

House Foreign Affairs Committee
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Hearing
on
Civilian Harm under Military Rule in the Central Sahel

May 14, 2026 - 2:30 p.m.
2255 Rayburn House Office Building

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Co-Chairs Smith and McGovern, thank you for the opportunity to speak to the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission about the deeply concerning state of human rights and civilian protection in the Central Sahel.

My remarks today are largely based on a report I authored¹ that was published in December 2025 by the Simon-Skjodt Center for the Prevention of Genocide at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, where I was a consultant. I will emphasize that my remarks reflect only my personal views, and I do not speak for the Simon-Skjodt Center or the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

I will start by commending the framing of this hearing. The fact that the governments in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger came to power through military coups, and have made no progress toward a return to civilian rule, is a central feature of the ongoing regional crisis—a crisis that, according to data from ACLED, has claimed the lives of more than 25,000 civilians since 2017². That these governments are unelected, and citizens have no mechanism to hold them to account, means that military leaders can continue to pursue destructive counterterrorism strategies that show little or no signs of succeeding, and engage in collective punishment of entire communities.

I want to be clear that emphasizing the culpability of the three military governments in no way absolves the Islamist armed groups—Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP)—that are at the center of this crisis. They have committed mass atrocities and employed brutal scorched earth tactics that have taken an enormous toll on civilians and communities. Data from ACLED suggests that JNIM is responsible for close to 6,000 civilian fatalities³, and the Islamic State Sahel Province is responsible for more than 5,000 civilian deaths⁴. The recent JNIM attack in Mali, conducted in collaboration with the Azawad Liberation Front, was a forceful display of their reach and capacity. All perpetrators of mass atrocities must be held to account.

But consistent with the theme of this hearing, I will focus my remarks on how the actions of the military governments place civilians at risk and curtail fundamental freedoms, and how the United States should approach the widening crisis in the region.

Since the early 2010s, under both quasi-democratic regimes and the military-led governments, security forces (including militaries, police, and intelligence agencies) have been responsible for mass atrocities in all three countries. They employ patterns of operations that punish entire communities for their real or perceived support to Islamist armed groups.

¹ “Between Armed Groups and Military Governments: Escalating Violence Against Civilians in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, December 2025, <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/countries/mali/between-armed-groups-and-military-governments-escalating-violence-against>

² According to an analysis of data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) Project, downloaded from www.acleddata.com on May 6, 2026

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The Malian Armed Forces (FAMa) has long been accused of committing atrocities during counterterrorism operations, at times operating alongside ethnic militias and, since 2022, Russia-backed forces. Available data suggests that the FAMa is responsible for more than 4,600 civilian fatalities since 2012⁵. In July 2025, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies estimated that “Malian and allied security forces were responsible for 82 percent of all civilian fatalities [in the country] over the past year.”⁶ Many of the worst attacks on civilians have directly followed Islamist armed group attacks on government positions in which the FAMa endured heavy losses. In many of the massacres for which it is responsible, the FAMa appears to make little distinction between civilians and fighters. It justifies its actions by alleging that its targets have ties to Islamist armed groups, but the practice of indiscriminately rounding up men in a community and slaughtering them casts doubt on this claim.

The Burkina Faso Armed Forces’ counterterrorism response has, since at least 2018, been punctuated by atrocities against civilians, which have grown in intensity. Burkinabe armed forces are responsible for more than 3,700 civilian fatalities since 2012.⁷ In July 2025, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies estimated that the Burkinabe security forces and associated armed groups were responsible for 41 percent of all civilian fatalities in the country over the previous year.⁸

The expanded use of the *Volontaires pour la Défense de la Patrie* (VDPs) in Burkina Faso, a state-backed self-defense militia, is especially concerning. VDP personnel are well armed by the state but receive just a few weeks of training. They have been thrust onto the frontlines of the fight with Islamist armed groups, providing some plausible deniability for the government when VDPs commit atrocities. Those atrocities are substantial, as recently documented by Human Rights Watch⁹, and the VDPs’ mere presence puts communities at risk, as Islamist armed groups have explicitly targeted civilians in areas where VDPs operate. As a result, communities are effectively forced to choose sides between the state, often represented by VDPs, and the Islamist armed groups. The future trajectory of the VDPs is also a concern—the military government exercises general control over them for now, but it is possible that the VDPs will display more independence in the future (a trajectory also followed by the notorious Rapid Support Forces in Sudan).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ “Africa Surpasses 150,000 Deaths Linked to Militant Islamist Groups in Past Decade,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, July 28, 2025, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/en-2025-miq-10-year/>

⁷ According to an analysis of data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) Project, downloaded from www.acleddata.com on May 6, 2026

⁸ “Africa Surpasses 150,000 Deaths Linked to Militant Islamist Groups in Past Decade,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, July 28, 2025, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/en-2025-miq-10-year/>

⁹ “None Can Run Away: War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity in Burkina Faso by All Sides,” Human Rights Watch, April 2, 2026, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2026/04/02/none-can-run-away/war-crimes-and-crimes-against-humanity-in-burkina-faso-by-all>

Niger's military is generally seen as more professional and disciplined than its Malian and Burkinabe counterparts. Even so, it is responsible for more than 300 civilian fatalities since 2012¹⁰.

It is essential to emphasize that across all three countries, there has been no accountability for atrocities committed by Islamist armed groups, government forces or their affiliates. As long as this is the case, the region will remain trapped in a cycle of impunity, in which some individuals and groups respond to atrocities by seeking revenge, at times targeting entire communities, perpetuating and expanding the cycle. There is no substitute for holding the architects of violence on all sides to account, accompanied by community-level reconciliation.

The casualty figures cited above, sizable as they are, only tell part of the story: Islamist armed groups and pro-government forces are also responsible for brutality, torture, enforced disappearance, and destruction and looting of villages, all undermining lives and livelihoods.

While virtually every ethnic and demographic group in the region has been affected by violence, members of the Fulani ethnic group have been a particular target of pro-government forces, and have suffered immensely. The Fulani (also referred to as the Peul or Fulbe) are spread across West Africa, numbering approximately 30 million in total, are predominantly Muslim, and by most counts are the second largest ethnic group in both Burkina Faso and Mali. JNIM and ISSP, and their predecessor organizations, have recruited heavily from Fulani populations, leaning on those populations' religiosity, high levels of mobility, and marginalization by the state. While the majority of fighters and most commanders in JNIM are believed to be Fulani, it is essential to emphasize that the overwhelming majority of Fulani are not associated with Islamist armed groups, and those who do join sometimes do so out of fear or desperation. The military governments exploit this dynamic; the Burkinabe government, in particular, advances a narrative that closely associates Fulani communities as a whole with Islamist armed groups, and employs allies in the media and on social media to amplify the message.

Fulani communities find themselves in an almost impossible position. They are stigmatized as terrorists and shunned by large segments of society. Pro-government forces in Mali and Burkina Faso clearly target regions and communities where Fulanis are prevalent, whether or not there is evidence of collusion with Islamist armed groups. The International Crisis Group previously accused Malian forces of ethnic cleansing of Fulani,¹¹ and Malian ethnic self-defense forces and Burkinabe VDPs are notorious for targeting Fulani communities. If Fulani communities try to cooperate with the state, including (in Burkina Faso) by accepting a VDP presence, they are targeted by Islamist armed groups. Fulani communities are caught in a cycle of being ostracized and attacked, which drives some into the arms of Islamist armed groups for both protection and for revenge, which then perpetuates the narrative that they are responsible for violence.

¹⁰ According to an analysis of data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) Project, downloaded from www.acleddata.com on May 6, 2026

¹¹ "Central Mali: Putting a Stop to Ethnic Cleansing," International Crisis Group, March 25, 2019, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/mali/centre-du-mali-enrayer-le-nettoyage-ethnique>

It is also essential to emphasize that the military governments have substantially restricted fundamental freedoms and political space in all three countries, further entrenching their rule. Just this year, authorities in Burkina Faso have dissolved over 100 civil society organizations, many of them focused on human rights, and outlawed all political parties. Burkina Faso's leader, Ibrahim Traore, recently said "we have to tell the truth: democracy isn't for us."¹² Malian authorities banned political parties last year, and following the recent JNIM attacks across the country have cracked down on perceived opponents. The military governments have targeted media outlets, suspending or closing down foreign outlets including the BBC, VOA, RFI, and France 24, and intimidating local journalists. In Burkina Faso, journalists and critics of the military government have been sent to the frontlines to fight as punishment for their work. The military governments have created a climate of fear, silencing many people and institutions that would otherwise report on their abuses and hold them accountable.

Recommendations for Congress and the Trump Administration

Let me conclude with several observations on how the United States should respond to the crisis. The Sahel may not be a first order national security concern, but it does present genuine strategic implications for U.S. national security. As the Islamist armed groups, JNIM especially, bring more territory under their control, they expand the space for illicit groups to operate, from drug smugglers to human traffickers to arms dealers. Mass atrocities in the region have reverberating effects that can implicate the United States. Niger is the prime example: instability contributed to a coup, and the new military government expelled U.S. military forces after they made a sizable investment in the country. Islamist armed groups are expanding into coastal countries, likely not to hold large swaths of territory but at least to disrupt, and in those countries the United States has more direct economic and security interests. There's also a risk of coup contagion in the region, especially given propagandists' success in building a cult of personality around Burkina Faso's Transitional President Traoré, and to a lesser extent Mali's leaders.

Recent reporting and actions suggest that the Trump administration seeks to re-engage with the three military governments, though it has not fully articulated the breadth of that engagement or intended outcomes. As a matter of principle, the United States should be willing to talk to, and seek common ground with, virtually any government. Conducting diplomacy is not in itself a reward, as it is sometimes portrayed.

That said, it is vital to recognize that the military governments in the Sahel show no inclination to modify their destructive counterterrorism tactics, or to put their countries on a trajectory toward democracy. In this context, policymakers must exercise great caution in taking steps like providing security assistance or sharing intelligence, to avoid being associated with the governments' abuses against their citizens. In many countries, we have seen that citizens, understandably, do not quickly forget when the United States aligns itself with abusive governments. The military governments lack a mandate from citizens and are built on weak foundations. If there is a change in government—and especially if there is a return to

¹² "Burkina Faso military leader Traore says 'forget democracy,'" Al Jazeera, April 3, 2026, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/4/3/burkina-faso-military-leader-traore-says-forget-democracy>

democracy—the United States would not want to find itself associated in citizens' minds with the old, abusive regime.

It is also worth noting that, so far, Islamist armed groups have rarely directly targeted American interests in the region, but that could change if the United States is seen as providing offensive support to military governments.

I would also caution against a transactional approach to bilateral relations, including any arrangements that trade security assistance for mineral access. This is the failed strategy that Russia has employed in Mali, making them both complicit in the military government's abuses, and a direct target of Islamist armed groups.

If the United States engages in more consistent dialogue with the military governments, it is an opportunity for the administration to emphasize three themes.

One, from a purely military perspective, strategies that employ collective punishment of entire communities are proven to be ineffective, in the region and in myriad other contexts. This is not a values-based or human rights-focused argument that will be quickly dismissed; it is driving home the fact that attacking entire communities seen as sympathetic to Islamist armed groups often creates more fighters than it kills. This is a point probably best articulated through military-to-military channels.

Two, a peaceful path forward requires negotiations between the governments and Islamist armed groups. That may be controversial, but in some instances Islamist armed groups have tapped into citizens' underlying grievances and are providing a modicum of governance and service delivery. Some of the support they receive reflects legitimate concerns felt by civilians. Including representatives of civil society and affected communities in negotiations is critical: they provide a genuine voice for many citizens, and a counterweight to armed belligerents.

Three, reconciliation between the Alliance of Sahelian States and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) is in both groups' interests, especially as Islamist armed groups expand into several of the remaining ECOWAS member states. American diplomats should encourage that reconciliation behind the scenes, with regional leaders out front.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration's nominee for Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, if confirmed, should initiate an interagency process to clarify and unify administration goals in the Central Sahel, as well as red lines it will not cross. Right now it is unclear the extent to which the administration seeks to reengage the military governments and to what end. That process can include consideration of appointing a Special Envoy for the Sahel. Special Envoys are not a panacea and should not be overused, but in instances where challenges cut across multiple borders and implicate many governments and interests, they can bring coherence to U.S. policy and action.

To conclude, I would urge Congress and the administration not to turn away from the Sahel, and to consider the medium- and long-term implications of how the United States engages in the region, balancing that against the short-term benefits. Ultimately, partnership with governments in the region will benefit the United States only if those governments are responsive to their citizens and represent their aspirations.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.