



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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April 3, 2020

The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' (USCCB) Committee on International Justice and Peace (CIJP), I write to express my concern about the growing conflict and loss of life in the Sahel countries of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger and the risk of its spread to neighboring countries such as Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire to propose recommendations on how the U.S. government can further address this conflict (see attached Policy Framework). I am keenly aware of the potential crisis the coronavirus will inflict not only on our own country, which is far more able to respond, but also especially in Africa where many of the poorest people in the world live. I want to thank Congress and the Administration for the allocations for countries overseas and hope that we can work together to complement those funds in phase four of the coronavirus response plans.

Returning to the Sahel, the outbreak of violent conflict in Mali in 2012 triggered by the return of Tuareg militia from Libya after the fall of the Khadafi regime was in fact the fourth rebellion in the northern region of Mali since 1962. At its core, this recurring conflict stems from a persistent problem of poor governance. 90% of Mali's population, mostly sedentary farmers, live in the southern 1/3 of the country and dominate the central government. The government of Mali has never built a just and sustainable social contract that recognizes the legitimate aspirations of the people in northern Mali, especially the Tuareg, for self-autonomy, inclusive government, local justice and adequate social services. After each rebellion, the government and the people in the North signed agreements, the latest in 2015, designed to address these grievances and aspirations, yet, these agreements have been ignored or violated.

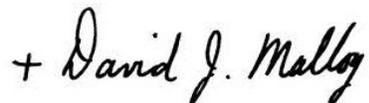
The outbreak of conflict in 2012 turned radically more threatening when Al Qaeda and ISIS took advantage of the instability, entered the area, and took control over most of the North. Worse yet, these extremist groups have capitalized on the long-standing grievances of the indigenous peoples in northern Mali and won their support and/or acquiescence by offering security, justice and social services, all but destroying the government's credibility. Armed groups have expanded this strategy into central Mali and Burkina Faso to form common cause with Fulani communities and have conducted additional deadly attacks in Niger. Even though the French, the European Union, the G-5 five Sahel countries, and most recently the African Union have deployed thousands of troops to the region, the number of these attacks has doubled every year since 2015; fatalities increased from 225 to 2,000, and 900,000 people have been displaced. Thus, the violence now threatens the entire Sahel and even coastal countries like Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Ghana and Benin.

In his 2020 address to the diplomatic corps in Rome, Pope Francis stated “...it is painful to witness, particularly in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Nigeria, continuing episodes of violence against innocent people, including many Christians persecuted and killed for their fidelity to the Gospel. I urge the international community to support the efforts made by these countries to eliminate the scourge of terrorism... we need to implement practical strategies aimed not only at increased security, but at reducing poverty, improving healthcare systems, favouring development and humanitarian assistance, and promoting good governance and civil rights. These are the pillars of authentic social development.”

The Committee on International Justice and Peace has been engaged with the Bishops’ Conference of Mali since 2013 at the beginning of the current deadly round of violence. We worked with the Church to develop policy points that we communicated to State Department in April of that year. Last year, CIJP staff participated in meetings with partners to develop new regional level strategies in programming, fund raising, communications, and advocacy to address the conflict. They then met with bishops from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to develop shared plans that they have now started to initiate. The attached Policy Framework is the product of these comprehensive consultations which I propose for your consideration.

I and the Committee staff are ready to meet and work with you, others in the Africa Bureau, as well as USAID to reinforce our efforts to address this conflict along with the violence preventing violence coastal in Nigeria that threaten the peace and stability of the entire Sahel region.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ David J. Malloy". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Most Reverend David J. Malloy
Bishop of Rockford
Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace

Policy Framework to Build Peace in the Sahel

In response to the conflict in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops proposes the recommendations below. These recommendations are derived from consultations with the local Catholic Church and are based on principles of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). CST urges respect for the principle of Subsidiarity -- – solving problems at as local a level as possible, valuing participation and decentralization, and inclusive governance that grants power and resources to people so that they can shape their own destiny.

The Catholic Church also emphasizes the crucial role of the state to ensure peace, the rule of law, and respect for human and civil rights. As such, it prioritizes dialogue and negotiations to resolve conflict and foster sustainable peace by rebuilding social cohesion between communities in conflict and leading them to reconciliation.

The Committee on International Justice and Peace urges the United States government to work with the European Union, the French government, the Africa Union, and the Sahel G-5 countries to support programs and progress in the following areas:

A. General Security, Political and Social Structures

1. Governments in the region should collaborate with civil society and faith-based groups to win back credibility by reestablishing the full range of government services, directed and staffed by local authorities. Priority should be placed on justice and the rule of law, to enable health structures, schools, and effective programs to promote employment and micro-enterprise skills among youth and women.
2. State military and police forces should prioritize the protection of communities, partnering with them to understand their needs and getting their buy-in on any security measures adopted. Any military/police action taken to prevent attacks should be proportionate, fully respecting human and civil rights.
3. Governments in the region should carefully control and limit the creation of armed self-defense forces to prevent their operating outside the rule of law.
4. Incentivize the Malian government to fully implement the 2015 Peace Agreement to:
 - a. Improve political inclusion and self-determination through decentralization of local government, election of local representatives with appropriate decision-making powers, and revenue generation.
 - b. Reform central government institutions by including northern communities.

B. In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, there is a long history of solidarity, dialogue and collaboration between Muslim and Christian religious leaders. These leaders are held up as credible and trustworthy advocates for their people and their institutions are valued for their service to people living in poverty and violence.

The Committee urges the United States and the international community to:

1. Assist religious leaders to implement an education/media program that constructs a new narrative countering extremist ideologies with messages of a return to traditional values of solidarity, collaboration, mutual support and social cohesion.
2. Start inter-faith led programs to end conflict that divides local communities along religious lines and instead, rebuild inter-community cohesion to counter future attempts to stir up violence. This is particularly important in the Middle Belt of Mali between the Fulani herders and the Dogon and Bambara communities. In Burkina Faso this kind of inter-faith peacebuilding is crucial in the North and East of the country where the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel is fueling conflict between Muslim and Christian communities.
3. Develop programs that offer youth (both men and women), education, particularly vocational and entrepreneurial skills training; employment assistance, and funding that will give them opportunities for a better future.
4. Organize National Youth Forums, gatherings and conferences for young people on social cohesion.
5. Institute programs for former young recruits of armed groups to re-integrate into their former communities and for communities to better assimilate former combatants.
6. Continue to provide humanitarian and recovery assistance for the victims and communities in conflict.
7. Maintain development programs in areas of stability to help communities to build the resilience needed to resist and/or recover from efforts to create conflict.
8. Integrate peacebuilding and social cohesion programs into all humanitarian and development programs.
9. Prepare for the Possible Expansion of Conflict into Coastal Countries: support early warning systems for violence in coastal countries such as USAID's Reacting to Early Warning and Response Data in West Africa Program (REWARD) and expand programming that prevents and mitigates conflict such as those that strengthen community bonds.

C. The Committee urges the United States to assist the Catholic Church in collaboration with its inter-faith and civil society partners in the three countries to develop an effective structure and campaign of advocacy towards those governments in the Sahel to encourage them to implement the peace accord in Mali and other responsibilities enumerated in Section A above.