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Before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global  
Human Rights, and International Organizations  
November 14th, 2019

Good morning, Chair Bass, Ranking Member Smith, and members of the Committee. Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Sahel and the rising violence in many parts of that region.

U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Mark Green has for many months emphasized the urgency of addressing the events unfolding in the Sahel. The region experienced a massive spike in deadly violence in the first half of 2019, and this violence shows no signs of letting up.

Many assume that extremism only is driving this conflict. Yet the dynamics that underpin violence in the Sahel is much more complex: a mix of persistent instability, extreme poverty, deteriorating environmental conditions, weak and often corrupt governments, and lack of economic opportunity. These factors and the conflict they give rise to offer fertile ground for extremists determines to advance their own ideology and power.

In response, USAID not only is providing humanitarian aid, but also programming assistance aggressively to focus on building the capacity of governments and local communities in the Sahel. We are also enhancing access to financial services and markets and generating employment opportunities. As USAID Administrator Mark Green always says - the purpose of foreign aid is to end the need for its existence. In the Sahel, USAID's investments promote resilience and self-reliance, with the eventual aim of diminishing the need for such assistance.

### **The Situation in the Sahel**

Throughout Africa, instability and the emerging forces of violent extremism threaten USAID efforts to create economic opportunity while advancing our national security and prosperity. In recent years, violence and conflict across the Sahel have compounded the impact of emergencies such as food insecurity, malnutrition and epidemics, and have undermined efforts to uplift communities from chronic vulnerability.

To understand what is driving conflict in the Sahel, we have to first recognize the size and complexity of the region. It encompasses an enormous area that stretches from west to east across the breadth of the African continent, from southern Mauritania to northern Ethiopia. Its borders are porous and its vast spaces are often beyond the reach of the governments.

The people of the Sahel are frequently on the move, as they migrate along trade routes and follow seasonal herding and grazing patterns. While the region's land and resources have always been precious and limited, recent population growth, shifting weather patterns and environmental

degradation have all increased the competition for these resources. This increase in competition has led to an increase in violence.

In the past, customary arrangements and swift mediation from local leaders restrained such violence. But traditional systems for managing disputes have crumbled in recent years, and the modern government institutions that have taken their place have failed to mediate conflict effectively.

The Sahel has also become home to international criminal groups and political movements that add to the volatility and complexity of the region. We have seen an increase in jihadist activity, a resurgence of Boko Haram, inter-communal conflict, and criminal and armed groups. In fact, according to the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, there has been a notable escalation in deadly violence across the Sahel. From November 2018 to March 2019, reported fatalities linked to direct attacks that targeted civilians have increased by roughly 7,000 percent in Burkina Faso, 500 percent in Niger and over 300 percent in Mali. And on March 23, 2019 an unprecedented massacre took place in the village of Ogossagou in the Mopti region of Mali, which left 174 men, women, and children from the Fulani ethnic group dead. The rising tide of extremist and intercommunal violence that is gripping the Sahel shows few signs of stopping. This is a global phenomenon, and no part of the world is immune.

### **USAID in the Sahel**

In the face of instability and violence in the Sahel, the temptation is for us to look for sweeping solutions that have the capacity to address all of these problems at once. However, history and experience have shown us that the drivers of violent extremism are very often localized. While we should be nimble and prepared to respond to local problems and triggers, we should also broadly reinforce economic, social, and governance institutions so they can withstand potential exploitation by malign actors. We need to help governments grow stronger by investing in their economies, governance, and people.

We design our activities and interventions to reduce extremists' opportunities to exploit social injustice, economic inequality, religious persecution, and ideological extremism to recruit followers. It is in our interest to be on the side of those who are working to end violence in places like the Sahel. Helping governments get stronger, respond to their citizens, and offer their people a better future is a smart investment in our own security.

Across the Sahel, USAID has developed a strategic, regional vision to address priority issues -- countering violent extremism, improving citizen-responsive governance, and fostering resilience. We bring our development expertise and more than a decade of experience in countering violent extremism programming to bear — harnessing the full range of tools to design, support, and measure programs that build government legitimacy, help reduce popular grievances, and increase economic opportunity for those most vulnerable to extremist recruitment.

USAID works through partner governments, local civil-society and faith-based organizations, and regional economic communities to strengthen capacity and provide African-led solutions to African development challenges. Through our work, we help reduce sympathy and support for Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (known as AQIM), the so-called Islamic State,

and similar organizations by addressing the structural conditions conducive to the rise and spread of violent extremism. We recently collaborated with both the Governments of Mali and Niger to help draft inclusive national strategies to counter violent extremism.

USAID's programs in the Sahel help reinforce institutions and governments so they can better respond and preempt local drivers of conflict. For example, through the Voices for Peace activity, we use local-language radio programming to increase community cohesion and prevent the spread of violent extremism. By partnering with respected leaders, institutions, and networks we address the drivers and root causes of violent extremism such as marginalization, exclusion, and poor governance. Our program empowers locally influential voices, establishes interactive media platforms, and engages at-risk youth, women, and communities. This increases social cohesion and solidarity, one of the most effective ways to promote resilience to increased radicalization and violence in the region. The project initially targeted Burkina Faso, Chad and Niger, but expanded in February 2018 to northern Cameroon and in April 2018 to eastern Mali. By amplifying moderate voices of peace and tolerance and strengthening positive local narratives, our program expands access to information, and increases dialogue and exchange to promote peace and counter violent extremism.

USAID's interventions have also allowed the Government of Niger to revise its state of emergency measures that have been in place since 2015, which had limited economic activity and further exacerbated the violent extremism problem. The Government of Niger's response included lifting the ban on fishing and the sale of fish in Diffa, as well as the ban on farming and commercialization of pepper - both important sources of livelihood for the communities in the region.

Though the lifting of these fishing bans has helped the Diffa communities, the economic situation remains dire. Severe flooding aggravates the humanitarian crisis in the region, having destroyed livelihoods of people already suffering from year-long conflict and the persisting insecurity. In addition, the August 20 closure of the Nigerian border increasingly hinders trade in the region. Finally, the continued prevalence of kidnappings and attacks from Boko Haram hamper local communities and authorities out of fear they may become a target.

In Burkina Faso and Niger, USAID's Resilience in the Sahel Enhanced program reduces humanitarian caseloads and creates partnerships with governments, community groups, and the private sector. Now in its second phase, the United States will commit more than \$540 million in Niger and \$190 million in Burkina Faso over the next five years to help the most vulnerable populations build resilience to climatic and other shocks and permanently escape poverty.

In Mali, our peacebuilding and reconciliation activities start with small projects to strengthen community level governance, civic engagement, and conflict resolution. The grass-roots approach serves to develop a nuanced village-by-village understanding of conflict dynamics for greater inclusion and better buy-in to create social cohesion and trust from the bottom up.

You may ask how we know if our programs to counter violent extremism are actually working. In late 2018, a rigorous impact evaluation demonstrated that one USAID project successfully changed attitudes and perceptions, lowered justification for violence, heightened

understanding of poor governance as a key threat to the country, and increased the likelihood that communities collaborate with security forces. This success tells us we are on the right path. And we are constantly evaluating, learning, and adapting our programs to reflect current realities.

### **The Future of the Sahel**

Recently, the United States Government started the process of building integrated programming (humanitarian, stabilization, and development) in areas of Burkina Faso and Niger most directly affected by cross-border instability from Mali. These efforts will focus on food security, water, income generation, health, community cohesion, and citizen-responsive governance. USAID's investments will strengthen governments and local communities; promote resilience and self-reliance to eventually diminish the need for long-term assistance. This is part of a broader national security partnership with the Governments of Burkina Faso and Niger and affected communities implemented in coordination with the U.S. Departments of State and Defense, and other U.S. Government Departments and Agencies.

Left unaddressed, the extremist elements that have taken root in the Sahel will likely expand elsewhere, affecting U.S. partners and allies. That is why our efforts are vital. Through assessment, implementation, and evaluation, we are learning what works and what does not. The United States is a leader in this area, and we consult closely with local and international partners to create the most effective and sustainable solutions to address violent extremism. Because trends in extremism are fluid, we constantly reassess our priorities, our progress, and our policies to ensure we base our work on the realities of today.

These are challenging issues. But one thing we know for sure is that the situation will not get better if the United States looks the other way. It is not the time to turn our backs but rather to double down, as we are doing in Niger. Congress recently approved, in a bipartisan manner, the upgrade of our office in Niger to a full USAID Mission, and our presence in Cameroon to a USAID office, and we are in the process of selecting new staff and establishing these new operating units. This is another powerful step that exemplifies the commitment of the United States to not only to the region, but to Africa as a whole.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I look forward to your questions.