CONFLICTS IN THE SAHEL: ANALYSIS OF REGIONAL CONTEXT AND LINKAGES

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Currently, three interrelated characteristics define the Sahel region;

1. The complexity of security challenges and humanitarian crises that manifest in:
   - Violent conflicts;
   - Environmental degradation;
   - Natural resource depletion;
   - Human and drug trafficking, and other transnational criminal activities.
The scope, spread and intensity of these violent conflicts have escalated to include:

- Militant Islamism and radicalisation;
- Terrorist insurgency, which are directly and indirectly linked to illicit flow of arms and proliferation of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALWs);
- Ethno-political cleavages, secessionist agitations;
- Natural resource conflicts (pastoralist/farmers clashes).
2. The region has problematic climatic conditions.

- The Sahelian climate is typically arid, which has severe implications for food insecurity and nutritional.

- Repeated and protracted drought in the Sahel has since the 1960s reduced the region's normally meagre water supplies, shattered its agricultural economy, contributed to the starvation of the people, and forced the mass migration of many people southward.
3. Conflict in one country of the region produces, with relative ease, domino effects across the region.

- Recent instances include the spillover effects of the Libyan crisis across the West African Sahel after the Arab Spring;

- The spread of terrorist insurgency in Mali through West Africa to the Lake Chad Basin; and

- The expanded activities of Islamist groups across the region.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/No</th>
<th>Nature and Type of Conflict</th>
<th>Affected Countries</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Terrorist Insurgency</td>
<td>Chad, Cameroon, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Somali</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Transhumance/Farmers conflict</td>
<td>Chad, Mali, Niger, Nigeria</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Ethno-political conflicts and Instability</td>
<td>Burkina Faso, Eritrea, Mali, Senegal, Sudan/South Sudan, The Gambia</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Revolutionary Tendencies and Secessionist Agitations</td>
<td>Ethiopia, Mali, Nigeria</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Environmental/Natural Resource Conflicts</td>
<td>Chad, Sudan, South Sudan, Niger, Nigeria</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Food and Nutritional Crises</td>
<td>Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Fragile Economies, human and drug trafficking</td>
<td>Regional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The key actors in conflicts in the Sahel vary from one state to the other depending on the nature and context of the conflict.

However, a mapping of the actors in the conflicts reveal that in all cases, Islamist terrorist groups, armed ethnic militia and rebels, National State Governments (NSGs) and a motley of foreign actors, are involved.

At least, about five main Islamist groups can be identified in the conflicts within the Sahel;
1. Boko Haram in Nigeria;
2. Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) and Ansar Dine in Mali;
3. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in Algeria; and
KEY ACTORS IN THE SAHEL CONFLICTS

- There, however, other smaller splinter-cells that dot the landscape such as
  1. Ansaru in Nigeria;
  2. Daesh (formerly referred to as Islamic State in the Iraq and Levant, ISIL) and Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen in Libya;
  3. The Signed-in-Blood Battalion and the Islamic Movement for Azawad (IMA) in Mali;
  4. Al-Murabitoun (the Sentinels) in Algeria, among others.

- One common feature of the Islamist groups is that they:
  - Seek to establish an Islamic State ruled by misguided versions of Sharia law;
  - Threaten the sovereignty and territoriality of the state;
  - Threaten the stability and legitimacy of political regimes.
- The main armed ethnic groups in virtually all the conflicts in the Sahel are the Tuaregs.

- From Mali to Niger and Mauritania, the ethnic Tuaregs have preponderant presence in the region and have continued to lead most of the rebellions in the region.

- The activities of armed ethnic militia groups have been made more complex by the activities of other big, smaller and isolated rebel groups and separatist agitators across the region.
Of course there are the National State Governments, whose duties, as state actors, have been to ensure state security and maintain its territorial integrity being threatened by Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs);

Then there is a motely of foreign actors with varying interests that range from economic to security, geo-strategy and military.
Although the underpinning causative factors of the conflicts in the Sahel differ from one country to another, virtually all the conflicts exhibit similar features.

This key characteristic of the conflicts in the Sahel is influenced by the interplay of certain internal and external factors, which give them their regional character.
1. Like other regions in Africa, the Sahel is home to peoples with common history, traditions and customs scattered across the region with national boundaries under the modern state system.

The implication of this is that “that neighbouring countries are not only affected by refugee flows, disruption of transportation routes and smuggling of weapons, governments of other countries have severally been implicated in the support of opposition groups on the other side of the border."
2. The physical and demographic features of the region and the porosity of its borders make it easy for environment-induced conflicts to assume a regional character.

➢ In this regard, it is plausible to argue that climate change, desertification, famine, and drought are parts of the causes of violent conflicts in the Sahel
3. The existence of social and economic networks that are built around informal trading, occupational and religious activities across many states that date back to the pre-colonial period and have been reinforced by contemporary process of globalisation.

➢ Trade, commerce and religion have always linked the peoples of West African Sahel since the eleventh century.

➢ The old cities of Kano, Timbuktu and Djenné served as religious centres and major hubs for the trans-Saharan trade.
As at January 2016, this was the startling statistics about the Sahel;

1. 1 in 4 persons in the Sahel live in areas affected by conflicts;

2. 3 in 4 persons are younger than 34 years old (youth bulge);

3. 4 in 5 persons relying on agriculture for livelihood are particularly vulnerable to climate change; and

4. 1 in 6 persons is food insecure.
In broader terms, about 3.5 million persons have been internally displaced with about 980,000 refugees and 1 million returnees scattered across the Sahel and beyond;

7 million are dependent on food aid, and half a million children are malnourished and about 14 million of them are going without schooling
2017 projections:

- A total of 4.5 million are expected to be displaced by conflicts;

- 23.5 million persons are expected to be food insecure;

- 3.3 million persons are projected to suffer from acute malnutrition, out of which 1.9 million are children under five years and will require treatment for severe acute malnutrition.

In general terms, 30 million people will not have enough to eat of which 12 million will require emergency food assistance.
In the Lake Chad Basin alone, Boko Haram-induced violence is affecting about 30 million people living in the poorest areas of Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria;

Pervasive insecurity has combined with underlying severe vulnerability to turn record numbers of people in need of emergency relief.

As of December 2016, an estimated 11 million were in need of urgent assistance and protection.

Around 2.4 million people have been displaced of which almost 2 million are in Nigeria alone – half of which are women and children.
The large majority of displaced have sought refuge with host communities, placing an unsustainable strain on already meagre resources. Interrupted farming and fishing, border closures and halted trade have led to a dramatic increase in food insecurity.
Food Insecurity

Sahel: food and nutrition crisis
Number of vulnerable people per country

13.4m people vulnerable of whom over...

10m are food insecure

1m children are at risk of severe malnutrition

Source: UN OCHA, 1 March 2012
HUNGER AND DISPLACEMENT
OUT OF SCHOOL CHILDREN...
Regional Approach to Peacebuilding in the Sahel

- Given the complex nature and international dimensions of the conflicts in the Sahel, a regionalist approach to peacebuilding as conflict management mechanism has become imperative.

- In this regard, regional organisations within the Sahel such as AMU, CEN-SAD, ECAS, ECOWAS, IGAD and the AU, should forge collaborative engagements in peacebuilding interventions in the region.
Some successes in regional peacebuilding have been recorded;

- ECOWAS in Liberia, Senegal, Cote d’Ivoire;
- AU in Somali, Darfur;
- AFISMA in Mali;
- MNJF in the Lake Chad River Basin region.
Regional peacebuilding initiatives and programmes in the region are driven by foreigners. This challenges;

1. Indigenous ownership of the initiatives and the programmes;
2. The competencies and capacities of member states;
3. The legitimacy of the African states
CHALLENGES...

- Peacebuilding initiatives have not been broad-based, comprehensive and inclusive;
- In most cases the state has descended heavily on armed militia and ethnic groups;
- Exclusion of terrorist groups in the peacebuilding process.

- The absence of early warning systems as part of conflict management strategies by many regional organisations is a major defect;
- Absence of effective coordination among intervening organisations;
- Excessively militaristic in approach;
- Do not seek to address the structural root causes of conflicts.
So long as peacebuilding initiatives and strategies emphasis the use of military power to the neglect of non-military dimensions to conflict management such as community dialogue, compromises, social wellbeing, environmental integrity, and good governance, violent conflicts may remain a recurrent decimal in the Sahel.

The nature and context of the conflicts in the Sahel region require more preventive diplomacy than has been used to date.

In other words, intensifying conflict resolution efforts after violent conflicts have erupted rather than seeking to prevent the outbreak of violence in the first place is old fashioned.
Expand the mandate of RECs to include peacebuilding and conflict management roles at their regional levels;

Peacebuilding initiatives must de-emphasise excessive militarisation of conflict management efforts and adopt more diplomatic and conciliatory approaches;

Peacebuilding initiatives must seek to prevent the outbreak of violence in the first, be preventive and proactive rather than reactive. In this regard, the development of early warning mechanisms and prompt responses to early warning signals must be encouraged and emphasised.
Thank You!