

The deteriorating situation in the Sahel and the implications on humanitarian aid

An update by humanitarian experts - 20 January 2022

The humanitarian situation in the Sahel is deteriorating quickly and significantly. People’s needs across the region are now at unprecedented levels, and their vulnerabilities are deepening and increasing due to escalating conflict, rising food insecurity, multiplying climate emergencies and the pandemic. During this webinar KUNO offered an update about the situation in the Western Sahel and the implications of the unsafety and insecurity on humanitarian aid.

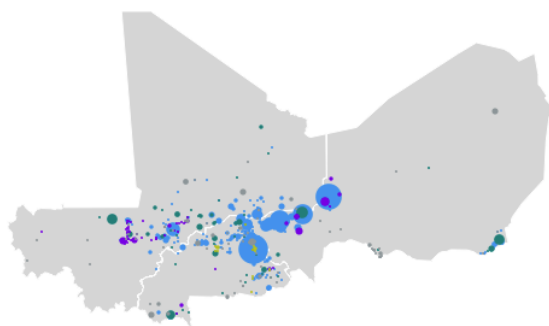
Speakers:

- **Anna Schmauder**, research Fellow at Clingendael’s Conflict Research Unit.
- **Hamouta Cornier**, Regional Safety, Security and Access Director of IRC for the Sahel region.
- **Franck Vannetelle**, Country Director IRC in Mali.

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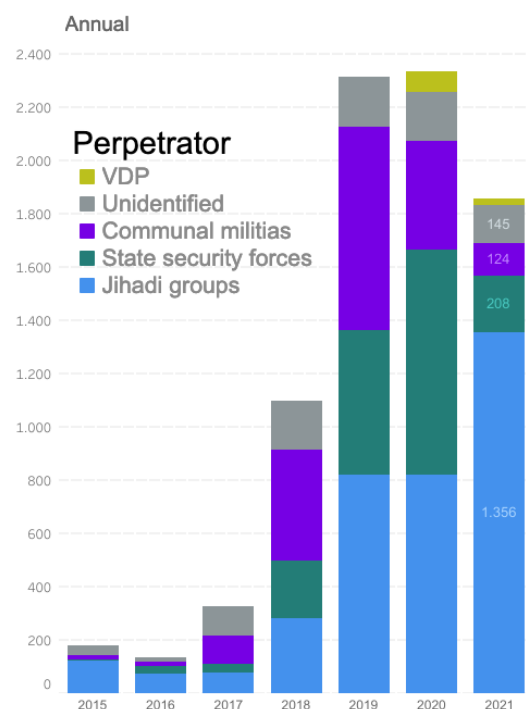
Anna Schmauder focuses on hybrid governance in peacebuilding contexts and the linkage of migration and security dynamics in the Sahel region.

For the **security situation** Schmauder referred to data from [ACLED](#) (Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project) and the visual on reported civilians fatalities created by J. Luengo-Cabrera. The data show violence against civilians did take a rise in recent years. A lot of this violence is clustered in the border regions and is attributed to Jihadist groups. The territorial control of violent extremist actors is expanding.



Data: ACLED

Burkina Faso, Mali & Niger Reported civilian fatalities*



The violence by extremist groups has destabilizing consequences: it leads to the proliferation of non-state armed actors, a high number of internally displaced persons, and to political repercussions through popular protest.

Political situation in the Western Sahel is characterized by civil-military imbalance (see the two military coups in Mali, the coup in Burkina Faso and the coup-attempt in Niger in early 2021) and an increasing geopolitical competition. The geopolitical competition reflects in a rejection of the French dominated status quo and the political instrumentalization of broad anti-French sentiments. Furthermore, we witness a diversification of foreign partnerships, such as partnerships for military support of the Mali government with Russia or the Wagner Group, a Russian private military company.

For more information Anna Schmauder referred to the Weekly [newsletter](#) by Clingendael on the Sahel. Also worthwhile reading is [this commentary](#) of the Italian institute for international policy studies ISPI.

Hamouta Cornier & Franck Vannetelle, IRC in Mali

Hamouta Cornier has, for the last 20 years, worked with several international humanitarian organizations in Mali as well as in some others Sahel countries. For the past two years, he has been the Regional Safety, Security and Access Director of IRC for the Sahel region.

Franck Vannetelle has been working in the humanitarian field for the past 20 years and the last 6 years as Country Director IRC in Mali.

Contextual Elements – Evolution of the political and security situation.

Over the past decade, Mali, Niger, Burkina, Cote d'Ivoire, and to some extent Benin and Togo have remained the epicenter of the current conflict between JNIM (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, a coalition of four Jihadist groups in Mali), EIGS (État Islamique dans le Grand Sahara) and national and international forces in central Sahel. Despite the presence of international forces in these countries in the past ten years, the conflict has resulted in tens of thousands of civilian deaths (mass killings of civilians through the burning of entire villages), millions of internally displaced persons, thousands of closed schools, and deaths in the ranks of the armed forces involved.

International forces in support of national forces have had little impact in the fight against terrorism in the central Sahel in almost ten years of presence. Russia is involved in this conflict, alongside Mali, with the aim of strengthening its military presence in the French pre-squared.

Two blocs are facing each other in this new development of the political and security situation and that could complicate the situation in Mali and in central Sahel more than ever. On the one hand there is a bloc made up of Mali, Russia, Algeria, China and Turkey. The other bloc is made up of France, certain European Union countries, and to a certain extent the Americans, and with these, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), UEMOA (*Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest Africaine*) and AU (African Union). We see new developments on the political front, with the economic and financial sanctions that ECOWAS and UEMOA have imposed on Mali. ECOWAS f.i. wants to ensure Mali will uphold the deadline of February 27, 2022 for elections.

Impact on humanitarian needs and the operations of humanitarian organizations.

The possible impact of the ongoing conflict:

- The intensive fight against terrorism in Mali with the support of Russian and or Wagner soldiers and the rise of the Malian army (better armed on the ground and in the air) could lead to the **killing of civilians** by the parties involved in the conflict and to more internally displaced persons in Mali and refugees in neighboring countries.

- Pressure from Russian and Malian forces on **JNIM and EIGS** elements may lead them to **move** to Niger, Burkina, CI, Benin and Togo, which may now be their sanctuaries. This would lead to intensification of terrorist actions in these countries, with more civilian and military deaths and the risk of destabilization of institutions in these countries.
- **Humanitarian access** in Mali and beyond is likely to be **further reduced**, especially in the Operations zones, where Russian and Malian forces may not want to have any witnesses to what is happening. French, European, and possibly American NGOs risk being seen as spies for Western countries.
- The economic and financial **sanctions** imposed on Mali by ECOWAS and UEMOA lead to **increases of prices** that will have huge impact on daily lives of Malians and beyond. Furthermore, they **affect humanitarian operations** (e.g. financial capacity).

Conclusion

There is good reason to believe that the security situation in Western Sahel will not improve if it does not deteriorate. Humanitarian organizations must continue to better analyze the context of the central Sahel and anticipate the measures needed to maintain access to the areas where humanitarian needs are greatest, but also and above all to ensure that they maintain all their operational capacities in these conflict zones.

Issues addressed in the discussion with all participants

In the discussion between the speakers and the other participants in the meeting, many topics were raised. Below follows a selection of these topics.

- The need to advocate for the continuity of vital funding for populations and basic services regardless of the outcome of the political situation in these countries.
- The need for national and local authorities to look into the discontent of certain population groups, such lacking access to land and water for pastoralists and farmers.
- The need to advocate for mechanisms to ensure the sanctions do not impact the financial capacity of humanitarian organizations to effectively respond to humanitarian needs in the country.
- The need to advocate for the protection of humanitarian teams with military and political actors. There is a link to establish and strengthen with the Malian and Russian military commanders on this subject.
- The need to develop more regional programs (Mali-Burkina-Niger) and more cross-border activities.
- The importance to ensure that Mali does not become too isolated. Even though the sanctions and the risk of escalation, that the EU keeps up a line of dialogue.
- The need to prepare for evacuation. Even if some airlines still continue to fly to Mali and the borders of three countries remain open with Mali, it is important, in the long term, to think about a possible humanitarian airlift to Mali if the situation deteriorates and if an agreement between Mali and ECOWAS is not reached.