

Statement of
Assistant Secretary of African Affairs Molly Phee
U.S. Department of State
Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing
“Instability and the State of Democracy in the Sahel
and the U.S Policy Response”
July 12, 2022

Mr. Chairman, Senator Rounds and Senator Van Hollen, other Committee members, allow me to begin by thanking the committee for your longstanding interest and engagement in the Sahel. We share your concern about surging instability and democratic backsliding in the region.

Instability in the Sahel is a security problem with a governance solution. A decade of a security-focused approach has underscored this lesson as armed groups continue to expand their presence and capabilities despite French counterterrorism operations and significant western investments in African national security capabilities.

The Department of State, together with our colleagues from DoD and USAID, have previously provided substantial counterterrorism support across the Sahel through the Trans Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). While progress has not proved linear, and increasingly inadequate given the expanding number of terrorist incidents and civilian casualties, our efforts have afforded us numerous lessons learned that we continue to take into account as we revise our approach to the Sahel.

As we have found in the Middle East and in Southwest Asia, we must address the underlying drivers of insecurity to effectively support efforts by African partners to turn the tide. First, we must be realistic about the daunting social, environmental, political and economic conditions that overwhelm the Sahel. In order to contend with violent extremist groups, governments in the region must dramatically reform and improve. We can best encourage this required change by investing in governance. The new interagency Sahel strategy seeks to build the capacity of governments in the Sahel to regain public confidence at the national and local levels by providing the equitable delivery of government services, law enforcement, and justice. In other words, we will provide the resources and guidance to encourage accountability, anti-corruption measures, and dialogue

between capitals and the periphery and among communities. These are the keys to winning the support of civilian populations.

The five-year strategy is sufficiently broad to withstand the blows of the kinds of crises and shifts we have seen in the Sahel in recent years. It allows U.S. embassies the flexibility to implement to greatest effect at the local level. I tell you frankly, however, that neither our African partners nor we will transform the Sahel within the first five years of the strategy. The goals we have identified call for action to promote fundamental policy and governance reforms that will take many years to undertake and implement. These are societal endeavors which by their nature are incremental. But the reorientation explicit in the strategy is an essential first step.

Recent extraconstitutional changes of government in three of the five Sahelian countries political degradations that illustrate the pressures of governance in this volatile region have complicated the task. We need greater investment in democracy and governance programing, as well as more development assistance that targets underlying social, environmental and economic deficiencies – so that the United States is positioned to assist these transitions in moving toward a more stable democratic future.

In Mali, we welcome the agreement to a 24-month timeline between the Economic Community of West African State (ECOWAS) and the transition government. We will join ECOWAS in insisting that the transition government turn its full attention to implementing the key reforms necessary to set Mali on the path to restore its democracy. The United States provided technical assistance for the creation of the electoral law. We stand ready to assist as long as the transition government moves towards a constitutional referendum and elections. We are committed to the Malian people and their aspiration for responsive democratic governance.

We know the Malian people also want security. The civilian casualties resulting from the reported tactics used by the Wagner Group, alongside Malian Armed Forces (FAMa), will only serve to sow further divisions in Malian society, undermine the credibility of the FAMa, and drive communities into the hands of violent extremist groups.

The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) shares our goal of protecting civilians. We will be watching closely to see how the mission operates without French reassurance flights from Operation Barkhane. The

United States is deeply concerned by the statement made by Mali's transition government expressing its intent to deny MINUSMA the freedom of movement necessary to fulfill its mandate. To act in this contrary manner would be a blatant violation of the status of forces agreement (SOFA) that the transition government is obligated to uphold.

In Burkina Faso, we are encouraged by the transition government's proposal to shorten the timeline to return Burkina Faso to democratically elected civilian-led governance by six months. While the January 24 military coup d'état triggered restrictions on U.S. assistance for the Government of Burkina Faso, we remain committed to assistance to the country under available authorities in order to address instability, prevent the spread of violent extremism, and support reforms to advance accountable democratic rule. The installation of a democratically elected government would open the door for deeper cooperation.

Chad has an historic opportunity to change direction after decades of authoritarian rule. To capitalize on this moment, we have emphasized the importance of a peaceful, timely political transition. It is the responsibility of the Transitional Military Council to fulfill its commitments to Chadian citizens, and to the principles outlined in the African Union 2021 Communique. These include peaceful resolution of negotiations with the country's insurgent groups – known as politico-military groups - that have been underway in Doha for six months, hosting a national dialogue that is inclusive of all voices, and holding free and fair elections that lead to a democratically elected and civilian-led government.

Mauritania remains one of our most stable partners in the Sahel. The country's 2019 election was a watershed moment which saw the country's first transition from one democratically elected president to another. President Ghazouani is tackling long-standing human rights issues. We applaud Mauritania's internal reforms to its security sector which have strengthened its capability in responding to violent extremist groups. Mauritania has not suffered a terrorist attack on its soil since 2011. The United States appreciates Mauritania's efforts to combat terrorism within its borders and its partnership with the United States in countering terrorism in the region.

Niger continues to be our most reliable and willing partner in the Sahel and a country with a firm commitment to democratic processes, as demonstrated in 2021 by the nation's first peaceful democratic transition of power. We applaud President Bazoum's forward-leaning pledge to strengthen and expand the High Authority

Against Corruption and Related Crimes to counter corruption and impunity. The United States values Niger's partnership and the country's contributions to regional peace and security.

Finally, Mr. Chairman, the new Sahel strategy identifies the threat to border countries in coastal West Africa which are most at risk from violent extremist spillover from the Sahel as well as vulnerable to internal factors that mirror the governance challenges in the Sahel. We are grateful for the resources and flexibilities provided by the Global Fragility Act. We are taking advantage of the GFA to forge a holistic approach to bolstering resiliencies and mitigating risks in marginalized communities. We are seeking to strengthen social cohesion between and among communities along the border, with a focus on improving access to livelihoods for unemployed youth. We also intend to strengthen civilian-security force relations through training to professionalize security forces and enhance their capacity to protect civilians. We will use the lessons learned from the innovative GFA approach in coastal West Africa to inform and reinvigorate our programming and coordination in the Sahel.