



**House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

Hearing on

“War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity in the Central Sahel”

May 14th, 2026 - 2:30 p.m.

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Co-chair Smith, Co-chair McGovern, and Members of the Commission,

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission.

The recent developments in Mali are likely to have far-reaching consequences across the Sahel. They reflect a broader regional pattern: military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have responded to Islamist insurgencies primarily through abusive military operations, while sidelining political, social, and governance solutions.

These juntas took power promising to restore security. Instead, insecurity has worsened in many areas. Security force abuses against civilians have increased, while journalists, activists, opposition figures, and ordinary citizens who criticize the authorities have faced intimidation, arrest, or silencing. This trajectory risks deepening instability rather than resolving it.

Human Rights Watch research across Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger documents serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law by all parties to the conflict. Government forces, allied militias, and foreign fighters, including the former Wagner Group, have carried out abusive counterinsurgency operations that have killed and displaced civilians. Islamist armed groups linked to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have also committed grave abuses against civilians in their efforts to control territory and attack state forces.

In Burkina Faso, our recent report found that since 2023 the military, allied militias, and the Al-Qaeda-linked armed group JNIM have killed more than 1,800 civilians and forcibly displaced tens of thousands. The government has targeted ethnic Fulani communities in operations that amount to crimes against humanity.

One of the deadliest incidents occurred in December 2023, when Burkinabè forces and allied militias killed more than 400 civilians in 16 villages near Djibo during “Operation Tchéfari 2.” Survivors described scenes of horrific violence and profound trauma. Yet despite the scale of abuses, the government has failed to hold a single member of its forces accountable.

In Mali, we are deeply concerned by the deteriorating human rights situation following the recent offensive by Islamist armed groups. Civilians have reportedly been injured in clashes around Kidal and Gao. JNIM fighters attacked medical facilities, targeted civilian buses, and burned trucks carrying food supplies. The armed group has also laid siege to Bamako. While sieges are not prohibited under the laws of war, parties must take all feasible precautions to protect civilians and ensure access to essential goods. Malian military carried out drone strikes that killed civilians and abusive counterinsurgency operations.

In Niger, Islamist armed groups continue to brutalize civilians, particularly in the Tillabéri region. In February 2026, fighters from the Islamic State in the Sahel rounded up and executed 31 men and boys in Bossieye village in apparent retaliation against residents accused of cooperating with pro-government militias. At the same time, Nigerien counterinsurgency

operations have included indiscriminate airstrikes and other serious abuses. In January 2026, a military drone strike on a crowded market in Kokoloko village killed at least 17 civilians, including children. I would also like to highlight the continued arbitrary detention of former President Bazoum and his wife, who have effectively been held hostage by the Nigerien authorities since July 2023, as well as the arbitrary detention of Moussa Tiangari, a prominent human rights defender detained since 2024.

Across the region, civic space is shrinking at an alarming rate. Authorities have suspended media outlets, dissolved civil society organizations, and used broad counterterrorism and cybercrime laws to target dissent. These attacks on civil and political rights are central to how power is being exercised. By silencing independent voices, authorities obstruct scrutiny, weaken oversight, and deny victims avenues for justice.

Civilians across the Sahel consistently tell us the same thing: they cannot safely flee, they cannot safely stay, and they cannot safely speak.

Military abuses and impunity are driving the conflict. Civilian harm by state forces undermines public trust, weakens cooperation between communities and security forces, and fuels cycles of grievance and revenge. In many cases, abuses have pushed marginalized communities closer to armed groups, including people who are not ideologically aligned with them.

This is where the United States Congress has an important role to play to break the cycle of abuses and impunity and work with the Administration to:

- Ensure a strategy of US engagement with each of the three countries is predicated on core principles of respect and protection of human rights and 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 action, Congress can help shift the trajectory from impunity toward accountability, protection, and respect for fundamental freedoms.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.