Global Counterterrorism Forum
Workshop on Countering Violent Extremism in West Africa and the Sahel
Co-hosted by Burkina Faso and Denmark
Ouagadougou, 18-19 April 2013

CO-CHAIR'S SUMMARY

On 18-19 April, 2013 West African and Sahel countries, Member States of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), regional and international organisations, representatives of civil society, academia and the GCTF Hedayah International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism in Abu Dhabi came together in Ouagadougou under the auspices of GCTF for a workshop co-chaired by Burkina Faso and Denmark. The workshop aimed to better understand the sources and drivers of violent extremism in the region and to discuss concrete ways of addressing the issue, which is of growing concern for the development and security of countries of the region and beyond.

The discussions highlighted the critical value of positive engagement between governments, civil society and local communities, in identifying and preventing violent extremism, addressing the conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and enhancing human security and regional stability. The workshop was conducted in French and English under the Chatham House rule.

Workshop participants underscored the importance of mutual trust – between governments and communities and also among communities themselves –as essential preconditions for strengthening the state-society relationship and the resilience of communities confronted with security challenges, including violent extremism. The discussions also demonstrated the importance of West Africa and the Sahel's vibrant network of civil society organizations as essential partners in advancing the common goal of overcoming terrorism and other sources of violence and insecurity that threaten the sustainable development of communities in the region.

We heard about a number of ongoing programs, some of which are directly aimed at addressing violent ideologies and groups. These programs may be more specifically labeled as "CVE." But we also heard about the many programs, including educational services, which contribute to addressing violence extremism though they may have other primary goals. Such programs may be focused on conflict transformation, peacebuilding or development, but they contribute to addressing the

drivers of violent extremism. Recognizing the nexus between security and development, participants highlighted the importance of a multi-layered and multi-stakeholder approach to CVE that builds on good practices developed over decades in these development and security fields, and leverages existing expertise in the region.

Four broad thematic areas were reflected throughout the discussions:

1. Conflict transformation
    a. Prolonged conflicts have been found to be an important driver of violent extremism.
    b. At the local level, community leaders, religious leaders, local governments, and civil society groups have been essential to conflict prevention, resolution and post-conflict peacebuilding efforts. The need to empower such groups and focus on local actors who already enjoy the confidence of the local population was reiterated by a number of participants.
    c. Experience from the region suggests that the role of religion and the potential positive impact of inter-religious dialogue should be considered in designing CVE interventions.
    d. Regional bodies have also played an important role in addressing conflict and mitigating its effects, and in developing early warning mechanisms like ECOWARN.
    e. At the international level, the humanitarian aid, development support and technical assistance provided by bodies like the United Nations were deemed important to addressing the conditions conducive to violence.
    f. The need to ensure state presence in vulnerable zones beyond the security and defense forces was highlighted in improving and enhancing the state/citizen rapport.
    g. The role of the media, including internet-based sources, was a recurrent theme. Participants noted that media could play a negative role when poor reporting can incite violence or prompt social division and discord. On the other hand, the media could play a critical role in providing a diversity of information and narratives that challenge extremist messages.
    h. The idea of improving media standards, incentives for the development of new and varied channels, and of developing credible counter-narratives was highlighted across several sessions.

2. Strengthening law enforcement, criminal justice and security sector actors
    a. Participants highlighted the importance of restoring civic trust in state institutions and of improving citizens' experience of the state, which in many cases was shaped by negative interaction at the hands of law enforcement officials.

b. Disillusionment with criminal justice and judicial processes was also highlighted as contributing to the appeal of some extremist groups. Indeed, if such groups provide even a rudimentary rule of law, they can appeal to communities which have not had any.

c. The idea of establishing local security committees, in particular in border regions, was raised. These committees could bring together civil society actors, government representatives and security actors. They could serve as a potentially valuable model for bringing key stakeholders together.

d. Attention was drawn to the need of including CVE awareness modules in training curriculum for law enforcement officials, prison staff, prosecutors and judges (in fact the entire chain of justice). Such modules should also include material pertaining to human rights and the rule of law.

e. At the regional and international level, organizations such as the African Union, ECOWAS, the UN, the EU and the GCTF were cited as important sources of support and technical assistance in strengthening the capacities of security, criminal justice and judicial actors, and strengthening mechanisms like regional early warning systems.

3. <u>The role of civil society</u>

a. Workshop participants reiterated the critical role of civil society and the importance of empowering them to be partners in strengthening civic engagement, supporting service delivery and mitigating conflict.

b. The increasingly active role of women in addressing violence and conflict was highlighted by participants. The importance of empowering and enhancing the capacities of women's groups to address threats related to violent extremism was underscored.

c. At the regional and international level, cross-regional interactions of civil society groups could provide important opportunities for an exchange of expertise, good practices and lessons learned, as well as support and guidance, particularly across regions facing a similar combination of structural and proximate challenges.

d. Participants also noted the importance of creating an enabling environment for civil society organizations to operate and succeed, and of ensuring that non-profit organizations can be protected from exploitation by extremist groups. Nonprofit groups, it was noted, also must be provided training and capacity to meet the requirements of national and international partners.

4. <u>Identifying and preventing violent extremism</u>

a. Speakers recognized the importance of mapping ongoing CVE initiatives that could contribute to identifying and preventing violent extremism. CVE programs need not start from scratch but could build on existing programs where relevant.

b. The critical importance of youth was underscored throughout the sessions, with an emphasis on improving education (both access to education and the quality of education) as well as employment opportunities for the masses of discontented and frustrated youth who might become susceptible to recruitment by extremist groups.

c. The complex development and security challenges in West Africa and the Sahel highlight the importance of addressing both structural and ideological drivers of violence – though this could be achieved through a mix of "CVE-specific" and "CVE-relevant" programming.

In addition, the ideas shared at the workshop might contribute to programming within the framework for instance of the newly established GCTF Hedayah International Center of Excellence for Countering Violent Extremism in Abu Dhabi. The Center was seen as a potentially important partner and platform for ongoing work on CVE in general including in the Sahel and West Africa.

Next steps
As an immediate next step the co-chairs will produce a draft Action Agenda in French and English which will outline in greater detail the findings of the workshop and set out a series of concrete recommendations to relevant actors at the national, regional, and international levels. The Action Agenda is intended to provide a roadmap for the delivery of innovative, practical and tailored community engagement initiatives in West Africa and the Sahel. This Action Agenda will be designed to empower local communities, civil society organizations, and government officials to respond to the growing threat of violent extremism, particularly since it can compound many of the region's existing challenges. The draft Action Agenda will be shared with workshop participants who wish to provide feedback.

The findings will also form part of the basis of the Danish Sahel Initiative which is to be presented in the autumn of 2013 and which will include actionable ideas of intervention in the framework of the following three broader areas: Mediation & Reconciliation, Security Sector Reform, and Countering Violent Extremism (CVE). In this regard the Government of Denmark will make available over the next five years the amount of 22 million USD. In this process the co-chairs will continue to draw on the expertise of the workshop participants.

The participants expressed support for the intention of the co-chairs to bring forward, as a matter of priority, a road-map to promote the workshop findings and recommendations and ensure they

inform the deliberations of the international community at the highest political levels. In this regard the co-chairs, Burkina Faso and Denmark, intend to use international bodies such as the Global Counterterrorism Forum, the United Nations, the European Union, ECOWAS and the African Union as vehicles for promoting this objective. This could include the following package of steps:

- The co-chairs intend to present the outcome of the workshop at the next meeting of the Global Counterterrorism Forum Sahel Working Group and seek additional support from donors.
- The co-chairs intend to present the outcome of the workshop to the highest political level including, inter alia, at the next Ministerial Plenary of the Global Counterterrorism Forum and meetings of the United Nations in New York.