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Ranking Member Eliot Engel Opening Statement at Hearing, “The Crisis in Mali: U.S. Interests and the International Response”

Washington, D.C. – U.S. Rep. Eliot L. Engel, the top Democratic on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, delivered the below remarks as prepared for delivery at today’s committee hearing, “The Crisis in Mali: U.S. Interests and the International Response.”

The statement follows:

“Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this very timely hearing on the situation in Mali. Last year, a coalition of Islamic extremists -- including a regional affiliate of al Qaeda -- took control of northern Mali, an area larger than the state of Texas. Armed to the teeth with weapons plundered from neighboring Libya, they imposed a harsh form of sharia law, amputating limbs, banning music and destroying priceless cultural artifacts.

These troubling developments raised fears that northern Mali would become a source of instability for the entire region, and possibly a safe haven for terrorists plotting attacks on U.S. and other western interests. The situation became even more urgent in early 2013, when the extremists renewed their offensive, and began driving south toward the capital city of Bamako.

The international community was forced to act – and France took the lead by launching airstrikes and putting boots on the ground. I’m pleased that we’re now supporting France and other West African nations participating in this critical effort, but I was disturbed by early reports that we were planning to charge Paris for providing airlift. If we can find a way to pay for military flyovers at parades and professional sporting events, then surely we can cover the cost of aiding a close ally in an operation that supports U.S. national security interests.

France has made it clear that it doesn’t plan to keep large numbers of troops in Mali on a long-term basis, and we must work with our allies and partners in the region to figure out next steps

in terms of promoting security. Some have suggested that the West African troops now deploying to Mali should form the nucleus of a traditional UN peacekeeping operation. Is that the right approach, since efforts to dislodge the extremists from northern Mali will likely require offensive combat operations for some time to come? Should we explore alternatives to a blue-helmet peacekeeping mission, such as the model offered by the African Union force currently operating in Somalia? While the immediate focus in Mali is on the military operation, we must recognize that this is a complex and multi-layered conflict. The French and African successes on the battlefield will not be sustained if we ignore the non-military facets of the conflict, and if the political situation in Bamako is not resolved.

Mali is now governed by an interim President that lacks popular legitimacy. The leader of last year's coup, Captain Sanogo, continues to play a role in Mali's political process. And it appears that elections, already postponed for a year until this April, will be postponed again until at least July. Clear steps must be taken towards having elections, Captain Sanogo must be marginalized, and the legitimate grievances of the entire population in the north must be addressed—not just those of the Tuareg minority.

We must also focus on the human rights and humanitarian situation in Mali. Hundreds of thousands of people have been displaced by the current conflict and by severe drought. And there have also been reports of serious human rights abuses by the Malian military – a force that received U.S. training before last year's coup, and which other countries are now supporting.

Unless these issues are addressed in a meaningful way, there is a risk of further radicalization in the north and prolonged conflict along ethnic lines, which will make it even more difficult to stabilize the country. As we consider the U.S. role in Mali and seek to increase cooperation with other countries in the region, it is critical that we learn the appropriate lessons from past efforts. In particular, I am interested to hear how the Departments of State and Defense plan to evaluate counter-terrorism and governance programs in light of the failures we have seen in Mali, and whether you believe some rebalancing of our assistance for the region is in order.

I look forward to the testimony of the witnesses, and once again thank the Chairman for holding this important hearing.”