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Topic A

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Topic A: Combating Military Violence Across the Sahel Region

Topic Overview

The Sahel region is a narrow stretch of land in Africa that separates the Sahara Desert (to the north) and the savanna (to the south).¹ The Sahel includes ten countries: Cameroon, Chad, Niger, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Mauritania, and Senegal.² The Sahel region has remained vulnerable to military violence for a number of reasons, including climate change and food insecurity, which has worsened displacement within the region.

Pastoralism is the primary source of income for civilians in the Sahel. However, according to the United Nations, nearly 80% of the farmland in the region is unsuitable for livestock and agriculture. Additionally, the Sahel experiences a shorter wet season and more frequent droughts and floods, severely affecting food supply. Compounded with population growth, there is not enough arable land in the region, increasing violence between farmers and herders. Furthermore, as a result of political instability in certain areas, multiple jihadi groups have gained power in the Sahel (i.e. Boko Haram in Nigeria), further perpetuating violence. Due to a lack of border security in the Sahel, violence quickly spreads between countries. Escalating violence in the Sahel has caused greater displacement amongst communities. In 2018, at least 5 million people were displaced due to violence in the Sahel, while 24 million faced food insecurity.³ Violence in the region has continued to grow, with attacks in the Sahel as recent as June 2020. This has displaced thousands of families, who are forced to live in overpopulated communities that lack access to adequate healthcare, water, and food. Though the UNHCR is committed to providing assistance to these families, the public health threat posed by COVID-19 has created difficulties in doing so.⁴

Background and Timeline of Events

_____ Violence in the Sahel region has been present as early as 2006 in some countries. While the exact timeline varies for each country in the Sahel, the timeline provided below is a general outline of key events in the region.

¹“The Sahel: Land of Opportunities | Africa Renewal,” accessed August 10, 2020, <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/sahel>.

²“Sahel, a Region of Opportunities,” UNDP, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://feature.undp.org/sahel/index.html>.

³Founder Written by Robert Muggah, “The Sahel Is Engulfed by Violence. Climate Change, Food Insecurity and Extremists Are Largely to Blame,” World Economic Forum, January 23, 2019, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/01/all-the-warning-signs-are-showing-in-the-sahel-we-must-act-now/>.

⁴United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Time Running out for Civilians in Africa's Sahel Region as Attacks Multiply,” UNHCR, accessed August 10, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/6/5ee1e9704/time-running-civilians-africas-sahel-region-attacks-multiply.html>.

- **2006:** Violence began in the region in Mali on May 23, when Tuareg rebels occupied 2 military bases in the town of Kidal. The government began peace negotiations with the rebels a month later and was ultimately signed in July. However, Algerian Islamic Insurgents attacked Tuareg rebels on October 6, causing the rebels to withdraw from the peace deal in November 2006.
- **2007:** The Tuareg rebels conducted an attack in Northern Mali in May, marking the first incident of violence since 2006. At this time, there was great political upheaval in Mali due to the election of the new President Amadou Toumani Touré. Unrest continued through September, when rebels fired on a supply plane from the U.S., bringing supplies for the Malian military. The Tuareg rebels held hostages in September, and were only freed on January 23, 2008.
- **2008:** Front Pour la Démocratie et la République (FDR), an opposition group in Mali, planned negotiations with the Tuareg rebels responsible for the hostages the previous year. During a military raid in March, they captured 33 more hostages. After further attacks in multiple cities in Mali, which resulted in several casualties, Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon deemed the situation in the Sahel “urgent.” In July, Algeria began peace talks with the Tuareg rebels, which were sufficient in avoiding conflict through August. However, violence ensued once again in September and through the end of the year.
- **2009:** Tensions between the Malian government and Tuareg rebels escalated in January, when the rebels attacked the homes of government officials. This forced the government to raid and destroy the rebel bases. Violence from Al-Qaeda groups also began to escalate in 2009, with multiple hostage situations and kidnappings.
- **2010:** In April, Mali and Algeria collaborated to mitigate the threat from this group. Violence incited by Al-Qaeda continued throughout 2010, with multiple hostage incidents.
- **2011:** In January, Al-Qaeda attacked a French embassy in Mali, injuring 2 Malian individuals. Mali increased cooperation with Mauritania in countering the threat of Al-Qaeda after Mauritanian forces raided Al-Qaeda in their camp at the Mauritanian border. The European Union (EU) aid commissioner agreed to provide 62 million euros in aid to improve security in Mali.
- **2012:** In February, the Tuareg rebellion gained momentum after the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNL) initiated an attack in the town, Hombori. This left over 130,000 individuals displaced. Throughout the year, further attacks occurred in Mali. Additionally, Mali faced economic consequences as they were briefly banned from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). ECOWAS acquired responsibility for addressing the escalating violence in the region; by October, the UN gave them a 45-day deadline to determine an appropriate means of intervention. In November, ECOWAS chose to deploy 3300 troops in the Northern part of the Sahel, despite the Security Council’s belief that this could worsen the situation. In December,

the Security Council proposed the deployment of the International Support Mission in Mali (MISMA), with the focus on “political reconciliation, elections, and army training.”

- **2013:** France began “Operation Serval” with the African-led mission (AFISMA) to counter the threat of Islamic militants in northern Mali. This killed numerous extremists, Malian troops, French soldiers, and civilians, while others suffered injuries. Military operations against these militants continued through February and March. In June, the Malian government and Tuareg groups agreed to a ceasefire, as well as the disarmament of armed groups, which decreased violence in the region. However, tensions remained high in the region. Furthermore, Amnesty International reported various human rights violations by armed groups due to Operation Serval.
- **2014:** Violence escalated further in 2014, with multiple attacks throughout the year. Peace talks progressed slowly, furthering fears of violence throughout the Sahel region. However, Algeria began peace talks with Tuareg rebels in July, however these were ultimately unsuccessful as violence continued.
- **2015:** The government and rebel groups signed an initial peace deal in March after multiple rounds of peace negotiations in February. The negotiations process was put to a pause after the Tuareg armed coalition, the Coordination of Movement of Azawad (CMA), refused to sign the preliminary peace agreements. They ultimately signed the agreements in June. However, violence continued throughout the Sahel. Violence escalated to such a great extent that the government had to postpone regional and municipal elections in northern Mali.
- **2016:** In January, Algeria held an emergency meeting to discuss challenges in executing a peace agreement between the government and rebel groups. Violence continued to escalate amongst jihadi groups, who carried out multiple attacks, including one on the UN Peacekeeping camp in Mali. Tension between ethnic armed groups and attacks escalated due to sustained clashes in northern Mali.
- **2017:** Jihadist groups continued to execute attacks throughout the Sahel. The EU also further increased its involvement in Mali, offering 29.7 million euros in aid for the next year. Violence continued to escalate amongst jihadist groups, between communities, and criminal groups. In October, the Security Council visited Mali, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso and decided to further support the Sahel to adequately counter militant violence and trafficking.
- **2018:** Jihadist groups continued attacks throughout the northern and central areas of the Sahel region. As a result, the G5 Sahel Joint Force increased its donations to the region to 414 million euros. In March, new peace negotiations began, but did not come to fruition. Attacks continued throughout the year, including those on the UN Peacekeeping camp in the Kidal region. Intercommunal violence also escalated in light of the presidential election in Mali in July, making the region increasingly susceptible to jihadist attacks.

Armed groups limited voting in certain regions, forcing some polling locations to ultimately close.⁵

Past UN Actions and Resolutions

- **United Nations Integrated Strategy for the Sahel (S/2013/254 — June 2013):** This strategy, adopted by the Security Council in June 2013, addresses both short-term and long-term issues in the Sahel region. The strategy proposes the continued provision of goods by the UN to the region, while also providing concrete actions that address long-term issues of security, governance, and resilience.⁶
- **Security Council Resolution 2931 (December 8, 2017):** The Security Council unanimously adopted this resolution to further the role of the Group Five Sahel States (G5 Sahel) joint force. The G5 Sahel States are responsible for developing and adhering to a framework that “prevents, investigates, addresses, and publicly reports” human rights violations and abuses.⁷
- **Support to the Sahel Region (E/RES/2020/2 — December 10, 2019):** The Resolution entitled “Support to the Sahel Region,” was adopted by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on December 10, 2019. This resolution encourages greater cooperation between the United Nations and African Union and emphasizes the dire state of the Sahel region’s security and humanitarian issues. It also highlights the role of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in assisting the youth who are currently being recruited for militia groups.⁸

Current Situation

The current situation in the Sahel region remains “extremely volatile” with the potential to escalate further. As stated by Mohamed Ibn Chambas, the Head of the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS), violent extremists continue to attack civilians and security groups, resorting to the recruitment of children into fighting. Increased violence in the region has only worsened the situation for civilians; in Burkina Faso, nearly 921,000 people were forced to flee, while approximately 240,000 were displaced in Mali as of June 2020.

In addition to the refugee crisis in the Sahel, human rights groups continue to report numerous human rights violations committed by militias and defense groups — especially in relation to the youth recruitment to militias. Furthermore, the threat of climate change in the Sahel has only grown. Given that agriculture is the primary source of income in the region,

⁵International Crisis Group, *Tracking Conflict Worldwide*, www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch/print.

⁶“The Sahel | Department of Political Affairs.” *United Nations*, United Nations, www.un.org/undpa/en/africa/sahel.

⁷“Security Council Outlines Modes of Support, Reimbursement for Joint Anti-Terrorism Force in Sahel, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2391 (2017) | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases.” *United Nations*, United Nations, 8 Dec. 2017, www.un.org/press/en/2017/sc13112.doc.htm.

⁸“Support to the Sahel Region | UNITED NATIONS ECONOMIC and SOCIAL COUNCIL.” *United Nations*, United Nations, www.un.org/ecosoc/en/node/36374508.

climate change has exacerbated conflicts between farmers and herders, contributed to food insecurity, increased migration, and caused tensions to escalate. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the issue, especially in terms of increased human rights violations that disproportionately affect women.

Despite such issues, recent elections in both Togo and Benin went smoothly, avoiding uproar and violence. However, elections are still to occur in a few other countries, including Ghana, Niger, and Burkina Faso, in which potential political upheaval is anticipated.⁹

Blocs

- **African Bloc:** Mali, Algeria, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin, Togo, Gambia, Sudan, South Africa
- **European Bloc:** France, United Kingdom, Belgium, Estonia, Russian Federation, Germany
- **North and South American Bloc:** United States, Canada, Mexico, Brazil, Dominican Republic, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
- **Asian Bloc:** China, Vietnam, Indonesia, India

Questions to Consider

- In what ways has climate change contributed to violence in the Sahel, and how can this aspect of the issue be resolved?
- What are the roots of the violence in the Sahel region and how can they be countered?
- How can the consequences of militant violence in the Sahel region — including displacement of individuals, political instability, food insecurity, and human rights abuses — be adequately addressed?
- What role do nations outside of the Sahel region play in countering violence in the region?
- How has the COVID-19 pandemic further perpetuated violence in the Sahel region?

⁹“Situation in West Africa, Sahel 'Extremely Volatile' as Terrorists Exploit Ethnic Animosity, Special Representative Warns Security Council | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases.” *United Nations*, United Nations, 9 July 2020, www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14245.doc.htm.

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Topic Overview

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Background and Timeline

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Current Situation

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UN Actions and Resolutions

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