

Opening Statement of the Honorable Ed Royce (R-CA)
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Hearing on “The Crisis in Mali: U.S. Interests and the International Response”
February 14, 2013

(As Prepared for Delivery)

The Committee will come to order. We meet today to review the continuing crisis in Mali.

After recognizing myself and the Ranking Member, I will recognize the Chairmen and Ranking Members of the Africa and Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade subcommittees for any opening remarks.

Over the past year and a half, northern Mali, a vast desert landscape, has fallen to jihadists. Al-Qaeda’s regional affiliate and others, many coming from outside the region, capitalized on the country’s weak government to make these gains.

Bolstered by weapons from Ghadafi’s stockpile, these forces have destabilized the entire region. Last month, scores of civilians – including U.S. citizens - were taken hostage at a remote Algerian energy facility. Those connected with the attack on our mission in Benghazi are thought to be connected to the militants in Mali. Militants in Somalia and northern Nigeria have received aid or training from these groups.

But it is Mali that has paid the highest price. Extremists have attempted to *destroy* much of its rich cultural heritage. At the center of ancient trans-Saharan trade, Mali is home to priceless Arab and Islamic literature and mosques of historical significance. Several mosques have been destroyed. A culture is under attack.

The militants sought to impose their radicalism onto Muslims they viewed as too liberal. Music was banned. Those who didn’t obey faced hanging, stoning, or flogging. An already tough life became hell on earth.

With Mali’s capital, Bamako, in jeopardy, and its interim government pleading for help, the French took decisive action. Malians have welcomed French forces with enthusiasm – ultimate proof of the extremists’ brutality.

Six thousand French citizens live in Bamako. AQIM is a threat to France. So Paris had an interest in intervening. But there should be no doubt that this militancy in northern Mali and the region threatens us all.

Yet, when France sought U.S. assistance, the Administration was tepid in answering our ally’s call. It seems the bureaucracy slowed our pace of support. And as Secretary of Defense Panetta put it, “Every time I turn around, I face a group of lawyers.” This is a NATO ally fighting al-Qaeda-linked terrorists – it shouldn’t be that hard.

While the French understandably would like to wind down their mission quickly, an abrupt turnover to a United Nations force would be a disaster. This militant threat remains too committed and too deadly to push this mission onto an ineffective, under-resourced or hamstrung peacekeeping force.

It doesn't help that the Administration has been divided. According to a former senior Obama Administration official, U.S. policy toward the region has been hindered by divisions between a Defense Department that wanted to confront the threat – and a cautious State Department that sought to contain it. We'll hear from both Departments today. We hope everyone's working in unison now.

Testifying before this committee last month, then-Secretary Clinton noted that in this region, "we are in for a struggle, but it is a necessary struggle. We cannot permit northern Mali to become a safe haven... we've got to have a better strategy."

Today's hearing is a step toward achieving that better strategy.

I'll now turn to Ranking Member Engel for his opening remarks.