

Testimony on Mali by Mr. Nii Akuetteh, Independent Policy Analyst

House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights

Hearing Entitled “The Tuareg Revolt and the Mali Coup”

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Introduction

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Bass, for this Hearing on Mali, I thank you and the entire SubCommittee. Twice. First because it is a personal honor and privilege to be asked for my views. Far more important though, you deserve sincere thanks for delving into the grave problems afflicting Mali and the role US policy has and might play.

Your staff did a remarkable and reassuring job in guiding me through the process and I thank them as well.

Mali’s Dire Situation & Pessimistic Prognosis

“Twin, inter-connected national explosions.”

That is one metaphor for seeing Mali, especially the events pinned down in the title of today’s Hearing, “The Tuareg Revolt and the Mali Coup.” Together, these national explosions, which were less than a month apart, have grievously wounded the country.

There exists another way to see today’s Mali. African diplomats on the scene say that today, the country is afflicted by three simultaneous crises.

Most call the first a crisis of constitutional rule; I call prefer crisis of democracy deficiency. Its telling symptom include the fact that on March 22, renegade soldiers and putschists halted a promising, uplifting democracy project. They have humiliated the admirable democracy-building president (a former general affectionately dubbed soldier for democracy) and bundled him out of the country—two months from the end of his term-limited 10-year tenure.

The renegades next allowed their thugs in mufti to walk into the presidential palace and assault the unprotected elderly replacement president. He was so badly hurt that he is still receiving treatment far away, on another continent. Today they still refuse to fully cede power to or obey civilian leaders—despite overly-generous concessions made to them.

Mali's second crisis concerns the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. This is what most outsiders understand as the revolt by Tuareg ethnic rebels. Back in January, brimming with weapons and fighters from Libya, they launched yet another war against the central government. It quickly bogged down—until the undisciplined renegades turned their arms on the civilian bosses. Within weeks the Tuaregs had sliced off the contested northern seventy percent of the national territory from the capital's control. It must be reattached.

The final crisis is terrorism and violent insecurity in the temporarily lost north. The Tuareg militia exercise little real control and a myriad of declared terrorist and Islamist organizations hold sway.

Whether seen as twin explosions or triple crises, the Malian people are suffering, especially in the lost northern territories. More than hundreds of thousands there have been displaced and have fled. 145,000 have headed south into the rump 30 percent to be internally displaced persons, IDPs. The remaining 180,000 went into neighboring countries (west into Mauritania or east into Burkina Faso and Niger) to eke out difficult existence as refugees. And yet those who fled may be the fortunate ones.

The suffering is worse for people left behind in Northern Mali. It may not be too much of an exaggeration to say that they are being held hostage. Consider the experiences and stories that a few have managed to get out through a single American news organization, Congressionally-funded VOA. Here is just one story told by a father and husband to VOA's correspondent last week, ***"They came into my house and started firing. Then they took two of my cars. Then they ordered everyone out and took away everything, even stuff belonging to my wife and children."*** He is talking about the various armed groups who claim to have liberated northern Mali. More on them shortly.

The father's story is not unique, as the VOA correspondent discovered, ***"People in Gao say the rebels looted shops, homes and the local hospital as soon as they arrived..."*** and ***"Electricity remains one of the central problems. Whole neighborhoods are going without power. One housewife told [reporter] Fall that food spoils quickly, and her family suffers."***

So there is no way to escape, spin or dismiss the bad news: Since March, Mali has quickly and badly deteriorated into today's sad condition.

Mr. Chairman, you, the Ranking Member, and the rest of this Subcommittee are to be commended. By holding this hearing and examining the two proximate events that triggered Mali's dizzying descent, you are doing the right thing.

As bad as its current circumstances are, I believe a worse catastrophe is about to afflict Mali—unless and until serious interventions are made. The very last thing I want to do in my career and the last image I want to leave in the US foreign policy establishment is to leave a reputation as an alarmist, or a Chicken Little. And yet these days I am regularly having nightmares about the plagues about to be visited on Mali. But not just on Mali. A good way to appreciate the danger is a worst-scenario exercise: to sketch how the interests of the many stakeholders could be hurt, if nothing is done and the three crises fester. The threatened interests include those of the US.

Residents of northern Mali can expect this: more illegitimate rule, chaos, insecurity, religious, gender and ethnic discrimination, lawlessness, and the disappearance of the basic amenities for living. Terrorist attacks and retaliation cannot be ruled out either.

In the southern rump nation around Bamako, increased rule by the gun is what can be expected if Mali's crises are not solved quickly. The young, fragile, already wilting democratic institutions will succumb altogether. This is likely to invite more violence as opponents attempt to end military rule. And the standard of living will worsen since ECOWAS' neighbors are likely to re-impose sanctions to make the soldiers really give up power.

Mali's neighbors, ECOWAS members and non-members alike, will also be hit hard. More refugees will flow in—with resulting pressure on scarce food, water, land and other resources. Such refugee flows will predictably cause health problems as well as spontaneous small-scale conflicts. Additionally, we will see planned, politically motivated larger conflict—war. They could be uprisings by emboldened Tuareg populations in neighboring countries. Or they could jihadist insurgencies aimed at imposing religious rule.

What about the interests of the US and its European allies? In a worst case scenario—a situation where Mali's three crises are allowed to fester—how will Western interests be impacted? This is a crucial consideration. Doing it even minimal justice must start with sketches of those Western interests. Put differently, in what ways are Mali and the Sahara-Sahel-ECOWAS swath of Africa important to the US and Europe? One set of ways, i.e. one set of Western interests, is that the area is a source of important natural resources—uranium, oil, diamonds and gold, among others.

Another set of Western interests must be termed the strategic location. The nearby Atlantic Ocean in the Gulf of Guinea is a major international sea lane whose vulnerability to piracy already causes concern. Moreover, virtually all air traffic between Europe and Africa passes over or through the area. Increased terrorist capabilities must give Western officials sleepless nights.

The remaining set of Western interests is the most crucial in my opinion. I have in mind these security-related interests that could be addressed should Mali become more of a failed state. They include theocratic rule, which will pose mortal danger to democracy and stability; increased proliferation of weapons, from missiles to small arms; the area serving as a transit corridor for narcotics (cocaine from Latin America and heroin from Afghanistan) being trafficked to Europe; terrorist kidnapping of Westerners in the area for ransom; and of course terrorist attacks inside the U.S. and Europe that are planned and mounted from Mali and its neighborhood.

The bottom line of all this is clear: The U.S. and Europe have a great deal to lose from a worst-case scenario Mali. And a great deal to gain from a Mali that recovers and heals quickly.

First US Response: Assist ECOWAS In Solving Mali's Crises

Mr. Chairman, it is equally clear to me that in the aftermath of Mali's descent, the U.S. best protects its interests with two major policy responses. Here is the first: Washington must give ECOWAS all necessary assistance and encouragement to reverse the recent horrific trajectory in Mali since a continuation of that trajectory puts important American interests at risk.

Some may insist on a further elaboration of the why and the what. The strong argument for Washington's assistance may be laid out as follows. What ECOWAS is doing in Mali could be described as battling a huge fire. In other words, ECOWAS is the fire brigade that is doing a difficult, dangerous, frustrating task in order to protect an entire neighborhood of stakeholders from getting seriously burned. The U.S. is one such neighbor. And if ECOWAS did not battle that fire, the U.S. may have to. Furthermore, ECOWAS, the fire brigade, could use that help. Badly. And the U.S. can afford to give the help. Easily. Additionally, a decent case exists that American policy missteps added fuel to the dangerous fire (more on this point shortly). Clearly it is both ethical and smart to give such a fire brigade the affordable help it need to put out the dangerous fire.

The dimensions of the Mali crises come nowhere near World War II. Still, the rationale for the U.S. today helping ECOWAS is not dissimilar to FDR's Lend-Lease maxim uttered in 1941. I paraphrase it thus, "They are risking a lot to fight our fire. The least we can do is let them use our effective hose."

The what refers to outlining the type of assistance that ECOWAS is likely to need from the U.S. Determining the precise assistance required is properly a collaborative job for professional teams on both sides who are experienced in diplomacy, military operations, etc. It is not for foreign policy campaigners like me. Still, a few types of U.S. assistance for ECOWAS seem obvious. An important one is rhetorical: American officials should issue strong public support and praise for what ECOWAS is doing. Conversely, they should publicly condemn individuals, groups and entities opposing ECOWAS, from putschist like Captain Sanogo to secessionists like MNLA to jihadist and Islamist groups like AQIM, Ansar al-Dine, and MUJAO. Of course such public praise or condemnation may have to be avoided in instances where they jeopardize delicate tasks. The second form of help the U.S. must provide is diplomatic by exerting influence multilaterally inside the UN Security Council and bilaterally with such key role players as Algeria. Some analysts have also called for more effective U.S. policy on refugees and on terrorism—both in Mali's Sahel-Sahara neighborhood.

Clearly, the most vital form of help ECOWAS needs is from the US is military assistance that excludes American boots on the ground. It bears stressing that no American troops must be requested or granted. Rather, what should be asked for and given is help on improving West African military capabilities in intelligence, in logistics, in planning and in operations.

And of course assistance means money.

Undoubtedly the U.S. as a whole and its key segments (the Obama Administration, and Congress's two chambers) will have to expend valuable capital—political and otherwise--to

provide ECOWAS the needed assistance. However, given the many important American interests—humanitarian, economic, and counter-terrorism—being protected, I remain convinced that Washington metaphorically giving a hose to the ECOWAS fire brigade is the ethical and smart thing to do. And it is the first of my two recommendations of how the US must respond to Mali's disastrous decline.

Second US Response: Africa Policy Must Be Reviewed and Reformed

My second recommendation is this: The US should use the Mali debacle as an opportunity to thoroughly review and then change significant aspects of its Africa policy which is dominated by the struggle against terrorism.

It is generally accepted that the 9/11 terror attacks in 2001 triggered lasting changes in U.S. foreign relations. In U.S.-Africa relations, the dominant status of AFRICOM, created in 2007, reflects this change. Without a question, the U.S. military has focused on Egypt and on the Horn more than any other region of Africa. Beyond those two, however, Mali is a good candidate for Washington's closest African partner in the post-9/11 fight against terrorism.

Mali's spectacular implosion due to security weaknesses, therefore, makes the case for a thorough review of the new post 9/11 Africa policy.

Only days ago, AFRICOM Commander General Carter Ham made an interesting confession about Africa's three most notorious terrorist groups, Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram and AQIM, "What really concerns me is the indications that the three organizations are seeking to coordinate and synchronise their efforts – in other words, to establish a cooperative effort amongst the three most violent organisations ... And I think that's a real problem for us and for African security in general." The general's concern bolsters the argument reviewing the post-9/11 policy for defeating terrorism in Africa.

As an important component, the review must thoroughly examine five issues and incidents that critics insist are Africa policy blunders or something similar. One criticism is that Africa's vastness makes prioritizing AFRICOM and the find-and-kill approach an ineffective strategy for rolling back terrorism across the continent. A superior alternative approach, critics argue, would put large emphasis on democracy, development and reconciliation that defuses intra-African quarrels and grievances. This would aim at prevention, with AFRICOM and its hard power the last resort. And budget allocation would reflect this.

Conspicuous military assistance—from loudly trumpeted multi-million dollar grants to shiny vehicles and equipment to annual military exercises to overseas training for officers—dominated the close relations that the U.S. forged with Mali after 9/11. This was another policy move severely criticized by some Africa policy analysts. They worried that bribing Mali in this manner to go chasing after AQIM while ignoring its own priorities (democracy, development and solving the Tuareg quarrel) would end badly. Mali's implosion seems to say they were prescient.

The inability to prevent heavily armed Tuareg fighters moving from post-Gaddafi Libya into Mali and re-igniting an even deadlier revolt is the third apparent policy failure that the review must investigate.

That Tuareg revolt re-ignition began in earnest in January. Reportedly, Bamako's response was so poor that it led to the two explosions mentioned—the March 22 coup by soldiers incensed at losing battles against the Tuaregs, and the Tuaregs' lightning fast conquest of northern Mali, which they announced on April 6. These events raise a question: Given that the Toure Administration had appeared to be such a close partner in counter-terrorism, why did the U.S. and AFRICOM not do more to help a close ally being attacked by fighters from Gaddafi's Libya. That question must also be answered by the Africa policy review being advocated in this testimony.

The State Department exhibited a strange initial reaction to Captain Amadou Sanogo's March 22 coup in Bamako. After an inter-agency meeting, the Department's spokesperson spent days refusing to condemn it as a coup and claiming it could not be determined how much of the \$140 million in aid could be cut as the law required. Most alarming, she more or less justified the coup with this March 23 comment, “. . . *this situation arose as a result of a number of grievances that the military had . . . So clearly, there's going to have to be some mediation between the government and the military. Its grievances are going to have to be addressed . . .*”

Mr. Chairman, it must be observed that this was justifying the treasonous action by a soldier that the U.S. trained repeatedly. And that the former School of the Americas caused many Third World observers to wonder whether Washington deliberately trained foreign soldiers to overthrow their governments and abuse their populations. I believe the policy review must also get to the bottom of this puzzling initial reaction to the Sanogo coup.

To assist in getting to the bottom of the five concerns, I have taken the liberty of suggesting questions that could be asked. They are:

Who (from U.S. officials all the way to contracted entities and persons, regardless of nationality) had responsibility for monitoring and tracking the spread of fighters and weapons from Colonel Gaddafi's Libya starting from the start date of the UN Security Council Resolution 1973?

Did they pick up the flows into northern Mali?

If yes, what actions did they take?

If no, were they asleep at the wheel, and what reprimands and other sanctions are called for and have been applied?

What detailed data capture American engagement with Mali throughout the tenure of the Amadou Toumani Toure government in Mali?

What did the US expect of the Toure government, and how satisfied was the US with how the Toure government played its expected role?

What precise sessions of training did the U.S. give Captain Amadou Sanogo whether in the US, in Mali or elsewhere?

Which courses did Captain Sanogo take and how well did he perform in training?

Which other Malian military personnel have received which U.S.-funded training since Amadou Toumani Toure was first elected president?

What is the Obama Administration's current attitude and view of Captain Sanogo's coup?

Has this attitude and view changed since March 21, 2012?

Admittedly, a good policy review will involve more than investigating the five concerns of critics just cited. However even when perfectly done in a perfect world, the review will still be a tool, a means to an end. That end is policy reform. My working environment of foreign policy advocacy is less than perfect. Therefore, without a formal review first, I have developed reforms and changes that must be made in U.S. policy for fighting terrorism in Africa. They derive from my instincts, long experience and observation of what has befallen Mali. I believe they would reduce the chance that other African countries will suffer Mali's fate. You could describe my suggested policy reforms as hypotheses that will be tested by the formal review. Below I present them as catchy, Africa policy dos and don'ts:

Don't site AFRICOM's headquarters in Africa; bring them stateside—to Florida or Virginia, or Georgia or South Carolina, all of whom have expressed a desire to get the HQ.

The first and most important training given to African soldiers must be attitudinal. Subordination to democracy and constitutional rule and respect for civilian leaders as Commander in Chief must be deeply inculcated.

Bend over backwards to avoid training soldiers to serve and bolster dictators.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, I hope you have found some merit in the case I make for the two policy responses that I believe the U.S. must make to respond to the disaster that has struck Mali and the dangers posed to many stakeholders—Maliens, West Africans, Europeans and Americans.

The first recommended policy response is that ECOWAS deserves all the help that the US can give it.

The second is that U.S.-Africa policy in general, and counter-terrorism in particular, begs for a thorough review. Followed by reform away from over-reliance on military approaches.

I thank you again for the privilege.