"Examining U.S. Foreign Assistance to Address the Root Causes of Instability and Conflict in Africa"

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Chairwoman Bass, Ranking Member Smith, distinguished members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to testify on how foreign assistance can alleviate the conditions that increase the risk of armed conflict in Africa. According to the International Monetary Fund, fragile and conflict-affected states may host 60% of the global poor by 2030. Nowhere is the specter of conflict derived from state fragility more acute than in sub-Saharan Africa, where 11 of the 15 most fragile states in the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index are located.

Internal and external pressures such as economic crises, food insecurity, climate security, corruption and governance challenges, and ethnic and faith-based societal divisions all contribute to uncertainty and ripen the environment for instability and conflict in Africa. Not one sector of development work is capable of "fixing" such a complex problem on its own, so the full spectrum of USAID's assistance - including and not limited to peacebuilding, governance assistance, food security, gender equality, health, and youth-centered programming - all must play part of a holistic, concerted effort. Addressing violence takes time and effort to understand the local context and work with local partner communities.

I am eager to describe the progress we are making on the implementation of the Global Fragility Act (GFA) through the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability. We are grateful for the bipartisan support of Congress which has enabled us to focus on implementing GFA as a flagship example of US assistance working "differently" in the interagency, with partner countries and local organizations in the lead, to collectively address the root causes of fragility and instability. Reinforcing the spirit of the GFA, the Agency is focusing on the localization of peacebuilding and local capacity development, helping our partners root out corruption in fragile environments, and starting early on planning, monitoring and evaluation, and strengthening partnerships in GFA countries.

I recently returned from a 3D (development, diplomacy, defense) leadership trip to Coastal West Africa, in the heart of prevention efforts under the GFA. We met with national and local leaders, private sector and civil society actors, young people and women peace builders, donors,

local security forces, and international partners - all eager to help us shape our commitment to 10-year country strategies to prevent conflict and promote stability. We heard diverse messages on the challenges faced in countries from Benin to Côte d'Ivoire to Togo. One unifying theme was clear: they want and need the United States to assist and partner with them, but they want to be in control of their own countries' development trajectory.

Leaders in these countries know they need to improve local governance and not just in service delivery, but in increasing trust and reinforcing social cohesion and resilience to stem the tide of social dynamics that lead to conflict. There is an understanding that transnational criminal actors and violent extremist organizations (VEOs) are seeking to take advantage of these fragile local situations, which can expand rapidly into a national crisis. They also know that a security response alone is not the answer and may backfire. I heard about predatory governance systems and corruption, democratic backsliding, and fraying social cohesion and trust among communities and between citizens and their governments.

I firmly believe the full range of U.S. foreign assistance, with an emphasis on USAID's social, political, and economic contributions, has a role to play in promoting stability and reducing the risk of violent extremism in sub-Saharan Africa; supporting partner governments to manage and transform conflict and violence; and ensuring communities are more resilient to recurrent threats. However, we cannot assume foreign assistance will solve Africa's intractable issues without concerted preventive diplomatic and security pressure.

In Coastal West Africa, we are seeing increasing reach by al-Qai'da in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) into these countries and recruitment of violent extremists as fighters or adherents. This is compounding longstanding development challenges as these groups exploit widespread marginalization to garner support and influence. During my trip, I heard how these countries are grappling with a range of factors undermining their stability, including: deeply rooted transnational criminal systems; natural resource conflicts; contentious and sometimes violent elections; deep political polarization often along ethnic, tribal, or religious lines; structural poverty and marginalization of minority groups; deeply entrenched gender inequalities; and a bulging youth population. Recognition of these challenges is coming from regional and national leadership and local organizations themselves . As a senior government official told me in Coastal West Africa, the extremists understand our youth much more than we do, and that's a problem.

In Benin, for example, between December 2021 and September 2022, al-Qa'ida affiliated militants launched at least 23 attacks against Benin Armed Forces (FAB), National Police, and civilians – resulting in numerous casualties, destruction of property, and theft of military equipment. At the same time, in Benin and elsewhere, I heard concerning reports of security forces targeting Fulbe communities, which could lead to further isolation and radicalization

among an already marginalized population. This is an important element to countering militants - security forces must work together with communities, adopt conflict sensitive and human rights approaches, and be seen as part of the solution, not as part of the problem. The region where these attacks are occurring is beset by armed group movements and smuggling, and Benin's eastern border with Nigeria has major transit points for criminal organizations illicitly trafficking narcotics, wildlife, and other contraband.

In Africa, root causes of conflict can be localized and so solutions must be as well. In Ghana, USAID has found that doctrinal differences, the quest for leadership, political influence, chieftaincy inclinations, and foreign influence are the primary sources of intra-Muslim tensions and a ripe opening for VEOs in northern Ghana communities. Working with a local, trusted organization, the Northern Regional Peace Council, USAID provided training and dialogue sessions with local religious leaders and FM radio station managers prior to the holy month of Ramadan. The religious leaders and media actors signed a Memorandum of Understanding including a code of conduct, fostering religious unity. The result was the absence of a call to violence and lack of an opening for VEOs to capitalize on. The entire program was conceived, designed, and carried out by local community members.

In Mozambique, the terrorist organization ISIS-Mozambique (ISIS-M) has capitalized on an underlying lack of trust in the government, while exploiting economic, political, and social grievances. Their attacks have led to the indiscriminate destruction of schools, hospitals, and government buildings, and contributed to a wave of approximately one million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and prompting the shutdown of operations to develop natural gas fields. Despite the significant challenge posed by ISIS-M, USAID has engaged the northern province of Cabo Delgado, by providing assistance to local governments to develop accountable and transparent systems and processes to provide basic services and combat systemic corruption. USAID is also providing needed support to local media, engaging youth in the process with a focus on improving community radio, and working with local communities to develop community-led economic and social solutions that build cohesion.

The fate of Coastal West Africa is inextricably linked to that of the Sahel and Nigeria. With weak, often illegitimate, governments characterized by corruption and lack of accountability, unprofessional security forces, limited services and opportunities for citizens, intercommunal conflicts, large gender inequalities, and armed groups looking to recruit, the Sahel has no shortage of issues requiring attention. The COVID-19 pandemic has further reduced the overall presence of the state, created economic hardship, and opened spaces for armed groups to exploit. Climate change is increasing competition and opening fissures between communities. Putin's war on Ukraine is harming food security and economic growth in the region. Meanwhile, democratic governance—the best mechanism to identify peaceful solutions to political problems, including those underpinning much of this violence—is under assault, with several extra-constitutional changes in governments in recent years. The Global Terrorism

Index reports the Sahel is home to the world's fastest growing and most-deadly terrorist groups and sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 48% of global terrorism deaths in 2021.

Reversing this trend requires employing every tool at the U.S. government's disposal and moving beyond overly securitized responses. USAID works with internally displaced populations in Burkina Faso to reduce tensions with host communities by providing national identification cards to IDPs, thus reducing the likelihood of detention at security checkpoints and the further disruption of livelihoods. The provision of these critical documents allows traditionally marginalized communities to participate in civic life and reduces the ability of JNIM and other militants to recruit disenfranchised locals.

In Mali, USAID supports vulnerable communities as they build capacity at the local level to address and mitigate conflict, radicalization, and violent extremism. Among other efforts, we are forming new and innovative alliances with Malian community-based organizations to better use local knowledge in combating radicalization and violent extremism. This localization effort works directly through these organizations to address local-level grievances and reconciliation to mitigate conflict, while increasing social cohesion and trust building.

Many of the grievances that have led to increasing vulnerability to extremist influence in neighboring countries are also present in Niger, including poor service delivery, growing numbers of unemployed and underemployed youth, a loss of coping mechanisms that contribute to migration and illicit cross-border trade, and a poorly functioning justice system. We must continue to partner with the Government of Niger - which continues to demonstrate democratic values and a desire to partner with the U.S. In Niger, USAID brings together local influencers, opinion leaders, government, and citizens to peacefully communicate and develop shared approaches to address ongoing sources of tension. For example, USAID provided joint training on managing land conflicts to local administrative and traditional authorities, justice officials, land commissions, and community representatives. The training provided tools which have effectively managed and reduced conflicts while improving communication, collaboration, and trust among stakeholders, including youth in at-risk communities. For at-risk youth, USAID also supported youth innovation camps that brought together young leaders from conflicting groups to build confidence, support tolerance, foster dialogue, and create community action plans to demonstrate the benefits of working together.

USAID's Women, Peace and Security program in Niger is improving community resilience to violent extremism by increasing women and girls' leadership and participation in community-level decision making, local economic opportunities, citizen action, inclusive service delivery, and peace and security initiatives at the local and national level. In Tillabéri and Diffa, USAID supported the creation of 12 women's leadership groups to promote engagement in decision-

making related to security issues and provided leadership training for 271 women and 40 girls in advocacy techniques and communication.

In Nigeria, USAID responds to the issues of religious freedom and the needs of Nigerian religious and ethnic minorities through an integrated development portfolio. For example, USAID's Community Initiative to Promote Peace mitigates violent conflict through inter-communal dialogue. The program empowers communities by connecting local actors to policy advocacy, media outreach, and linkages to other development programs. USAID's Addressing Education in Northeast Nigeria activity addresses acute emergency education needs in two states affected by Boko Haram and the Islamic State in West Africa, while laying the foundation to rebuild and transform these states' education systems.

As we plan for the future in the GFA focus countries and get in front of issues of fragility, we are learning and applying lessons from other parts of the continent. In the Horn of Africa, the political and security challenges that have re-emerged in Sudan and Ethiopia over the past few years, as well as food insecurity issues driven by drought and the war in Ukraine, have added to the complex set of challenges impacting the region. Nonetheless, USAID has been at the forefront of helping to navigate these varied challenges and issues. In this context, USAID supports peaceful and inclusive consensus processes among polarized political groups by working through local stakeholders such as civil society, women, youth, media, and political parties across ethnic groups to mitigate conflict and promote inter-communal dialogue. This work has included convening regional political parties and community leaders representing different ethnic groups in dialogue sessions to collectively identify challenges and build consensus around key issues.

In Sudan, USAID is committed to strengthening the conditions for a transition to democracy. Following the military takeover in October 2021, USAID pivoted from supporting the civilian-led transitional government to supporting local community and media organizations to continue to pursue democratic change, improve citizen access to timely, accurate information, and model democratic behaviors within their organizations. USAID programs are also supporting local community peacebuilding structures and actors to mitigate localized conflicts, which are disruptive to building the national consensus needed to foster democratic and equitable governance.

In other parts of the Horn of Africa, USAID has continued long-standing support, to include stabilization programming in Somalia that is critical to building on security gains and strengthening local governance capacities. In Somalia's complex political environment, Al-Shabaab (AS) actively exploits marginalized communities' historical grievances and sense of injustice to gain support. USAID's focus is on eroding AS' influence. To do this, USAID focuses on expanding marginalized communities' role in decision-making; expanding access to

justice, education, and economic opportunities; and supporting community reconciliation activities that address the grievances that had sparked historical rifts. When successful, the result is more inclusive governance structures; reduced feelings of marginalization; and an opportunity to transition to meaningful development investments and economic growth. In addition, USAID's support around the recent Kenyan elections was designed to strengthen electoral capacity and mitigate conflict.

U.S. policy and our approach to advancing our strategic objectives in the years ahead requires fresh thinking and a new set of tools. We must ensure all US non-security and security assistance is conflict sensitive and serves to strengthen peace even as it accomplishes its own sectoral goals. Priorities for U.S. foreign assistance in sub-Saharan Africa in the coming years will need apply proven successful practices to bolster national institutions and policy reforms, promote local-level civilian protection, service delivery, and development, improve partner coordination, promote gender equality and social inclusion, optimize coordination around food security and humanitarian assistance, and counter disinformation campaigns,We must support timely and peaceful democratic transitions in Burkina Faso, Chad, Guinea, Mali, and Sudan when these changes take place and critical political, social, economic, and governance reforms across the region to reduce corruption and prevent further democratic erosion.

Additionally, among the myriad of priorities for the region, we see fiscal transparency, the implementation of strong anti-money laundering and counter terrorism financing regimes, a risk-based approach to supervision and monitoring of the non-profit sector for potential terrorist financing threats, and an overall trajectory towards achieving full implementation and compliance with the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) recommendations as necessary steps to ensure state stability. We will work with our Treasury colleagues and regional partners to engage on these goals.

Our approach must entail elevating policies and programs that simultaneously limit or reduce democratic backsliding, corruption, and other drivers of poor governance, combat disinformation, and limit openings for malign external influence across the continent. In some cases, we will need to work with military-led governments to achieve timely and credible transitions to democracy. To counter disinformation campaigns by malign actors, we must improve our public outreach to better convey the reality of both problems and solutions, the benefits of partnering with the United States and the generosity of the American people. In addition, we must improve people's access to local, professional information programming and platforms to counter the divisive effects of malign content in information environments.

We must also partner early and over the long haul with like-minded bilateral and multilateral donors in this space, working off the same page, using the same definitions, and measuring programs against the same goals. Our work will require close, genuine partnerships with local

actors, including governments and civil society, to shift more leadership, ownership, decision making, and implementation to the people and institutions who possess the credibility to drive change in their own countries and communities. Finally, we must reassure our partners in fragile states that we are in it for the long haul, standing beside them to address the endemic challenges they face that cannot be addressed with short-term fixes.

U.S. assistance should also enable governments to enhance their presence in underserved areas and decentralize their service delivery, foster increased citizen trust in their governments, mitigate the risk of inter-communal conflict, improve business-enabling environments, transform systems to be more gender equitable, and reduce cycles of political instability by demonstrating that democracy can deliver tangible benefits to all. We must also help our partners adapt to and manage the consequences of ongoing climate change and displacement in many places across Africa. None of this work will take root without strengthening and expanding the role of African institutions in balancing regional threats and opportunities with underlying macroeconomic conditions.

The Global Fragility Act (GFA) of 2019 and the President's announcement of partner countries in April 2022 represents an opportunity to elevate issues of conflict and violence in our foreign policy across Africa and allows us to rethink how the U.S. Government can better our engagement to address a myriad global destabilizing issues we see today.

We have taken the GFA mandate seriously and we are making progress as a combined U.S. Government team with State Department, USAID, Department of Defense, and Treasury colleagues in Washington and across country teams. My recent trip to Coastal West Africa together with A/S Witkowski and DASD Saenz gave us a view of how a regional approach across our Embassies, Missions, and AFRICOM with national government and civil society partners is making a bureaucratic but important difference that will bear fruit on the ground. This alone addresses part of the bureaucratic and strategic impediments that will ultimately better the collective efforts of the U.S. Government and local partners. The GFA has provided us an ability to recognize where our own systems, cultures, and protocols might stand in the way of addressing conflict. Many of these impediments impact our ability to address vulnerabilities and conflict in Africa, will require Congressional support, and include limited capacity at Embassies, material support constraints, and a lack of flexible and adaptable funding.

We are already working differently, across the interagency, with partners and with local actors to build the foundation for the GFA in Coastal West Africa and Mozambique. First, as demonstrated by the most effective peacebuilding programs and called for in the GFA, we are localizing our assistance. Missions and posts have conducted robust consultations with civil society, the private sector, local government, and communities to focus on how we can work together to avert crises in the future. Africa's rich and diverse populations and many African

nations' inclusive governance challenges necessitate how we work with Africa government partners to further embrace democratic and inclusive governance.

USAID is committed to locally driven solutions as a key element of implementation. USAID will adopt programming approaches that recognize the diversity of country contexts, leverage the existing capacities for local leadership and ownership, employ women, peace, and security principles, and strengthen such capacities throughout the lifecycle of implementation plans to sustain such efforts. This is evidenced by USAID's new Policy on Local Capacity Strengthening released at the end of October. USAID will partner with local actors to jointly improve the performance of a local system to produce locally valued and sustainable development outcomes for peace. Instead of USAID creating a top down, linear program process telling a community what is needed, a network approach places local organizations at an equitable level with USAID and donors in designing and implementing programs.

Furthermore, we will soon submit the GFA required 10-year plans for each designated country and region, including Mozambique and the Coastal West Africa regional area, and we look forward to engaging further with appropriate Committee members to address opportunities and challenges. The 10-year planning process is dramatic in terms of engaging local and international partners and focusing on all the tools and resources of the U.S. Government. The 10-year time frame is a major innovation and an opportunity that allows for longer planning horizons, sustaining new partnerships, and enabling the adaptation that we hope will be at the heart of our efforts. It also signals to partner countries that we are committed to doing the hard work with them over the long term.

The GFA reminds us that often in challenging operating environments, we lose sight of prevention opportunities. The GFA is challenging us - not just in the designated countries, but more globally - to learn and establish an architecture to refocus our efforts using all the tools of the U.S. Government - diplomatic, security, and development - towards prevention. This is certainly the case for our regional approach in Coastal West Africa where multiple transborder issues require a sequencing across bilateral engagements and where we might work to support simultaneous activities nationally and locally.

To this end, we are reaching out to and partnering with other donors early as we begin our 10-year planning. We are working closely with Germany and other bilateral partners to consider how security and non-security assistance in a coherent and coordinated manner can help border security and the communities nearby along the Coastal West Africa and Sahel regional lines. We are buoyed by bilateral and multilateral organizations' interest in seeing the GFA succeed, including several new strategies on fragility and prevention that emulate the GFA. Our engagements with the World Bank's Fragility Conflict and Violence office and the IMF's office on Fragile and Conflict-Affected States recognize tackling fundamental underpinnings of fragility cannot be handled by one donor alone. We are planning to do joint assessments so that we are on the same page, coordinating, and influencing where precious donor money is going and all aiming for the same prevention results.

Finally, the GFA provides an opportunity to invest in and contribute to a growing body of evidence and analysis towards what works and what does not work in addressing conflict. How we measure conflict and violence is dependent on looking at specific risks in each context with local networks, the capacity of our partners to address those risks, and how the interplay of our diplomatic, development, and security interventions engage and address those risks. To this end, we are actively conducting and utilizing monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) processes upfront as part of the 10-year plans in partnership with local stakeholders, including governments, non-governmental organizations, academia, civil society, and the private/philanthropic sectors. We will be able to iterate and adapt our approach based on what works and how the context shifts. Consultative approaches to promote local ownership may include engaging with local stakeholders to co-design and develop the country/region MEL plans, lead data collection and analysis, and contribute to decision-making on program adaptations.

Many of the problems that Africa is facing today are neither contained by national borders, nor have origins in any one country. However, as these countries move on the sliding scale of development, exogenous factors like climate, geo-political competition, regional conflicts and extremism, infectious diseases, and food insecurity can affect them more drastically than other places in the world. My trip to West Africa left me feeling more positive than not about the way in which our work is boosted by the agency of the people of those countries to address their own issues. The more we do to listen, consult, and work alongside the people and communities in Africa, the better. Peacebuilding is not simply the absence of violence or war; it is the constant need to build, cultivate, and sustain the foundations of a peaceful society throughout a country whether it's in the middle of a crisis, slipping into one, or emerging from one. What we do as donors and interveners matters on the ground; this unity of purpose demonstrates for other African countries, donors, and partners how we can maintain peace together.

As further progress is made on the GFA and conflict prevention in Africa, we are grateful to the U.S. Congress for its passage of the bipartisan Global Fragility Act that underpins the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability and demands a fundamental shift in how we work to prevent conflict globally. To quote the President in his Letter to Congress on April 1, "From strengthening social institutions and state-society relations, to mitigating the spread of extremist ideologies, to confronting the corrosive impact of gender inequality, to cultivating greater trust between security forces and citizens, to guarding against the destabilizing threat of climate change — we will help foster locally led, locally owned solutions grounded in mutual trust and long-term accountability." I can honestly say we have started this; we are making progress; we are listening to our local counterparts, and we are ready to go further. Nowhere is this more pronounced than with our African partners.

Madam Chairwoman, thank you again for convening this important hearing.