



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on the Crisis in Mali
February 2013

“Turning to sub-Saharan Africa, I encourage the efforts being made to build peace, especially in those places where the wounds of war remain open and where their grave humanitarian consequences are being felt. Mali is also torn by violence and marked by a profound institutional and social crisis, one which calls for the effective attention of the international community.

--Pope Benedict XVI, January 7, 2013

BACKGROUND

Conflict in the north is not new to Mali. For decades Malian government regimes dominated by Sub-Saharan ethnic groups in southern Mali have oppressed the Tuareg and Moorish peoples in the north. The governments failed to implement development and political reform programs in the north due to mismanagement and corruption. These governments also used violent and destabilizing divide-and-rule tactics among northern groups.

In January 2012, Tuareg (an ethnic group indigenous to northern Mali and Niger) militia, united under the banner of the National Movement for the Liberation of the Azawad (MNLA), attacked Malian military forces and in three months took over the less populated northern two-thirds of the country.

The outbreak of the armed revolt was fueled by several factors. In June 2011, a large, heavily armed group of Tuareg fighters left Libya after the fall of the Gaddafi regime and returned to Mali. As far back as 2003 Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) also moved into northern Mali to escape Algerian government anti-terrorism operations and to take advantage of the insecurity in Mali to conduct kidnappings and drug trafficking operations in order to raise funds.

After MNLA took over the north, AQIM then started supporting two Malian-based Islamist groups, Ansar Dine and the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa, allowing them to build significant militia forces that eventually took control over northern Mali from the MNLA forces by the end of June 2012.

During this same period, in response to the humiliating loss of control of the northern part of the country and the lack of government action, in March 2012 a group of junior Malian military officers used these developments as a pretext to overthrow the government of Amadou Toumani Touré one month before a presidential election. In the face of universal international condemnation, subsequently the coup was ended with an agreement on an interim government brokered by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The civil war and the establishment of sharia law by radical Muslim groups in the north forced about 265,000 people to flee northern Mali to neighboring countries while another 185,800 fled to southern Mali.

At the request of the Malian interim government, France and the AU, the UN Security Council passed a resolution stating its “readiness” to support a military force of 3,000 West African troops into northern Mali to end the rebellion. This force, assisted by France, the European Union and the United States was to arrive by September 2013. In January 2013 Islamist forces in the north launched an offensive into southern Mali threatening to topple the government in the capital Bamako. The interim Malian Government called on French military forces which quickly counterattacked to stop the offensive and to bomb Islamist bases in the north. Al Qaeda forces retaliated by attacking a natural gas installation in Algeria, killing a number of Algerian and foreign hostages including Americans.

The Catholic Church in Mali

After the March 2012 coup d'état, Catholic, Muslim and Protestant religious leaders formed a coalition (The Holy Union of Religious Leaders) and held a mass meeting of their faith communities in the national stadium in Bamako. They urged rebel leaders to restrain their forces so humanitarian assistance could reach those in need, asked national leaders to prioritize the common good of the country and negotiate a peaceful end to the crisis, and pressed neighboring countries to support Malians in their efforts to resolve the crisis in the north through concerted action and negotiations. They met with members of the military regime and other political leaders to promote calm, restraint and dialogue to resolve the political crisis and the fighting in the north.

The Catholic Bishop's Conference of Mali (CEM) convened two General Assemblies to emphasize the need for a united government, religious freedom in a secular state, territorial integrity, dialogue, and tolerance to preserve unity in diversity. They urged political leaders and members of the military to build peace, reconciliation and national unity.

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) has had a presence in Mali since 2006. CRS partners primarily with the Church to support programs in agriculture, health, water and sanitation, education and micro-finance. Since the outbreak of civil war in the north, CRS has had to close its operations there, but has intervened to assist internally displaced people fleeing the north.

USCCB Position

The USCCB is working with the Church in Mali to develop a policy framework to guide our advocacy. A preliminary policy framework asks the United States, in collaboration with the European Union, France and the UN, to work with Malian authorities to:

1. Provide adequate development and emergency relief to Mali and to neighboring countries for refugees and displaced people in order to avert a major crisis and the resulting social unrest;
2. In line with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and Mali government Framework Agreement of April 6, 2012, establish and strengthen a stable, legitimate interim government that will conduct a national dialogue with civil society and religious leaders to build national unity and develop a roadmap to a return to elections and full constitutional, democratic rule;
3. Support military reform that promotes full subordination to civilian leaders and a unified and disciplined force of officers and soldiers trained in their responsibility to protect the human rights of Malians in the north and south;
4. Promote sustained, long term dialogue between southern leaders and northern leaders with a goal to negotiate a peaceful end to the rebellion, disarmament of northern militia, a commitment to cut links to AQIM, and reunification under an agreement granting power sharing and self-determination;
5. Support engagement of religious leaders to ensure their participation in civil society rebuilding and to continue their peacebuilding and reconciliation initiatives;
6. Develop a carefully balanced strategy to the crisis that addresses the threat of AQIM, and the root causes of the crisis of poor governance;
7. Only consider the use of force as a last resort after all other avenues of negotiation have been exhausted and in accordance with just war criteria and limit U.S. military support to logistical and non-lethal aid;
8. Preposition humanitarian relief supplies, in the event of war, to manage widespread casualties and flows of refugees to Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and internally displaced to southern Mali; and
9. Work with regional leaders to curtail the drug trafficking routes and cut financing to AQIM.

RESOURCES: Visit: www.usccb.org/about/international-justice-and-peace/ or www.usccb.org/globalpoverty/
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