

**Written Statement of Administrator Mark Green, U.S. Agency for International
Development (USAID)
Senate Appropriations Committee
Subcommittee on State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs
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Chairman Graham, Ranking Member Leahy, distinguished Members of the Sub-Committee: Thank you for this opportunity to discuss the Sahel region, the rising violence in many parts of that region, and some of the ways in which USAID is responding with humanitarian assistance, investments in community-level institution strengthening, and economic development programming.

The urgency of this topic is clear. Across the Sahel, the recent escalation of violence has resulted in thousands of deadly attacks and four-times the number of conflict-related fatalities compared to 2012. At the epicenter of conflict—where Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger meet—more than 2,000 civilians were killed in 2019 alone. The situation has further deteriorated in 2020; in Burkina Faso, violence has displaced an average of 4,000 people each day since the year began.

It would be a mistake to attribute all of this violence to extremism or inter-religious conflict. But when conflict in the region is combined with persistent instability, extreme poverty, deteriorating environmental conditions, weak and often corrupt governance, and lack of economic opportunity, it offers fertile ground for extremists who seek to advance their own ideology and power.

Sahel: Perception and Reality

To understand the challenges of the Sahel, it is essential to recognize how large and complex the region is. Many people think of the Sahel as a handful of nations along the “coast” of the Sahara. In reality, it is a vast region that stretches from southern Mauritania to northern Ethiopia, touching at least 15 countries. It is not so much a modest set of nation-states as a vast, intricate network of informal trade and migration routes that connect clusters of often very ethno-centric communities. Borders are porous at best, and central government institutions are of little relevance to the daily lives and needs of most people.

A significant portion of the people in the Sahel are always in motion, moving along trade and migration central routes, as well as seasonal herding and grazing patterns. As one observer told me during my visit to Nigeria last August, in the West we see the brush and sands of the Sahel and Sahara as barriers, while Africans see the landscape as an inviting ocean to be sailed upon from place to place.

Traditions Under Pressure

However, it is just as true that land and resources are precious and limited, and competition for those resources between and amongst ethnic groups, licit and illicit traders, farmer-herders, and yes, faith communities, has existed for decades, if not centuries. Over the years, disputes would

arise and violence sometimes erupted, but the consequences and costs were managed through traditional dialogue, reconciliation, and mutually beneficial arrangements.

But those traditional systems and institutions have been eroded in recent years by an array of shocks and stresses. Population pressures, drought-and-flood cycles, environmental degradation, and other forces have intensified poverty and suffering. With up to 80 percent of people living on less than \$2 a day, many families struggle to feed themselves because they lack the livelihoods to purchase or produce sufficient quantities of food. Loss of human lives to hunger, malnutrition and disease, massive displacements of people, and shattered economies has made poverty more widespread in the Sahel than nearly any other region in Africa.

Modern government institutions that have supplanted many traditional community and tribal structures have proven too weak and ill-equipped to respond or serve the vital role of mediation and conflict resolution. In the minds of many observers, the situation has been made even worse by corrupt and self-serving political elites. During my Nigeria visit, multiple civil society and faith-based leaders claimed these elite often politically exploit conflicts and disputes to shore up their own political constituencies and expand their public influence. These politicians use inflammatory radio and social media messages in ways that raise tensions, reinforce dangerous stereotypes, and recast disputes over resources as ideological or religious confrontations.

To make the mix even more combustible, a range of groups are bringing their own violence to the region. They include criminal gangs exercising control over lucrative illicit trade of arms, cigarettes, and drugs, as well as extremist groups seeking to expand their power or advance an ideological agenda. Many work to exploit local tensions and grievances, economic and social marginalization, and abuses by government officials and security forces to recruit disaffected young people into their ranks. Militias, often ethnically based, are forming as a response to governments' inability or unwillingness to provide security for communities. When governments do act, poorly trained, poorly led officials and security forces can often make things worse when they respond to incidents of insecurity and unrest with severe crackdowns and indiscriminate arrests. This sometimes exacerbates grievances against governments, sows greater mistrust, and wears down local resistance to recruiters' rhetoric and worldview.

Extremist Groups Already Operating

That violent extremist groups are operating in the Sahel and surrounding areas has become all too clear in the last several years. There are currently five major violent extremist groups active throughout the region, including Boko Haram, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), Islamic State West Africa (ISWA), Ansar al-Islam, and the Al-Qa'ida affiliate Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen, known as JNIM. There are also dozens of smaller, loosely-affiliated extremist groups. Operating across vast spaces and comprised of more than ten thousand extremists, their acts of violence have killed tens of thousands of people and displaced millions more.

The number of attacks linked to Al-Qa'ida affiliates and the Islamic State has tripled in recent years, and the number of associated fatalities has doubled. Over time, these armed groups have overrun government-led forces in strategic towns in Mali and Nigeria, turning swaths of territory

into no-go zones for governments and security forces for extended periods of time. As the Committee will recall, in 2017, ISGS fighters ambushed American Special Operations soldiers and Nigerien partner forces, killing four Americans and five Nigeriens. Previous attacks targeting hotels and restaurants in Bamako, Ouagadougou, and in Côte d'Ivoire, killed nearly one hundred. Driven by competition and the pursuit of personal, ethnic, "religious," and economic interests, these groups have taken a terrible toll on already fragile and economically marginalized communities.

Current USAID Work

Working with the Department of State and others, USAID has developed a range of initiatives to help respond to the growing Sahel crisis. Our humanitarian assistance aims to help relieve suffering. Our development assistance aims to help partners restore economic hope and prevent and resolve conflict. More generally, our work aims to help partners in their efforts to turn back the spread of criminal and extremist influence. Our implementation involves partnering with a diverse range of stakeholders, including community leaders, public officials, and faith and interfaith groups.

As a reflection of the priority we place on the region, we recently launched our new Mission in Niger. We appreciate the support from Congress to open this new Mission. We have also recently opened a new office in Cameroon. These moves complement our current missions in the region and our Senegal-based Sahel Regional Office.

Programs Addressing Underlying Conditions

As we all know, the suffering and extreme poverty confronting people in the Sahel is intensified by a combination of underlying conditions, including a pervasive lack of economic opportunity, population pressures, recurrent natural disasters, and environmental degradation. To help address these and other conditions, our programs focus on specific areas of vulnerability, working to alleviate acute pressures while simultaneously fostering in people and communities the capacity to withstand future shocks.

We invest in the Sahel on multiple levels, with agriculture as our base. First, we finance the World Food Program to work with local groups to pay subsistence-level people in food in exchange for their labor to build community assets (like ponds) that regenerate land and harvest water. At the same time, we engage with larger non-governmental organizations to increase vulnerable farmers' access to seeds and teach them to use land more productively, while mobilizing communities to participate in the food-for-assets campaigns.

Next, our Feed the Future investments, like those in Niger, Nigeria and Mali, enhance economic opportunities in market-based agriculture for farmers who are more stable and help communities across the Sahel sell their surplus crops and economically diversify so they are more resilient in the face of an increasingly complex set of risks, like drought and price shocks. We have paired these investments with others that improve access to water, sanitation, hygiene, and health care to help address the individual and community-level vulnerabilities.

A specific example of USAID's effort to address underlying conditions is our flagship Resilience in the Sahel Enhance (RISE) program. RISE, which is active in Burkina Faso and Niger, employs a layered, multi-sector approach to reducing the chronic vulnerability of targeted populations. This integrated program focuses on expanding economic opportunities and livelihoods, improving governance, and bolstering the delivery of essential services. In Niger, RISE programming has helped smallholder and pastoralist farmers connect to markets and fostered an environment for private-sector investment. It has also strengthened targeted value chains and helped communities better manage their own natural resources.

These investments in building individual- and community-level resilience are one prong of USAID's approach to address some of the underlying conditions that exacerbate poverty and suffering in the Sahel. But we are also focused on strengthening early warning and monitoring capacity so that stakeholders can intervene before key food security and nutrition indicators begin to deteriorate. To that end, we've recently contributed an additional \$7.5 million to the Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (*Comité permanent inter-État de lutte contre la sécheresse au Sahel [CILSS]*), an African-owned multilateral institution partly funded by member states. The contribution brings our funding for CILSS through this award to \$16.8 million, and will enable them to improve the quality and reach of their seasonal forecasts and crop-monitoring reports—vital tools for farmers and governments in the harsh and unpredictable environment that characterizes much of the region.

Programs on Peacebuilding, Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation

One of the lessons USAID has learned over the years is that it is often local disputes and community grievances that are the main drivers of tension and violence. When competition for resources is intense and individuals or communities feel marginalized or aggrieved, it is essential that there are institutions and voices actively promoting dialogue, understanding, and reconciliation.

The irreplaceable first step in most of our work is an informed analysis of conditions and actors. We strive to determine what is actually driving conflict, not what we assume is doing so. As leader after leader told me during my travel to Nigeria, not every dispute is religious in nature. Not every conflict is ethnic. We need to tailor our approaches to address real causes.

In many parts of the region, we partner with “peace observers” who closely monitor local tensions and act as an early warning of sorts for disputes which, if left unchecked, might erupt in a given community. Peace observers help us to diagnose the nature of the problem so we can help resolve or reduce tensions.

When disputes or tensions are intercommunal in nature, our programs will often lead to constructive joint projects that can build cooperation and coexistence. For example, where water scarcity is a source of contention, we can facilitate the drilling of boreholes with shared access.

More broadly, USAID's Voices for Peace program, active in five countries across the region, uses radio broadcasts to strengthen social cohesion by countering misinformation and amplifying

moderate voices of leadership. The broadcasts are tailored to the local needs and dynamics of each community. They promote shared values.

Preventing the Spread of Violent Extremism

As I have indicated, much of the work we do in the Sahel aims to address drivers of stress and tension by accurately diagnosing the specific nature of conflict. The reality is that violent extremism already has a presence and is looking to expand its influence and power, as well as spread its toxic ideologies. An important part of our work is trying to counter efforts by these groups to recruit more individuals and groups to their cause. We work with governments to enhance their countering violent extremism (CVE) response strategies, strengthen overall response to citizen needs, and promote messaging that counters extremist propaganda and misinformation.

We target our assistance to improve the resilience of vulnerable communities targeted by extremist recruiters. For example, in northeastern Nigeria—where Boko Haram and ISIS West Africa continue to wreak havoc—we are implementing programs that provide entrepreneurial training, apprenticeship, and short-term employment opportunities, as well as agricultural livelihood activities. Each is specifically designed to erode pockets of support for these groups.

In areas across the Lake Chad Basin, we work to amplify credible voices of tolerance and moderate ideologies. We are working with a broad network of radio stations and social media outlets—a key source of news and information—to disseminate messaging with as far a reach as possible. In Niger, our assisted partners are able to reach more than 90 percent of the target audience.

Looking Ahead: The Sahel Development Partnership

Last Fall, we launched the Sahel Development Partnership (SDP), an expansion of our integrated programming that is focusing first on Burkina Faso and Niger before expanding elsewhere. The SDP's focus area consists of the Centre-Nord, and Est Provinces of Burkina Faso and the Tillabéri Region of Western Niger. Historically, this area has served as a crossroads for various ethnic communities, including nomadic herders and settled farmers who have shared the same marginal land and limited water resources for centuries. Communities in the SDP's focus area face shocks and stresses that include droughts, floods, food-price volatility, environmental degradation, population pressure, health crises, corruption, fragility, and conflict. As a result, millions of people are chronically vulnerable and food-insecure, and even moderate droughts result in large-scale humanitarian crises.

Through the SDP we are applying an integrated, layered development approach targeting areas most directly affected by cross-border instability. This approach layers resources strategically, from across different sectors and funding streams, in three lines of effort: CVE; stabilizing communities; and building greater resilience within communities.

As part of a broader national security partnership with the Governments of Burkina Faso and Niger, civil society, and affected communities, we aim to demonstrate how holistic programs can

help halt the spread of violent extremist groups, avert costly humanitarian crises, and stem the flow of destabilizing migration. The SDP will stabilize focus areas of the target countries by building local communities' resilience and capacity to counter violent extremism through rapid-response programs such as moderate voice radio programs, local governance support, and greater access to financial services in the agricultural sector.

USAID is accelerating implementation of this new approach in coordination with the U.S. Departments of State and Defense, and other U.S. Government Departments and Agencies. Through the SDP, USAID intends to demonstrate within two years that it can help halt the spread of violent extremist groups, avert costly humanitarian crises, and stem the flow of destabilizing migration in a setting where recent trends are decidedly negative.

The SDP's approach focuses on strengthening community cohesion, resolving grievances and local conflicts, building resilience, and providing economic alternatives to counter the emotional appeal of extremists. Rather than treating each set of problems as discrete development challenges that require separate interventions, the SDP attempts to address the intertwined nature of recurrent social, political, and environmental crises with the emergence of violent extremism, which overlap, both causally and geographically, within Burkina Faso and Niger.

In parallel and complementary to the SDP, we have several large, ongoing initiatives that further target underlying conditions of vulnerability—including in the areas of health care, food security, and livelihoods. USAID is coordinating with our partners across the humanitarian and development spectrum to ensure that our programs are complementary and reinforcing.

Long-term, multi-sector resilience programming builds sustainable local capacities to help families weather shocks and reduce the need for humanitarian assistance. USAID's resilience programming allows households to increase their assets, savings, and access to markets despite exposure to the stresses and crises described above. Resilience programs enhance access to financial services, including savings, credit, and insurance; improve the management of water for productive and household use; promote the reclamation of land and the introduction of conservation agriculture; develop value-chains for agriculture and livestock, including by linking rural producers to high-demand urban and coastal markets; improve health outcomes, including in maternal and child health and nutrition, voluntary family planning, and hygiene and sanitation; build the capacity of local governments to deliver high-quality health care, nutrition, and sanitation; and strengthen the capacity of government and community organizations to mitigate conflict and respond to shocks such as droughts and floods.

In summary, members of the Committee, we believe the Sahel is a region that requires flexible programs that address localized conflicts and stresses, and recognizes people often self-identify in terms that cross borders and ignore modern government institutions. We seek to build resilience, increase constructive options and opportunities for individuals (especially youth), resolve conflict through tailored mediation and reconciliation programs, and promote peace-and-stability affirming messages to counter extremist propaganda. We would welcome the opportunity to expand our work. We pledge to continue to work closely with the Departments of State and Defense on a coordinated, whole-of-government approach in the region. We welcome your input, counsel, and appreciate your ongoing support.

Thank you for allowing me to speak with you today, and I welcome your questions.