



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

Background on Peace in the Sahel Initiative February 2020

I address a special thought to dear Burkina Faso, who for some time has been tried by recurrent violence... I entrust to the Lord all the victims, the wounded, the numerous displaced persons and those who suffer from these tragedies. I appeal to (civil and religious authorities) to multiply their efforts, in the spirit of the Abu Dhabi Document on Human Brotherhood, to promote interreligious dialogue and harmony." --Pope Francis, The Joy of the Gospel, 2013, no. 59

In December 2019 Alioune Tine, a UN Independent Expert of Human Rights, reported, "I am gravely concerned at the continuing deterioration of the overall security situation, which has now reached a critical threshold." This crisis has grown despite a peace agreement signed between the government of Mali and two coalitions of rebel groups in 2015. The agreement was supposed to end an insurrection that began in 2012 which resulted in the virtual rebel takeover of the northern half of Mali and almost resulted in the fall of the capital Bamako. The French army with logistical help from the United States halted the attack before it reached the city. Today, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies reports that violent attacks involving extremist groups based in Mali have spread to central Mali and into Burkina Faso and Niger. These attacks have doubled every year since 2015 while fatalities increased from 225 to 2,000 and 900,000 people have been uprooted from their homes.

Research identified numerous reasons for the failure of the 2015 peace agreement:

- The 2012 revolt was the fourth large-scale upsurge of violence based on political, economic, and social grievances dating back to the colonial period, but past agreements were never respected.
- There is a constantly changing plethora of armed groups based in the North – some locally-based, home grown groups searching for independence, some others fighting for greater autonomy and self-rule while remaining part of Mali. Other armed groups who follow no political agenda conduct terrorist attacks aimed at overthrowing the current regimes in the Sahel or creating a chaos. These more extreme groups may profess an extremist religious ideology, but really work to exploit ethnic grievances or religious differences to win recruits. They also conduct criminal activities (especially illicit gold mining) to finance their group.
- The Malian Government included the separatists and groups searching for self-autonomy in the 2015 peace agreement negotiations. It excluded the extremists even though some of them formed alliances with local Malian groups and had won their support.
- Despite a strong military response that includes the Malian army, 4,500 French soldiers, 5,000 G-5 Sahel troops, and 15,000 UN forces, insecurity continues to increase. The United States military operates a drone base in Agadez, Niger and conducts counter-terrorism "advise and assist" operations, although the death of four Americans in Niger in 2017 has led some people to believe that the U.S. does conduct combat operations.
- Subsequent to the peace agreement, the separatist and extremist groups fragmented further, fought among themselves, and formed new alliances., New groups, most notably the Islamic State in the Greater Sahel, entered the scene. Shifting alliances and the new groups have greatly complicated the implementation of the peace deal and weaken the commitment of those who were a party to it.
- The peace agreement produced aspirations for political reform, decentralization and increased economic development to address the many grievances, but left implementation details for later negotiations. The parties to the agreement have set up some structures for negotiations and reconciliation but more progress is needed to find sustainable political solutions.

- Currently, the incentives to implement the peace agreement need to be strengthened because some parties seem more interested in the process as a tactical measure giving time to gain military advantages like additional territory and financial resources that then could provide greater leverage in a final strategic peace agreement.

Shortly after the agreement was approved extremist groups expanded their attacks into central Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. The attacks seem designed to target traditional forms of authority, ignite new grievances, and provoke conflict between Muslim and Christian communities where there have not been issues in the past. The violence has killed hundreds of people and closed down many schools.

The Catholic Church in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger is an important actor for peace despite its status as a minority faith community. In Mali Christians only make up 2% of the population; in Niger they are 1% and in Burkina Faso, Christians make up around 30% of the population (Catholics being 20%). Despite its size, the Catholic Church is a respected and important actor in society in all three countries, particularly in Burkina Faso and Mali. The Church wields this influence due to its united hierarchy, its large network of schools and health structures, and the ability to develop and communicate objective, moral, and realistic policies on important social and political issues. The Church is a leading party to inter-religious dialogue bodies and in inter-religious efforts to address social divisions and violence. As an example of the Church's importance, in June 2019, the President of Mali asked Cardinal Jean Zerbo, Archbishop of Bamako, to help calm tensions by joining in a visit to a village where a fatal attack had killed 35 people.

In reaction to the spread of attacks into central Mali and neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger, the Church in the region has begun to speak out more forcefully and has engaged with Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the USCCB to strengthen its capacity to promote peace through greater dialogue, outreach to governments, and programs to rebuild their societies torn apart by violence. In September 2019 CRS called a meeting of its leadership in the three countries, and technical experts in its headquarters office and the USCCB to develop programs to support the Church in its efforts to build peace. In November 2019 many of these same leaders from CRS and the USCCB met with the bishops from the three countries and their staff and produced a broad joint strategy to reinforce Church capacity to build peace, including plans to promote social cohesion, education, and humanitarian assistance programs.

The Church hopes to address the root causes of violence – like high rates of poverty and youth unemployment – in the three countries. Young people are especially vulnerable to recruitment from armed groups. That is why one of the objectives will be to increase livelihoods training for youth, including young women. The Church plans to continue collaborating with other Muslim and Christian leaders to work with the government(s) to address the grievances that have given rise to increased violence. To this end the Church may decide to: increase support to dialogue programs between ethnic groups who have been affected by violence; establish radio or other media programs to call their people back to their roots and history of peaceful coexistence; and continue to facilitate or mediate in negotiations between parties in conflict and then build reconciliation between these people; dialogue with the governments in the region about possible administrative and political reforms, etc.

The Church may also work with CRS and the USCCB to conduct missions to Europe and the United States to share their on-the-ground expertise with the international community and describe what the Church hopes to do to stop the violence and rebuild social cohesion. In the United States in particular, CRS and the USCCB will work with the Church to support increased funding for humanitarian, development and peacebuilding activities. CRS and the USCCB call on the U.S. government to balance its military interventions with an increased commitment to humanitarian, development, and social cohesion funding.

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