



House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Civilian Harm under Military Rule in the Central Sahel

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Statement of Carine Kaneza Nantulya
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Human Rights Watch Submission

Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am Carine Kaneza Nantulya, deputy Africa director at Human Rights Watch, an independent international organization that investigates and documents human rights and humanitarian law violations around the world by states and non-state armed groups. We take no government funding.

Human Rights Watch respectfully submits this testimony for the record on the human rights situation in the central Sahel—Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—a region at a critical juncture of its history, marked by increased threats to civilians caught in armed conflict, impunity, emboldened authoritarianism of the military juntas, and increased isolationism from regional and international institutions.

Across the region, state security forces, allied militias, foreign fighters, and Islamist armed groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State continue to commit serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including war crimes and crimes against humanity. As of February 2026, the armed conflicts in the Central Sahel had killed tens of thousands of civilians, resulting in one of the world's most acute humanitarian crises, forcing over [three million people](#) from their homes.

Since 2020, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have experienced five military coups. The ruling juntas have shown intolerance for the political opposition and peaceful dissent. Civic and political space has shrunk as a crackdown on journalists, civil society activists, and opposition party members has increased, through arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and unlawful conscription. The military leaders of the three countries have consolidated their power without elections, delaying the return to democratic civilian rule.

The authorities in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have ignored calls for accountability and failed to uphold their international legal obligations to investigate serious rights violations by their security forces and hold those responsible accountable, allowing impunity to fester and emboldening the abusers. In 2025, the three countries [officially left the Economic Community of West African States \(ECOWAS\)](#)—depriving their citizens of the opportunity to seek justice for human rights violations through the ECOWAS Court of Justice—and announced their intention to [withdraw from the International Criminal Court \(ICC\)](#).

Country Findings

Burkina Faso

Human Rights Watch's April 2026 report, "[None Can Run Away](#)," documents the devastating impact on civilians of an armed conflict including widespread war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by all sides. These atrocities have received far too little global attention.

Our report documents that murder and other grave abuses against civilians, often from communities accused of supporting the opposing side, have become a key tactic of the junta as well as of the Al Qaeda-linked Islamist armed group Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims, or JNIM).

Based on over 450 interviews and extensive open-source analysis, examination of satellite imagery, thousands of hours of audiovisual footage, and official documents, the report documented 57 incidents across 11 regions between January 2023 and August 2025 in which more than 1,800 civilians were killed. Of them, 1,200 were killed by soldiers and allied militias. This is likely the tip of the iceberg as incidents often go underreported.

Government forces and allied militias known as the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland (Volontaires pour la défense de la patrie, or VDPs) have fired on civilians in the path of military-escorted convoys and during large-scale counterinsurgency operations and have massacred civilians simply because they lived in JNIM-controlled areas. Witnesses described security forces and militias surrounding villages, separating men from women, summarily executing civilians, and burning homes leading to the displacement of entire communities. The military and VDPs have disproportionately targeted Fulani people because of their alleged support for Islamist armed groups, resulting in the ethnic cleansing of entire communities. JNIM has also committed serious violations, including killing civilians, enforcing sieges that deprive communities of food and medical care, and carrying out violent reprisals against those perceived to collaborate with state forces.

Human Rights Watch found that President Ibrahim Traoré, supreme commander of the armed forces, and six senior Burkinabè military commanders may be liable as a matter of command responsibility for grave abuses and should be investigated. Iyad Ag Ghaly, the JNIM supreme leader who is wanted by the ICC for alleged crimes in Mali in 2012-2013, and four JNIM commanders may be liable as a matter of command responsibility for abuses by JNIM in Burkina Faso and should also be investigated.

Since taking power in a 2022 coup, the junta has suspended independent media outlets, [dismantled civil society groups](#), [curtailed political pluralism](#), and [pursued legal action](#) against critics. It has intimidated, unlawfully conscripted, forcibly disappeared and arbitrarily detained journalists, [political opponents](#), [civil society members](#), and [judges](#), shrinking the country's civic space. The prominent investigative journalist Serge Atiana Oulon [remains missing](#) two years after his enforced disappearance. Recent reports revealed the junta lied about his fate: he was not unlawfully conscripted but held in secret and tortured in an illegal detention facility in the capital, Ouagadougou.

In February, the military authorities suspended the activities of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, effectively removing the last international body tasked with overseeing the human rights situation in the country.

Mali

In Mali, Human Rights Watch has documented [widespread abuses](#) by Malian armed forces, allied militias, and foreign fighters of the Wagner Group (now Africa Corps) during counterinsurgency operations across the country, including summary executions, enforced disappearances, and indiscriminate drone strikes.

Islamist armed groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State [have also targeted](#) civilians for killings and forced displacement and [have laid sieges](#) on various towns and cities, including the capital, Bamako.

The coordinated attacks in April 2026 by JNIM and the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA)—that followed JNIM’s months-long siege of Bamako—have shown the weaknesses of the government’s approach to this multidimensional crisis. By failing to prioritize the protection of civilians, the junta led by Assimi Goita has undermined both human rights and long-term stability. The government’s military operations have gone hand in hand with a crackdown on the political opposition, independent media, and peaceful dissent. The junta has [suspended media outlets](#), [dissolved civil society organizations](#), [abolished multiparty politics](#), and [prosecuted](#), arbitrarily arrested, and forcibly [disappeared](#) its critics. The recent abduction by unidentified gunmen of the prominent lawyer Mountaga Tall, opposition figures Youssouf Daba Diawara and Moussa Abba Djiré, and three relatives of the exiled politician Oumar Mariko raise serious concerns for their safety and others who may be at risk.

Niger

In Niger’s western Tillabéri region, civilians continue to face attacks by [Islamist armed groups](#) operating along the country’s borders with Mali and Burkina Faso. These groups have carried out killings, attacks on villages, and reprisals against civilians accused of cooperating with the state authorities or pro-government militias.

In late January, the Islamic State in the Sahel (IS Sahel) claimed responsibility for a coordinated surprise attack on the international airport in the capital, Niamey. The significance of the attack lies both in the consolidation of links between IS Sahel and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) and in its scope. Fighters attacked at night, shooting while riding motorbikes into the airport, and monitored their operations by drones.

Nigerien security forces have also been implicated in abuses, including unlawful killings during military operations and [indiscriminate drone strikes](#). Like in Mali and Burkina Faso, the junta led by Gen. Abdourahamane Tiani has relied on local militias and has recently institutionalized those by decree in March 2026.

More than two-and-a-half years since the coup, Niger’s ousted president, Mohamed Bazoum, and his wife remain [detained](#) without legal basis. The UN and other [international bodies](#) have called Bazoum’s detention illegal and have called for his release.

Bazoum's case reflects a broader crackdown on [political opposition](#), [media](#), and activist groups engaging in [peaceful dissent](#). The military authorities have tightened their control over political life by restricting opposition activity, a return to civilian democratic rule, and targeting critics in the media and civil society.

The military junta has detained at least 30 officials from the former government without due process. A prominent human rights activist and critic of the junta, Moussa Tiangari, [arbitrarily arrested](#) in December 2024, [remains](#) in detention on fabricated terrorism-related charges. Six journalists, arrested in October 2025, also [remain detained](#) under a draconian cybercrime law.

In December 2025, Niger's military junta [adopted](#) a sweeping "general mobilization" decree granting authorities far-reaching powers to confront security threats, but at the expense of human rights. The decree establishes a broad legal framework allowing the government to summon citizens, seize goods, compel the reporting of alleged "hostile activities," and restrict communications deemed harmful to "national mobilization efforts."

Recommendations to the United States Congress:

- Ensure a strategy of US engagement with each of the three countries is predicated on core principles of respect and protection of human rights that press all parties to respect international humanitarian law, especially the protection of civilians.
- Call for the release of former President Bazoum, his wife, Moussa Tiangari, as well as human rights defenders, critics, and journalists arbitrarily detained in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso.
- Provide financial and other support to independent civil society groups, human rights defenders, independent media, research institutions, and other actors working on monitoring, documenting, and reporting human rights abuses and accountability-related issues.
- Ensure strict compliance by the US government with the two statutory provisions prohibiting it from using funds to assist units of foreign security forces where there is credible information implicating that unit in the commission of gross violations of human rights, commonly referred to as the “Leahy Laws.”
- Ensure any waivers sought to provide security assistance to Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger includes regular review and reporting to Congress on the human rights record of recipient parties.
- Increase US support towards the provision of public services in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, including in the areas of health, psychosocial assistance, education, and justice.
- Support targeted sanctions, including under the Global Magnitsky Human Rights Accountability Act, against individuals credibly implicated in serious abuses in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, including military and JNIM commanders named by Human Rights Watch in its latest report on Burkina Faso.
- Consistent with the Elie Wiesel Act, ensure that the US strategy for central Sahel fully assesses the risk of future atrocities in the region and mandates that the administration reports to Congress on efforts to prevent and respond to atrocities in the region.

With targeted and principled actions, Congress can help shift the trajectory from impunity in central Sahel toward accountability, protection of civilians, and respect for fundamental freedoms.