

Statement of
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U.S. Department of State
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa
“The Sahel in Crisis: Examining U.S. Policy Options”
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Chairman James, Ranking Member Jacobs, I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the broader Sahel.

The Biden-Harris Administration recognizes Africa is a major geopolitical force that influences global stability and security. By 2050, one in four people on the planet will be African. The talents of more than one billion Africans already shape the world’s economy, culture, and politics.

The recent coups and conflicts are primarily a result of the enormous challenges facing the Sahel, notably a weak tradition of democratic governance, an acute terrorist threat and insecurity, insufficient economic opportunities for the region’s young population, and climate-related water and land shortages, which contribute to food insecurity. We also know that Africa is disproportionately affected by upheaval in the global world order, which we saw in the civil wars and coups of the 1990s and 1960s, and as we see today the destabilizing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s war in Ukraine.

I want to share with you what we are doing to mitigate the reality of an increasingly unstable Sahel, leveraging intense diplomacy and the full range of tools to strengthen at-risk democracies, buttress regional bodies, and mobilize the international community.

While each country in the Sahel has its own unique set of circumstances, we see weak governance as the overarching factor that allows corruption, human rights violations, terrorism, and malign actors like the Wagner Group to take root. We are utilizing a variety of measures to make it crystal clear that it is no longer business as usual in a country’s relationship with the

United States after a military takeover. Following the July military coup d'état in Niger, we suspended nearly \$140 million in security assistance programs and more than \$300 million in our MCC Compact. To bolster African-led solutions to the crisis of coups in the Sahel, we are actively supporting ECOWAS negotiations by enabling them to leverage this assistance to craft actionable terms for a democratic transition timeline and for the release of former president Mohamed Bazoum. By working with regional blocs and multilateral bodies, we are demonstrating that there is a path back to democracy. And we remain steadfast in our support for the people in Niger by maintaining our humanitarian health and food programming. As you know, thanks to the generosity of the American people, almost 700,000 people impacted by events in Niger have received lifesaving humanitarian support.

Mali and Burkina Faso are challenging cases. In Mali, prospects for the return of democracy are increasingly grim as the Wagner-supported transition government once again delayed elections and is forcefully seeking to exert control in northern Mali. Our near-term priority in Mali is for the transition government to end its obstruction of the safe withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping mission. The deterioration in security, the rise in civilian casualties, and the exploitation of the country's natural resources illustrate convincingly the dangers of the Wagner role. As Secretary Blinken has said, "Wherever we've seen Wagner deploy, countries find themselves weaker, poorer, more insecure, and less independent," and this is abundantly clear in Mali.

Burkina Faso faces a dramatic security and human rights crisis and will not be well-served by following Mali's playbook. We are advocating for the Burkinabe to employ a counterterrorism strategy that prioritizes civilian security rather than the military-first approach used by Mali alongside its Wagner partners. We know an overly militarized approach to counterterrorism is bound to fail. To address Burkina's ongoing political instability, we are pressing for a democratic transition in line with a publicly declared timeline. We have made clear that insecurity should not be used as an excuse to prolong the transition to democracy.

In Chad, we are urging the transitional government to adhere to its transition timeline and to preserve political space for opposition and civil society groups to participate in next year's elections. As Chad confronts surging refugee flows and growing security threats from the conflict in Sudan, we are mobilizing humanitarian support and working with regional and international partners to minimize the security risks.

In each of these countries, security will only be achieved by improving governance and addressing the root causes of instability.

To promote this path to security, we have eagerly embraced the tool Congress provides us in the Global Fragility Act (GFA). Drawing on those resources, we are seeking to strengthen institutions through implementation of the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability to help insulate neighboring countries in coastal West Africa that could be vulnerable to democratic backsliding. We are focusing our diplomatic and programmatic engagement to improve government responsiveness through public service delivery, strengthen social cohesion and dialogue, expand civic space, increase access to justice, and enhance security force accountability and responsiveness with at-risk communities that border the Sahel region, including in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo.

As we navigate these challenges, leading with our values supports our national security strategy. U.S. security partnerships prioritize civilian security, build partner capacity, and address underlying cases of instability. Our approach seeks to provide African partners with the capacity to implement comprehensive security approaches that respect the rights of their people, resulting in better effects and creating an alternative to malign actors.

I want to turn to a topic that is of grave concern to us all: the military conflict in Sudan, which threatens to destroy the unity of the country and destabilize the region. The escalating violence and human rights abuses in

Sudan, especially attacks by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Darfur, have included mass killings, ethnic targeting of non-Arab communities, killings of traditional leaders, unjust detentions, widespread rape, and obstruction of humanitarian aid. This power grab by the two forces has only produced human misery and instability. What remains clear is the two forces have unequivocally disqualified themselves from a role in governance and demonstrated without a doubt that there is no acceptable military solution to the conflict.

Following the inspirational 2019 overthrow of the military led by a vibrant and broad-based popular movement, there were two serious attempts to achieve a civilian-led transitional government through a joint negotiation process involving civilian and military leaders. Twice the security forces trampled on these democratic aspirations: in October 2021 when the military conducted a takeover and again in April 2023 when they went to war. As a result of these hard lessons, Sudanese civilians now seek to negotiate among themselves an inclusive civilian transitional government that can resume and complete the democratic transition. These discussions are taking place in Addis Ababa with our active support. We have arranged for the East African regional group to serve as a co-facilitator in Jeddah, where talks with SAF and RSF representatives remain focused on ending the conflict and addressing humanitarian needs.

To quote the Secretary, “Sudan’s civilians must be the ones to define Sudan’s path going forward.” That is why in addition to dispatching skilled U.S. Ambassador Daniel Rubinstein to engage the belligerent parties in Jeddah, U.S. Ambassador to Sudan John Godfrey is supporting Sudanese civilians in Addis and throughout the region. We have realigned our Embassy presence to be as close to the Sudanese civilian population as we safely can be, enabling Ambassador Godfrey to continue supporting efforts to coalesce around a political process to resume Sudan’s democratic transition.

We are doing our best with our current resources to meet the challenges in Africa, but limited funding and staffing remain a concern. So I ask you to support the administration's budget.

In closing, let me express my appreciation to this Committee for your support in advancing democracy, peace, and security as the cornerstones for a successful U.S.-Africa partnership.