

NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS IN US POLICY TOWARD MALI

Written Testimony Submitted by Mr. Nii Akuetteh, Independent Policy Analyst

**Before
The Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
SubCommittee on African Affairs**

**At Hearing Entitled
“Addressing Developments in Mali: Restoring Democracy and Reclaiming the North”**

Washington DC: WEDNESDAY, December 5, 2012

Opening

Chairman Coons, Ranking Member Isakson, other Subcommittee Members, thank you. The personal honor of your invitation is my smaller reason. The much bigger reason is this: Being African-born and a strong believer in democracy, I very much appreciate that you are devoting the moral prestige and other priceless resources of this great institution of democracy to the deadly cocktail that is assailing Mali. It has and continues to inflict much suffering on millions of Malians. Furthermore, it is contagious and poses grave threats to the rest of Africa, to Europe and even to the US. In walking me through the process, your staff astounded me with their competence, promptness, patience, courtesy and sense of humor. I am grateful to them as well.

Introductory Overview

Tuesday, January 17, 2012 (45 weeks ago) is a very important date in understanding Mali's dizzying decent. That was the day heavily armed Tuaregs (hardened former fighters for Libya's late leader, Col Gaddafi) fired opening shots and re-ignited the latest Tuareg secessionist war against Mali.

Other 2012 dates are also vital. One is Thursday, March 22, 2012 when Capt Amadou Sanogo and his fellow putchists chased their commander-in-chief away from the Presidential palace, declared themselves the government, and effectively killed the infant that is Mali's much admired democracy. It is crucial to keep in mind their professed reason: Allegedly, the democratically elected president, Amadou Toumani Toure, himself a former general, had not prosecuted the war in the north well enough; the treasonous soldiers bragged they would do a far better job.

Within hours, the world--with one curious exception--sharply and emphatically rejected the coup. ECOWAS, the African Union, the UN, even the international financial institutions, were all scathing in their condemnation.

The lone exception was the US Administration. Initially, following an inter-departmental meeting, the State Department spokesperson was strangely sympathetic to the coup-makers, questioning whether this was really a coup, and speaking about the coup-makers' "legitimate grievances," about the government needing to negotiate, and taking days before announcing that some aid has been suspended as required by law. Happily this puzzling equivocation from the State Department has since disappeared.

From Mali's neighbors, there was not the slightest hint of such equivocation. By promptly closing land-locked Mali's most vital borders, ECOWAS forced the reluctant coup makers to hand over power to an interim regime which in turn was forced to agree to a one-year deadline for holding hold the previously scheduled legitimate national elections.

The next memorable day came 15 days after the coup. The Tuareg secessionists—allied with three Jihadist fighting groups—completed conquest of 66 percent of Mali (a territory rivaling France in size). On Friday, April 6, from Paris, they declared the conquered territory the independent nation of Azawad. This proved a phantom independence. And rather brief. Not a single country recognized the declaration.

Much worse soon followed. The Tuareg secessionists, the MNLA, had implemented their war project by forming alliance with three jihadist groups—AQIM, Ansar Dine, and MUJAO. Within weeks, the jihadists turned on their former allies killing and chasing them out of the population centres in the north, taking over and announcing their real intent—an Islamic rule based on strict sharia law. What has transpired since is more legitimately described as a reign of terror: summary executions; amputations and floggings; forced marriages; conscription of child soldiers; confiscation of private property; enforcement of dress codes; banning of much music; and destruction of ancient Islamic shrines recognized by the globally as World Heritage monuments. Understandably, a large proportion (perhaps half) of Malians in the north who are able to have fled. That non-Malians (from as far away as Pakistan and Afghanistan) have played leading roles only makes the situation more intolerable.

Two more dates must be mentioned. On Sunday July 15, with little territory remaining under their control, some Tuareg secessionist leaders told Reuters they were renouncing independence.

Mr. Chairman, my condolences. Reason: I am acutely aware that the remaining date carries pain for Americans and especially for this full Committee—Tuesday September 11, 2012. That day witnessed the murder of Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other patriots in Benghazi, Libya. The relevance to Mali is this: Though investigations are on-going, there have already been believable hints that some of the murderers of Ambassador Stevens are jihadists who came from northern Mali.

There is a reason for my recounting these many dates in 2012: They show that Malians and friends could be forgiven for regarding this year as our own *annus horribilis*.

And yet this one year of agony does not reflect the entire historical journey travelled by Mali and its people. For West Africans and hundreds of millions of others, admiring fascination with Mali goes back centuries to the ancient empire. After military dictatorship dampened the pride brought

by 1960 independence, people again held their heads high when “the soldier for democracy,” Amadou Toumani Toure, in 1991 and 1992, stopped the massacre of protesting women and children, humanely but decisively eased out the dictatorship, set the democratic experiment on course, and then gave up power to an elected politician. Ten years later, there was little surprise when popular sentiment brought him back to power on the strength of two landslide electoral victories.

However, there was disappointment when, many years into the Toure administration, Malians and outsiders began recounting stories of corruption in Mali.

More than disappointment, concern was the emotion evoked in some observers by one other observation. What triggered the concern were the incentives provided to the Malian government by US anti-terrorism strategy in general and in particular by three elements--the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorism Program, AFRICOM, and Operation Flintlock. Some observers including me felt unease that, as operated, these elements in US policy might prove an ineffective and even counterproductive strategy for combating terrorism in Mali, and perhaps in other African countries as well.

That is not to say terrorism does not bother Africa. To the contrary. Terrorism and violent extremism remains the gravest of threats to Africa--by itself and because terror attacks makes it impossible for Africans to respond to other challenges and opportunities. The attacks must be fought robustly and effectively. The war waged in Algeria by what is now AQIM; the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania; Al Shabaab in Somalia; Boko Haram in Nigeria; the World Cup bombing in Kampala—all these have killed and maimed thousands of innocent Africans, even when the declared targets have been Western officials, installations and interests. Clearly, defanging violent extremists across the continent saves African lives and otherwise serves African interests.

There are two parts to the concern about US counter-terrorism strategy in Mali. One is over-reliance on militarization instead of on democratization, reconciliation and development. The other is a near-exclusive focus on in-coming foreign jihadists such as AQIM at the cost of paying even greater attention to the home-grown challenge of Tuareg grievances.

When in January, Tuareg fighters abandoned Col Gaddafi, and returned to Mali to launch the latest of their latest secessionist wars, there was a sinking feeling that our worst fears had happened.

Four Suggested Improvements in US Policy

Mr. Chairman, in June, I paid close attention to the Mali testimony that Ambassador Carson gave in the other chamber. In the ensuing six months, I have tried being an even keener observer of the Mali situation: monitoring events on the ground in Mali and dissecting the words and deeds of the major stakeholders—Malian factions; ECOWAS countries, especially Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Niger, and Nigeria; non-ECOWAS neighbors especially Algeria, Mauritania, and Chad; the African Union; the European Union, especially France, Germany and Italy; the United Nations, and above all, the United States.

In his June testimony, Ambassador Carson reacted as follows to Malian and African vows to restore territorial integrity, “We think an ECOWAS mission to militarily retake the north is ill-advised and not feasible.” Months later, however, at the UN and in Algiers to push a reluctant Algeria, Secretary Clinton said kinder things about military intervention. And last week at Howard University, here in Washington, another senior State Department official said this:

We support the efforts of the government of Mali, ECOWAS, the African Union, the United Nations, neighboring partners, and others in the international community to prepare a military response as necessary, in accordance with international law, to restore the unity of Mali.

The pattern is unmistakable: US policy toward Mali is evolving—for the better, in my opinion. This is commendable.

Despite this progress, however, some concerns remain. Put another way, further improvements are possible and needed in current Mali policy. Consequently, the heart of my testimony today is to highlight four such concerns/improvements. They are unequal, varying in individual importance and weights.

The first concern/improvement is semantic and may appear trivial and unimportant. But I believe this appearance is deceptive because precise semantics reflect clear thinking which is a prerequisite for effective problem solving.

A cocktail of four crises. That is how today’s Mali situation is described by the US--and by all the major global actors and even most analysts. The four are: the Bamako-centred broken democratic rule; the deeply-rooted, recalcitrant secessionist aspiration and wars of the Tuaregs; Mali’s loss of integrity over most of its territory and the control of that area by violent religious extremists, significant numbers of whom are foreigners; and the humanitarian crisis centred in the north, epitomised by mass displacement of the population and fueled by environmental deterioration, by the secessionist war, and by harsh jihadist rule.

While agreeing that these four crises are afflicting Mali, I add a fifth dimension—contagion—which must be recognized and explicitly included in the discussion and analyses. By contagion I refer to the clear and present danger that Tuareg irredentism, large population displacements, and most critically, jihadist violence, will not be contained within Mali’s borders. Indeed they are already boiling over and destabilizing other countries. And not just in Africa: Jihadist violence especially has not been shy in declaring Europe and the US as its prime targets.

To a significant degree, the international community already appreciates the high contagion risk in Mali. Contagion and enlightened self-interest—and nothing else—explain why Paris, Bonn and Brussels, are so seized by the agony an impoverished African country. I am convinced that were the risk of contagion negligible, Mali would get little or no global attention.

But I am also convinced that significant benefits would flow from explicitly adding contagion—correctly counting Mali’s crises as five. Put another way, I believe the American and European

general publics, if they became more persuaded that the jihadists in Mali have them in the cross-hairs, would be far more supportive of rapid reaction to help the Malians. In other words, recognizing the high risk of contagion would mean much less foot dragging and hand-wringing outside Africa when it comes to extinguishing the jihadist threat in Mali.

Nor can it be denied that such foot dragging does exist. Irrefutable evidence is the reason. Exhibit A, to my mind, is time: Seven months after 66 percent of Mali was violently sliced off by irredentists who were then shoved aside by their own jihadist allies who immediately began terrorizing and pushing out much of the populace, the UN Security Council has still not authorized an alarmed Africa to use force. Perhaps the Council has a convincing argument for such nonchalance. If so I have not heard it. Which makes me wonder: Would Security Council authorization would be this slow in coming had the amputee country whose cultural heritage are being smashed been a rich, powerful global player--Brazil, China, Canada, Germany or Italy?

African disappointment and frustration at the delay is unmistakable. This is apparent in a leaked letter sent last Thursday by the Africa Union's head, President Boni Yayi of Benin to UN Secretary General Ban ki-Moon. The letter described UN foot dragging as "beneath the expectations of the African continent as a whole," warned that this "will be interpreted as a sign of weakness," and advised that "What we must avoid today is giving the impression that we lack firmness in the face of determined terrorists."

But reluctance to urgently and forcefully dislodge the terrorists from Mali is not confined inside the Security Council. Sadly, and hoping I am wrong, it seems apparent in US policy too. As observed above, compared to June, US today is noticeably more serious about Mali's terrorism crisis.

But this progress is clearly limited and insufficient. The State Department continues to discourage a swift restoration of Mali's territorial integrity and a forceful end to the terrorizing and displacement of northern Malians which has continued for seven months. This conclusion seems inescapable after scrutinizing what last week's Howard University statement said about intervention and contrasting that with its stance on elections and negotiations.

On national elections across Mali in 2013:

"The United States firmly believes that Mali's interim leaders must continue preparations in earnest to hold elections in this timeframe simultaneous with efforts to restore territorial integrity. We continue to encourage the interim government to set a date for elections. The interim government should build on the preparations that were undertaken before the aborted April 2012 elections and hold elections as soon as possible with as much of the country as possible . . . The return of democracy must not be held hostage to the security agenda." [emphasis added].

On negotiations with the brutal terrorist and secessionist groups:

"We urge the interim government to find ways to effectively address northern grievances in a peaceful manner . . . We also welcome the news that representatives of MNLA have retracted the declaration of independence of the

north, and key figures in the MNLA and Ansar al Dine have declared their readiness to negotiate with the interim government. Mali's interim government must demonstrate its commitment to negotiations by appointing a lead negotiator for the north. [emphasis added].

And on the overwhelming African desire to militarily eject the jihadists and restore Mali:

“We . . . recognize that an African-led, multinational force, supported by the international community, may be necessary to assist the Malians to dislodge extremists from the north. . . .” [emphasis added].

Reflecting on these pronouncements, I conclude thus: The two top priorities of the Department are first, elections by May 2013, and second, negotiations with northern groups including the irredentist MNLA and the jihadist Ansar Dine.

Sugar-coating feels impossible; so here goes: I disagree respectfully but firmly with these State Department priorities. Instead I believe the number one priority must be swift African-led international military intervention (with zero European and American boots on the ground, none) to restore Mali. Intervention must be given higher priority over elections and over negotiations—vital as those two are. To flip one of the State Department's assertions: Re-asserting Mali's sovereignty, restoring its territorial integrity, and ending the terrorizing of its population—these steps must remain top priority and they must not be held hostage to hasty ill-planned elections in only parts of the country, nor to endless haggling with violent, untrustworthy groups of questionable legitimacy. But there is another State Department argument that I do fully endorse, “Any military response in Mali should be well planned, managed, and resourced, and account for civilian security . . .” No question about that. But the bottomline remains that I believe the State Department's current priorities--putting security and Mali's restoration on the back burner--have it backwards.

Several arguments support my critique. To begin with, ECOWAS and the African Union clearly prefer making security and Mali's restoration the number one priority. President Yayi's fresh letter is only one indicator among many of this strong African preference. This is not to deny that forceful US advocacy of a different strategy can be extremely valuable in such a global effort. But it is to say that an unmistakable contradiction must be acknowledged: dismissing what Africans are loudly demanding negates the following assertion routinely made by State, “The United States supports the principle of regional ownership . . .”

A sequencing question also arises in this disagreement over priorities. State is right in saying that all of Mali's crises are critical and all must be addressed simultaneously. However, to govern is to choose; this observation is a cliché precisely because it is so true. Consequently, choices and setting of priorities must be made in allocating resources to Mali's crisis. This poses a question: Is it a better sequence to first establish reasonable peace and security in Mali as a condition for properly preparing, organizing and holding credible elections across the country? In contrast to State, my answer is emphatic yes.

Now it may well be that current Malian conditions and other information justify the opposite sequence preferred by State: prioritizing hasty, ill-prepared truncated elections in only part of a

war-torn country over the restoration of sovereignty, law and order over 66 percent of Mali's territory. But if so, such conditions and information must be woven into a convincing argument. So far, I have not seen such an argument; I am yet to see the persuasive case made.

One's preferred images for seeing military intervention in Mali constitute another important consideration in the priorities disagreement. In a way it is a variation on the sequencing question. Two images capture my view: Proper military intervention in Mali to me is akin to a fire brigade that must race to a dangerous fire in a crowded neighborhood. My other image is of intervention as the sending of a SWAT team to a hostage situation. Either way, I see the proposed African-led military intervention as a first responder. And like all first responders, it must still respond first to bring to the swiftest end to a dangerous emergency wreaking havoc.

To reiterate: In northern Mali, 7-month old dire havoc must be swiftly ended. For Malians the havoc takes the form of summary executions; amputations and floggings; forced marriages; conscription of child soldiers; confiscation or destruction of private property; enforcement of dress codes; banning of much music; destruction of ancient Islamic shrines recognized by the globally as World Heritage monuments; and forcing much of the northern population into involuntary exile.

For the international community the havoc also includes contagion—the reality that the jihadists will keep trying to attack bigger fish, especially France and the US.

The urgent need to immediately halt northern Mali's havoc is crucial. This urgency drives my strong recommendation that the State Department should upend its current priorities and adopt a new one where military intervention is deemed a higher priority than elections and negotiations—even though those two are very important. This recommendation is the second--and by far the most important--among the four policy improvements that this testimony is advocating.

Now to the third desired policy improvement. It emanates from observed American attitudes toward the Tuareg minority in Mali. Mr. Chairman, in the very first paragraph of this testimony I identified myself as an ardent believer in democracy. Vanity was not the reason. Nor does self-pity drive this other self-description: I am a double ethnic minority—within both of the two countries I love: Ghana where I was born and the US where I immigrated almost four decades ago. Rather, I offer the self-observations as possible explanations of political sentiments I hold: I happen to possess deep empathy for minorities everywhere and minority rights to me are no mere academic concept.

Notwithstanding these sentiments, I am today concerned about romanticization of the Tuareg political project in Mali. I fear this may be coloring and tilting US policy views and positions. Specifically, evidence abounds of persistent US pressure, throughout 2012, for Mali to concede “that the Tuaregs and others in northern Mali have legitimate political and socioeconomic grievances” and to negotiate with them. Washington has exerted this pressure on Bamako and on ECOWAS, even though throughout the spring of 2012, when the MNLA Tuareg had the choice, they rejected negotiation and opted to plunge Mali into war, dismemberment and other dire consequences. And even though the MNLA cynically formed alliances with brutal Islamists like

Ansar Dine—whose leadership contains ethnic Tuaregs as well. I fail to understand the US is running so much interference for a minority that rejected negotiation, unleashed devastating war, broke Mali's territorial integrity and ceded most of the country to marauding jihadists.

Two reasons drive my concern. Democracy, equal justice and peaceful coexistence within multi-ethnic African countries constitute the big one. According to one UN data source, Tuaregs form two related branches among Mali's 57 ethnic groups. At 813,000 they constitute 5 percent of today's population of 16,319,000. Given this slim proportion within much diversity, extra care must be taken to avoid creating the impression of unfair ethnic favoritism for the Tuaregs—especially one purchased through the barrel of a gun.

African colonial history is my other reason. After carving up Africa, 19th century European imperialists embarked on strategies of divide, weaken and rule. They vigorously promoted division by romanticizing some groups while demonizing others; by rewarding others while depriving others; and by stirring up mutual prejudice, suspicion and antagonism. The baleful consequences still plague Africa more than a century later. The visible signs discernible from Rwanda to Nigeria, and from Kenya and Congo to Cote d'Ivoire are only the tip of an iceberg. This politicized ethnicity may even apply to Mali's Tuaregs. Some analysts suggest that in addition to legitimate grievances, the four secessionist wars of the Tuaregs have been driven by a superiority complex. Allegedly, with independence approaching, French colonialists encouraged the lighter-skinned Tuaregs to refuse to live under the rule of Mali's darker-skinned majority, presumed to be inferior. These analysts claim that this is a reason why the very first Tuareg rebellion against Bamako's rule happened within days of independence.

The third policy improvement this testimony is advocating then is this: The US must put in place effective mechanisms and bend over backwards to ensure that its pronouncements and positions are not perceived as playing ethnic favorites in Mali.

Policy review and adjustment is the fourth and final improvement this testimony calls for. The policy in question is America's counter-terrorism strategy not just in Mali before the implosion, but across the Sahel-Sahara area and from 9/11 to today.

If a reason for the review is required, perhaps the following can suffice. A question has persisted since Mali's implosion almost a year ago: Why did the collapse of the much admired 20-year democracy happen so fast and with such apparent ease? To find answers, all possibilities must be explored. As noted above, some observers, several years ago, had become concerned at the counter-terrorism strategy's close militaristic embrace of Mali's young democracy. Consequently, one hypothetical possibility is that the strategy inadvertently contributed. After all, Captain Sanogo, the soldier who inflicted the fatal blow, had been trained multiple times by the US as part of the strategy.

I have a preferred list of constituent elements within the strategy which must be scrutinized for their possible impact on Mali. They must include AFRICOM, the Trans-Sahara Counter Terrorism Program (TSCTP), Operation Flintlock, and the curriculum used to train African soldiers. The policy review must establish if any of these produced unintended or unforeseen consequences in Mali. If so the consequences and their causal mechanisms must be fully

understood. One narrow practical reason why is obvious. Any detrimental consequences in Mali must be guarded against in Mauritania and Niger where TSCTP is being operated right now. A broader positive reason can also be advanced for the policy review: It could lead to improvements that make more effective the overall strategy that the US has used to fight the scourge of terrorism across Africa since 9/11.

Thumbnail Answers to Select Questions in Invitation Letter

Mr Chairman, your invitation letter posed several questions. They have proved extremely helpful in shaping the preceding bulk of my testimony. In this rump section I will provide direct thumbnail answers to a select few.

Q1: What recommendations do you have for US policy as we consider next steps in addressing the simultaneous political, security, humanitarian crises in Mali?

As the bulk of the testimony elaborates, I make four strong recommendations. Washington must:

- A) Highlight the high contagion risk in Mali and designate contagion as crisis # 5.
- B) Change the State Department's current priorities and place military intervention to dislodge terrorists from northern Mali above elections and negotiations.
- C) Take precautions to prevent US from being perceived as practicing ethnic favoritism to benefit Tuaregs.
- D) Conduct thorough, in-depth review of US counter-terrorism strategy, especially how the component elements of AFRICOM, TSCTP, Operation Flintlock, and training of African soldiers worked or not in Mali and then adjust policies accordingly.

Q2: Why were we so unprepared for the recent coup in Mali, a country which was largely heralded as a stable democracy for so many years? What lessons can be learned from this experience as we look at US policy toward Mali and the region?

This first is among the questions that can only be well answered following a thorough policy review. One superficial answer is that presumably we, like everyone else, were taken in by the appearances and failed to drill below the surface. Regarding causes, chances are that many causal factors contributed to Mali's implosion. Good candidate hypotheses to test include: A) the extreme fragility of all infant democracies; B) the incentive to focus on foreign terrorists diverted Mali's attention from aggrieved domestic groups such as the Tuaregs; C) why TSCTP failed to make a capable fighting force of Mali's army; D) the failure to detect and neutralize armed Tuaregs moving into Mali from Libya; and E) the failure to come to the aid of Bamako once Tuaregs from Libya struck in January and to give sufficient help in defeating returning Tuaregs. Lessons, like causes, are best extracted after thorough policy review. Excellent early warning systems that target domestic grievances may be one likely lesson. Another might be to change curriculum for training African soldiers to imbue them with sacred and robust respect for civilian control.

Q3: What are the regional implications of AQIM's presence in northern Mali and what is the extent of the threat to US interests?

The implications cannot be good—especially the more time AQIM has to create a thriving haven in northern Mali, a territory as big as France. Significantly, it has already been reported that AQIM personnel probably participated in inflicting the US national trauma that was the Benghazi murder of Ambassador Stevens and his three colleagues.

Being no expert, I must defer to the judgement of the countless experts advising both State and DoD—except to observe that with time the threat to the US can only worsen.

Q5: How can the government in Bamako negotiate more effectively with the Tuaregs?

I believe legitimacy on both sides is the key, a critical pre-requisite. The Bamako government must be democratically elected. Similarly, Tuareg leaders negotiated with must also be legitimate representatives of the community and its subgroups. We must not be satisfied with un-elected, self-appointed Tuareg individuals. This again bolsters the sequence that this testimony advocates: security first, then impeccably prepared democratic elections to reveal Mali's real leaders both in Bamako and among Tuaregs.

Q6: How might military operation impact the humanitarian situation in the north and plans for elections, and what is a realistic timetable for holding elections in 2013?

Clearly, war would affect the humanitarian situation for the worse. However precautions can and must be taken to minimize the detrimental effects. This is because the risks and consequences of not intervening and leaving northern Mali at the mercy of the brutal jihadists, those risks and consequences are far worse than intervention and they will only deteriorate with time.

Q7: What are potential implications of holding elections without the participation of the northerners in the north?

I believe this runs a high risk of opening up a messy post-elections Pandora's box. Sore losers would make all manner of claims. At worse they could ignite small wars and stir up other trouble across a land already torn by war and instability.

This risk bolsters the argument for a sequence of restoring Mali first and thereafter making impeccable plans and preparations for free and fair elections nationwide.

Cote d'Ivoire's recent trauma may be instructive. Ex-President Laurent Gbagbo's claim of rigging failed to convince the world precisely because there had been five years of pains-taking and transparent electoral preparations. The Gbagbo claims would likely have been more credible, the world would have been more divided and the Ivorian civil war would have been longer and bloodier had the elections been less well prepared.

Closing

Mr. Chairman, let me express again my deep appreciation for this focus on a grave situation afflicting countless Africans. I hope that my opinions are of some use. I would be glad to respond to any questions or clarifications you might have. Thank you.