

**Written Statement of Rob Jenkins, Assistant to the Administrator, Bureau for Conflict
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Before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa
The Sahelian Crisis – Examining Policy Options
December 5, 2023**

Chairman James, Ranking Member Jacobs, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify here today and for your support of this vital region, whose peace and stability is deeply intertwined with that of the United States and the rest of the world.

The Sahel is facing multifaceted challenges that overlap, blurring the lines between climate, the environment, economic instability, political unrest, and social tensions. These crises don't merely coexist, but amplify one another — a vicious cycle that demands our urgent attention, innovation, and collaboration. This convergence of trends is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the Sahel.

Across the Sahel, undelivered promises and rampant corruption have eroded what were once burgeoning, hopeful democracies. Violent extremists are preying upon a generation that sees little promise, holds little hope, feels little agency in their lives, and is desperate for many of life's most basic needs. The withdrawal of the French throughout the region and of the UN peacekeepers from Mali provides an opening for growing influence by our adversaries. We see young people dancing in the streets in support of military takeovers. Russian support for juntas may embolden others in the region to follow suit.

Climate shocks — dangerously high temperatures, changing rainfall patterns, and frequent droughts — exacerbate conflict by pushing people to herd, farm, or fish in areas controlled by violent extremists like Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM), the Islamic State, and Boko Haram. This not only exacerbates vulnerability to climate but also reduces economic opportunities for youth, driving them into the arms of violent extremists who provide a crude semblance of stability and prosperity.

The rise of violent extremism and intercommunal violence has closed schools, killed thousands, displaced more than 4.2 million people, and created a humanitarian crisis for an estimated 29 million people. In turn, non-democratically elected leaders are adopting aggressive and security-centric responses to violent extremism, framing this as “total war,” and in the process facilitating massacres based on ethnicity. Nomadic groups like the Fulbe (Fulani)—long marginalized and already in recurrent conflict patterns with sedentary populations—are at particular risk.

It's important for me to paint a vivid picture of just how dire the situation is in a part of the world that doesn't get enough attention. But I'm not here to present an endless list of problems. USAID's purpose is to find solutions and bring hope. But how do we go about solving such a complex set of problems? These are problems where each factor exacerbates the others, and fragility begets fragility.

Building Trust

To address the root cause of violence and conflict, we need to support peaceful transitions back to democracy to lay the foundation for improving governance and building trust between citizens and their governments. Improved governance is critical to promoting stability because it removes one of the more persuasive narratives of extremist groups. In transitional countries and fragile democracies, it is as important to focus on the delivery of basic services as it is to focus on inclusive, free, fair, and transparent institutions and political processes. Democracy needs to deliver.

For example, in Mali, USAID works with local governments on the development of community plans for water, sanitation, and hygiene and ensures that local civil society participates in planning. This improves long-term civil society capacity to advocate and improves the ability of local government to respond to citizen needs.

Undemocratic regime changes in the Sahel since 2020 are a symptom of the lack of trust between people and institutions. The most healthy, resilient societies are based on trust. When institutions reinforce the perception of being weak through their lack of will or capacity to deliver services, people are more likely to turn to violence—particularly when other forces seek to exploit those trust deficits. Over-reliance on force in responding to violence, including through unaccountable security forces, offers little operational success, and furthers this trust deficit. This mistrust can become a pervasive gateway to instability and extremism.

Youth Engagement

We also need to create opportunities for populations to access and influence the trajectory of governance in productive ways. The durable peace and stability we seek will be impossible if this disconnect and distrust between people and governments continue. The region's population is among the youngest in the world and it's vital that youth engage in decisions affecting their future. Youth can be champions of democracy and reinvigorate economies, or can serve as foot soldiers for extremist organizations and further destabilize the region. This will be determined by their education, agency, and opportunities. In Mauritania for example, USAID supports a network of young women to build equitable and peaceful communities, as a result,

these young women are leading local dispute resolution and advocacy with the local social affairs officials to resolve community challenges.

Education

USAID is also investing in young people as a long-term asset to support democracy and economic growth in the region. When children and youth can go to school and gain the skills they need for life and work, they are able to build more hopeful and prosperous futures. The United States has been the third-largest contributor to the Global Partnership for Education, a multilateral organization providing education services in several countries across the Sahel. This complements bilateral education and youth programming assistance in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, and, until recently paused, Niger. In Mali, USAID has an early-grade reading and mathematics project in four regions and in Burkina Faso, USAID funds a resilient education project for learners displaced by conflict and crisis that focuses on their foundational skills, well-being, and odds of completing primary school. By providing basic social services and educating youth, we are investing in young people as a long-term asset to support democracy and economic growth in the region.

Civil Society

To build trust and good governance, USAID works with the people in-country who are most impacted. People who intimately understand the problems their communities are facing and have the dreams and determination to address them. These problems can't be solved by the U.S. government alone, nor by only working with elites in the region who have yet to serve all of their constituents fairly and equitably. Rather, we are working with communities on the ground and with other bilateral, multilateral, and private-sector partners. We're doing this through venues such as the re-energized Stabilization Leaders Forum, a global network of like-minded countries that are committed to a shared vision of global peace and stability.

Tackling Disinformation

USAID programming in the Sahel also focuses on tackling the spread of false information. In Mali, we are training youth in the responsible production and consumption of media. Training includes fact checking, debunking, discrediting influencers who traffic in disinformation, investigations into the sources and financing of disinformation, messaging and awareness-raising campaigns, and support to local journalism (e.g., radio). USAID also educates youth on responsible consumption of information, enabling them to discern the quality of content they consume and to discourage them from sharing false, misleading, or unreliable information.

Global Fragility Act

We're seeking solutions by integrating our efforts more strategically across the U.S. government, with long-term shared goals that extend beyond traditional funding cycles. This is the paradigm shift and innovative framework that Congress envisioned in the landmark Global Fragility Act and Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability. Through extensive consultations with a wide range of partners, we've developed 10-year whole-of-government plans that are guiding our development, diplomacy, and defense in five partner geographies, including Libya and Coastal West Africa; a country and a region inextricably linked to the Sahel.

Peace and stability in the Sahel requires bringing peace and stability to Libya, which has served as a source of and destination for weapons and armed fighters since the collapse of the state in 2011. The 10-year plan in Libya is already working in the southern part of the country to increase licit economic opportunity, invest in community advocacy to counter militia influence, and build local governance capacity to deliver public services to Libyans.

Much of our work under this innovative Strategy is concentrated in the critical northern regions of Coastal West Africa that border the Sahel. This includes a joint U.S.-German initiative, the Coastal States Stability Mechanism, which leverages shared funding and partners with local communities to bolster community resilience against violent extremist organizations. Through this mechanism and other USAID programs throughout the region, including the Littorals Regional Initiative, we're hearing directly from communities about what they need. We're helping build the relationship and trust between democratically elected governments and their people so they feel heard and cared for.

Based on community feedback in Togo, for example, we partnered to build a new bridge, a youth center, and a community radio station to improve economic opportunities in disconnected towns, foster a sense of belonging with communities, and promote access to credible information. Across the border in Burkina Faso, we are building trust between farmers and herders through dialogues, intercultural events, and community-led microenterprise projects. As a result, 79 percent of participants reported improved mutual understanding.

Democratic Transitions

We must also continue to foster hope and find ways to work creatively with the people in the Sahel. We must support timely democratic transitions in Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger, Guinea, and Mali, so that critical political, social, economic, and governance reforms can be realized to reduce corruption, prevent further democratic erosion, and rebuild a social contract. We're committed to countering democratic backsliding and pressing for timely progress on transitions to civilian and democratic rule. For each country, we adopt a nuanced approach that is

informed by conditions on the ground. The Biden-Harris Administration's approach to the Sahel aims to increase collaboration and engagement with host governments and like-minded donors, while leveraging existing partnerships to address growing insecurity.

Sudan

We also remain committed to supporting the people of Sudan during this challenging time. The United States is the largest donor of humanitarian aid to the Sudan response, providing more than \$870 million in U.S. humanitarian assistance in fiscal year 2023, including more than \$579 million from USAID. Where safe and possible to deliver assistance, USAID's humanitarian, political transition, peacebuilding, and development programs are helping Sudanese people through the current crisis and supporting them in preparing for a future beyond this crisis. USAID continues to support programs that protect human rights, promote democracy, and empower civil society in Sudan. We are also engaging Sudanese civilian leaders and civil society in peace processes and discussions about Sudan's future, to ensure Sudan's citizens are at the forefront. Only a civilian government can succeed in reducing the risk of atrocities, delivering stability and security, and fulfilling the Sudanese people's aspirations for freedom, peace, and justice.

Service Delivery

U.S. assistance, like that provided under the Coastal States Stability Mechanism and throughout the Sahel, is helping governments reach underserved areas and decentralize their service delivery, foster increased citizen trust in their governments, mitigate the risk of inter-communal conflict, improve business-friendly environments, and reduce cycles of political instability. The severity of climate risk in the region means that to be successful we must integrate this work with efforts to increase communities adapt to and manage the consequences of ongoing climate shocks.

None of this work will take root without strengthening and expanding the role of African institutions in balancing regional threats and opportunities. Through the Stabilization Leaders Forum and similar fora, the United States is improving its coordination with other donors and allies to increase synchronization across development, humanitarian, and peacebuilding programming, and burden-sharing while also countering the propaganda and disinformation generated by strategic competitors. Overall, our support for people-centered approaches to governance, service delivery, conflict resolution, and trust-building will ultimately reduce the ability of violent extremists, criminals, and other destabilizing actors to exploit ethnic, religious, and livelihood chasms.

We are grateful for the Congressional leadership and vision to pass the bipartisan Global Fragility Act, which challenges us to do things differently and in a more coordinated whole-of-government effort. Congress can continue to lead us in realizing this vision by enacting legislative reforms that will reduce bureaucratic challenges and help us work across the U.S. government to address root causes and prevent conflict before it starts. These reforms include authorizing the use of Prevention and Stabilization Funds for monitoring, evaluation, and learning of all activities required to implement the Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, not limited to foreign assistance. They also include extending authorization of the Prevention and Stabilization Fund through the 2029 fiscal year. With these changes, the United States and our partners will be better equipped to work together strategically and efficiently to build a more peaceful and resilient future.

In addition to our conflict prevention work, USAID is providing life-saving humanitarian assistance and early recovery, risk reduction, and resilience programming: over \$387 million in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania during Fiscal Year 2023. USAID reached over 1.7 million people affected by conflict, floods, drought, and other types of disasters with emergency food and nutrition assistance; health and psychosocial support; water, sanitation, and hygiene; and shelter.

Through our development and humanitarian assistance, we can make the United States a partner of choice in the Sahel and beyond. We can demonstrate that democracy delivers by partnering to tangibly improve the lives of the millions in the Sahel searching for hope and opportunity.

Thank you again for the opportunity to speak with you, and for convening this important hearing.