



Mali: an endangered peace

by Taynja Abdel-Baghy and José Luengo-Cabrera

The 20 November attack at the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, which killed 21 people, reaffirmed that the terrorist threat in Mali is not confined to the central and northern provinces. The timing and target of the attack are indicative of a revived campaign by jihadist terrorist groups to undermine the stabilisation efforts in the country – almost three years after the launch of the French military mission Operation Serval.

Amid stubbornly persistent insecurity, successfully implementing the peace agreement signed on 20 June in the Malian capital remains a tall order. The truce struck in Anéfis last October between the rebel coalitions signatory to the accord emanating from the Algiers process has, however, offered some respite after a series of territorial grabs and ceasefire violations.

But the delay in initiating an enforceable disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) programme has raised doubts over the credibility of the warring parties' commitment to the agreement's security provisions.

Beyond demilitarisation and decentralisation, no durable peace can be envisaged without dismantling the trafficking and patronage networks that fuel terrorist and criminal activities alike. Achieving this – and thereby ensuring that yet another peace process in Mali does not derail – will require the upping of financial and military assistance by both regional and international partners.

Jihadist disruption

The overlapping claims of responsibility for the Bamako attack by al-Mourabitoun and the Ansar Dine-affiliated Macina Liberation Front indicate a desire to prove operational capacity by both groups. Even if the true identity of the perpetrators remains a matter of speculation, the readiness to take credit for the attack can be seen as an effort by both to raise their respective profiles amid the expanding presence of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) in North Africa.

Most importantly though, it serves to vindicate their fervent opposition to the continued presence of external forces in Mali and the wider Sahel region, which translates into efforts to obstruct international stabilisation initiatives by targeting foreigners. The fact that the attack was carried out as the Algerian-led committee responsible for the implementation of the accord was due to meet in the capital also points to an attempt to hamper the peace process underway.

With past links to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the recurrent attacks carried out by al-Mourabitoun and Ansar Dine-affiliated groups demonstrate the fluidity of the jihadist landscape in the Sahel. As groups like the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO) continue to operate in the Timbuktu region, al-Mourabitoun and Ansar Dine have recently ambushed convoys and camps of the UN peacekeeping operation

(MINUSMA) in Gao and Kidal, respectively. The continued spread of jihadist terrorist groups and the resultant security vacuums throughout the Malian territory have highlighted the need to step up international support.

International support

With a wider remit than its Serval predecessor, the French Operation Barkhane is leading the international counter-terrorism efforts – and doing so in close cooperation with the members of the Sahel G5 group (Chad, Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso). During the 20 November N'Djamena summit, the regional grouping announced the creation of a joint force brigade. In addition, they agreed on establishing a security and defence committee, principally mandated to coordinate regional counter-terrorism cooperation. Although these initiatives are unlikely to become operational in the immediate future, their activation could be expedited as soon as financial resources are made available through the recently launched EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, among others.

Notwithstanding progress on regional action, bolstering the capacity of Malian security forces remains a strategic priority for international partners. Despite the technical and material support provided by the EUTM and EUCAP Sahel Mali missions, the national army and police are still heavily dependent on MINUSMA to address security threats while largely reliant on French and American special operations to curb terrorist activities.

International military assistance is expected to gather pace following the activation of the EU mutual defence clause in the wake of the 13 November attacks in Paris, something which will relieve French forces in the Sahel, as well as in the Central African Republic and the Middle East. A number of EU countries, in particular, are expected to raise their commitment in terms of deployments and provision of equipment, as well as financial assistance. Indeed, the €3.2 billion commitment pledged by international donors at the 22 October OECD meeting in the French capital will be key to support the economic development dimension of the peace accord, with €605 million earmarked for the restive northern regions.

No peace without security

Without further international support, the prospects of maintaining a durable peace remain grim. Existing divisions between supporters of the rebel

coalitions have been exacerbated by the ceasefire violations and ensuing local clashes. Moreover, acts of harassment against civilians perpetrated by national security forces and pro-government militias continue to reinforce a pervasive sense of acrimony and distrust, preventing reconciliation initiatives from taking root.

Despite the deployment of 40 MINUSMA military observers to supervise the ceasefire and the launch of violence-reduction projects to reduce communal tensions, the country's pressing security and humanitarian needs are still not being met. Civilians and security forces alike continue to fall victim to armed attacks, and access to humanitarian services remains restricted at a time when an estimated 3 million people suffer from food insecurity and over 50,000 are internally displaced.

Meanwhile, the longstanding collusion between militia leaders and corrupt officials in control of trafficking networks remains an impediment to the implementation of the disarmament process. As long as the porosity of borders continues to facilitate the influx of arms and other contraband goods, the lucrative opportunities emanating from illicit commercial activities will act as disincentives for combatants to engage in a prolonged and risky DDR programme. Even if the launch of joint observation and verification teams presents an important trust-building mechanism for credibly disarming the warring parties, inadequate financial resources and poor enforcement procedures may prove insufficient for the task at hand.

Demilitarisation and decriminalisation remain basic prerequisites to move forward with peace and reconciliation. In their absence, the much-awaited provisions of political devolution and development assistance to the north cannot be effectively implemented. With the postponement of regional and municipal elections in the wake of the Bamako attack, the urgent need to reinforce the administrative powers of northern regions has been deferred.

As local populations become increasingly disgruntled with the poor provision of public services and the lack of security, the protracted grievances that have been at the source of Mali's past conflicts are at risk of rekindling. This raises the likelihood of undoing the progress which has been made through the Algiers process.

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