Senior Officials’ Meeting
Responding to humanitarian challenges in a long-term perspective in the Central Sahel
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Co-hosted by Denmark, Germany, the EU and the United Nations
Report from the thematic track discussions on protection

Co-facilitator: Ms. Mette Thygesen, Director for Humanitarian Action, Civil Society and Engagement, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Denmark

Opening remarks: Ms. Khardiata Lo N'Diaye, UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator, Niger

Panel Members:
- Mr. Yakouma Jean de Dieu Bambara, Director-General, Human Rights and Defence Division, Ministry of Justice, Burkina Faso
- Mr. Yann Faivre, Regional Director, Danish Refugee Council (DRC)
- Mr. Xavier Creach, Head of the Protection Service for West and Central Africa, UNHCR
- Mr. Vianney Bisimwa, Regional Director, Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC)
- Ms. Christelle Zafiryadis, Programme Manager, Africa, Human Rights Systems, Danish Institute for Human Rights (DIHR)
- Mr. Abdoul Kassim Fomba, National Coordinator, Mali, Think Peace

In her opening remarks, Ms. Khardiata Lo N'Diaye, UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator in Niger, stressed the multidimensional nature of the conflict and the importance of recognizing that the crisis in Central Sahel is also a protection crisis. It is the result of a crisis in key institutions and dysfunctional public services, which reinforce a feeling of injustice among the most vulnerable parts of population. It was important not to lose sight of the need to tackle the root causes of the crisis, like lack of access to justice, and look at actions to promote stronger governance and sustainable development. She highlighted the need to ensure the continuity and reinforcement of basic social services, including in those areas where the crisis is at its worst, and to promote the rule of law and the implementation of regional and international commitments. Efforts should draw on lessons learned and aim to find innovative solutions, which reinforce cohesion and inclusion of youth, women, children, marginalized persons, humanitarian actors and the state.

She emphasized the need to recognize the centrality of protection by integrating protection objectives in a more holistic manner in efforts to address the crisis as well as establish a common coordination platform, which will allow a stronger interaction between humanitarian, development and peace interventions. Improving the management of knowledge and sharing of lessons learned within and across countries in the Sahel is also key. Lastly, she noted the need to enhance capacity building and review the current funding system in order to enable multi-annual planning and ensure that funding covers the need for protection.

In the subsequent panel discussion, panel members noted the increase in violations of rights, both those directly linked to the conflict and otherwise. People are experiencing injustice, discrimination, inequality and a feeling of abandonment by the State. This has been further exacerbated by COVID-19. Also seen is a competition between conflict management systems: the formal system, the traditional conflict management system as well as the religious ones. Currently, rights are violated and there is no protection in place. Actors that should be providing protection are also actors of persecution
and the other way around. The main protection challenges also include the impossible neutrality of civilians. There is a lot of suspicion of and threats against civilians who are trapped in the region. Youth and women are particularly exposed because of lack of opportunities, gender-based violence and forced recruitment. The militarisation of the crisis has only added to this picture. Furthermore, there is no access to justice when rights are violated and no end to impunity.

The panel also noted the need to recognise that the crisis is also a protection crisis. This will require fully addressing the root causes of the crisis, not just its consequences – i.e. the security challenges. The protection crisis needs to be addressed as such, including by engaging on a new inclusive social cohesion model. While the primary responsibility for protection and access to services lie with governments, other duty bearers also have obligations and responsibilities. Protection of civilians should therefore be central to the response of all actors. Respect for rule of law, international humanitarian law and humanitarian principles should also be promoted and access to justice for victims should be ensured, while ending impunity. It is also important to strengthen collection of independent protection data and analyses to ensure evidence-based responses by all actors. The centrality of protection must be reflected in government plans and in the programming of development and humanitarian actors.

The panel spoke on the issue of placing civilian protection at the heart of security force assistance and on the need to elaborate a strategic approach to civilian harm mitigation. The panel referred to the complex situation on the ground where communities are afraid of both government security forces and of the armed groups and recommended that international partners try to assist through the training of security forces, including on international humanitarian law.

The panel also spoke on the role of government in ensuring protection and the importance of implementing protection obligations. Burkina Faso was used as an example: Burkina Faso is facing a protection crisis, where insecurity is growing and people are being displaced. The main challenges are forced displacement, gender-based violence, exploitation and lack of access to basic social services, abuse of children and exposure to all kinds of violence. It is a major challenge to ensure access to justice. Even if IDPs identify perpetrators, almost no judicial follow-up is taking place and only a few isolated cases have been brought to justice. A key challenge in this regard is not only the lack of capacity, but also lack of resources.

The panel noted that building trust in security forces was key to improving protection of civilians and humanitarian workers. However, the army’s role is to defend the territory against external enemies and it has not been trained to fight internal insurgents, like armed groups and jihadists, nor to tackle conflicts between civilians. Soldiers have no training on how to protect civilians and vulnerable groups nor on human rights. The police, however, has transformed into a civilian institution in all three Sahel countries that is trusted by the people. More training in humanitarian law, in protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure as well as on humanitarian access is needed. However, the security forces themselves also face challenges. The high turnover of staff has contributed to increasing confusion, especially in Mali. Decision-making and planning become difficult when the hierarchy is changing regularly. While massive recruitments to help fight terrorism have been made, training capacity has not followed suit and new recruits have made mistakes and violated human rights. Training is taking place, but capacity cannot be built over night. Security forces need more training on their role and their mandate to ensure protection.

Finally, the panel spoke on the need for setting a framework for inclusive dialogue and on the role of civil society. Emphasis was placed on the importance of traditional customs, which involve dispute-handling mechanisms at community level. The experience on the ground is that people are eager to find solutions. They see that when discussion takes place, solutions can be found. Panel members recommended support be provided to local communities in this regard which ensured the involvement of women.

**Main points raised during the discussion:**

A participant noted that protection is at the heart of the UK’s response in the Sahel. A challenge, however, is access to as well as collection and sharing of data. The participant raised the question of what the advice to international community is in order to help it make a more effective response.

The panel noted that there has not been consistent data collection nor a joint analysis of the situation. Furthermore, when data is available it is not always used for programming. However, recent progress includes 30 different actors using the same protection data tools across three countries. The availability of very clear data has also enabled the regional protection group to make joint advocacy. On the issue of programming, where GBV is a priority, it was surprising to find that female genital mutilation (FGM) and early marriages top the list, in particular since FGM and early marriages are not addressed in programming. It is the hope that this kind of data can help improve the response going forward. However, gathering relevant data is difficult and there is a need for more transparent data and for ensuring the communication of data at the regional level.
A question was raised about the possibility of having governments make commitments on responding to violence. Many conventions have been signed, but how to ensure justice? The panel noted that governments and security forces had to take this into account and ensure a better understanding of their respective mandates.

Another question was raised regarding the indications that military forces are involved in human rights violations against civilians, what the incentives are for the military forces to change this and what the role of the international community is. The panel noted that when speaking to soldiers, they would refer to the difficulty in working in high-risk zones where they are sometimes confronted with challenges, which make them act out of reflex. Obviously, this is a question of respecting the rights and protection of civilians, but also about ensuring that civilians and military personnel have a better understanding of each other and the necessary training.

**Summary of key messages and recommendations from the discussion:**

There was agreement that the challenges in the crisis in the Sahel are immense and that Sahel is facing a protection crisis. The presence of non-state armed groups, tension between security forces and civilians, frequent human right violations, restrictions on or lack of access to basic services, shrinking humanitarian access and a context of worsening inter-community tensions prevail. However, not all protection needs are related to conflict. Tension surrounding natural resources, climate change and environmental stress adds to the pressure. The effects of COVID-19, the increasing power inequalities and the feeling of frustration only adds to the challenges.

There was a clear recognition that the desperate situation also provides a breeding ground for sexual and gender-based violence. Female genital mutilation was highlighted as a major challenge. Often negative survival strategies such as early and forced marriage, are also adopted as survival mechanisms by poor families. All of these threats increase the need for a more comprehensive response across the humanitarian, development and peace nexus. But it also weakens the possibility for implementing solutions. The following key messages came across clearly:

- First and foremost, to recognize that the crisis in the Central Sahel is a protection crisis. It must be tackled, in a holistic manner, by addressing the governance challenges, by respecting the fundamental rights of the population, by providing access to basic services, justice, economic opportunities and to security. And by addressing the humanitarian challenges in a long-term perspective. The lack of security is a symptom, not a root cause and should be treated as such.

- Without security, people will have no choice other than to join armed groups, something termed as “the impossible neutrality of civilians”.

- There is a need for collection of and timely access to data. Quality data is needed to underpin joint analyses, programming and decision-making.

- Ending impunity for violations by security forces and armed groups is key, as is the obligation of governments to take responsibility for ensuring this. Trust between security forces and civilians is not automatic and training is needed in human rights and humanitarian law.

- There is a need to consider formal vs traditional means of conflict resolution and again consider inclusiveness, including the fact that women and young people are often excluded from the traditional mechanisms.

- The need to urgently step up efforts, be it humanitarian, development or peace related.