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Report of the Secretary-General

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I. Introduction

1. The General Assembly has asked me to continue to provide assistance to countries members of the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa and to submit to it a report on the implementation of General Assembly resolution 52/39 B of 9 December 1997. This report focuses on the Committee's activities since 20 August 1997, when the Secretary-General submitted his previous report (A/52/293) to the General Assembly, at its fifty-second session.

2. Over the reporting period I have been particularly encouraged by the firm commitment of the Central African countries, which have continued to work towards achievement of the Committee's goals in order to strengthen their cooperation in establishing a climate of peace, stability and prosperity in their subregion. In addition to these contacts, the Committee's Bureau has met with me several times in order to inform me of progress in the implementation of the Committee's programme of activities and of developments in the political situation in Central Africa.

3. In that regard, on 2 October 1997 I held a lengthy meeting with a ministerial delegation of the Committee's Bureau headed by its President, the Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Gabon, and also comprising his colleagues from Burundi and Chad. At this working meeting the members of the Bureau affirmed their commitment to the Committee as the only existing mechanism for political dialogue at the level of the Central African subregion.

4. The Committee's Bureau also requested continued United Nations assistance in implementing the confidence-building measures adopted by the Committee to strengthen subregional capacities for peacekeeping, post-conflict peace-building, good governance and combating the illicit traffic in arms and drugs, and to support the ongoing process of democratization in the Central African subregion.

5. On 24 June 1998, I held a working meeting with the Minister of Defence of Gabon, who headed a Committee Bureau delegation requesting United Nations support for a Committee proposal to organize joint military exercises aimed at increasing the capacity of countries members of the Committee to participate in peacekeeping operations. At that meeting, the Bureau again requested Secretariat support in carrying out its varied programme of activities, which involved, *inter alia*, political and security-related matters, including issues related to democracy, human rights and good governance.

6. During the visit, the Minister of Gabon transmitted to me a personal message from His Excellency El Hadj Omar Bongo, President of the Gabonese Republic. In that message, President Bongo, whose country holds the Chairmanship of the Committee, reiterated his country's commitment to supporting the activities of the Committee, which it considers to be a valuable instrument for political consultation and cooperation in the field of security, both between member States of the Committee and between the Committee and the United Nations. I am pleased that many of the Committee's projects have been carried out over the reporting period.

7. From 28 to 30 April 1998, the countries members of the Committee held an important joint Meeting of Ministers of Defence and of the Interior in Libreville, Gabon, at which they considered in detail the security situation in the Central African subregion and the means of achieving peace, disarmament and sustainable development. The Ministers stressed the importance of combating the illicit circulation of arms and drugs, two scourges which pose a serious threat to subregional peace and security. From 18 to 22 May 1998, a Subregional Conference on Democratic Institutions and Peace in Central Africa was held in Bata, Equatorial Guinea. At that conference, member States reiterated their commitment to promoting participatory systems of Government and respect for the rule of law, human rights and human dignity as a means of helping to prevent conflict in the subregion.

8. With the support of the Group of States interested in the practical disarmament measures established in implementation of paragraph 4 of General Assembly resolution 52/38 G of 9 December 1997, the Advisory Committee organized a training-of-trainers seminar on peace-building through practical disarmament measures for high-level Central African civilian and military officials at Yaoundé, Cameroon.

9. In a subregion still subject to violent political change, I am convinced of the need to promote confidence-building measures, strengthen ongoing democratization efforts and promote training programmes and activities aimed at peace-building through demining campaigns, demobilization, disarmament and reintegration of former combatants into civilian life.

II. Meetings held by the Committee in 1998

A. Joint Meeting of Ministers of Defence and of the Interior

10. The Ministers of Defence and of the Interior of the countries members of the Committee met jointly for the first time in Libreville, Gabon, from 28 to 30 April 1998 to discuss the security questions currently facing their respective countries and to adopt common strategies to combat the illicit traffic in arms and drugs, scourges which threaten the peace and stability of their subregion.

11. In view of the cross-border nature of the many threats to subregional peace and security, the Ministers unanimously acknowledged that only increased cooperation between their States at the highest political level could facilitate the development and implementation of effective strategies to promote a climate of increased security in Central Africa.

12. In that regard, they adopted unanimously a proposal for the creation of a political body at the level of heads of State and government entitled "Supreme Council for the Promotion of Peace and the Prevention, Management and Resolution of Armed Conflict in Central Africa", included in the appendix to annex I to document A/53/258.

13. In that connection, the Ministers also agreed to take effective measures to eliminate the uncontrolled proliferation of arms and drugs in their subregion (see document A/53/258, annex I, section E).

14. Furthermore, I welcome the Ministers' favourable reception of the recommendations on efforts to contain arms proliferation contained in paragraphs 27 and 28 of my report of 13 April 1998 entitled "The causes of conflict and the promotion of durable peace and sustainable development in Africa" (A/52/871). In this regard, I support the Ministers' commitment to strengthen and develop a genuine climate of trust within the Committee and between its countries members as a means of lessening mistrust and promoting a reduction in military spending.

15. In their discussions, the Ministers also reaffirmed their common will to prevent more effectively the outbreak of additional armed conflicts in their subregion and reiterated the need to establish as quickly as possible an early warning mechanism which would monitor the security, political, diplomatic, economic and social, and military and strategic situation, thereby contributing to improved prevention of armed conflict in Central Africa.

16. I note with satisfaction that this proposal has the support of both the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the United States Government, which have decided to provide the Committee with the sum of US\$ 200,000 towards the establishment of the early warning mechanism. I welcome this decision and support the appeal to other donors made by countries members of the Committee for financial contributions for implementation of this project. The Government of Gabon, the host country, has in turn taken practical measures to provide the Committee with logistical facilities at the local level.

17. In the area of peacekeeping, several countries members of the Committee have established specialized peacekeeping units in their armed forces in order to participate more actively in peacekeeping operations carried out under the auspices of the United Nations and OAU. In order to train these units for future missions, the countries members of the Committee have agreed to organize joint military exercises in connection with mock peacekeeping operations, scheduled to be held in south-western Gabon in 1999.

18. I commend the Government of Gabon on having facilitated the meeting of Chiefs of Staff and the work of experts from the Central African subregion, which met on 14 and 15 May and in June 1998, respectively, in order to finalize plans for the joint military exercises in connection with peacekeeping operations.

B. Subregional Conference on Democratic Institutions and Peace in Central Africa

19. In accordance with the decision taken by the heads of State and Government of the countries members of the Committee at their summit in Brazzaville, the Congo, on 2 and 3 December 1996, the Committee held a Subregional Conference on Democratic Institutions and Peace in Central Africa in Bata, Equatorial Guinea, from 18 to 22 May 1998. I assured the Committee of United Nations support for this initiative, which has received funding from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

20. It is particularly encouraging to note that despite the persistence of political tension and armed conflict in their subregion, the countries members of the Committee have maintained their commitment to the continued strengthening and promotion of democracy. I am convinced that the political dialogue initiated in Central Africa as a result of this conference will help to promote the establishment of democratic governments in this turbulent subregion. The participation in the conference of Ministers and

representatives of opposition parties, senior officers, representatives of the security forces and of civil society, seated side by side, in itself constitutes a novel and encouraging development.

21. I strongly encourage all countries members of the Committee to implement the principles and measures contained in the Bata Declaration, which they adopted unanimously, in order to promote lasting democracy, peace and development in Central Africa (see document A/53/258, annex II, appendix I).

22. I particularly appreciate these countries' firm condemnation of the use of armed force as a means of winning or retaining political power.

23. I greatly welcome the recommendation that a subregional parliament should be established in order to promote dialogue between the countries members of the Committee and to develop democratic values and the democratic experiment throughout Central Africa.

24. It is encouraging to note that the countries members of the Committee have recognized the vital role of organizations of civil society and, in particular, of women's organizations, in the peace processes initiated in Central Africa. Their decision to allocate funding to these organizations in order to strengthen their activities should be supported.

25. Furthermore, I urge these countries to implement as quickly as possible the training programmes which they have decided to establish in order to make media professionals more aware of the need to follow the code of ethics of their profession and of their responsibility to promote a culture of peace and democratic principles in the Central African subregion.

C. Subregional training-of-trainers seminar on peace-building through practical disarmament measures

26. The resolution of numerous armed conflicts and the restructuring of national armies in several Central African countries has resulted in a new category of citizens: former combatants.

27. Their presence, unparalleled in society, together with the quantity of weapons and ammunition in circulation post-conflict, is currently one of the primary threats to the internal security of States and to the overall stability of the Central African subregion. It is increasingly clear that unless countries which have just emerged from conflict situations

take appropriate measures, peace will remain fragile and endangered.

28. I therefore welcome the holding of the first subregional training-of-trainers seminar on peace-building through practical disarmament measures at Yaoundé, Cameroon, from 27 to 31 July 1998. It is now important for the countries members of the Committee to cooperate in the development of programmes for demobilization, disarmament and the reintegration of former combatants into civilian life.

29. I note with satisfaction that this seminar is the first project carried out by the group of States interested in practical disarmament measures. I congratulate all of the countries which, through their generous financial contributions, made possible the practical organization of this seminar. In this respect, I encourage the group of States interested in practical disarmament measures to continue their support for the training initiatives and peace-building programmes undertaken by the countries members of the Committee in order to ensure follow-up to the Yaoundé seminar.

III. Programme of activities for 1998–1999

30. During the three meetings which they held in 1998, the countries members of the Committee agreed to undertake a number of activities and to complete the implementation of several projects launched at previous meetings (see document A/52/293). During the period 1998–1999, the Committee's programmes and activities will, as a priority, focus on:

(a) Organizing joint military exercises to strengthen the capacity of the countries of the Central African subregion to participate in peacekeeping operations;

(b) Supporting peace-building activities through training programmes and demining campaigns, demobilization, disarmament and reintegration of former combatants into civilian life;

(c) Establishing and ensuring the functioning of an early warning mechanism for Central Africa, based in Libreville, Gabon;

(d) Establishing a subregional parliament as an instrument for the promotion of democratic values and the democratic experiment in Central Africa;

(e) Organizing a subregional seminar to train press professionals in the code of ethics of the communications profession as a means of promoting the ideals and culture of peace.

IV. Administrative and financial aspects

31. The reinstatement of the two annual ministerial meetings of the Committee, funded from the regular budget, makes it possible to better implement the Committee's programme of work.

32. However, implementation of the Committee's other activities, which are not covered by the regular budget, will require additional financial support.

33. To that end, I note that a Trust Fund open to voluntary contributions from Member States and governmental and non-governmental organizations was established in the Secretariat in 1996 by the Secretary-General, at the request of the General Assembly, to facilitate financing of the programme of activities of the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa.

V. Conclusions and observations

34. Over the reporting period, the countries of Central Africa, within the framework of the activities of the United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa, have again shown their determination to confront together the many challenges to peace, security, disarmament and development in their respective countries and in their subregion as a whole.

35. The important recommendations and measures which they have adopted during their deliberations reflect the Central African peoples' deep desire to live in peace and develop the many aspects of their economic potential. In today's world, to assist in implementing the confidence-building measures decided upon by the countries members of the Committee is to contribute effectively to efforts aimed at restoring and building peace in Central Africa.

36. It is, therefore, essential for the countries members of the Committee to implement the confidence-building measures which they have already adopted. To that end, I strongly urge countries which have not yet done so to sign the Non-Aggression Pact adopted by the Committee, and I invite all countries members to ratify it as quickly as possible. I remain convinced that this act of transparency will help to lessen mistrust and to reduce the tensions which may give rise to conflict between States.

37. It is more important than ever to increase efforts to resolve peacefully the many disputes which continue to trouble the Central African subregion and to strengthen

peace-building endeavours in countries just emerging from conflict situations.

38. Since the establishment of the Committee in 1992, the General Assembly's constant support for implementation of its activities has led to strengthened cooperation for peace and security between Central African countries. However, much remains to be done if the conditions for lasting peace, disarmament and development are to be established. I therefore emphasize the need to strengthen this support in order to increase the likelihood of promoting and building peace in Central Africa, one of the most fragile subregions of the African continent.

39. The United Nations Standing Advisory Committee on Security Questions in Central Africa provides the international community and the countries of Central Africa with an appropriate mechanism for the development and strengthening of a genuine partnership for peace, security, disarmament and development. Therefore, I again appeal to Member States, and to the international community as a whole, to contribute generously to the United Nations Trust Fund established to facilitate the effective implementation of the Committee's programme of work.