Foreword

Ambassador Said Djinnit

Ambassador Said Djinnit is Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for West Africa

The recent history of Sierra Leone and Liberia shows that post-conflict transition is a complex and long-term process, which requires time, resources and continued commitment. The armed conflicts in these countries did not only lead to the disintegration of state institutions and devastating consequences for their populations, but these tragedies also represented some of the gravest threats to regional stability that the West African sub-region has ever faced.

Following the end of the wars, Liberia and Sierra Leone engaged in strenuous rebuilding processes, with the strong support of the international community, including the tremendous added value of their respective United Nations operations, the UN Operation in Liberia (UNMIL) and the UN Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL), both working in synergy with respective UN Country Teams.

The results achieved so far are impressive. The two countries have made great strides towards political stability, with legitimate authorities established through competitive elections. This progress has further consolidated regional stability, while giving new impetus to regional integration.

Despite these gains, however, the situation in the two countries remains fragile, and continues to require vigorous support from the international community. Liberia and Sierra Leone must overcome the numerous political and socioeconomic challenges they face. These challenges include strengthening democratic institutions and national security, as well as building an economy capable of providing security, jobs and basic social services.

In Liberia, although great efforts have been channelled into key recovery areas including security sector reform, infrastructural development and the expansion of state authority, the country is still confronted with numerous security and political problems. Police and justice capacity remains an urgent priority and youth unemployment continues to be very high. Besides, the impact of the crisis in neighbouring Côte d’Ivoire, in particular the influx of refugees and ex-combatants, poses serious threats to Liberia’s fragile stability.

In Sierra Leone huge strides towards sustainable peace have also been registered and the country stands out today as a positive example of security sector reform in a post-conflict situation. The peaceful and democratic election of the opposition leader as head of state in 2007 demonstrates the important efforts the country has made in its recovery process to consolidate democratic governance. But despite significant institutional reforms,
Sierra Leone still faces critical threats to its stability, including the worsening socioeconomic malaise, slow progress in the fight against corruption and dwindling international support.

The overall situation shows that while both Liberia and Sierra Leone have achieved much, a great deal remains to be done if a satisfactory level of stability is to be attained. For example, there has been the challenge of the crucial general elections for Liberia in 2011 – and scheduled for Sierra Leone in August 2012. Dramatically high levels of youth unemployment in situations of modest economic growth are also a critical challenge that both countries face.

This special Accord issue on Liberia and Sierra Leone provides fresh perspectives on the post-conflict transitions in these countries and on the many challenges to their success. UNMIL and UNIOSIL have played and should continue to play critical roles in fulfilling the great expectations of Liberians and Sierra Leoneans. However, unless realistic and practical long-term follow-up mechanisms are established by their respective governments to build on ongoing progress, the countries’ high dependency on these operations may paradoxically become the Achilles’ heel in the international community’s efforts to restore peace and stability.

I am confident that reading these articles will not only assist in understanding the critical issues involved, but also encourage creative thinking on what can be done to prevent conflict and support the emergence of stable and peaceful states, throughout the West African sub-region and beyond.

Said Djinnit is the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for West Africa since April 2008. Prior to this appointment, he was Commissioner for Peace and Security at the African Union, formerly Organisation of the African Unity, where he held various positions notably as Assistant Secretary-General for Political Affairs.