

# UNDERSTANDING THE ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF FRAGILITY IN COASTAL WEST AFRICA

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## BACKGROUND

The **Global Fragility Act (GFA)**, passed by the United States Congress in 2019, looks towards building long-term political engagements with states facing threats of political instability and conflict through 'whole-of-government' approaches. The goal is to **shift from over-securitized approaches** to approaches that promote economic and social self-sufficiency among at-risk communities in the partnering countries. A significant mandate of the GFA requires US Government (USG) agencies to use contextual data and evidence to accurately represent the issues being faced in the partnering countries. In its pilot phase, the GFA partners with four countries and one region - **Coastal West Africa (CWA)**, which includes **Ghana, Togo, Cote d'Ivoire, Benin, and Guinea**. The focus of this project, in CWA, the USG determines violent extremism (VE) to be the major threat in the region due to the "spillover" of VE activity from Sahel and growing instability in the countries of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. While recognising the external threat to the region, the GFA also recognises how internal **social and economic factors intensify fragility** in the region and drive recruitment to VEOs. Relying only on militarized approaches to address the threat, without engaging with these socio-economic factors could potentially intensify civilian mistrust against the state and exacerbate existing vulnerabilities. **Persistent economic distress, poor governance, absence of justice mechanisms, inadequate infrastructure, marginalisation, and inter-communal conflicts** need to be addressed simultaneously.

Since 2019 and until present, the **instances of violent attacks have increased**. The maps in Figures 1 & 2 show a snapshot of the drastic change, through a hotspot analysis of the violent events, at the district levels of countries in the Sahel and CWA. The data reflects northern parts of Ghana, Togo, and Benin as hotspots pointing to the contiguity of fragility from countries in Sahel.

Figure 1. 2022 West Africa Hotspot analysis of violent events

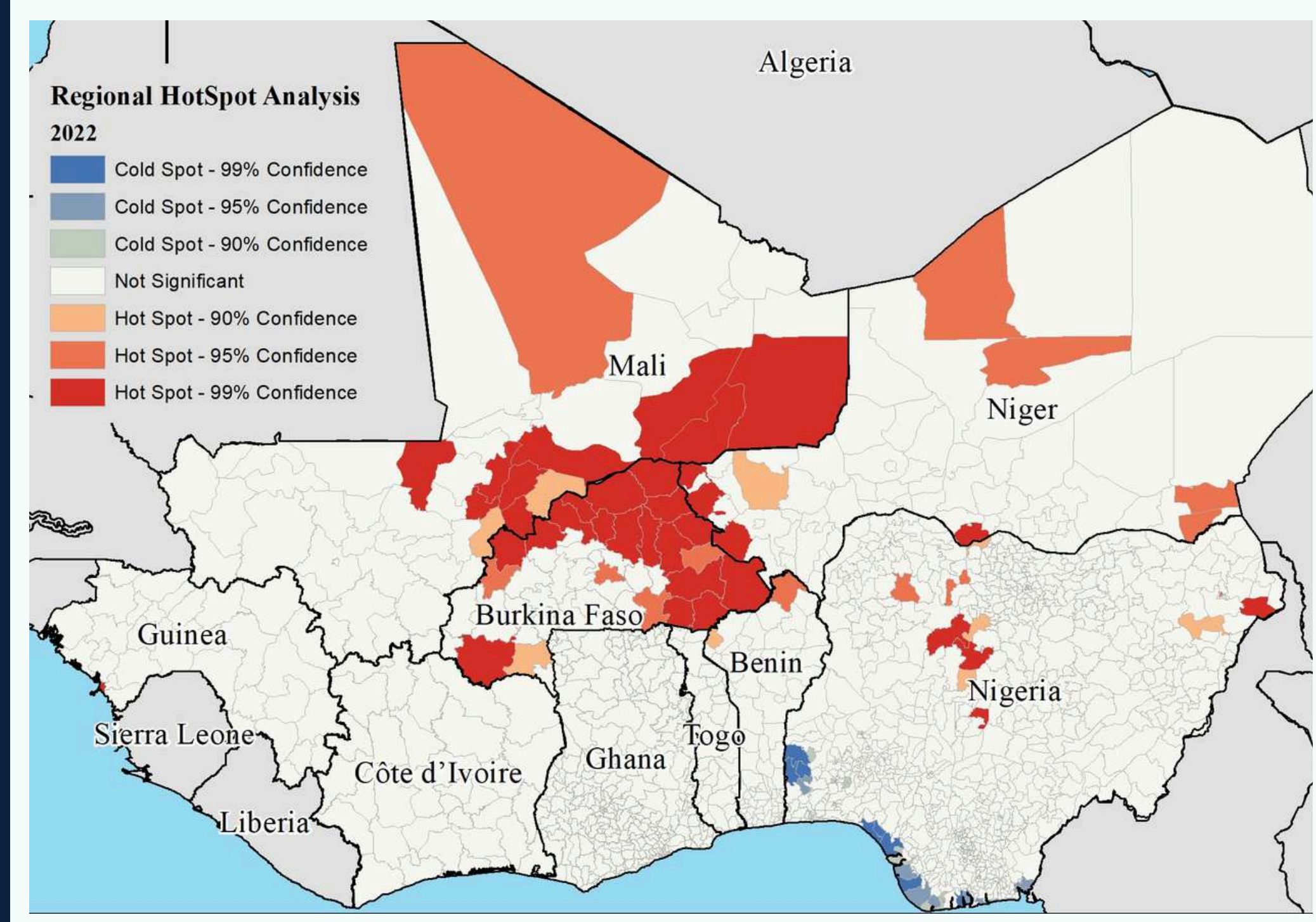
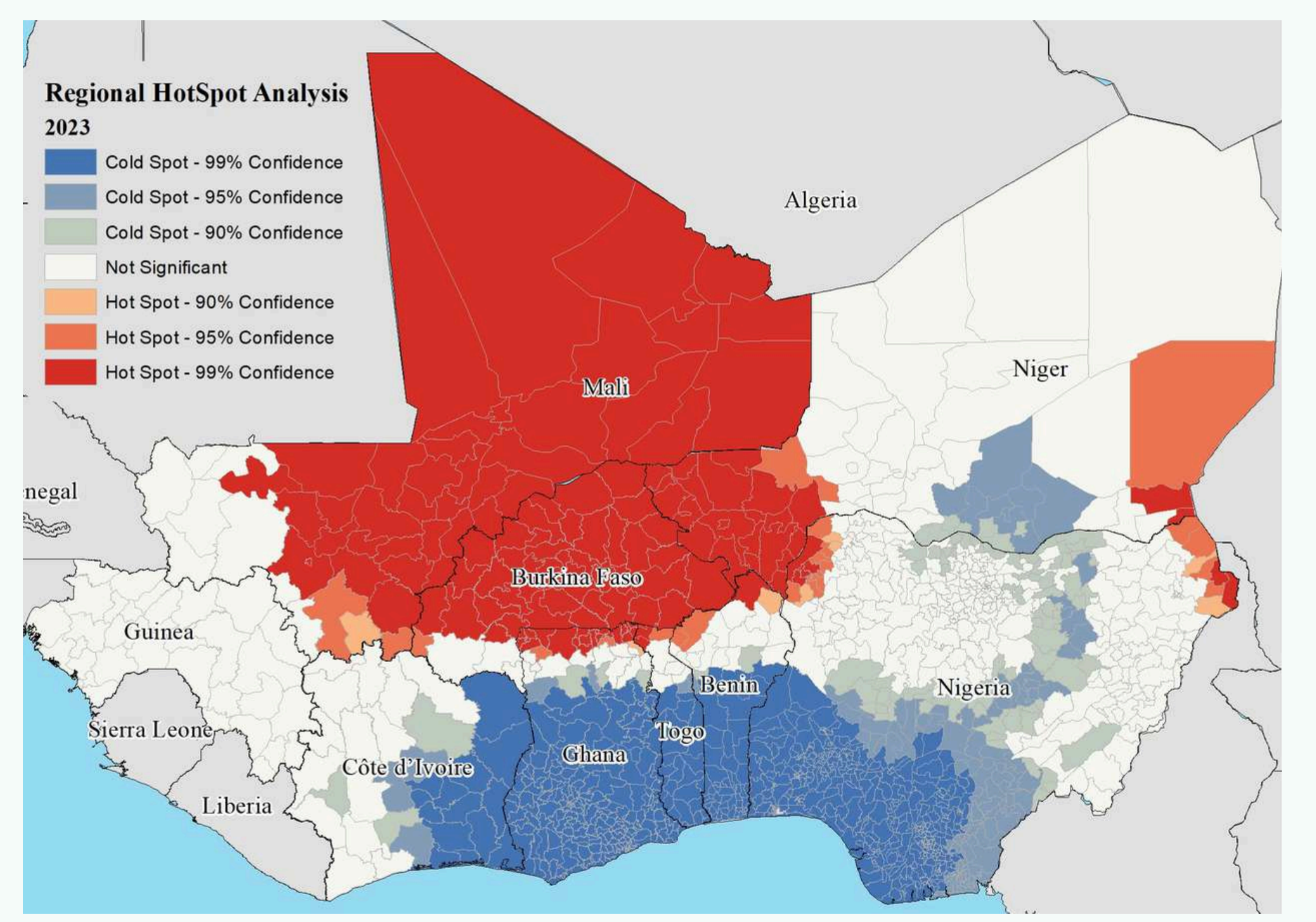


Figure 2. 2023 West Africa Hotspot analysis of violent events

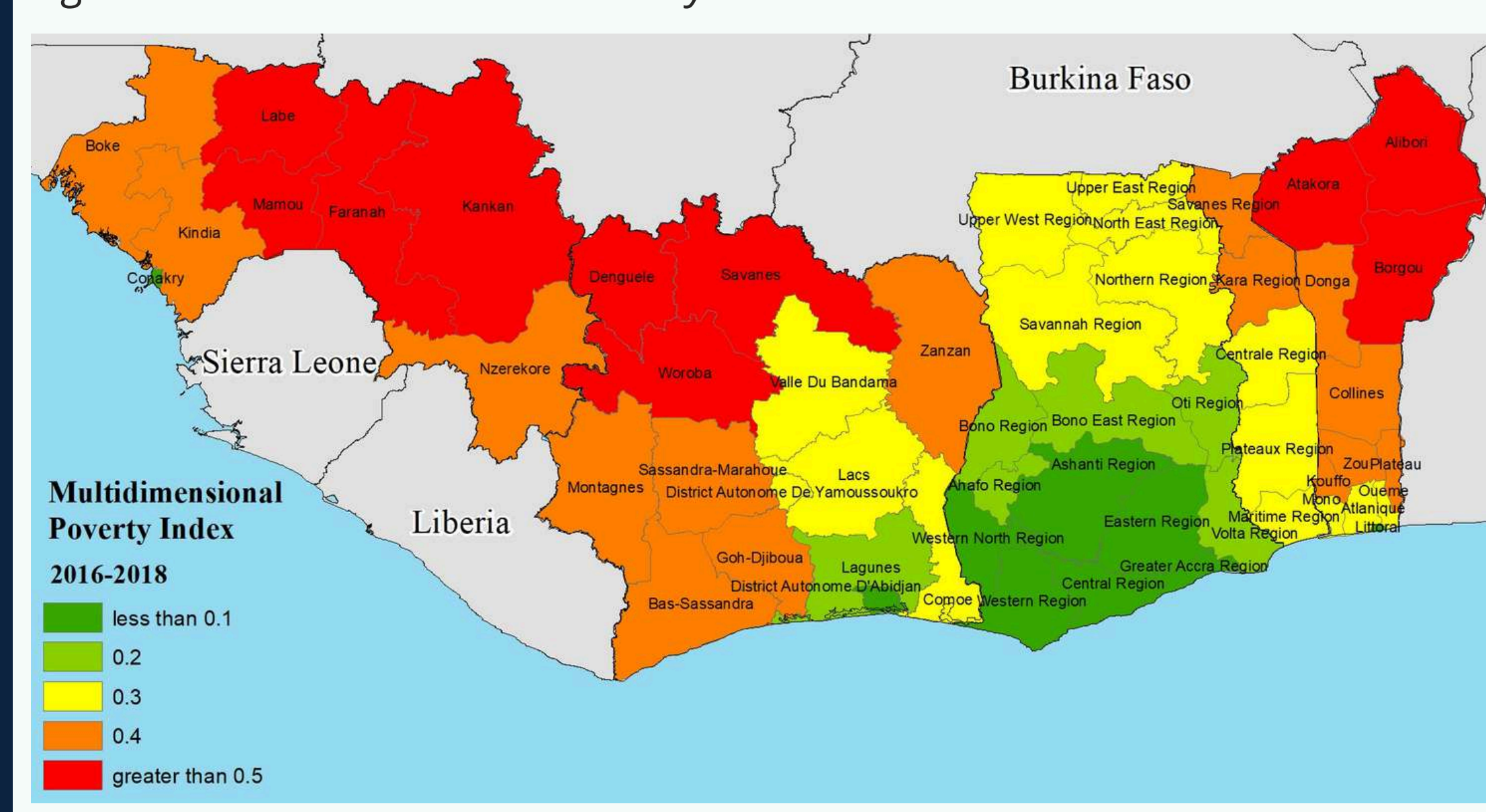


## METHODOLOGY

The data used in this spatial analysis was collected from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), collecting dates, coordinates, types of events, sub-events, actors, secondary actors, civilian targeting, location based on three administrative levels, fatalities count, population estimates, sources of attacks and notes on the attacks within the broader region of West Africa, including 8 countries: Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Guinea, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, and Nigeria across 5 years: from 2019 to 2024 (until March). The coordinates of the events were plotted on maps exported from Global Database of Political Administrative Boundaries Database, focusing on 3 administrative levels - 0 (country borders), 1 (region borders) and 2 (municipality/district). Recorded events were then joined to the municipal level maps, producing several hotspot analyses to show the frequency and severity of the attacks. Data on violence against civilians as well as protests was also extracted from ACLED. For socioeconomic analysis, Multidimensional Poverty Index, jointly published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI), was picked. The disaggregated data is based on the surveys conducted in 2016 and 2018.

## FINDINGS: ECONOMIC DIMENSIONS OF FRAGILITY

Figure 3. Multidimensional Poverty Index across CWA



One of the tactics of establishing trust and legitimacy by VE actors in the region is to play upon the **grievances** experienced by distressed communities. Abject poverty and sociopolitical marginalisation, unaddressed and unacknowledged by the government, drives **internal recruitment**. Some of the initiatives carried out by VE groups include constructing bore wells for providing drinking water, constructing schools or places of worship in the region, and giving unemployed youth the chance to earn money through activities like smuggling.

Data provided in the *Figure 3* points out the differences in economic dimension and lived poverty across communities in the region. The spatial distribution suggests an **unequal distribution of resources**, with most of the wealth concentrating around coastal capital cities across the five countries. **Lack of access to essential services** in peripheral communities drives their further isolation. Absence of positive state presence leaves a **power vacuum** that could potentially be exploited by the VEOs. The emphasis here is on positive state, as military punitive approach will only drive further resentment of the civilians who already harbour resentment towards their government.

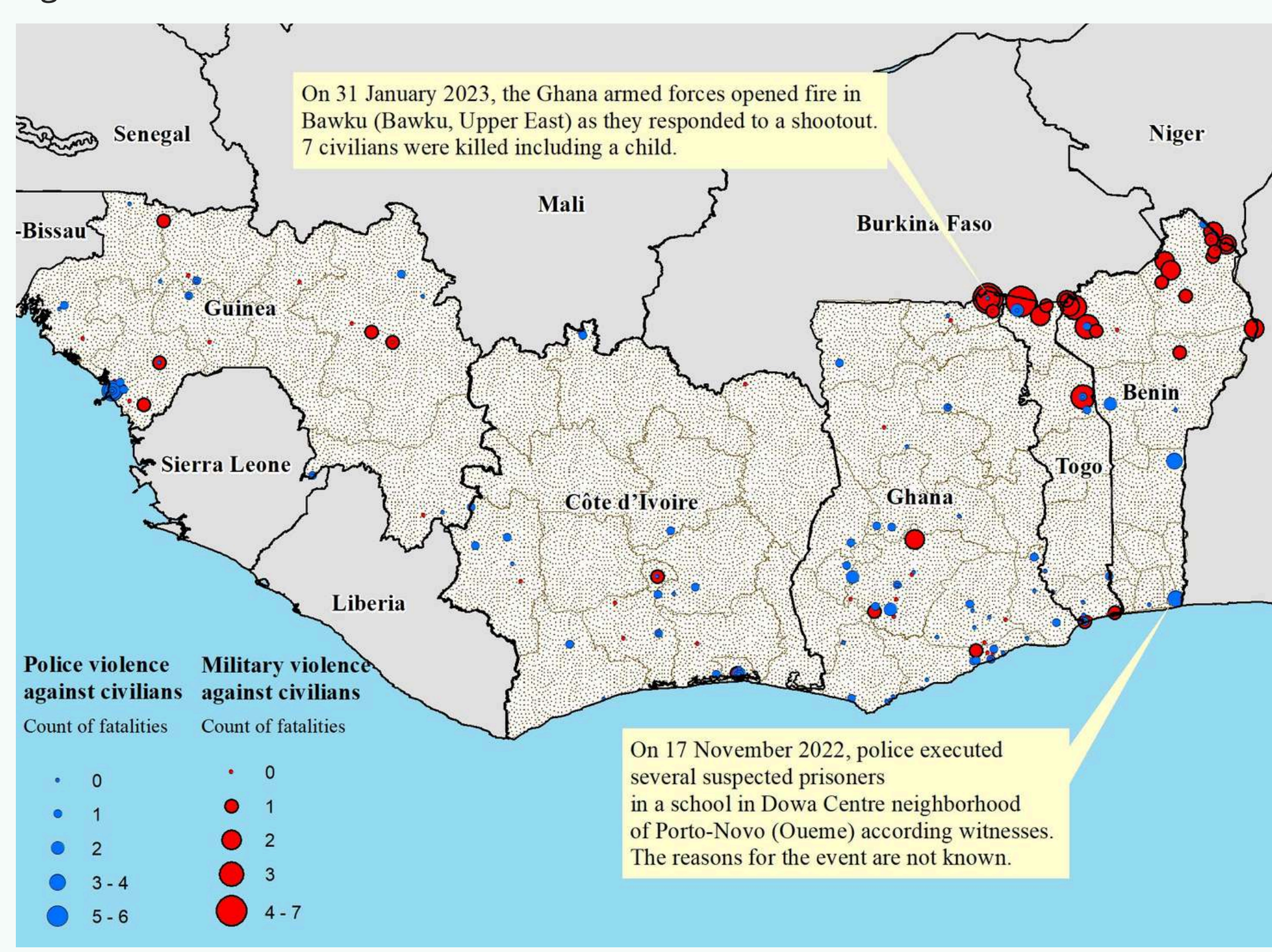
## FINDINGS: POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF FRAGILITY

Equally important to social and economic factors of fragility are direct interactions between citizens and the state forces manifested in **security apparatus**. Currently, deteriorating civil-security relationship drives mistrust towards police and military institutions in the region.

For many communities in the **northern regions**, historically neglected by the state, presence of uniformed personnel represented the first they had seen of state engagement in the region. The sudden build-up of check points on previously established trade-routes, as well as take over of public infrastructure (schools, community centers, hospitals etc) by security personnel in cases of long term deployments created massive **resentment** against the security forces. This has been exacerbated by security transgressions of civilian rights, extortions and bribery at checkpoints and information clampdowns around security operations.

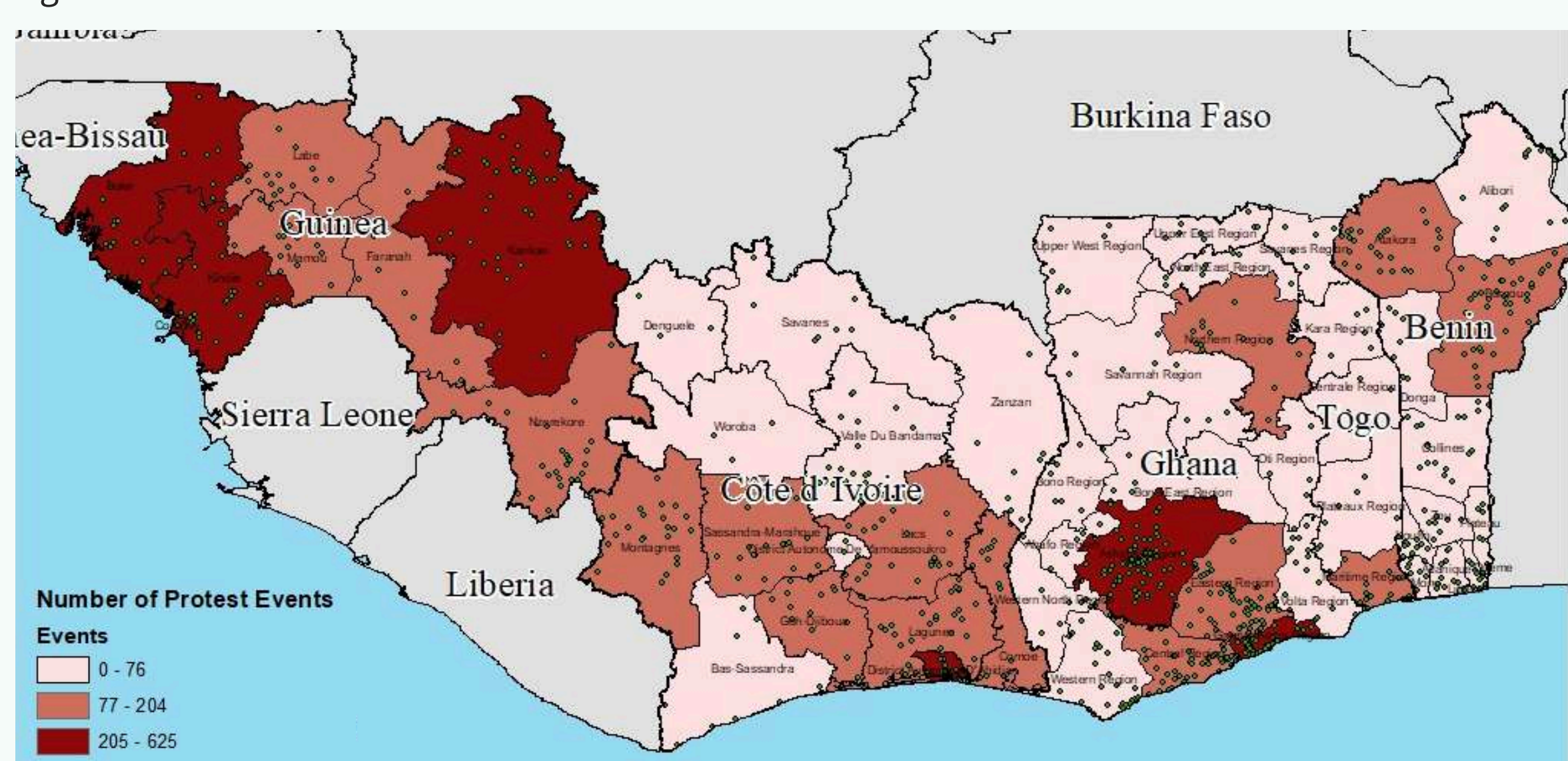
*Figure 4* reflects instances in which state security forces used **targeted violence against civilians**. A significant focus of policy interventions in the region is professionalizing the security forces' capacities to better protect borders. However, noting the violence against civilians perpetuated by the security forces themselves, equal attention needs to be paid to driving security sector governance and reform, as well as **civilian accountability mechanisms** for the security apparatus. This is to ensure US provided resources do not enable violence against civilians in the border communities, further driving their marginalization.

Figure 4. State-induced violence across CWA



## FINDINGS: SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF FRAGILITY

Figure 5. Protest Events across CWA



A crucial factor to understand mistrust against state institutions in the countries in CWA is the frequent **protests** by civilians against the ruling regimes. These range from reasons including the lack of infrastructure, to state excesses by security forces. *Figure 5* shows a heat map for civilian led protests between 2019 to March of 2024. As noted, protest intensity is not just a characteristic of regions in the north. In Ghana for instance, a high number of protests occur around its capital city of Accra. However, when thinking about **strengthening state capacity** in the northern regions, specific attention must be paid to provinces in Guinea (Kankan, Boko and Kindia) and Benin (Atacora and Bogo) in terms of addressing existing grievances of civilians against the state.

On the other hand, comparative absence of protest events should not be treated as an indicator of stability, considering stark differences in **regime types** across the five countries. For example, when analysing Togo, it is important to keep in mind the repressive nature of the ruling regime, which consequently affects the ability of citizens to participate in public governance processes. In Guinea, which is currently ruled by military junta and undergoes a democratic transition process, presence of protest events indicates rather a power vacuum.

## CONCLUSION & POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the SPCPS country plan on Coastal West Africa focuses on expanding partnerships in the region to prevent the emergence or spread of violent extremism from the central Sahel region. The plan highlights the geographical focus of the threat at the northern borders of the CWA region, where Ghana, Togo, and Cote d'Ivoire share porous borders with frequent cross-border movements and exchange of goods as well as families living across state borders. Commonly, the northern areas in these countries lack government presence and suffer from impoverished civilian communities, leading to limited access to essential social services, infrastructure, and security. As instability and violent extremist activities in the Sahel region escalate, Ghana, Togo, and Côte d'Ivoire have deployed their military forces to the north, often resulting in negative interactions with local populations. Violent extremism in CWA must be understood through its broader economic, political and social motivations. It isn't always ideological or religious reasons that drive recruitment into VEOs in CWA.

- Develop **comprehensive contextual assessments** of the operational area, focusing on internal grievances that become potential drivers of VE recruitment in the northern communities of CWA region
- Utilise geo-spatial analysis not only to understand hotspots of conflict and fragility, but also to contextualise existing and future **development projects** to target the needs of border communities
- Prioritise **improvement of civil-security relationship** through establishment of civilian accountability measures, human rights curriculum and civilian harm mitigation capacity in security institutions

Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), available at: [acleddata.com](http://acleddata.com); Global Database of Political Administrative Boundaries Database, available at: [geoboundaries.org](http://geoboundaries.org); Multidimensional Poverty Index, available at: [undp.org](http://undp.org); The U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (formerly known as GFA), available at: [state.gov](http://state.gov).

## SOURCES