

**Statement of Assistant Secretary Johnnie Carson
Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Subcommittee on Africa
November 17, 2009**

Chairman Feingold, Ranking Member Isakson, and Members of the Committee:

I welcome the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss our counterterrorism approach in Africa's Sahel region. I look forward to working with the Congress, and especially with this Committee, to identify appropriate tools to support the efforts of the countries in the region to improve their long-term security and constrict the ability of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and a variety of criminal networks to exploit the area's vast territory.

This hearing is very timely. While the security challenges in the Sahel are not new, several attacks in recent months against African and western targets have drawn additional focus to the situation. Key countries in the area, including Algeria, Mali and Mauritania, have intensified efforts to coordinate their activities against AQIM and address the region's short, medium, and long-term vulnerabilities. At the same time, we have consulted with African and European partners to identify areas where we can more effectively support regional efforts to improve the security environment in the Sahel over the long-term.

The United States can play a helpful supporting role in the regional effort, but we must avoid taking actions that could unintentionally increase local tensions

or lend credibility to AQIM's claims of legitimacy. First and foremost, we must be sensitive to local political dynamics and avoid precipitous actions which exacerbate long-standing and often bloody conflicts.

AQIM's ideology and violent tactics are antithetical to the vast majority of people in the region and the group's ability to mobilize significant popular support for its objectives has been largely frustrated. It has failed to build and sustain meaningful alliances with insurgencies and criminal networks operating in the region. In fact, AQIM's murder of a Malian military officer this summer, the unprecedented execution of a British hostage, and the murder of an American citizen in Mauritania may have caused some groups in Northern Mali to sever opportunistic economic arrangements occasionally established to supplement local groups' efforts to survive in the region's austere environment. By contrast, the perceptions of the United States have been generally favourable throughout the Sahel, even during periods when our popularity around the world declined. It is instructive that a 2008 poll involving 18 Muslim countries revealed that Mauritians had the highest opinion of the United States.

The countries in the region continue to demonstrate the political will to combat terrorism and trans-national crime. They have explicitly stated that the Sahel's security is the responsibility of the countries in the region. They have not asked the United States to take on a leadership role in counterterrorism efforts and

have, in fact, clearly signalled that a more visible or militarily proactive posture by the United States would be counterproductive. We fully concur that the appropriate roles for the United States and other third countries with even more significant interests in the region must be to support regional security efforts while continuing to provide meaningful development assistance to the more remote areas. Moreover, we have emphasized that while the United States will do its part, the burden must be shared.

We recognize, however, that the security environment in the Sahel requires sustained attention to address a wide range of vulnerabilities and capacity deficits. There is insufficient capacity to monitor and protect immense swaths of largely ungoverned or poorly governed territory. The arid northern half of Mali alone covers an area larger than Texas. Niger is the poorest country in the world according to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and Mauritania and Mali rank near the bottom of the Human Development Index scale.

The vulnerability of the northern Sahel has not only led AQIM to seek out safe-havens in the region, but has also enabled the operations of a range of trans-national criminal networks. Criminal traffickers in human beings, weapons, and narcotics also exploit parts of the region. West Africa has emerged as a major trans-shipment area for cocaine flowing from South America to Europe. Narco-trafficking poses a direct threat to U.S. interests since the proceeds of cocaine

trafficked through the region generally flow back to Latin American organizations moving drugs to the United States.

The Committee has asked how our counterterrorism efforts in the Sahel relate to our long-term goals of good governance, civilian control over security forces, and respect for human rights. The first priority President Obama has identified for our Africa policy is helping to build strong and stable democracies on the continent. This is essential in West Africa. In recent years, the region has witnessed two military coups in Mauritania, deeply flawed elections in Nigeria, and an undemocratic seizure of power in Niger. Our experience in the region has underscored the urgency of improving governance, strongly promoting the rule of law, developing durable political and economic institutions at all levels of society, and maintaining professional security forces under civilian control.

Meaningful progress in these areas is crucial to the success of ongoing efforts against AQIM and other criminal networks. The groups are drawn to areas where they can take advantage of political and economic vulnerabilities to safeguard their operating spaces and lifelines, cross borders with impunity, and attract recruits. They benefit when security forces and border guards lack the necessary training, equipment, intelligence, and mobility to disrupt their activities. Their cause is advanced when human rights abuses undermine the credibility of security forces. Terrorists and criminal organizations also take advantage of weak

or corrupt criminal justice systems unable to effectively investigate, prosecute and incarcerate all forms of criminals.

Underdevelopment in key areas represents a critical security challenge in the Sahel. The region is extremely diverse and the sources of insecurity in the region vary. In Northern Mali, for example, insecurity in isolated border areas and along traditional smuggling routes is perpetuated by unmet economic expectations and the lack of legitimate alternatives to smuggling or opportunistic commerce with criminal networks. Mali is one of Africa's most stable democracies, but its efforts to address insecurity in the northern part of the country are severely hampered by poor infrastructure and the inability to provide adequate service delivery and educational and vocational opportunities to isolated areas. This dynamic can become particularly problematic in cases where AQIM has provided small amounts of food and other consumables to generate good-will or at least tolerance from groups living in their vicinity.

Although AQIM's attempts to recruit in Mali and elsewhere in the Sahel have been largely unsuccessful, its limited successes in countries such as Mauritania can largely be traced to its ability to capitalize on the frustration among the young over insufficient educational or vocational opportunities. AQIM has also attracted recruits and material support from isolated communities or

neighbourhoods in Mauritania and elsewhere that lack alternatives to schools, media or networking centers that promote violent extremism.

The United States' primary instrument to advance counterterrorism objectives in the Sahel and the Maghreb is the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership (TSCTP). TSCTP is a multi-year commitment designed to support partner country efforts in the Sahel and the Maghreb to constrict and ultimately eliminate the ability of terrorist organization to exploit the region. The rationale and overarching strategy for TSCTP was approved by a National Security Council (NSC) Deputies Committee in 2005. TSCTP originally included Algeria, Chad, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Tunisia; Burkina Faso was added in 2009.

TSCTP serves two primary purposes. The program identifies and mobilizes resources from throughout the interagency to support sustained efforts to address violent extremism in the region. It was understood when TSCTP was created that sporadic engagements without adequate follow-up or sustainment would fail to achieve meaningful long-term results in a region with a multitude of basic needs. The emphasis was therefore placed on key capacity deficits that could be addressed over a period of years. The program draws resources and expertise from multiple agencies in the U.S. government including the State Department, the Department of Defense, and USAID. As the threat levels, political environments and material

needs differ substantially among the partner countries, most engagements and assistance packages under TSCTP are tailored to fit the priorities of the individual countries.

TSCTP was also designed to coordinate the activities of the various implementing agencies. The coordination takes place at several levels. Action Officers representing the various agencies meet periodically in Washington to coordinate activities and share information. Representatives from Washington and AFRICOM also meet regularly with our Embassies in TSCTP countries. The first line of coordination and oversight takes place at our Embassies. While various assessments and inputs from throughout the interagency inform decisions regarding TSCTP programming, Chiefs of Mission must concur with all proposed activities. They are best placed to understand the immediate and long-term implications of various activities and are ultimately the primary interlocutors with the host countries.

Forming a definitive conclusion at this relatively early stage regarding whether our counter-terrorism approach in the Sahel is working is difficult, but we believe that we are making important progress. For example, TSCTP resources contributed to training and equipping more capable and professional security forces in Mauritania. We believe that our work with Mali to support more professional units capable of improving the security environment in the country

will have future benefits if they are sustained. Our public affairs teams and USAID are implementing a range of beneficial exchanges and projects in Mali and promoting outreach to communities potentially vulnerable to extremism in Mauritania, Chad, Senegal, and elsewhere.

The decision in 2005 to focus on long-term capacity-building rather than search for quick fixes was clearly correct, even more so given the limited absorptive capacity of these countries. Clear victories against the underlying security and developmental challenges in the region are unlikely to clearly announce themselves in the near term, but I am confident that a steady and patient approach provides the best opportunity for success.

The recognition that we must take a holistic approach involving multiple agencies was also correct. Efforts to improve interagency coordination and the vital coordination between our Missions and program managers in Washington and Stuttgart have been crucial. We continue to seek a balance between the financial resources for the development and diplomatic pieces of TSCTP and funding devoted to military to military activities. We will continue to work toward a balanced approach envisioned when the program was created.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I want to thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I will be happy to answer any questions you have.