is the need for the governments to reactivate the inter-MRU collaborations. Furthermore the MRU has been requested to come up with a paper on critical issues and proposals on food security. At the national level, UN agencies dealing with food security will assist the Ministries of agriculture and fisheries to come up with proposals aiming at strengthening their capacities and draft action plans and budgetary requirements for capacity development of the Ministries. The UNCTs will compare the assessments and draw commonalities. Resource mobilization efforts have to be driven forward.

Harmonization of DDR programmes: In Sierra Leone the DDR programme has been completed, and in Liberia still ongoing, while in Cote d'Ivoire a Joint Operations Plan has been signed by the Ivorian parties but implementation has yet to commence. In light of the porous borders between Liberia and Cote d'Ivoire and the fairly ease of movement of armed combatants between both countries, it is critical to forge a common understanding of DDR issues between the UNCTs in Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire.

Border management and control: The meeting agreed that the Guinea UN Resident Coordinator will convene a meeting in Conakry to assess the measures that should be taken to strengthen border management and control.

Refugees and IDPs: The UNCTs concluded that there is need for further structured consultations on the issues of IDPs and refugees. The existing mechanisms dealing with these issues need to be strengthened. There is also need for greater collaboration among agencies within countries of return. UNHCR in Guinea and Liberia were tasked to draft proposals to address these issues.

Strengthening MRU: Governments should be encouraged to provide their committed support in reactivating the MRU. Training and capacity building support may be provided to the MRU Secretariat, as soon as it clearly demonstrates efforts for reactivation and political will. The Small Arms Project is to be implemented in close

collaboration with the MRU Secretariat. Funding for initial salaries and equipment may need to be raised.

Strengthening partnerships: To achieve the goals of the UNCTs in the respective countries, the importance of strong partnerships was underscored. As soon as the ECA study on the MRU is completed, it will be circulated to all UNCTs. Efforts will be made to implement the MRU small arms project in close collaboration with the MRU secretariat. The fall out from the UN small arms and other projects will go towards strengthening the MRU secretariat. The UNCTs should encourage the donors to ensure the UN System is involved in bi-lateral policy dialogue with the Governments.

Conclusion

The meeting was viewed as a very good opportunity to discuss and agree on a number of issues pertaining to the various national and regional challenges amongst the UNCTs, identifying common area of concern and initiating a joint way forward. Furthermore it was seen to be very useful to consult with the donors and agree on ways to strengthen partnerships.

The UNCTs agreed to meet twice a year to maintain the ongoing cross-country cooperation, placing the regional perspective at the UN agenda on a long-term basis. Key donors will be invited to one of the two meetings every year. The next meeting of the UNCTs is scheduled to take place during the last quarter of 2005 in Conakry, Guinea.

Prepared by the Resident Coordinator Office
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