



## Re-thinking the Security Situation in Mali

*Last week's helicopter attack against a U.N. peacekeeping helicopter that killed two German soldiers is a cold reminder that Mali remains the deadliest active U.N. mission. As the rate of violence increases, the pending stability of the country's fragile peace deal will have implications on the spread of extremist groups into neighboring states such as Burkina Faso and Mauritania.*

**By Brandon Locke**  
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Violence in Mali has seen a concerning uptick in recent months. Last week on 26 July, a United Nations peacekeeping helicopter was attacked in northern Mali, killing two German soldiers. The day before, four civilians, including a child, were killed near the Niger border in a terrorist attack.<sup>1</sup> Just nine days earlier, the bodies of eight ambushed Malian soldiers were found in the between the northern towns of Gao and Menaka.<sup>2</sup> As the rate of violence increases, rapid implementation of the new G5 Joint Security force (FS-G5S) will be vital to maintain stability and prevent the spread of extremist groups into Burkina Faso and Mauritania.

<sup>1</sup> News24. At Least 4 Mali Civilians Killed in Suspected Jihadist Attack. 2017.  
<http://www.news24.com/Africa/News/at-least-4-mali-civilians-killed-in-suspected-jihadist-attack-20170726>

<sup>2</sup> Africa News. Bodies of 8 Killed Soldiers Found in Northern Mali. 2017.  
<http://www.africanews.com/2017/07/18/bodies-of-8-killed-soldiers-found-in-northern-mali/>

The forthcoming joint military operations are also an important opportunity for G5 and European actors implement a reformed strategy that amends past failures with multifaceted initiatives that tackle the root causes of violence in Mali. While strategic military approaches are a necessary component to building national stability, more than two decades of conflict have proved that that lasting peace in Mali requires more than improved security capacity.

Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world, and has a long history of violence, military coups, and ethnic tension between communities throughout the central and northern regions of the country. Since the 2012 Taureg rebellion, Mali has seen unprecedented levels of insecurity, despite extensive UN and EU peacekeeping operations. The French intervention that began in January 2013 secured a rapid military victories to stabilize the government, but over the following years, the political and ethnic drivers undermining peace persisted.

### **Three Failed Peace Agreements:**

Since 1990, Mali has seen three rebellions, and three failed peace agreements. Each one notably promised economic assistance to the poorer regions in the rural north, political decentralization, and better oversight of security forces. Each deal failed shortly after spikes of violence that occurred in 1990, 2006, and 2012, with many aspects of each agreement unfulfilled. As violence continues to rise again throughout the country, the same mistakes appear to once again undermine Mali's peace.

Besides the failure to properly encourage sustainable economic growth in the rural north, analysts have long concluded that agreements are negotiated by small group of actors that don't represent the voices of the population. This is usually limited to the most vocal armed groups, which in turn excludes the voices more moderate community concerns from the dialogue.<sup>3</sup>

These strategic failures are further compounded by significant abuse and provocation by national security services, which are frequently accused of torturing and detaining political opponents. This works to alienate the general public in the central and northern regions, and fragments the public opinion of the population.<sup>4</sup> By fostering insecurity in rural areas, the national security services encourage dependence on tribal and community systems to provide basic protections.

These dependences are also fostered by the weak and partial justice system, which struggles to hold military and government officials to account for crimes and abuse. This not only delegitimizes the state and its authority, but also discourages against respect for rule of law. This offers credibility and credence to extremists that advocate for the use of violence to overthrow the system.

### **Economic Growth for Peace:**

According to the EU counterterrorism coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, only one-third of violent extremists in the Sahel should be considered ideologues ready to die for their cause.

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<sup>3</sup> Rand. Achieving Peace in Northern Mali. 2015.

[http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR800/RR892/RAND\\_RR892.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR800/RR892/RAND_RR892.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Rand. Emergencies: France, Mali, and Turkey Are Playing with Fire. 2016.

<http://www.rand.org/blog/2016/08/emergencies-france-mali-and-turkey-are-playing-with.html>

<sup>5</sup> Conversely, he argues that two-thirds of extremists in the region are motivated by financial or local reasons. As seen throughout many other extremely poor and fragile states, ethnic tensions are exacerbated by resource competition and financial grievances in Mali. The rise of violence in the central region of the country is inextricably linked to the growing strain on the agricultural sector.

Over 80% of Mali's population works in the agriculture and agribusiness, which has made the country's economy vulnerable to increasing desertification, deforestation, water scarcity, and other effects of climate change.<sup>6</sup> Still, only seven percent of the 43.7 million arable hectares of land currently cultivated, proving that there is potential for growth.<sup>7</sup> If international actors want to permanently shift incentives away from violence in Mali, it will require significant investments in sustainable development and growth of the agricultural sector.

As with any other democracy, the future of Mali is depends on the capacity, authority and legitimacy of the state. If Mali is to continue to play a major role in the G5 and stabilization of the Sahel, it needs to build better dialogue and social inclusion between regional actors, and establish stronger accountability from the judicial system. Finally, it is essential that the G5 and European actors begin simultaneously leveraging both strategic military capacity and economic growth in order to guarantee long-term human security. Without a true renegotiation of systemic inequalities between Bamako and disadvantaged groups, violence will inevitably continue.

## **Recommendations:**

- The Malian government should launch judicial support teams to reestablish rule of law and accountability in northern and central regions where extremist groups are spreading.
- European actors and the Malian government should develop targeted regional economic support plans to drastically increase cultivation of arable land for agricultural growth.
- The G5 Joint Force (FS-G5S) should concentrate efforts along border regions of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mauritania to prevent militants from destabilizing border towns in neighboring countries.
- The Malian government should work with the international community to renew peace talks with a wider base of moderate local leaders, especially those in the central region of the country.

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<sup>5</sup> Fride. The Mali Conflict: Avoiding Past Mistakes. 2013. Available at: [http://fride.org/download/PB\\_148\\_The\\_Mali\\_conflict.pdf](http://fride.org/download/PB_148_The_Mali_conflict.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.usaid.gov/mali/agriculture-and-food-security>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.