Centre for Democracy & Development
Centre pour la democratie et le development

WEST AFRICA
SECURITY TRACKER

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary

January 2025 witnessed a sharp escalation in security challenges across West Africa, with insurgency, terrorism, and inter-communal violence reaching critical levels. The month was marked by a high concentration of violent attacks, predominantly in Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria, and Benin, which collectively accounted for nearly 96.8% of the conflict-related fatalities[1]. Data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED) indicates a significant rise in Jihadist attacks and deepening instability across multiple states.

Militant groups, including Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and ISIS Sahel,[2] have increasingly exploited weak governance structures and porous borders to expand their operational reach. In Mali and Burkina Faso, insurgents executed sophisticated, large-scale attacks against military forces and civilians, resulting in mass casualties and widespread displacement. Burkina Faso, in particular, experienced a surge in jihadist offensives in its northern and eastern regions, where state security efforts have struggled to maintain control. Mali's security landscape remains dire, with Wagner-affiliated forces and government troops engaging in heavy counterinsurgency operations, often marred by allegations of human rights abuses.

The spillover of violence into Benin highlights the growing transnational nature of these conflicts. Previously regarded as relatively insulated from jihadist activity, Benin has faced an increasing number of attacks in its border regions, where militants exploit security gaps to conduct cross-border raids. These developments underscore the urgency of regional security cooperation in addressing the shifting nature of the threat.

Nigeria remains a critical focal point in the broader security crisis. Boko Haram and ISWAP continue their insurgency in the North East, while the North West and North Central regions struggle with banditry and intercommunal conflicts. However, the insecurity across West Africa is not confined to any single state but reflects a regional crisis that demands a comprehensive and collaborative response. Political instability and governance failures continue to exacerbate these security challenges. Corruption, ineffective law enforcement and the absence of a unified counterterrorism strategy have allowed militant groups to consolidate their influence. Additionally, intercommunal clashes particularly those between herders and farmers have fuelled localised conflicts, further destabilising already fragile regions.

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[1]ACLED, 2025: https://acleddata.com
[2]ACLED, 2025: https://acleddata.com

The humanitarian consequences of these conflicts are severe. Thousands of civilians have been displaced, food security remains precarious and humanitarian access is increasingly restricted due to ongoing violence. Without decisive policy interventions, the deteriorating security landscape will continue to pose a major threat to stability in West Africa. This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the current security trends in the region, examining key incidents, major actors and broader geopolitical implications. It also presents policy recommendations for national governments and regional organisations, emphasising the need for intelligence-sharing, specialised counterinsurgency training and strengthened civilian protection mechanisms.

Regional Overview

Mali and Burkina Faso remain at the epicenter of West Africa's jihadist insurgency. The ongoing instability in these countries is largely driven by the presence of militant groups such as JNIM and ISIS Sahel, which have executed increasingly sophisticated attacks against both military and civilian targets. Security forces have relied on aerial bombardments and drone surveillance, but these efforts have resulted in significant civilian casualties, fuelling resentment against the government and further entrenching jihadist control over key territories.

The conflict in January was concentrated in three primary regions. Central Mali, encompassing Mopti and Segou, experienced the highest number of fatalities with a total of 199 deaths. The widespread presence of JNIM, Dan Ambassagou[3] militias and military forces made this region the most volatile. Northern Mali, particularly in Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal and Menaka recorded 80 fatalities, primarily due to militant attacks and counterinsurgency operations. Dan Na Ambassagou, a Dogon self-defense militia in Mali, was officially ordered to disband by the Malian government in 2019. However, despite this order, the group remains active and continues to operate, particularly in the central regions of Mali, including Bankass, Bandiagara, and Koro. Reports indicate their involvement in ongoing violence, including clashes with JNIM militants and other armed groups. In contrast, southern Mali, including Kayes, Koulikoro, Sikasso and Bamako saw significantly lower levels of violence with 47 reported deaths. However, attacks in Nioro du Sahel and Garalo indicated that insecurity is gradually spreading southward.

In Burkina Faso, a devastating attack occurred on January 15 in Sebba, where insurgents ambushed security forces, killing 55 personnel. The attack destabilised the area, forcing thousands of residents to flee. On January 22, an IED attack on a government convoy in Montionkui led to 32 fatalities, including high-ranking officials. This attack highlighted the dangers of landmines and explosives in the region, further restricting mobility and aid delivery. Another significant attack took place in Sono on January 20, where armed militants targeted a village, setting homes ablaze and executing 23 civilians in what appeared to be a retaliatory assault against local security measures. On January 25, a prolonged gunfight between insurgents and military forces in Pama resulted in 23 deaths, raising concerns about the ability of security forces to maintain the control of the region. Meanwhile, on January 28 in Yebelba, an IED explosion struck a local transport vehicle, killing 22 civilians, including women and children and creating fear among local traders.

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[3]European Council On Foreign Relations: https://ecfr.eu/special/sahel_mapping/dan_na_ambassagou

Nigeria continues to grapple with a multifaceted security crisis with insurgency, banditry and communal clashes overwhelming security forces. The North East remains the most volatile region, where ISWAP and Boko Haram maintain their capabilities despite ongoing counterterrorism efforts. The rise in banditry in the North West has added another layer of complexity to Nigeria's security landscape, as heavily armed groups engage in mass kidnappings and raids on villages with little resistance from government forces.

However, the conflict in Nigeria is unevenly distributed, with certain regions experiencing higher levels of violence. In January, the worst-affected locations included Tsafe and Shinkafi in Zamfara State, both hotspots for communal and insurgent violence. Batsari in Katsina State was another troubled area, targeted by insurgent groups and communal militias. In Ondo State, Iwaro Oka was notable for communal disputes, while Umu-Okanne in Imo State witnessed violent protests and militia activity. Despite the widespread violence, some areas managed to remain relatively peaceful. Abuja, Akure and Abeokuta reported minimal or no fatalities during the month, offering glimpses of stability and hope amid the chaos.

Meanwhile, Benin, previously considered a relatively peaceful state is now experiencing a rise in cross-border jihadist incursions. The government has increased military patrols along its borders, but the lack of counterinsurgency experience has left security forces vulnerable to coordinated attacks with the northern region of Benin, particularly areas like the W and Pendjari national parks, Alibori, Borgou and Atakora have been increasingly targeted by jihadist groups from neighboring Burkina Faso. If this trend continues, Benin risks becoming a new frontline in the ongoing conflict.
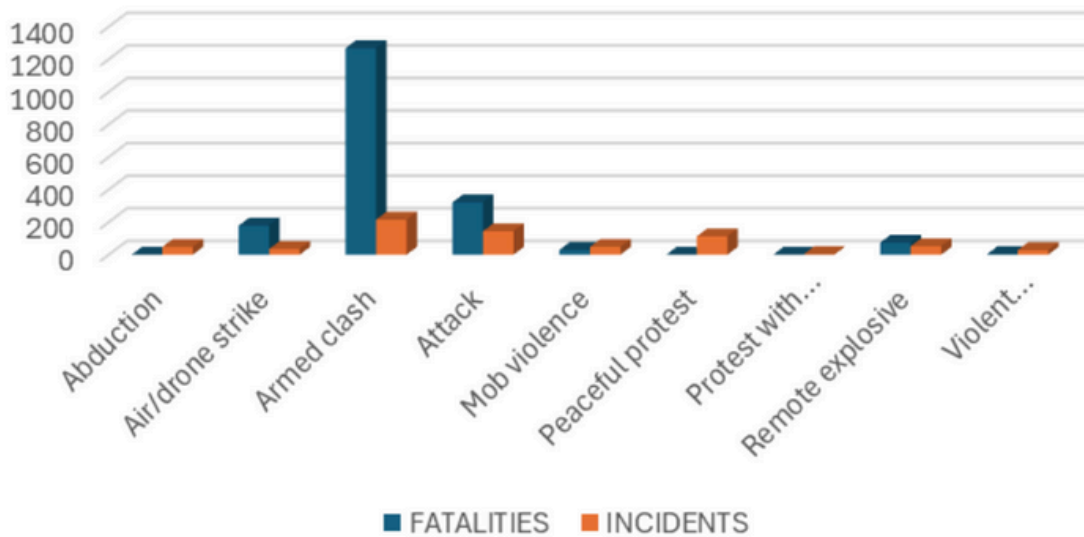
Figure 1: Fatalities and Incidents in West Africa January 2025
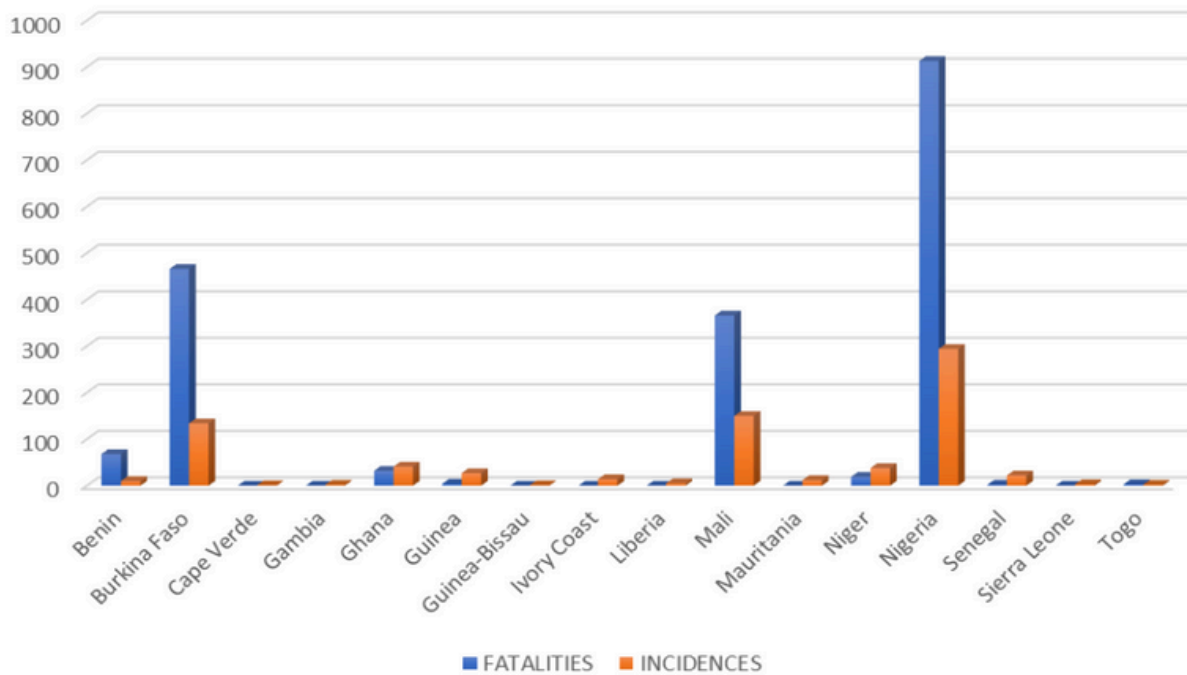
Data Source: ACLED 2025

Figure 2: Conflict Types in West Africa – January 2025

Data Source: ACLED 2025

The Key Issues in January 2025

The dominant security issue in January 2025 was the escalation of jihadist violence and its regional implications. In Mali, Burkina Faso, Nigeria and Benin, insurgents executed a series of high-profile attacks, demonstrating an evolving operational capacity that threatens not just the Sahel but the entire West African region.

Mali recorded 150 violent incidents leading to 366 fatalities, with Mopti and Timbuktu emerging as major conflict hotspots. The involvement of foreign mercenaries, particularly Wagner-affiliated groups, has led to controversial counterinsurgency operations that have drawn accusations of human rights abuses. Burkina Faso witnessed 134 violent events resulting in 466 deaths, as militant groups continued to target military outposts and key infrastructure. Security forces in the country, already stretched thin, struggled to contain the growing influence of jihadist groups, particularly in the northern and eastern regions.

Nigeria saw the highest number of fatalities, with 294 recorded incidents resulting in 913 deaths. Boko Haram and ISWAP intensified attacks in Borno State, launching coordinated ambushes against military personnel. In Zamfara and Katsina states, banditry escalated significantly as armed groups engaged in mass kidnappings and violent raids on rural communities. Benin, although not previously a major conflict zone, is now experiencing spillover effects from Burkina Faso with jihadist groups targeting security forces in cross-border attacks.

A historical analysis reveals that jihadist influence in the region has expanded due to the persistent governance vacuum left by ineffective counterinsurgency strategies. Insurgent groups are capitalising on widespread discontent, leveraging ethnic and religious tensions to recruit new members. With minimal state control in several areas, militant factions have established operational strongholds, making it increasingly difficult for regional governments to reclaim lost territories.

Looking ahead, the trajectory of these conflicts depends on the ability of regional governments to adapt their counterinsurgency approaches. Without structural reforms and increased military coordination, there is a strong possibility that jihadist groups will continue to expand, deepening instability across the region.

Big Stories in January 2025

January 2025 was marked by an escalation of violence between Malian Armed Forces (FAMa) supported by Wagner paramilitary units, and various militant groups, particularly Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM). Early in the month, on January 2, FAMa and Wagner forces carried out an attack on a civilian vehicle traveling between Goma-Coura and Dioura, resulting in the deaths of nine civilians, including an aid worker. This incident underscored the persistent issue of military-led extrajudicial killings in conflict zones.

By January 6, JNIM militants launched an offensive against FAMa and security installations in Nioro du Sahel, Kayes. The attack resulted in the death of a Malian soldier and extensive damage to government infrastructure, including the destruction of a vehicle and the takeover of Customs and Gendarmerie posts. FAMa retaliated and claimed to have neutralised 30 militants, although JNIM contested these figures, asserting that several of those killed were civilians.

A significant escalation occurred on January 8, when JNIM militants overran a FAMa camp in Diangassagou, Mopti. In the ensuing battle, over 60 individuals lost their lives, including at least 20 Malian soldiers. The militants seized weaponry and vehicles, and FAMa responded with airstrikes that reportedly killed 14 militants. The intensity of this battle underscored the fragile security situation in central Mali.

On January 12, FAMa conducted an airstrike in Berdossou, Koro, targeting suspected JNIM positions. The attack resulted in the deaths of 20 militants. Simultaneously, clashes between JNIM and the Dan Ambassagou militia in Koro led to 23 militant fatalities. The attacks on January 15 were coordinated assaults carried out by terrorist groups. Reports indicate that the 21 fatalities were civilians across Bandiagara, Mopti, and Segou, highlighting the impact of the violence on non-combatant populations.

Later in the month, on January 22, a joint FAMa and Wagner patrol targeted civilians in Boulde and Niangassadiou. Five civilians were killed in Boulde, while two civilians from the Dogon community and three from the Bellah community were executed in Niangassadiou[4]. Accusations of collaboration with JNIM served as the justification for these attacks, reinforcing concerns about indiscriminate violence against local populations.

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[4]ACLED, 2025: https://acleddata.com/

The peak of the violence was observed on January 28, when 13 incidents resulted in 84 fatalities. The majority of these casualties occurred in Inekar and Menaka, where FAMa claimed to have neutralised militant targets through airstrikes. This escalation demonstrated the growing reliance on aerial military operations to combat insurgent activities.

Burkina Faso also faced a period of intense violence. The country struggled with attacks by armed groups, deadly explosions and protests. A total of 134 violent incidents were recorded, leading to the deaths of 466 people. These incidents ranged from direct battles between armed groups and security forces to bomb attacks using remote explosives. There were also peaceful protests where people expressed their frustration with the lack of security. The ongoing violence created serious challenges for both the government and ordinary citizens, making daily life dangerous and uncertain.

Among the different forms of violence, armed clashes stood out as the most prevalent and deadly. These confrontations, often characterised by intense gunfights between insurgents and government forces, accounted for 61 incidents and 365 fatalities. The single deadliest event of the month occurred on January 15, when insurgents launched a devastating ambush on security forces in the northern town of Sebba. The brutal gunfight left 55 soldiers and insurgents dead, sending shockwaves through the nation and severely destabilising the region.

On January 18, another fierce battle erupted in Pama, as armed groups engaged military personnel in a prolonged exchange of fire. The clash claimed 23 lives and highlighted the growing boldness of militant groups as they challenged the state's authority with increasing confidence and organisation.

But the danger was not limited to direct combat. Remote explosives, landmines, and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) inflicted immense harm throughout the country. On January 10, a government convoy transporting high-ranking officials was targeted near Montionkui. The explosion tore through vehicles, claiming 32 lives including senior officials and civilians who had the misfortune of being in the vicinity. The aftermath left twisted wreckage and despair, underscoring the ruthless precision with which insurgents wielded these deadly devices.

Another tragic attack unfolded on January 22 in Yebelba, where an IED planted along a frequently travelled road detonated beneath a public transport vehicle. The blast killed 22 passengers including women and children, a grim reminder of the indiscriminate nature of insurgent warfare. In the wake of the explosion, fear gripped the region, forcing many traders and transporters to abandon critical trade routes, further crippling an already fragile economy.

On January 20, militants attacked the village of Sono in a horrifying raid. They burned down homes and killed residents without mercy. By the time it was over, 23 people had lost their lives and hundreds were forced to flee leaving everything behind. It seemed the attack was revenge for local security efforts, showing just how vulnerable rural communities are caught between the militants and the government's forces. On January 28, chaos broke out in Gounguen-Petit, a normally busy marketplace. A group of armed men stormed in shooting at traders and shoppers. Fourteen people died in the attack and businesses were left shattered. The attack not only took lives but also made life harder for families who depended on the market to earn a living.

On January 25, a military drone strike hit an insurgent camp in Bagala killing 15 fighters. This showed the government was turning to more advanced technology in the fight. But even with these efforts, the militants kept adapting, finding new ways to resist and fight back.

On 4 January, Nigerian security forces launched a coordinated operation in Katsina State's Jibia area targeting militant hideouts. The operation, involving air and ground strikes resulted in the deaths of 80 militants. While celebrated as a significant victory, the event underscored the sophistication of insurgent tactics and the challenges faced by security forces.

The same day, ISWAP fighters ambushed Nigerian troops in Sabon Gari Gana, Borno State, using drones to survey military targets before launching their assault. This battle claimed 40 lives[5] and marked a worrying escalation in insurgent capabilities. While this is not the first time insurgents have employed drones, their increasing use for reconnaissance and tactical advantage signals a new dimension in asymmetric warfare. This shift underscores the growing sophistication of non-state armed groups and raises concerns about the Nigerian military's counter-drone capabilities and broader security implications in the region.

Another tragic incident occurred on 12 January in Baga, Borno State, where suspected ISWAP fighters attacked farmers killing 40 people. These farmers had reportedly signed a protection agreement with one ISWAP faction, only to be targeted by another, highlighting the complex and often exploitative dynamics of local power struggles. The troops were ambushed while returning from a mass burial for the victims of the January 12 attack. The ambush resulted in 29 fatalities including 9 soldiers.

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[5]Al Jazeera: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/1/13/armed-groups-kill-at-least-40-farmers-in-nigerias-borno-state

This event highlighted the persistent threat posed by insurgents and the difficulties faced by security forces in stabilising the region. In Zamfara State, air strikes on 11 January[6] targeted communal militias in Tungar Kara and Maradun. While the operation successfully neutralised several militants, it also led to the accidental deaths of 17 defence militia members, raising concerns about the precision and accountability of military actions.

The Benin Republic, which had previously remained relatively insulated from the regional conflict, saw a major escalation on January 8 2025[7], Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) militants attacked Beninese troops in Point Triple (Karimama, Alibori), killing 34–36 soldiers. The army retaliated, killing 40 militants. JNIM claimed responsibility, displaying seized weapons. ECOWAS and the AU condemned the attack, urging stronger intelligence sharing. Burkinabe forces later arrested suspects and seized weapons.[8] Also, 21 January 2025, JNIM militants attacked a Beninese military barrack in Porga (Materi, Atacora), killing 4 soldiers and seizing a mortar and five Kalashnikovs. These incidents reflect the increasing spillover of conflict from the Sahel into West African coastal states.

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[6]Premium Times Nigeria: https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/nwest/766428-another-military-airstrike-kills-20-civilians-vigilantes-in-ministers-hometown.html
[7]International IDEA: https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/report/benin/january-2025
[8]African Journals Online: https://www.ajol.info/index.php/gjss/article/view/274766/259376

Emerging Risks

In Burkina Faso and Mali, the violence can largely be attributed to the growing influence of jihadist groups such as Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and ISIS Sahel. These groups have intensified their operations by employing more advanced tactics, including the use of air drone strikes and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Their attacks have targeted both military and civilian infrastructure, causing significant civilian casualties and displacements. The spread of jihadist influence in these regions has been exacerbated by weak state presence and ongoing political instability. The increasing sophistication of their attacks poses a challenge to national forces and regional security coalitions, deepening the crisis.

Nigeria experienced the highest number of fatalities due to a combination of banditry and counterinsurgency operations. Terrorist groups such as Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) have further destabilised the country, particularly in the North West and North East, through violent attacks and the targeting of civilians for ransom. The rising frequency of these incidents has overwhelmed security forces, who are already stretched thin due to the persistent insurgent activity. The surge in organised criminal groups engaging in kidnapping and cattle rustling further complicates security responses and undermines local economies.

Benin Republic also saw a marked increase in violence linked to jihadist groups operating in the region, with attacks on military bases contributing to the growing insecurity. This violence is largely a result of spillover from neighbouring countries like Burkina Faso, as militant groups expand their operational reach beyond traditional strongholds. Benin's proximity to these conflict zones has made the country increasingly vulnerable, with security forces struggling to contain the growing threat along the northern border regions. Additionally, the movement of displaced populations fleeing violence in Burkina Faso has strained local resources, increasing tensions between host communities and migrants.

The spillover effect of violence is also evident in Niger, where cross-border incursions from both Burkina Faso and Mali have escalated attacks on security forces and rural communities. The porous borders and the limited capacity of state security forces have allowed militant groups to exploit weak enforcement, extending their influence into previously stable areas. Chad and Cameroon, both sharing borders with Nigeria, have also been affected by the spillover of violence from the Boko Haram insurgency. These countries continue to experience cross-border attacks, particularly in the Lake Chad region, where militant groups take advantage of difficult terrain and weak border controls.

Similarly, coastal states such as Togo, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire are facing an increasing risk of infiltration by extremist elements. Jihadist groups from Burkina Faso have gradually extended their activities southward, prompting security concerns in these relatively stable states. Togo has already experienced multiple attacks in its northern regions, while Ghana has heightened border security due to intelligence reports indicating potential threats. The growing instability threatens to further entrench extremist networks in the region, exacerbating security challenges for these West African nations.

Beyond immediate spillover effects, emerging risks are becoming more pronounced in countries that have not yet experienced direct violence but are increasingly vulnerable due to their proximity to conflict zones and existing socio-political tensions. Countries such as Senegal, Guinea, and Liberia face heightened risks as transnational criminal networks, arms trafficking, and extremist recruitment expand across porous borders. While these countries have so far remained relatively stable, the increasing presence of displaced populations, economic disruptions, and governance weaknesses could provide fertile ground for insecurity to take root.

The political instability in these countries has created an environment where violence thrives. Weak governance, corruption, and ineffective law enforcement have allowed militant groups to operate with relative impunity. In January 2025, several West African countries experienced demonstrations that led to clashes with security forces. Nigeria recorded 27 protest incidents, Burkina Faso 25, Niger 7, Mali 4, and Benin 1.[9] While these demonstrations contributed to regional instability and heightened tensions, no fatalities were reported. The nature of the clashes varied, with some involving confrontations, property damage, or arrests. However, the broader trend of unrest highlights deep-rooted grievances related to governance failures, economic hardship, and political exclusion.

The weakening of state institutions in affected areas has also contributed to the growing influence of non-state armed groups, making regional security coordination more difficult. As violence spills across borders, the lack of cohesive regional security strategies and intelligence-sharing mechanisms hampers efforts to contain the crisis. The evolving nature of security threats underscores the urgency of strengthened governance, increased security cooperation, and long-term conflict resolution strategies to prevent further deterioration of stability in West Africa.

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[9]ACLED, 2025: https://acleddata.com/

Recommendations

Given the increasing sophistication of insurgent tactics such as IEDs, ambushes and coordinated assaults both Burkina Faso and Mali must prioritise counterinsurgency efforts. This includes:

- Improved Intelligence Sharing: Establishing mechanisms for better intelligence sharing both regionally and internationally is essential. Enhanced cooperation among regional security forces would improve operational awareness and help prevent insurgent attacks.
- Advanced Surveillance and Technology: Both nations should invest in cutting-edge surveillance tools including drones, satellite imagery and data analysis systems to detect and neutralise threats. Specialised counter-IED technology and training for local military forces will also help mitigate the impact of insurgents' tactics.
- Secure Humanitarian Corridors: Advocate for the creation of safe humanitarian corridors to ensure aid can reach vulnerable populations without interference from armed groups. Collaborating with local and international bodies to ensure these corridors are respected.
- International Advocacy: NGOs should continue to advocate with international bodies to ensure the protection of civilians in accordance with international law and work to prevent the disruption of humanitarian assistance due to insurgent activities or state violence.
- Community Engagement: Initiatives such as local dialogues and peacebuilding efforts led by local leaders and NGOs are essential in mitigating the spread of extremist ideologies. Engaging local communities in security and peacebuilding processes will promote resilience and reduce the appeal of insurgent groups.

West Africa needs to enhance their counterinsurgency capabilities to address growing threats from armed groups such as Boko Haram, ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province) and other militants operating across borders. Effective counterinsurgency operations should focus on:

Specialised Military Units: West Africa should invest in forming or strengthening specialised counterinsurgency forces such as rapid response units that are equipped to combat irregular warfare tactics used by insurgents including ambushes, IEDs and hit-and-run attacks. These units should also be trained in intelligence gathering, community engagement and counterterrorism strategies.

About CDD-West Africa

The Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa) was established in 1997 as an independent, not-for-profit research, training, advocacy, and capacity-building organisation. Its mission is to drive democracy, security, and development in West Africa by bridging policymakers, civil society, and academia through research and strategic analysis.

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