

APPG for Africa: Briefing on the growing crisis in the Sahel

12/11/2020

Description: With UK troops due to deploy before the end of the year to the region of which the UN Humanitarian Chief warned 'nothing scares me more', this briefing in partnership with Crisis Action will inform Parliamentarians and participants about the growing crisis in the Sahel region of Africa (particularly Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger), the risks it poses, and what the UK can do about it. The panel will include experts with a focus on the security, human rights and humanitarian aspects of the crisis, including voices from leading organisations working on the ground. Following the panel there will be an opportunity for discussion and Q&A.

Chair: Lord McConnell, Vice Chair of the APPG for Africa.

Speakers:

- **Dr Niagalé Bagayoko**, Chair, African Security Sector Network: overview of the Sahel crisis, the key root causes and issues, and the People's Coalition recommendations
- **Maureen Magee**, Regional Director, Central and West Africa, Norwegian Refugee Council: the humanitarian crisis in the Sahel region
- **Ousmane Diallo**, West Africa Researcher, Amnesty International: human rights abuses in the Sahel and the need to combat impunity
- **Dr Alex Vines OBE**, Director, Africa Programme, Chatham House: the UK interests and role in the Sahel and the need for a comprehensive political strategy

TOPLINES

On the overview of the Sahel crisis and key root causes

- The Sahel crisis is complex and multidimensional, and despite all the efforts of regional and international actors, the response has not been effective to tackle insecurity and more generally the crisis.
- The **humanitarian need** is enormous and growing: [13.4 million people](#) in need of urgent humanitarian assistance across the Central Sahel: the equivalent of the residents of London, Manchester and Newcastle combined.
- Civilians face **threats to their lives and human rights abuses** not just from a variety of different jihadist groups (who also fight amongst themselves), but from local 'self defence' groups and militia, rebel groups and national security forces.
 - Since 2020, abuses perpetrated by the Sahelian military operations against civilians has exceeded the impact of extremist armed groups: more than 25% of people who were forced to flee their home in 2019 fled military operations.

- Abuses have largely been met by impunity – partly due to vested interests from regional governments (links between executive and military), but also as a result of logistical difficulties and lack of funding
- This **impunity** erodes the trust of the population in their government and security forces.
- Years of military and counterterrorism responses, mostly led by France, have not led to more safety for civilians in the region, or greater security. The generic response to the crisis in Sahel has been too focused on counterterrorism and a more militarised approach.
 - Jihadist groups are only one among the many actors affecting the civilian population today and insecurity is a symptom rather than a cause of the problem. There is a need to tackle the structural causes of insecurity (weak governance, widespread poverty etc.)
 - There is a need to recalibrate the response: the UK needs to use all the tools in its toolbox, invest in security but also diplomacy, humanitarian assistance, long-term development and supporting community-based conflict resolution mechanisms
- There is a need for a strengthened and joint action of regional actors, notably ECOWAS.
- Local populations hold their own solutions – they need to be supported, consulted and listened to. NGOs encouraged the UK to work in partnership with the People’s Coalition for the Sahel, advocating for an answer to the crisis that will put the protection of civilians first, by developing a comprehensive political strategy to respond to the crisis, in addressing notably the governance challenges, increasing humanitarian access and combatting impunity.

UK role

- The UK is deploying 300 personnel to support the MINUSMA peacekeeping mission in Mali before the end of the year, as part of a broader pivot to a new Sahel strategy, including military, development and diplomatic engagement.
- Britain has clear interests in the Sahel:
 - Relationship with France, EU and European partners: Sahel matters to them
 - As a permanent member of the UNSC
 - Economic interests in the region (including Senegal, Mauritania and Mali)
 - The risk of a dramatic deterioration in Burkina Faso threatening to spill over into the wider region, including Ghana
- The UK can use its leadership voice in the upcoming COP, the G20 meetings and its presidency in 2021 of the G7 to make sure that the humanitarian needs in the Sahel remain in the agenda. The UK will need to develop an integrated strategy, bringing development, diplomacy as well as security.

FULL NOTES

Kick-off video: a filmed intervention by Pastor Victor Ouedraogo, Director of the Diocesan Centre for Communication in Burkina Faso

- The Sahel is in crisis, linked to insecurity.
- The causes of this insecurity include structural causes but also socio-cultural causes.
- Today many partners and states are intervening to help the Sahel: civil society call upon to all actors and partners to put human security and the protection of civilians at their heart of their intervention.

- The priority, both in terms of political and financial focus, has been the fight against terrorism and extremism. It's important, but it must not overshadow the protection of civilians. The understanding of security needs to be extended: must take into account humanitarian needs, the protection of human rights and the security of the population.
- Interventions must be measured and assessed against the key criteria of civilian protection and human security.

Dr Niagalé Bagayoko, Chair, African Security Sector Network: overview of the Sahel crisis, the key root causes and issues, and the People's Coalition recommendations.

- Overview of the diversity and complexity of actors.
 - o Jihadist groups: very active in the region, but it is not a uniform category: differences between their ideologies and their targets.
 - o The two major jihadi groups operating today in the Sahel are:
 - **Nusrat al-Islam**: affiliated with Al-Qaeda, and mostly targeting international forces and all state representatives (national army, governors, teachers).
 - Talks with this group started under Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta's regime, before the coup. Talks initiated following the recommendations of a National inclusive Dialogue. Necessity to open dialogue was again mentioned in the roadmap which was adopted after the coup of August 2020.
 - **Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS)**: the Sahelian branch of the Islamic State. International Coalition for the Sahel decided to focus on the eradication of this group in the three-border region.
 - These two groups are fighting each other since the beginning of the 2020.
 - o Rebel groups: some of them claim autonomy, particularly on territories in Northern Mali. Complex geopolitics: some groups are competing each other, they did or didn't sign the 2015 Peace agreement (Algiers Agreement), they are more or less closed to the national authorities
 - o Self-defence groups and militias: particularly present in Burkina Faso and central Mali. Based on community affiliations. Some of those groups are extremely violent.
 - o Unidentified armed groups: targeting populations, including their belonging live stocks
 - o National security forces: responsible for abuses too.
- Civilians are the target and the primary victims of these groups.
 - o We need a comprehensive response, not only a counterterrorism one, but a response to the civilian protection crisis, based on 4 pillars:
 - 1) The protection of civilians
 - 2) Developing a political strategy (including how to address governance challenges)
 - 3) Responding to the humanitarian crisis
 - 4) Fight against impunity

Maureen Magee, Regional Director, Central and West Africa, Norwegian Refugee Council: the humanitarian crisis in the Sahel region

- As of today they are [13.4 million people](#) in need of urgent humanitarian assistance across the Central Sahel: the equivalent of the residents of London, Manchester and Newcastle combined.
- [1.6 million](#) people have been forced to flee their homes.
- A face behind these figures: Zambéné was displaced from Dénon village in Burkina Faso. He is married with 7 children. He told us, “Armed men arrived in the village looking for men, 10 men were killed during that day, I survived through hiding and that same night I left the village and walked for five days. When I arrived in Kongoussi, I had no food, water or shelter. I remember when it first rained, we were not able to sleep, as the makeshift plastic sheeting we had was leaking and we couldn’t all fit inside.”
- There are tens of thousands of other families who still haven’t had any support and a safe and dignified place to sleep.
- In Mali, 193,000 people were displaced this year alone, many of them have been displaced two or three times: it shows the vicious circle of violence and the extreme vulnerability of the populations.
- Education in the region is in peril: in Mali, and more recently in Burkina Faso, there are direct attacks on teachers and schools.
 - o Over [4,000 schools](#) were closed due to conflict and violence against schools before Covid, where most of the schools closed.
 - o Today, [55% of children](#) are out of school in Central Sahel.
- Covid19: luckily the direct health impact has not been to date as bad as we have feared. However, secondary impacts notably the socio-economic one is extremely severe. Since the pandemic, host communities are now afraid of displaced people coming in, and less likely to offer employment.
- Covid19 will have a longer-term impact in the region. As the donor countries are facing a socio-economic crisis due to Covid, they could deprioritise region like the Sahel leaving people in need behind.
- The UK can have a strong role in ensuring the Sahel is not forgotten – the UK is engaged in many conferences coming up, and can use its leadership role to maintain focus on the Sahel, including at the G20 Summit, the COP climate conference, and the upcoming presidency of the G7 to make sure that the humanitarian needs in the Sahel remain in the agenda.
- To date, the overarching focus of the international community, largely led by France, has been on counter-terrorism and security in the Sahel. However, years of militarized action has not translated into more safety for civilians. There is a need to recalibrate international assistance, providing a comprehensive humanitarian response, investing in longer term development, and supporting community-based conflict-resolution efforts.
- The UK has the expertise and convening power to shift communications, balance-out the security approach.
 - o The appointment of Nick Dyer as the UK's first Special Envoy for Famine Prevention and Humanitarian Affairs is a great opportunity, as he has been already engaged in the Sahel.

Ousmane Diallo - researcher for Amnesty International in the West and Central Africa Regional Office: impunity and conflict prevention.

- The complexity of the security crisis is due to the plurality of actors.
- Since 2017, there has been an increase of negative impacts of military operations on civilians.

- Since 2020, abuses perpetrated by the Sahelian military operations against civilians has exceeded the impact of extremist armed groups. Partly due to an urge to produce more results after the Pau summit.
- The issue is military interventions come with human rights violations, enforced disappearances and extrajudicial killings.
- It is not a new phenomenon, but it is sharply increasing. There has been premises of national investigation but rarely a judicial follow up, leading to penal responsibility being found. Also investigations from MINUSMA, submitted to judicial courts in Mali... still no follow-up so far.
 - Why there are no follow-up? Because of the close links between the executive and the army. But also due to logistical difficulties. For instance, in the three-border area, state presence is very limited. Even local councillors have fled. There is only a military presence. State representatives often cannot go themselves (due to insecurity risks, lack of resources and institutional design) on the ground to investigate incidents in remoted areas.
 - **This impunity has a wider negative impact: it erodes the trust of the population in their government and security forces.**
- It is important that the UK, contributing to the UN mission in Mali, also supports judiciary institutions (training, capacity building, but also advocating towards national governments to put an end to impunity).
 - It is important because even when human-rights organisations (such as the Niger Commission for Human-Rights, the constitutional agency in charge of protection human-rights) document and find the army guilty, there are no follow-up because of the reluctance of governments.
 - It is important that the UK engage with the Nigerien government on this issue.

Dr Alex Vines OBE, Director, Africa Programme, Chatham House: the UK interests and role in the Sahel and the need for a comprehensive political strategy

- British engagement in the Sahel is deepening as we speak. The British task group contributing to MINUSMA will be upgraded further than it was: last month the Ministry of Defence announced that 300 personnel deployed (before 250). Task group will help in training local army.
- It is part of the broader pattern: the UK is supporting France in Mali (operation Barkhane), that commitment was renewed its commitment this year.
- It fits more broadly in a pivot around a new Sahel strategy which was adopted after tremendous debate in the Whitehall. The revised strategy is more defined than the previous one and underpins military and development engagements but also significant investment in the diplomatic network (extension of embassies in the region).
 - This increased financial investment is due to a redirection of strategic focus, notably from the Zimbabwe towards the Sahel.
- Despite the latter, the UK ambition for the Sahel is decreasing: there will be less money, less people. So the question is how can you do things well with less resources but more focus?
- It can become of a strength if there is a comprehensive prioritisation, including around the question of the security/development nexus.
 - **The British engagement should not just be about security, it is about getting development in difficult and dangerous places**
- What are the interests of the UK in investing in the Sahel?

- In a Brexit environment, the relationships with France, the EU and member states are really important, and the Sahel really matters for the UK European partners.
- The UK is a permanent member of the UNSC, where there is a lot of discussion on the Sahel. Investing in the Sahel would enable the UK to share responsibility and leadership, as well as have independent thinking in that regard.
- There are economic interest growing in the Sahel: Senegal and Mauritania have more economic ties with the UK (the involvement of BP for instance). There is also more commercial interest between Mali and the UK and France (e.g. mining companies listed in London producing gold in Mali and Burkina Faso). The UK is probably even more economically integrated in the region than France.
- Finally, the importance of this region for containing the situation: the situation is dramatically deteriorating in Burkina Faso and is threatening to spill over into Ghana
- The UK will need to develop an integrated strategy, bringing development, diplomacy as well as security.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

Q - Nick Wescott: Insecurity is a symptom rather than a cause of the problem, and if you tackle only the security issues, you don't get at the core of the problem, that is partly development but also fundamentally political. Governments are not able to assure the security of their own citizens. It is both a security problem -their armies are not effective even sometimes counterproductive- and a political challenge. The G5 Sahel, primarily a security body, but also all regional countries (Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Nigeria...) now have an interest to improve security in the Sahel. Local conflict resolution mechanisms can work sometimes but in Mali, jihadist groups are killing those trying to implement them. A lot of foreign intervention (MINUSMA, Barkhane, two European task force...), but none of them are truly affecting the situation. Can a wider international intervention move more to the political sphere to resolve the security dilemmas?

Q - John Sandwich: There was one aspect missing from the briefings: the Khartoum process, an EU program to monitor migration. Sahel is a source of migration although decreasing today. Comment?

Q - Joe Gazeley: given the recent coup in Mali, is it appropriate for the UK to be involved in military operations, and If so, how we can use our influence to encourage the return of democracy in a normal constitutional life?

A – Niagale Bagayoko:

On regional actors:

- A multiplicity of actors in the region and the G5 Sahel is a new one. Its creation might be due to Mauritania, one of the biggest supporters of the project, since it is not a member of ECOWAS.
- Insecurity is spreading to neighbouring countries member of ECOWAS. There is another conflict around the Lake Chad region. ECOWAS needs to step in in the region.
- There is a need for more coherence and joint action of all the regional actors.
- Globally, need to recognise a collective failure, of all stakeholders. The problem is generic approach and understanding of the situation which is mainly focused on security issues.

- Even the security approach itself is flawed: reinforcing the capacity of the military is not enough if you do not take into account their formation and accountability on human rights and protection of civilians, or if you don't consider the context of poor governance (huge budget diversions). And the security actors are not only the military, but also the police, the penal chain etc.
- There is a need today to refocus the approach on the protection of civilians.

A – Maureen: on the issue of migration:

- Coming from the humanitarian perspective, we have to intervene in a context modelled by a political agenda, but we just focus on ensuring people are not suffering,
- Need for a political situation, investment in development BUT ALSO immediate humanitarian response.
- **More than 25% of people who were forced to flee their home in 2019 fled military operations.** Again the issue is to protect populations not chasing designated terrorists.
- Conflict is interdimensional, there are growing tensions between communities. The conflict is so complex that we need to use all the tools of the toolbox, including diplomacy, development, humanitarian assistance, military.

Q- Lord Chidgey: Should we concentrate much more on rebuilding civilian structure and organisations? It is almost insulting to not consider that the local community does not have the capacity to deal with their own affairs – they just need the means.

Q - Frank Judd: How the election of Joe Biden is going to affect the US policy and the situation in the Sahel?

A- Ousmane Dialo:

- Regarding the question of Joe Gazeley: it depends on the approach of the government (the US stopped all military partnership with Mali while EUTM is still present but downgraded its relationship). EUTM is a wise decision because the coup is a symptom of the collective defeat. It is good to probably downscale military intervention while starting a political dialogue with the transitional authorities before going fully back in.
- Regarding the question of Lord Chidgey: in the Sahelian rural areas, the state is seen as an external apparatus because sometimes there is a language and knowledge gap between local communities and the state. They don't know their rights towards the state and its institutions, they prefer traditional and communitarian institutions. Need for more synergy between the different type of institutions and communitarian and traditional institutions shouldn't be forgotten as key player in these areas.

A – Alex Vines:

- Regarding military training, it has been highly unsuccessful. At the end it seems it was more a training for the protection of elites than the population. The military is still contested and seen as illegitimate.
- **We have been encouraging fragile state to become brutal state:** the only institution that kind of work is the military, but work not that effectively and even counterproductively (i.e. human

rights abuses). We need to rethink on how to build long-term and effective institutions and not just the military.

- The US policy in the Sahel should remain under the Biden presidency. The US footprint in Niger is a lot about North Africa and notably Libya.

A – Maureen Magee:

- In agreement that the local populations hold their own solution provided they are supported and enabled to solve them, that is why we need to work in partnership with the People's Coalition for the Sahel.