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Summary Report

Second Regional Senior Course for the Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE)

**to the address of Member States of the Economic
Community of Central African States (ECCAS)**

Libreville, Gabon, 28-31 March 2022



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Note from the Course Directors

The Course Directors would like to thank all participants and resource persons for their invaluable contributions to this interactive course. However, they take full responsibility for any shortcomings and for transcribing the work in this report.

Any questions on the Course should be addressed to the Co-Directors:

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I. Introduction

In 2019, the African Union's African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT), based in Algiers, and the Peace and Human Rights Division (PHRD) of the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) launched a **Joint Training Programme for the Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE)** for African Union Member States.

Concerned about the proliferation of extremely violent armed groups, affected States have responded primarily in a security and military manner over the past decade. Those that have been spared so far but are still worried about this threat are also considering the option of an armed response as a priority. **This programme therefore seeks to incorporate these traditional responses into a comprehensive approach that takes into account "human" security**, i.e. all the policies and decisions that enable societies and individuals to live in harmony, using humankind as the reference point for any security solution and placing their security at the centre of all concerns. The main objective of this joint training programme is to envisage a peaceful future for each society through a dialogue and sharing process that will help to gradually iron out the current political rifts. To this end, it is crucial to convene all the components of society (public or private) of a State or region to identify both the causes of extreme violence, which can vary enormously from one place or country to another, and the most appropriate tools to prevent it.

This joint training programme, which comprises a series of regional and national courses, is designed to help build a violence prevention response and to enhance the capacity of senior governmental and civilian officials to effectively integrate this approach into their respective activities and responsibilities.

II. Scope, methodology, resources and organizers

As part of this programme, the **Second Regional Senior Course for PVE for Member States of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)** was organised in Libreville, Gabon, from 28 to 31 March 2022.

About fifty high-level personalities from eight countries in the region participated, along with a dozen specialists, most of them from the African continent. High-level government officials, representatives of the defence and security forces (DSF), politicians, community leaders and local elected representatives, as well as members of civil society, were invited to take part in the course.

This regional course was a sequel to a pilot course conducted from 6 to 9 August 2019 in Yaounde. This report deliberately leaves out details about the scope (concept, issues and objectives), methodology, resources and course organizers, as these elements were presented in full in the 2019 report, and are recurrent throughout the framework programme. The 2019 report is available in English and French on the African Union website.¹

This Second Regional Senior Course for Central Africa consisted of **22 modules**, all of which involved specific presentations and discussions, followed by in-depth exchanges in working groups. These allowed participants to experience, through discussions and practical exercises,

¹ Rapport : https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/39274-doc-rapport_synthese_fr.pdf ; Report: https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/39274-doc-summary_report_1.pdf

the full scope, complexity and importance of the **prevention approach**. These modules were divided into **four main chapters**: understanding drivers of VE (violent extremism), PVE strength and tools, the roles that each actor in society is called upon to play in its own space, and some specific challenges (such as education and environmental governance).

III. PVE topics

III. 1 Understanding drivers of VE

It was observed that violent extremism is constantly on the rise and is becoming more widespread geographically, and that the groups are growing in number and undergoing major demographic changes, with women and young people increasingly playing more prominent roles. The rising complexity of the modus operandi of these groups was also noted.

Five speakers examined the reality of extreme violence from specific standpoints: historical, sociological, political, economic and cultural. Their contributions particularly underscored the complexity of the phenomenon, the various causes of violence, the way it is used in different places, the changing composition of armed groups, the many and varied reactions of local populations to this violence, and the varying pace of State responses.

Participants agreed on the need to **better comprehend the realities of extreme violence** as increasingly illustrated by the work of researchers. They stressed the importance **of supporting this research**, which is often considered secondary and yet absolutely essential for making the right decisions in every conflict situation. However, researchers face many challenges: the lack of funding, difficulty in collecting data, limited access to official data, data security, objectivity, neutrality, and sometimes isolation and the distrust of researchers by the DSF and decision-makers. All these challenges must be addressed, coupled with the insufficient involvement of local researchers and the power of foreign research structures.

Research is particularly useful in understanding how armed groups (as well as various other violent players) enter and use **latent or poorly resolved conflicts**, how their power is used by different political, economic or ideological structures, some of which are well established in the States concerned, what their links are with **mafia and trafficking networks** (and sometimes even with international criminal groups), or how these groups use weak security arrangements and **porous borders** in their regional movements.

Research has also revealed that **the appeal of armed groups** is due to a number of factors, notably poor administrative management of the territories (the region's marginalization and refusal to decentralize), the weakness of the States themselves, in which the populations often no longer have confidence, the lack of participation of citizens in decisions that concern them, numerous inequalities between elites and populations, use of the army in every difficult moment in the life of States on the subcontinent, military operations that are too often disrespectful of the needs and expectations of the populations, and inter-community and inter-generational conflicts. Although it has been demonstrated that the causes of VE can be endogenous or exogenous (examples abound of external interventions or support for violent armed groups), it was also rightly pointed out that not all radicalizations should be considered negative (**e.g. Ghandi or Mandela**), especially when it challenges an established order that does not meet the fundamental needs of the population.

The **economic causes** of VE were widely discussed. Recurrent poverty, lack of prospects for young people, inequalities between citizens, limited economic resilience of populations, stranglehold on natural resources, land expropriation, corruption, unmet social expectations, are the most frequently cited reasons. The economic disparity between areas within a country can also lead to violent resentment. In addition, armed groups have in many instances proved to be better managers of local economic activities than the State in the areas they control. This has been acknowledged by the population.

As for **the more direct incentives that drive young people to join VE groups**, it was pointed out that this does not happen overnight. There is a time lag between attraction and departure (hence it is also possible to work on prevention). At the individual level, pull factors may include revenge, trauma arising from poor behaviour by public servants or uniformed services, greed, membership of a supportive and dynamic group, religious, family or ethnic appeal or sheer coercion. The need for protection and the search for justice and equity have also been cited as factors that motivate young people to join violent groups. Understanding the motivations for joining also means being able to consider the return, resettlement and possible participation of returnees in PVE efforts.

III. 2 PVE strength and tools

The UN Counter-Terrorism Strategy (2006) and the UN SG's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (2016) are the international benchmarks of the prevention approach. It is these texts and their recommendations that have served as the backbone of all the national and regional PVE strategies which have been approved ever since by States. However, while these strategies exist on paper, this PVE governance does not seem to have been truly integrated, seven years on, into public policies and leaders' narratives. Yet VE has not dissipated since then. Far from it, violence is currently spreading well beyond the scope of VE. Indeed, what we seem to be witnessing is a contagious expansion of violence, and the population is the first victim.

From that point on, course participants fully agreed on **the importance of human security**: it is all about our life, it is about life in society, it is about peace, which is built every day for life is a process. **PVE is a process**. It is not made up of distant concepts or objectives: each of us has to understand how to act here and now. It is the safety of our daily life and that of tomorrow that are at stake. This notion of human security has evolved over time: today it encompasses all aspects of social life, all our thoughts on "how to live together". Yet wars continue, collective security is often not ensured and even the role of the United Nations peace operations in Central Africa is questioned. This PVE approach is therefore universal because even without any means of defence against violence, populations must find solutions to their survival. It is based on this view that **it is possible to transcend mere rhetoric and make the PVE a way of life**. Nevertheless, it is necessary to prove its relevance and the soundness of the policies that underpin it.

The PVE hinges fundamentally on **the power of dialogue**, whether this takes place in the family, at school, within the DSF, in the professional environment, between the DSF and the population or with extremist groups. Even though we are aware of this fact, this natural human readiness to communicate is institutionally limited by social and political structures. "All too often, there is a total disconnect between the leaders and the grassroots. They do not speak to each other", was it said. This was illustrated by numerous practical examples from the everyday experiences of the participants. Dialogue is an integral part of the Course methodology. It was

given pride of place, not only among the participants, but also in the narratives of the various dialogues that enabled peace to be restored. A detailed analysis of the successive dialogues in the CAR was actually presented during the Course. This is an exemplary case where periods of dialogue (twelve in all since 1960) have followed periods of violence but where the enthusiasm of those who believe in peace has never waned.

III. 3 The role of some actors of the society in the PVE

As key actors in the PVE, **communities** play a pivotal role in prevention. In many places, surviving violence is a daily community endeavour. The sense of belonging to a social group that protects the individual is crucial reassurance. It provides hope and creativity. The number of people joining armed groups is indicative of the strength or absence of this feeling, a measure of the value of the social contract between the individual and the community and between the community and the State. Hence the importance of investing massively and at all levels in the life of communities and of fostering the spirit and policies of decentralization at the national level. **Political, social and religious leaders** are fundamental to community cohesion. Living together is made a lot easier when they perform the role of rallying people together. When they shirk their responsibilities or disappear from a region that has turned violent and dangerous, they have failed in their duties. The same is true when they place their personal interests above those of the people or when they do not maintain a balance between the interests of the central power and those of their community.

No quantity of speakers was enough to emphasize **the role women** play in the PVE. All too often left out of the decisions that directly affect them, they are often forced to navigate difficult and complicated paths in order to be effective. The recognition of gender equality in decisions, discussions and participation in the social life of the country is one of the opportunities provided by the PVE. This affects the highest level of society (parliament, DSF, civil society, media, education) where women have been able to show their abilities and diversity. Women's associations are particularly well versed in this preventive work. It is therefore important to support them, to train them in PVE and to involve men in such training. Women's difficulties in speaking in public can also be overcome through information, education and the use of the media. It is all about their self-confidence. Women are human beings and can assert themselves when they are ready to do so. "One is not born a woman, one becomes one", "Elite women, take care of rural women", it was mentioned repeatedly.

In wartime, but above all in peacetime, **the defence and security forces (DSF)** are instrumental in providing concrete and immediate protection to the population. To this end, the DSF must be able to represent a State that is both purposeful and able to build relationships of trust and respect with the communities. This is the essence of the Army-Nation relationship. However, all too often, the presence and actions of the DSF, through their abuses and excesses, increase the risk of young people joining armed groups and trigger cycles of violence that the civil-military activities of the DSF find it impossible to halt. More than ever before, this situation urgently warrants the DSF to embark on implementing PVE programmes with the local population. **Engagement** with all local actors, PVE **training** for field officers and their commanders, **political support** from local and national officials, administrators and the media, are essential requirements that have been too slow to be integrated into DSF operations. Contrary to perceptions, it was acknowledged that when the DSF are open to the needs of the population, when they clearly explain the purposes of its presence and integrate PVE principles into their deployment, they gain civilian support and significantly mitigate the risks

themselves face while helping to stem the flow of young people towards extremist movements. This is a **much-needed factor of trust and respect**, which is all too rare.

Discussions revolved around the issue of the **establishment of militias**. Advocates argued that their creation was justified under certain conditions: rigorous supervision, a temporary structure, clear and unique objectives for the protection of the population, full accountability and a code of conduct. For their part, opponents demonstrated that deviant individuals could easily manipulate these groups, starting with sponsors of all kinds (politicians, traffickers, tribal leaders, etc.), and that the self-defence groups were not different from extremist groups because of the violence that characterised them, causing more problems than they solved, due mainly to the associated risks of communalism and the delicate issue of their disarmament and reintegration. The question that arose during the course was: in what way can they be actors in the PVE?

As for the **actors in the justice system**, it was underscored that their role in the PVE was vital given that they must be rigorous (no room for complacency, impunity, corruption or subservience to power) and make wise judgements. They play a key role in relieving States of tension that could trigger off departures into groups and in ensuring respect for the rule of law, a duty it is incumbent on them to perform as guarantors.

Young people were not left out of the Course. They are at the very core of the issue of VE and its prevention because they are the primary victims of violence. They are also caught up in intergenerational conflicts as well as issues relating to their national identity and their future. Many youth associations show that many young people are involved in society through cultural, civic, economic or political activities. These are forefront PVE actors. They must be able to participate actively in decision-making circles because they are now fully mature enough to be integrated into them, even if social habits may be slow to change.

Discussions on the role of the **media** in PVE were very lively: are they in a position to broadcast alternative content to violence when it comes to fighting? Do they have permission to do so? What are the policies of media owners, both public and private? How should social media be regulated? Should it be? How should community media be used? Once again, there is a lot of grey area in the answers. But given the penetration of radio and social media in rural areas, especially those affected by EV, it is important for the media to have an ethical framework that can be developed by their hosts or, why not, by a yet-to-be established African media authority. Furthermore, it was stressed that independent media, which suffer from recurrent financial precariousness, must receive support to ensure that prevention is well understood.

III. 4 Education and environmental governance, major drivers of the PVE

As we know, **education** is instrumental in pacifying morals and bringing about social integration. However, the public authorities and the institutions responsible for it do not invest enough in education, nor in the informal places of socialization, starting with the family. It is still too elitist, sclerotic and oriented towards objectives that do not reflect current realities. It should be based on **"life skills rather than mere knowledge"** and should strengthen the spirit of otherness. The role of the family, as the central focus of education, needs to be revalued. **The teaching of the cardinal values of peace and violence prevention, such as dialogue, respect for others and the handling of differences, must start and be practised within the family, and should also form the core of formal education programmes.** Instilling a spirit of public

welfare, citizenship and responsibility (e.g. on social networks) is part of an approach that is fully integrated into the PVE.

Last but not least, the **role of environmental governance** was acknowledged as a central component of the PVE. Africa is teeming with raw materials that the whole world is dependent on. Without doubt, their presence has encouraged the establishment of extremist groups that exploit the tensions between the central state and the outlying areas, tensions caused by the plundering of land which has been managed for centuries by the population, and reactions to authoritarian and non-inclusive land management (privatized resources). VE groups are often perceived by the populations as objective allies rather than predators, and as those who know how to properly distribute the proceeds from natural resources. Trafficking in these resources and poaching have certainly increased, but to the benefit of the populations as well. The areas where VE groups settle are usually the richest in resources (and always the poorest!), with a focus on gold. How can these issues be taken into account by the PVE? First of all, by holding a dialogue with the States on their land policies, with the multinationals on the respect of the needs of the local populations, with politicians on urgent decentralization and on the tax policy that penalizes the small communes, generally those occupied by violent extremists, and by harmonizing the economic policies between the States and integrated border management.

To end without finishing, to finish without concluding...

IV. Conclusion

The Course was dense and keenly followed. Everyone went home with the PVE package of their choice. There is no doubt that once again, the community of people who understand the importance of PVE and its implementation in public, professional and personal policies has grown to include an impressive number of high-level officials from the Central African region. These are all people with whom sharing, and dialogue will continue. They have helped to **cement this community** and to share the unique experience of the Libreville meeting with future course participants.

Annexe 1 – Références utiles

- **Plan d'action du Secrétaire général des Nations Unies pour la prévention de l'extrémisme violent (24 décembre 2015) / Plan of Action of the United Nations Secretary-General to Prevent Violent Extremism (24 December 2015)**
Français : http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674&referer=/english/&Lang=F
English: http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/70/674
- **1999 Convention de l'OUA sur la Prévention et la Lutte contre le Terrorisme / OAU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism /**
Français : <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/algiers-convention-terrorism-fr.pdf>
English: <https://caert.org.dz/official-documents/conventions/convention-terrorism.pdf>
- **2002 UA Plan d'action pour la prévention et la lutte contre le terrorisme / AU Plan of Action on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism**
Français : https://www.caert.org.dz/fr/AU-official-documents/plan_action_fr.pdf
English: <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/au-anti-terrorism-plan-of-action.pdf>
- **2004 Protocole à la Convention de l'OUA sur la prévention et la lutte contre le terrorisme / Protocol to the 1999 AU Convention on the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism**
Français : <http://www.peaceau.org/uploads/protocole-lutte-contre-terrorisme-fr.pdf>
English: https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/7787-treaty-0030_-_protocol_to_the_oau_convention_on_the_prevention_and_combating_of_terrorism_e.pdf
- **2014 Charte africaine des valeurs et des principes de la décentralisation, de la gouvernance locale et du développement local / African Charter on the Values and Principles of Decentralisation, Local Governance and Local Development**
Français : https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36387-treaty-0049_-_african_charter_on_the_values_and_principles_of_decentralisation_local_governance_and_local_development_f.pdf
English: https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36387-treaty-0049_-_african_charter_on_the_values_and_principles_of_decentralisation_local_governance_and_local_development_e.pdf
- **2014 Rapport de la Présidence de la Commission sur le terrorisme et l'extrémisme violent en Afrique / Report of the Chairperson of the Commission on Terrorism and Violent Extremism in Africa**
Français : https://au.int/sites/default/files/speeches/25397-sp-cps.455.rpt_terrorisme.nairobi.2-09-2014-2-0.pdf
English: https://au.int/sites/default/files/speeches/25397-sp-psc-rpt-terrorism-nairobi-2-09-2014-pdf_0.pdf
- **Plan d'action de politique étrangère pour la prévention de l'extrémisme violent du Département fédéral des affaires étrangères (DFAE) de Suisse (avril 2016) / Switzerland's Foreign Policy Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism (April 2016)**
Français : https://www.eda.admin.ch/dam/eda/fr/documents/publications/SchweizerischeAussenpolitik/Aussenpolitischer-Aktionsplan-PVE160404_FR.pdf
English: <http://www.news.admin.ch/NSBSubscriber/message/attachments/43587.pdf>

Annex 2: About the partners

The African Union, its benchmark and the ACSRT

The African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT) was established as a structure of the African Union Commission, in accordance with the provisions of Section H, paragraphs 19 to 21 of the AU Plan of Action for the Prevention and Combating of Terrorism in Africa (2002). The objectives set at the time of its establishment were to assist African countries in building and strengthening their capacity to prevent and combat terrorism, as well as to act as a watchdog and warning tool and to complement international action by strengthening cooperation among African countries in these areas. Subsequent decisions of AU political bodies expanded this mandate to include countering and preventing violent extremism.

The AU Commission, through the ACSRT, seeks to:

- strengthen the capacity of States to prevent and combat terrorism and violent extremism, (strategies and AOPs, training, advice...);
- promote better institutional interaction and coordination at national and regional levels and better development of the Early Warning Mechanism;
- work towards improving the policy and legal framework for preventing and combating terrorism and violent extremism;
- conduct and promote research on terrorism and violent extremism issues.

In line with the ACSRT's mandate, this Course promotes a multidimensional approach, based on the concept of "Human Security", to eradicate VE and terrorism in the Member States of the African Union.

The PVE programme of the Swiss FDFA

Following the adoption of the United Nations Plan of Action for the Prevention of Violent Extremism (2016), the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) made this topic a priority (*). The Peace and Human Rights Division (PHRD) is the FDFA's centre of competence for implementing its priorities in the areas of peace and human security.

As early as 2016, it launched a PVE programme, which has since been carrying out a range of advocacy, dialogue and training activities for this prevention approach that focuses on the causes of violence and possible alternatives. It also mobilizes its experts to conduct field activities with its partners.

The initiative includes about thirty meetings, which brought together some 2000 personalities from various professional backgrounds in North, West and Central Africa.

The aim is to provide an informal space for multi-stakeholder dialogue on the prevention approach, to highlight and strengthen positive initiatives that represent concrete alternatives to EV, and to contribute to the capacity building of PVE stakeholders in their functions and in their communities.

The ACSRT of the African Union is a partner of the initiative and has joined forces with the Swiss FDFA to launch this PVE training framework programme.

(* The Swiss FDFA adopted a Foreign Policy Action Plan for the Prevention of Violent Extremism in April 2016 - see reference in Annex 1)