Civilian Protection Needs and Responses in Coastal West Africa:

Benin and Togo

Nonviolent Peaceforce

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NP scoping team meeting at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Cotonou, Benin.
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Executive Summary

Between June and August, Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) conducted research looking at civilian protection and peacebuilding needs in Coastal West Africa, with a specific focus of Togo and Benin. This brief is the result of this research and draws on 24 key informant interviews from an August field mission, plus several months of desk research. This work took place against the backdrop on the complex Sahelian context where violent extremism has been growing faster than in any African region over the past decade. In 2024, 51% of global terrorism deaths occurred there.[1] A string of coups in the Central Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) has since stripped away most international oversight and further obscured the plight of civilians trapped in violence. Absent effective regional and international conflict resolution mechanisms, the violence has progressively expanded further down south, into coastal West Africa.

Togo and Benin were chosen as field research sites for this assessment because they sit earlier on that trajectory than harder-hit areas like the Liptako-Gourma region. The threat is significant and growing, but there is still room to work with communities, governments, and militaries before it hardens into something closer to what's already happened further north. The two countries are handling it differently, and this brief treats them as distinct cases rather than a single package. Togo has kept its response tightly centralized, militarised and coordinated through a single security-led body that also acts as a control point for most outside actors. A history of state violence there means most people do not trust the military or police, and information about the threat tends to be tightly held rather than shared. Benin came to the threat later and has responded in a more decentralised, disjointed way, spread across several separate programmes with less central control. It is markedly more open to engagement with international actors on security, and where Togo tends to keep the threat under wraps, Benin is more a case of managing it quietly than concealing it.

Six structural dynamics run through the findings and compound one another. Both countries pivoted to a military-first response. Civilians are relied on by both the state and armed groups for intelligence but are rarely treated as those who should shape the response meant to protect them. Pastoralist communities, Fulani herders especially, face disproportionate suspicion and are increasingly criminalised for continuing traditional transhumance routes. On the ground, this shows up in specific ways: civilians targeted by both sides on suspicion of helping the other; friction between displaced people and the host families absorbing them; rural livelihoods disrupted by curfews and checkpoints; and a blurring of combatant and civilian status as self-defence groups get folded into formal security structures.

[1] https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel

At the end of its assessment, NP argues that there is still a narrow window for prevention-focused, civilian-led work before violence escalates further. That means protecting the people who run early-warning networks, not just the information they produce; pushing programming away from its current military-centred default; resisting the pull toward militarizing civilian self-protection; and building out practical harm-reduction tools for when prevention does not work.

Methodology

The brief draws on 24 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted during the August 2026 field visit to Togo and Benin, as well as preliminary desk research, which synthesizes publicly available research, conflict-monitoring data and policy analysis conducted from June - August 2026. Interviewees spanned local civil society organisations, national NGO networks, international NGOs, UN and international agencies, donor governments, and government-linked actors engaged in civil-military and community dialogue processes.

This assessment was exploratory in orientation, aimed at listening and learning rather than program design. It was not intended to position NP for an immediate country program in either country, but rather to explore civilian protection practice beyond NP's current footprint. It will also contribute to an understanding of the full range of creative avenues through which NP could support civilian protection efforts globally going forward, including technical support, accompaniment, knowledge exchange, and regional coalition-building.

The NP assessment team conducted prior risk assessments which identified conflict-affected regions across the coastal countries as red-zoned by numerous travel advisories, including those issued by national governments, with particular concern for the security of easily identifiable foreign personnel. Data collection was accordingly mostly based in urban centers, Lomé and Cotonou. This was supplemented by leveraging the Beninese nationality of one team member to conduct a limited number of interviews in Parakou, a location outside the political centre and among the last accessible areas near the frontline. Three interviews were completed there, with a religious leader, a former NGO worker, and a female resident.

Overall, the assessment involved only a limited number of direct interviews with civilians and affected communities. As a result, their self-identified threats, needs, and perspectives are not substantially reflected in their own words elsewhere in this brief.

In the interviews, the NP assessment team asked institutional and government-linked interlocutors for their assessment of the violent-extremist related security threats at both national and regional levels, their assessment of protection needs facing the communities

they work with, and the drivers behind them; the community-level protection structures, coping strategies, and early-warning mechanisms already in place, and the gaps in them; and how state, military, and international responses are perceived to be functioning. Importantly, most interviews were conducted in French.

It is important to note the limitations of this assessment, which include:

- Field engagement was limited to Togo and Benin; the assessment of Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire relies on desk research rather than direct interviews, so comparisons across all four countries should be read with that asymmetry in mind.
- Women were underrepresented among interviewees overall; any follow-on work in these contexts would need to intentionally tease out women's perspectives more fully.
- This assessment draws primarily on interviews with institutional actors - international organizations, INGOs, national NGO networks, and donor representatives and did not allow for extensive direct engagement with conflict-affected civilians themselves; community members' self-identified threats and needs are therefore represented largely at a remove, through the interpretation of intermediary actors.



NP scoping team meeting with staff members of the Collectif des Associations Contre l'Impunité au Togo (CACIT) in Lomé, Togo.
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A note on terminology

The vocabulary of "violent extremism", "terrorism" and "jihadism" is contested, and we use it carefully in this brief. The UN itself does not offer a fixed definition. In the Secretary-General's Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism (A/70/674, 2015), the term is explicitly framed as open-ended: "Violent extremism is a diverse phenomenon, without clear definition. It is neither new nor exclusive to any region, nationality or system of belief". Even at the level of the UN system, member states have been unable to agree on a common definition of "terrorism" and the Secretary-General has cautioned that sweeping definitions of terrorism or violent extremism are often used to criminalize the actions of opposition groups, civil society organizations and human rights defenders, and that governments should not use them as a pretext to silence critics. As a nonviolent, decolonial peace organisation, we are conscious that this lexicon has often been deployed in ways that racialize, "other" and securitize entire populations and regions, particularly in the Sahel and West Africa, rather than illuminating the lived realities of the people most affected. Hence, our use of these terms in this brief is pragmatic and not definitional. We adopt them where necessary to engage with existing security and policy literature, while remaining wary of reproducing the assumptions embedded within them. We return to this question in the Key Findings section, where it emerged directly in discussions with interviewees.

Regional Background

Figure 1: Coastal West Africa



The Sahelian picture is bleak. For the past ten years, the region has seen the most rapid growth in violent extremism of any region in Africa.[2] In 2024 alone, 51% of global-terrorism related deaths occurred in the Sahel.[3] Armed groups systematically target zones of civilian

[2] https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel

[3] https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel

life, such as markets, schools, health centres, and homes. The region also hosts complex networks of criminal economies and farmer-herder conflict over increasingly scarce land and water due to the effects of global climate change.

The stakes for civilians and communities here are high: the scale of suffering is on par with the world's most acute conflict zones, yet the Sahel receives a fraction of international attention. According to UN OCHA, the region hosts over 26 million people requiring assistance in 2026.[4] However, where Gaza, Ukraine, and Sudan together absorbed nearly a quarter of all global humanitarian funding in 2025, humanitarian operations across the Sahel remain critically underfunded with Burkina Faso, for example, being described as facing the worst humanitarian crisis in its history, with one in four Burkinabe in need of assistance.[5]

The regional political situation also compounds the security situation. Since 2020, a cascade of coups/unconstitutional changes of government (Mali (twice), Burkina Faso (twice), Niger) has dismantled every major international security presence in the region. It has also exposed the limits of a decade's worth of heavily securitised, counterterrorism interventions (from French Barkhane operations, the G5 Sahel Force, EU training missions, and MINUSMA) which failed to reverse the expansion of armed groups or reduce civilian harm. Russia's Africa Corps has also sought to exploit the vacuum, but attacks on civilians by junta security forces and their security partners have only increased over the years. In other words, the proliferation of armed actors and weapons over recent years has not translated into greater civilian safety. Rather, civilians have become more systematically targeted, caught between jihadist groups, state security forces and foreign paramilitaries, each operating with growing impunity.

The successive coups have also collapsed the architecture of international oversight onto the Sahel. All three central Sahelian states have been suspended from the African Union and formally withdrew from ECOWAS in January 2025, having formed their own "Alliance des États du Sahel". At UN level, no dedicated Security council monitoring mechanism for civilian harm in the Sahel remains. Juntas have restricted press access, meaning the true scale of violence is almost certainly higher than what is recorded. The region has, in effect, gone dark to international scrutiny, to accountability and increasingly to donor attention.

Meanwhile, the crisis is spreading. Attacks in coastal states Togo, Benin, and Ghana increased significantly as armed groups pushed south, seeking to exploit the same governance gaps and community grievances that enabled their expansion in the central Sahel. Benin has been hit hardest, with attacks in its northern border areas rising roughly eightfold since 2021, while Togo recorded its worst year for terrorism on record in 2024 with slightly fewer incidents since.[6]

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[4] https://donare.info/en/emergencies/sahel_crisis

[5] https://donare.info/en/emergencies/sahel_crisis

[6] https://www.acaps.org/fileadmin/Data_Product/Main_media/20250207_ACAPS_Briefing_Note_Benin_-_Conflict_in_Alibori_and_Atacora_.pdf ; https://afriquexxi.info/No-Peace-No-Bread-Northern-Togo-in-the-Grip-of-a-Three-year-State-of-Emergency

	Togo	Benin
PRIMARY REGION AFFECTED	Savanes region	Alibori and Atacora departments
WORST-HIT LOCALITIES/AXIS	Kpendjal and Kpendjal-Ouest prefectures (worst-hit); spreading since 2024 into Tône and Oti/South Oti prefectures, along the Cinkassé–Mandouri axis	Alibori: Point Triple, Kofouno, Banikoara, Karimama, Malanville; Atacora: Tanguiéta, Natitingou, Kérou, Kouandé - concentrated around the W-Arly-Pendjari (WAP) park complex
SOURCE OF SPILLOVER	JNIM-linked militants operating from Burkina Faso's Kompienga province, across a porous shared border	JNIM and Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP), based in southeastern Burkina Faso and southwestern Niger, using the WAP park complex as a cross-border safe haven
NAME OF NATIONAL COUNTER-TERRORISM MILITARY OPERATION	Opération Koundjoare	Opération Mirador

In terms of regional cooperation, Coastal West African states have distinguished themselves by their attempt to confront this threat collectively rather than purely at the national level. The Accra Initiative is the clearest expression of this. It is a self-financed regional security mechanism bringing together Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo to coordinate their response to the spillover from the Sahel.

The Accra Initiative

The Accra Initiative was launched in September 2017 by Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Togo and is a self-financed, cooperative security mechanism aimed at preventing the southward spread of violent extremism from the Sahel and countering organized crime in border areas. It operates on three pillars: 1) intelligence and information-sharing, 2) training of security personnel, and joint cross-border military operations, 3) coordinated through national focal points and a central coordinator based in Ghana.

While a good example of regional cooperation, the Initiative is still said to face several structural challenges. For example, its joint military operations have been intermittent and short in duration, meaning any disruptive effect on armed groups tends to be temporary, with insecurity resurging between operations. Member states also have uneven intelligence capacities and differing internal security architectures, complicating coordination – not all have a gendarmerie, for instance, and English-French language barriers between Ghana and its francophone partners have at times hindered communication.

Overarching Key Findings

This section outlines six structural drivers specific to Togo and Benin that were identified during the field assessment: organized crime spilling over from Nigeria; the mismatch between both countries' limited histories of large-scale violence and the speed of their shift to military-first responses; the unsettled and possibly shifting nature of what armed groups are actually seeking; the structural invisibilisation of civilians and their coping strategies; the criminalisation and marginalisation of pastoralist, and particularly Fulani, communities; and the structural constraints (institutional, political, and reputational) that box in how far civil society and international actors can adapt their response. None of these operates in isolation, each compounds the others, and together they shape both the risks to civilians set out below (see Risks to Civilians) and the priorities for engagement this brief goes on to recommend (see Opportunities and Recommendations).

1. Two societies that are unaccustomed to large-scale violence, now overwhelmed by it.

Neither Togo nor Benin has a recent history of large-scale armed conflict on their own soil. However, both states have converged on the same belief that counterterrorism, delivered through military force, is the route to protect civilians. This discrepancy between national histories of use of force and current military postures was consistently framed as a paradox in interviews.

In Benin, interviewees described that the country was “caught off guard” by the violence. A civil society actor told us “Beninese people don’t know war, their mindset isn’t prepared for it” which is a framing that others cautioned also serves as cover for government opacity around ongoing operations, at the cost of infantilising the population and invisibilising those already living with the war’s effects. Despite this inexperience, Benin moved quickly to a military-first posture, signed bilateral security agreements with the US, France, and Belgium to close capacity gaps. But according to a source within the army that we spoke to, this has not come with matching scrutiny of how militarisation affects civilians. In fact, several partner militaries have documented abuses in other conflict theatres around the world, concerns that are simply not discussed publicly in Benin, as noted by a Cotonou-based policy officer at a German think tank. Civil-military relations sit outside the army’s institutional experience, prior combat exposure came mainly through UN peacekeeping deployments, rarely active combat and soldiers are described as unaccustomed even to writing basic activity reports, let alone applying civilian-harm frameworks. The force is also modest: roughly 20,000 troops, with only around 7,000 deployed under the counterterrorism Opération Mirador.

This is not to say the shift toward force has gone entirely unaccompanied. The government has simultaneously sought to make the security forces more population-centred,

recognising that building trust within local communities is essential to countering militancy. Agencies such as the border management agency (Agence béninoise de gestion intégrée des espaces frontaliers – ABeGIEF) which supports border communities through income-generating projects and schools and the national Coalition for Peace, active at the commune and department level, have been reinforced as part of this effort. Whether this translates into a meaningfully different civilian experience of the security response, however, remains to be seen, and was not something interlocutors described as widely felt on the ground.

The ways in which violence, militarism and civilian experiences of safety manifest in Togo are quite different. As one civil society actor told us, "you're in a country where army massacres have marked people's minds." Interviewees recounted killings and abuses by state forces in the context of several electoral violence episodes in the early 2000s, leaving little trust in anyone in uniform. "Here in Togo, anyone wearing a uniform, whether soldier, police officer, even customs official is seen as someone who harms, who kills, who causes trouble," another civil society actor said. This traces to a longer history of repression, including violence around the contested 2005 election that killed hundreds of mostly unarmed civilians and was attributed by a UN mission at the time to a deliberate "strategy of repression" with no prosecutions in the three decades since. As one interviewee put it "In Togo, talking about security has always led to death. Even more so today."

In both contexts (though to varying degrees of course correction), the militarised response to the spread of violent extremism is occurring faster than the civilian protection frameworks that is supposed to accompany it. Armies are at the forefront of what is treated as a force-first endeavor, with soldiers in constant contact with communities yet ill-equipped for the task at hand and the community-engagement responsibilities it brings.

2. The nature of the threat, and what groups are actually seeking, remains contested.

Most attacks to date have targeted what interlocutors call "symbols of the state", that is, border posts, police stations, army bases, with soldiers for now bearing the brunt of casualties. This pattern shapes how the threat itself is understood, and in turn, how the response is designed. If the primary casualties are security forces, the primary fix is treated as a security-force problem. What the groups are actually seeking, however, is far from settled among those we spoke to. Some framed it in maximalist terms i.e territorial expansion toward an eventual West African caliphate. Others offered the more modest reading that Togo and Benin function less as territory to conquer than as a rear base, a place to rest and regroup from the more intense fighting underway in Burkina Faso and Niger, with pressure from those theatres pushing groups southward almost by default. The two countries' experiences of this pressure also diverge: Togo has dug trenches along its border with Burkina Faso, and has seen markedly fewer incursions as a result, a more

stable picture than in Benin. In both countries, civil servants, particularly teachers, remain reluctant to take up postings in the north, wary of being targeted as visible representatives of the state. And in both, the working assumption both of state actors and international actors supporting them driving current programming is that it is the military that most needs capacitating and protecting, and that protecting the state, in turn, is what will protect civilians – a logic that leaves relatively little space for asking what protection looks like from civilians' own vantage point.

Importantly, this pattern is not fixed. NP's experience in other conflict contexts affected by violent extremism has shown that the targets of violence are highly volatile, and the ratio can invert quickly, with civilians overtaking security forces as the primary target once groups shift tactics or consolidate territorial control. Preparing civilians now, rather than waiting for that inversion to materialise, is crucial (see more below in the case for prevention).

3. Civilians are integral to the conflict but structurally invisibilised and exposed to undue risk.

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Civilians sit at the heart of this conflict, yet the impression was that almost everyone engaging with them does so instrumentally. Government forces rely heavily on civilians as sources of early-warning intelligence, e.g. on armed group movement, what was seen near a border crossing, who is unfamiliar etc. Armed groups, in turn, use incentives, favors, and coercion to secure civilian cooperation or silence. In both cases, civilians are valued for what they can provide, not truly engaged as people with a stake in how the response unfolds or a say in what protection should look like.

This asymmetry is visible in where institutional energy is directed. The overwhelming focus among both government and international actors has been on civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) and civil-military dialogue. These mechanisms are designed, at root, to improve the military's situational awareness and its relationship with the population it operates among. Comparatively little attention or investment has gone into civilian-led or civilian-centred protection approaches, i.e. structures designed around what communities themselves identify as threats and needs, rather than around what they can contribute to someone else's response. The result is a conflict in which civilians are present, regularly consulted, and relied upon but rarely positioned as the ones shaping the response meant to protect them.

Where civil-military initiatives have moved beyond dialogue and into delivery, the underlying theory of change is that in order for state forces to win community buy in and do effective community engagement, they need to promote community development and be seen to directly contribute to it. This was particularly illustrated by the IOM Togo/Benin representative that we spoke to. IOM has a regional Coastal States Stability Mechanism (CSSM), a $40 million initiative funded by the German Federal Foreign Office and formerly

USAID, across northern Ghana, Benin, and Togo, explicitly designed to reinforce local security presence and trust between authorities and border communities alongside basic service delivery and community cohesion programming.

“The approach is similar to what you find in peacekeeping with the quick impact projects. It’s about winning hearts and minds through community development”. The logic, as he put it, is that external actors like IOM "pay and backstop the state, but let the police and security forces be the hands and faces of these punctual interventions” so it is uniformed officers, not humanitarian workers, who are seen conducting free veterinary vaccinations in remote, livestock-dependent areas, rehabilitating public schools, distributing food, and leading sensitisation campaigns and community-policing programmes aimed at improving living conditions in the north. The intended effect is twofold: 1) tangible service delivery for communities, and 2) rehabilitated visibility and trust for the security forces delivering it.

4. Civilians are adapting, with little collective infrastructure to support them.

In the absence of that kind of civilian-centred response, people have developed their own strategies for getting by. These range from the transactional approaches to the protective one and range from selling fuel or food to armed groups, smuggling goods on their behalf, or simply going silent and withholding information from anyone, on any side, in order to avoid becoming a target.



Meeting of the NP scoping team with staff members of the Centre de Documentation et de Formation sur les Droits de l'Homme (CDFDH) in Lomé, Togo.
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What is largely absent is anything collective to back up these individual strategies. Our background research illuminated that elsewhere in coastal West Africa, comparable pressures have pushed communities toward more organized responses. For example, in northern Ghana, community watchdog groups have formed to counter both violent extremism and cross-border criminal networks, running patrols, using early-warning and early-response tools, and reporting up to traditional leaders, while also maintaining cross-border contact with Burkinabé villages through joint meetings, trade, and information-sharing. Northern communities elsewhere in the subregion have similarly organized around CSOs for collective agricultural support and threat awareness.

Nothing of that scale was described to us in northern Togo or Benin; what came up, secondhand, were more informal coping mechanisms rather than anything organised, patrol-based, or linked to traditional authority in a structured way. There is no pre-existing organised system for managing emergencies, for instance. “It's true that we have much less experience with emergency humanitarian management here but our communities sadly need this awareness now,” said a government Fulani representative we spoke to. This gap largely pertains to mass displacement where, based on our interviews to date, there is no coordinated mechanism for deciding who flees where, or for matching displaced people with host families in an orderly way, despite host-family reliance being the explicit policy in both countries (see IDP/refugee tensions with host communities, below). Hence, the overall picture is one of adaptation happening at the level of the individual or the family, improvised in real time, rather than anything resembling collective or community-level preparedness.

5. Pastoralist communities are caught between armed group predation and state suspicion leading to the criminalization of transhumance.

Transhumance long predates the current crisis: before violent extremism took hold, the borders between Burkina Faso, Togo, and Benin were crossed each season by thousands of cattle, sheep, and goats herders moving in search of pasture, sustaining both livelihoods and cross-border social ties. That system has now been seriously disrupted. Traditional passage areas now report stolen herds, displaced families, and abandoned villages, as shrinking pastoral space and intensifying competition over farmland fuel local disputes between herders and farmers.

Herders (predominantly Fulani but not only) have borne a disproportionate share of the fallout. They are increasingly ethnically profiled, stigmatized, and socially isolated (see more below), and restrictions or outright bans on transhumance have pushed many into deeper precarity, a vulnerability that armed groups have proven adept at exploiting for infiltration and recruitment. This is especially visible in the Togo Gourma region, the crossroads linking Burkina Faso, Togo, and Benin, where a historically pastoral economy is increasingly captured by criminal and extremist networks. Herders there now live under double suspicion: targeted by armed groups for looting, and by state authorities as suspected

extremist collaborators. Transhumant herders have, in fact, come under growing scrutiny from security forces over alleged clandestine ties to extremist groups, through financing, recruiting young men, or taking part in attacks directly.

That suspicion has led to concrete state measures. In northern Togo, the response has included closing major cattle markets, banning the sale of transhumance-origin herds, and tightening controls along passage corridors. Benin took a more categorical approach, banning cross-border transhumance outright in 2019 in favor of domestic-only grazing. At the same time, Benin has also tried formally marking out passage corridors and supporting local dialogue, to ease friction between mobile herders and settled farmers. International actors, especially UNDP, have supported programming in both countries aimed at strengthening early warning systems and preventing agropastoral conflict before it escalates. But these remain partial fixes against a backdrop where transhumance has become tied to collective survival itself.

Beyond state pressure, armed groups themselves subject civilians to direct violence. They seize livestock, burn villages, and sometimes force people to flee outright. Livestock theft in particular has become a core part of how conflict gets financed across the Sahel and West Africa. According to Global Initiative, groups such as JNIM (Al-Qaeda-affiliated) and IS Sahel have built a real war economy around cattle raiding, selling stolen animals to fund weapons and operations. This serves two purposes at once: it extracts resources, and it lets these groups present themselves as protectors of herders against rival predation. In doing so, they also buy local legitimacy, embedding themselves in the pastoral economy rather than simply preying on it from outside.

6. The response landscape is boxed in.

Both civil society and international actors face real constraints in adapting to this threat. Civil society organisations in both countries have historically worked mainly on human rights and civic issues i.e free speech, civic education, and holding the state accountable for arrests, torture, and other abuses. This background is not unrelated to the current crisis, and many organisations have in effect turned their attention to the violence linked to armed conflict and terrorism as it has grown. But the change is new enough that their existing experience only partly equips them to deal with the current nature of threat affecting civilians in the North. The perpetrator is different (armed groups rather than the state) and this brings questions they have rarely had to deal with before: how to engage with non-state armed actors, how to prepare for and act in humanitarian emergency situations, how to reduce harm to civilians caught in conflict. So while civil society has not stood still, its way of thinking and its tools are still closer to human rights work than to the kind of human security response this threat calls for.

Because Togo and Benin were not traditional conflict contexts as mentioned above, the international footprint that built up over time skewed heavily toward development actors

with the World Bank foremost among them, with substantial and long-running investments traditionally geared toward long-term national development. Humanitarian actors are a much more recent and much thinner layer on top of this. In Benin, some UN agencies - UNICEF, UNHCR, UNDP - have begun orienting programming toward the northern response, and a small number of non-UN INGOs, such as CIVIC, are present, though they remain the exception rather than the rule. In Togo, by contrast, the state actively discourages INGOs, in particular humanitarian organisations.

Both civil society and international actors, in turn, are operating against states for whom managing this threat is existential, and directly in tension with their development goals. As a result, public discourse on security is heavily curtailed in Togo and closely managed in Benin (see comparative analysis above). That caution is tied partly to tourism: in Benin especially, the government has invested heavily in an image of stability and attractiveness, and is wary of anything that casts the country as an active conflict theatre. Layered on top of this are sensitivities around colonial-era optics i.e. which international actors are present, which military cooperation agreements have been signed, and how transparent governments can afford to be about either, particularly where France is concerned, given how much popularity it has lost across the wider region. In Togo, the operating posture is closer to “we are handling this ourselves”; Benin’s stance is somewhat more permissive, with a genuine appetite for a larger international presence, but the optics of that presence are closely and carefully managed.

Risks to Civilians

The structural drivers set out above translate into concrete, often compounding risks for civilians in northern Togo and Benin. This section sets those risks out directly: how civilians are targeted by both state and armed groups on suspicion of complicity with the other; how pastoralist communities face disproportionate suspicion and exclusion; how displacement and camp policy are managed, and the tensions this creates with host communities; how the security response itself is disrupting civilian space and livelihoods; how spaces that were once clearly civilian are becoming militarized; and how local community members, particularly youth, are being pulled into violence.

Read together, these risks are the practical case for the priorities this brief sets out under Opportunities and Recommendations, below.

Civilians targeted by both sides for suspected complicity with the other. Reports of mass torture in prisons: Civilians constantly face accusations of affiliation and ensuing punishment, without due process. The state detains and prosecutes those suspected of aiding extremist groups (accused, e.g, of supplying them, or leaking information on troop movements) through dedicated courts. We have heard accounts of mass arrests both in the Northern regions and in capital cities via these repression courts; in Benin the CRIET (Cour de répression des infractions économiques et du terrorisme), established in 2018; in Togo,

through a special court linked to the historical prison de Sotouboua in the outskirts of Lomé, considered Togo's "Guantanamo". Incarceration and reported torture is reported to disproportionately affect people along ethnic lines, particularly Fulani communities. Extremist groups, in turn, lethally and often publicly target civilians suspected of the mirror offense (i.e cooperating with the state, especially by supplying security forces with information on their movements). Community leaders serving as formal EWER focal points are especially exposed and have been killed and beheaded – not only to eliminate them, but to instill terror in the wider community. Interlocutors say this strategy is working: formal EWER systems are becoming harder to sustain and to staff with willing civilian volunteers. In other words, informant-targeting in these areas and fear-driven silence in Benin are undermining the community relationships that protection programming depends on.

Pastoralist communities face disproportionate suspicion and exclusion: While the topic is viewed as highly sensitive and politicised, we acknowledge the ethnic-specific vulnerabilities we have heard of. In particular, Fulani and Tuareg pastoralist communities face disproportionate suspicion of extremist sympathy, which manifests concretely as constant harassment, including by national security forces, exclusion from access to basic services, and disproportionate representation among those detained. Harmful portrayals of Fulani herders as criminals or terrorists circulate in the media, popular discourse, and even within security and political circles. These perceptions are increasingly evident in northern Benin, where many communities describe violent activism as a "Fulani threat," even though the Fulani make up only about 9% of Benin's population. This sits on top of longstanding farmer-herder tension over shrinking land and water access, worsened by desertification which are tensions that predate the current conflict but are increasingly exploited by it (see key finding above).

IDP/refugee tensions with host communities: Both Togo and Benin have long histories as refugee-hosting countries in the region. While refugees and asylum seekers comprise the majority of displaced persons in country, both now face a crisis of internal displacement. Facing a sharp recent influx, particularly from Burkina Faso, both countries have opted for an out-of-camp policy, relying on host families rather than formal camps to absorb displaced people. Benin tried the camp approach out in 2024, supported by UNHCR amid significant influx from Burkina Faso and Niger, visible disparities in assistance between camp residents and host communities generated enough tension that the government closed it and moved residents into host communities instead, consistent with Togo's own integration-based approach. However, hosting brings its own safety risks, particularly for young women. We have heard several accounts of sexual violence within host families, likely far underreported, as well as accounts of revenge killings linked to the mounting pressure on shared resources.

Togo	Benin
As of June 2026, Togo hosts **65,100** refugees and asylum-seekers, 86% of which come from Burkina Faso, alongside **13,400** internally displaced persons (IDPs).	As of December 2024, Benin hosts over **23,000** refugees and asylum-seekers – mainly from Burkina Faso and Togo – and nearly **9,000** internally displaced persons, with most residing in Alibori and Atacora.

Displacement figures in Togo and Benin. Source: UNHCR.

Disruption of civilian space and livelihoods: The security response is reshaping daily civilian life in ways that go beyond the direct violence itself. Curfews, transhumance restrictions, and the presence of IEDs have made people too afraid to go out and farm, disrupting rural livelihoods across both countries' northern zones. Schools have in some cases been repurposed to house displaced people and have subsequently been targeted and burned; health facilities, by contrast, have not faced the same pattern of direct attack, though they remain chronically understaffed (see Governance and Service Gaps, above). Together, these changes have fostered a pervasive sense of unsafety and eroded trust in the authorities meant to protect people).

Militarization blurring civilian/combatant status: Traditional "hunter" groups that are historical self-defense community groups with a strong spiritual connotation, are increasingly being armed and formally integrated into military and security operations, particularly in Benin. Interlocutors described this as blurring the line between combatant and civilian on the ground, making it harder for civilians to distinguish protective armed actors from threatening ones. This adds a further layer of risk on top of the militarized curfews and checkpoints already reshaping daily life in affected areas.

Mobilisation of local community members into violence: Beyond the structural drivers to recruitment addressed in the key findings, the direct risk to civilians is the pull of local community members (often but not only youth) into armed groups, frequently via the same intercommunal and farmer-herder disputes described. For some, this route offers a form of economic opportunity, protection, or standing unavailable through legitimate channels in areas the state has largely abandoned; for others, it follows more coercive pressure or the desire for revenge after a personal or family grievance. Whatever the pathway, the consequences extend well beyond the individual recruited: families and wider communities of those who join, or are suspected of joining, often face retaliatory suspicion themselves, be it from the state, from neighbours, or both which compounds the cycles of mistrust and violence.

The CIPLEV in Togo: a case study of early warning that puts civilians severely at risk

Togo's main institutional vehicle for early warning and PVE coordination is the Inter-ministerial Committee for the Prevention and Fight against Violent Extremism (CIPLEV), created on 15 May 2019 as a non-military complement to the country's broader counter-extremism measures. At the national level, CIPLEV brings together 18 members drawn from relevant ministries (including Decentralization, Health, Justice, and Social Affairs), the armed forces general staff, religious representatives, and civil society, reporting up to an oversight committee of ministers covering security, territorial administration, defense, finance, social action, and grassroots development. Its stated mandate is twofold: reducing the spread of violent extremism across Togolese territory, and strengthening cooperation between the administration, defense and security forces, and civil society.

The design deliberately pushes this structure down to the local level. There are prefectural and cantonal sub-committees, the first of which were installed and trained in October 2019 in the Savanes region, that mirror the same integrated logic of combining civil society, security forces, religious leaders, and local authorities in a single body meant to coordinate early warning, community sensitization, and liaison with security forces on the ground.

However, it is precisely at the local level where the greatest risk for civilians are visible or were recounted. CIPLEV's local committees rely on volunteers, community leaders, mayors, and civil society figures, who take on this role in addition to their existing professional and civic responsibilities, with no dedicated operational arm or standing protection mechanism built in to support them. In our interviews in Togo, multiple sources described community leaders and mayors involved in CIPLEV-linked early-warning activity having been killed, understood locally as retaliation for their perceived role in feeding information to the state.

For NP, this illustrates starkly what happens when an early-warning system is designed around the flow of information rather than the safety of the people producing it. We have seen how the committee structure may well succeed at generating intelligence and strengthening state-society cooperation on paper, but without embedded protection for its local volunteers, it is, in practice, asking civilians to absorb a fatal risk that the design of the mechanism itself does not account for.

Opportunities and Recommendations

Preventing escalation in coastal West Africa and using the space that prevention creates to strengthen social cohesion, is a critical priority while the region still has the chance to avoid the trajectory seen further north in the Sahel.

The Case For Community-Based Prevention and Protection Work

Togo and Benin both offer a window for prevention-focused, civilian-centred approaches but one that may not stay open much longer. The violence so far has been low-intensity and slow-moving. It is pressing on fault lines that already existed such as North-South historical inequality, farmer-herder tensions, cross-border crime etc. without yet breaking them completely open. That is what makes this a moment for prevention rather than response as the cracks are visible, but they haven't given way yet.

A few things make this urgent.

1. The response so far has been almost entirely military, on the assumption that force alone could resolve the problem quickly.
2. Years in, the threat hasn’t gone away. Rather,it has become normalized and absorbed more resources each year without a matching investment in violence prevention.
3. At the same time, there is no shared understanding, at least among interviewees, of what happens next, which has led to a scattered rather than coordinated response, made worse by a kind of disbelief, in two countries with no history of civil war, that something like this could really take hold.
4. Most importantly, nearly all the energy and funding is still going toward training and equipping security forces and improving civil-military coordination. As a result, civilians, and what protection actually means to them, remain largely left out of the picture.



Meeting of the NP scoping team with His Excellency, Dr Amadou Mama Sambo, High Commissioner in charge of Resettlement and Transhumance in Cotonou, Benin.
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This is exactly the gap where UCP can add real value. There are basic building blocks such as active early-warning networks, though the people running them face serious danger just for participating (see Key Finding above); there's real, if still limited, room to bring in voices that have been missing so far, particularly women-led organisations and directly affected communities; and there is genuine appetite for this kind of engagement, especially in Benin.

Waiting until the violence escalates, until self-defense groups become more heavily armed, or until civilians are pushed further into passive complicity just to stay safe, would mean stepping in only once prevention is no longer an option. Acting now, while the situation is still relatively contained, is what gives a civilian-led approach the space required to work.

Strengthen EWER mechanisms and readjust them around protecting the people who run them, not just the information they produce: The current approach to early-warning and early-response systems in both countries overlooks the very real fact that participating in them is incredibly dangerous. Instead, it assumes that the focus for sustainability and effectiveness is to get more community members reporting more threats faster. As seen above, in Togo, community leaders involved in information-sharing have been systematically targeted as suspected informants. However, a system that asks civilians to take on this risk without addressing it isn't solving the early-warning problem but is covertly relying on civilians to absorb undue risk or a cost that the approach itself is generating. De-risking the act of participation is what makes the information flow more reliable and sustained, not the other way around. Concretely, this could mean embedding reporting within activities that offer people a plausible reason for involvement beyond flagging threats to authorities, protecting the anonymity of sources, or building in direct protection for those known to participate.

Current response remains heavily state- and military-centered: Even protection-focused programming with an explicit civil-military dimension, such as CIVIC's community protection work in Benin, remains, by its own account, still primarily framed through a military lens. Interlocutors across multiple meetings called for a genuine shift toward civilian-led protection models: giving communities the tools and standing to define and manage their own protection (PVE, civilian-led approaches to controlling the line of risk), rather than positioning them chiefly as recipients of, or informants for, a state-led response.

Guard against the militarization of civilian protection space: The drawing of civilians into counterterrorism efforts as proxies of the state is a worrying trend. The absorption of chasseurs self-defense groups into formal military structures is a clear example with consequences for how civilians will distinguish protective from threatening armed actors

going forward. This also points to a broader gap: military conduct itself is a source of civilian harm, not simply a variable that determines whether protection succeeds elsewhere, yet this dimension remains far less explored than the state-as-protector logic dominating current programming. The response should actively work to preserve and reinforce civilian-led alternatives before this kind of drift toward militarization becomes the default.

Build concrete harm-reduction tools for when prevention fails: Communities need practical self-protection options for the moment an attack occurs, not only upstream prevention. Early-warning indicators paired with clear evacuation routes and escape planning were described as still insufficient in current responses, and should be developed as a distinct, practical deliverable rather than treated as a byproduct of broader social cohesion work.