

Statement of
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U.S. Department of State
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“Instability in the Sahel and West Africa: Implications for U.S Policy”
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Chairman Cardin, Ranking Member Risch, thank you for the opportunity to discuss the crisis in the Sahel and the U.S. role in promoting democracy, economic development, and security in West Africa.

The urgent challenges in Ukraine and the Middle East at times overshadow the U.S. partnership with Africa. But we must prepare for the future. By 2050, one in four people on the planet will be an African. The talents of more than one billion Africans already enrich the world’s culture, politics, and economy. The continent is the source of critical minerals such as cobalt. The Congo River basin is the largest carbon sink in the world. This is why the strategy of the Biden-Harris Administration recognizes Africa as a major geopolitical force and why we seek to elevate African voices in institutions such as the UN Security Council, the G-20, and the IMF.

The sub-region of the Sahel is integral to our relationship with the continent. The coups that have occurred recently in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and now Niger illustrate the democratic regression that threatens not only the people of the Sahel but their neighbors and our partners in coastal west Africa.

Allow me to address the drivers of political instability and what the United States has done and could do. A primary problem is weak governance. Every country where a coup has taken place had previously experienced military takeovers. Many of these governments had engaged in corrupt practices, failed to provide basic services, and ignored democratic values by extending term limits or disregarding human rights. Such practices tested the presumption that democracy delivers. But context matters, too. Historical legacy, enduring poverty, climate change, and a decade of escalating

terrorist violence further weakened the performance and resilience of Sahelian democracies. Atrocities by the Islamic State and the branch of al-Qaeda known as JNIM, and predations by criminal armed groups, have placed unrelenting pressure on governments and civilians.

Military rulers point to the supposed failure of democracy to justify their actions. But military rule does not improve people's lives. In fact, military rule leaves populations poorer and less secure. The number of deaths from political violence increased by 150 percent in Mali and 77 percent in Burkina Faso in 2022. Violence targeting civilians in Mali increased by 38 percent this year, nearly a third of these incidents perpetrated by Malian security forces or the Wagner Group. Violent incidents in Niger – which had been declining due to President Bazoum's leadership and the partnership between Nigerien and U.S. and European forces – rose by 42 percent in the month after the coup.

How to foster a return to democracy? In the case of Niger, we are working with the regional organization ECOWAS. The African Union and Africa's regional economic commissions are essential partners in advancing democracy and peace. That is why - although we promptly paused the majority of U.S. assistance for Niger after the coup - we delayed at the request of our African partners the formal assessment that the outcome constituted a coup while they sought to restore President Bazoum to office. Acting Deputy Secretary Toria Nuland traveled to Niamey in August to try and convince the generals to restore constitutional order. I later traveled to west Africa to consult on how to encourage a quick and credible restoration of democratic rule. Secretary Blinken met with ECOWAS Foreign Ministers at the recent UN General Assembly to propose a phased approach to resuming U.S. assistance based on concrete actions to return the country to democratic rule. Committed to the Nigerien people, the United States has maintained humanitarian and basic health and food assistance. Swiftly resolving the crisis in Niger could serve as a positive alternative, and we are now encouraging negotiations between the junta and ECOWAS.

How to prevent coups? With the support of Congress and the Global Fragility Act, we are helping countries in coastal west Africa to strengthen governance by programming such as increased engagement in historically marginalized communities. We are also working to implement the African Democratic and Political Transitions initiative, or ADAPT, as well as the 21st Century Partnership for Africa Security, or 21PAS -- programs launched by President Biden at the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit.

There is a perception that we spend too much on security, but in Fiscal Years 2018-2022, the State Department provided approximately \$2 billion in bilateral assistance to the Sahel. Of that, about less than 15% was for security assistance.

Adequate staffing is essential so I ask you to support the administration's budget request and to confirm Ambassadors. We are now missing Ambassadors in Nigeria, Gabon, and the African Union, among other posts.

Thank you again for scheduling this important discussion to renew our shared commitment to advance democracy, peace and security as the cornerstones of a successful U.S.-Africa partnership.

