



Civilian Harm under Military Rule in the Central Sahel

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May 14, 2026**

Welcome to this important hearing on the worsening human rights and security crisis in the Central Sahel, especially in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

For many years, this Commission has examined the growing threat posed by terrorist and extremist violence across Africa, including the horrific targeting of Christians and other vulnerable religious communities in Nigeria by Boko Haram, ISIS-West Africa, Fulani extremist elements, and affiliated terrorist organizations. At the Africa subcommittee, where I serve as chair, we have heard heartbreaking testimony from survivors of massacres, church attacks, kidnappings, sexual slavery, forced displacement, and the abduction and exploitation of children.

Today, we must ask whether many of these same dynamics are increasingly spilling across borders throughout the wider Sahel region.

The terrorist threat in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger is real, expanding, and extraordinarily dangerous. Al Qaeda-affiliated JNIM and the Islamic State's Sahel affiliate have carried out mass killings, forced recruitment, kidnappings, attacks on humanitarian workers, and coercive enforcement of extremist ideology. We are deeply concerned by reports of child soldier recruitment, trafficking networks that thrive amid lawlessness and displacement, and mounting attacks on civilians, including religious communities.

This Commission is extremely concerned about the vulnerability of children caught in these conflicts—whether forcibly recruited by armed groups, exploited by militias, trafficked across porous borders, or deprived of education and protection. Extremist violence and state collapse create fertile ground for trafficking in persons, modern slavery, and the exploitation of women and children. So I look forward to learning from our witnesses their policy recommendations on how to respond to that crisis in the very difficult situation of the Sahel today.

I am also deeply concerned about the safety and survival of Christian communities and other religious minorities in the region. We know from Nigeria that attacks on churches, clergy, and faith-based communities are often part of broader campaigns of terror and intimidation designed to fracture society and drive populations from their homes. We need to understand more

clearly whether the perpetrators, networks, financing streams, and extremist ideologies operating in Nigeria are linked to those now terrorizing parts of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—and whether these crises must increasingly be addressed through a coordinated regional framework rather than country-by-country approaches alone.

At the same time, governments in the Sahel face extraordinary pressures from heavily armed terrorist movements seeking to overthrow states and impose violent extremist rule. The United States should remain engaged pragmatically and energetically to prevent terrorist safe havens from expanding further across West Africa. But counterterrorism efforts that fail to protect civilians, uphold human dignity, and maintain accountability risk worsening instability and fueling radicalization.

I also want to learn more about the role of our regional partners – which include most of the neighboring countries – and whether they can work with the U.S. also in addressing human rights and humanitarian concerns. Some of these partners, above all Algeria as well as Mauritania, have also been reported as playing a very constructive role in countering the destabilizing influence of Russia’s so-called “Africa Corps” and associated security networks in the region.

I thank our distinguished witnesses for appearing today and look forward to their testimony.