



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Civilian Harm under Military Rule in the Central Sahel

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Room 2255 Rayburn House Office Building

Co-Chair James P. McGovern

As delivered

Good afternoon and welcome to the Commission’s hearing on “Civilian Harm under Military Rule in the Central Sahel.”

I extend a special welcome to our distinguished panel of witnesses. We very much appreciate your willingness to share your expertise with Congress.

Today, we are examining human rights conditions in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. In each of these countries, civilians bear the brunt of entangled crises of security and governance.

Armed Islamist groups have long sought to undermine the stability and legitimacy of Sahelian states. Since 2015, they have expanded their reach while committing grave human rights abuses—abuses that in some cases rise to the level of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Under international law, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are obligated to guarantee the human rights of their citizens. This means that governments must do all that is in their power to prevent, to investigate, to punish, and to provide redress for harm, including harm caused by acts of terrorism.

But as today’s witnesses will testify, the responses these governments have taken have too often been harmful in their own right.

Worsening insecurity and public frustration with dysfunctional civilian governments set the stage for a wave of military coups across the region. In Mali, military officers seized power in 2020 and 2021. Two consecutive military coups also struck Burkina Faso in 2022. Niger followed suit in 2023.

The three countries kicked out American and French military personnel, withdrew from the West African regional bloc ECOWAS, started their own regional alliance, and invited the Russian mercenary force formerly known as the Wagner Group to set up shop.

In each case, coup leaders justified their actions as necessary to restore security and national sovereignty.

Exhausted by years of violence and political dysfunction and angered by colonial legacies of inequality, many in the region accepted that logic. I have to say that I cannot blame them for hoping that change—any change—would be for the better.

But military rule has not delivered the stability that the people of these countries were promised.

The U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that more than 2,600 people have been killed in the region since the beginning of 2026. Nearly 3 million are internally displaced. Another 11.4 million people require critical food assistance—more than 400,000 of whom are children suffering severe acute malnutrition. Left untreated, they could face lifelong health problems.

The humanitarian crisis is compounded by an accelerating assault on human rights and democratic freedoms. The military regimes have banned all political parties, dissolved hundreds of civil society organizations, and restricted independent media. Political dissidents and civil society actors have been forcibly disappeared.

Across the region, but most alarmingly in Burkina Faso, civilians are targeted by all security forces, armed Islamist groups, auxiliary defense groups, and Russian mercenaries alike. As we will hear from witnesses, state security forces are now responsible for the majority of civilian deaths. Minority groups, including the Fulani, have faced particular risk, as state officials threaten to “kill them all.”

The complexity of this crisis and the gravity of its human cost demand a careful, holistic response from the United States government. That response must be rooted in human rights. It must support civilian protection, humanitarian access, democratic governance, and accountability for abuses committed by all parties.

It doesn't seem that we can expect such a response from the Trump Administration, so far, and I'm sorry to say that.

The head of the State Department's Bureau of African Affairs, Nick Checker, visited the region earlier this year. Since then, he has spoken at length about engaging the juntas in a manner that "respects sovereignty" and "avoids public moralizing."

I agree that respect for state sovereignty is important. It is a cornerstone of the U.N. Charter and a prerequisite for upholding international human rights obligations.

But we don't get to pick and choose *when* it is important, as this Administration sometimes does. The President disregards sovereignty when he *chooses* to invade Venezuela and decapitate its government, or *chooses* to launch an unprovoked war against Iran without the approval of Congress or the UN Security Council.

At the same time, the Administration invokes "sovereignty" to justify defunding human rights NGOs in Hungary and El Salvador and in other places with dictators he likes.

Those episodes erode the credibility of the "respecting sovereignty" argument. They suggest that the discourse of "sovereignty" is being deployed as cover for this Administration's transactional foreign policy that deprioritizes human rights.

We cannot let that drift go unchecked.

We *must* approach human rights promotion in the Central Sahel with humility—not only because the United States' credibility on human rights been diminished, but because colonization in the Sahel left profound political, economic, and social scars that continue to shape public attitudes toward countries like ours. Resentment toward foreign involvement did not emerge in a vacuum.

That does not excuse abuses committed by military governments or armed groups. But it does mean that any sustainable international response must acknowledge historical harms and do right by those who are now suffering.

The people of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger deserve security without repression; sovereignty without isolation; and stability without fear.

That is what this hearing is about. I thank our witnesses again for joining us today, and I look forward to their testimony.