



**Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development
Office of International Justice and Peace**

**Backgrounder - Conflict and Hunger in the Sahel
February 2021**

" May the Divine Child alleviate the suffering of the peoples of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, affected by a grave humanitarian crisis caused by extremism and armed conflicts, but also by the pandemic and other natural disasters.. "--Pope Francis, Urbi et Orbi, 2020

Last year, the USCCB and CRS presented the conflict that has raged in the Sahel countries of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. We also laid out a first tableau of the new Sahel Peace Initiative (SPI) that CRS designed with the USCCB Office on International Justice and Peace. The SPI has four objectives: 1) humanitarian assistance, 2) continued development programs in areas free of conflict, 3) peacebuilding activities to stop the conflict, and 4) advocacy work by the Church and its interfaith partners to help government reform its policies and build good governance and social cohesion. This backgrounder offers an update on the state of conflict, the effects of the coronavirus on the region, and presents the progress that CRS and the Church have made to launch the SPI.

In a [July 21, 2020 study the Africa Center for Strategic Studies](#) reported a record number of 4,000 violent attacks in Africa by extremist groups and their allies from June 2019-June 2020. Tragically, the conflict, violence, and loss of life and livelihood in the Sahel that started in 2012 continue. This is despite a 2015 peace agreement between the government and the armed groups willing to negotiate solutions to the conflict and the deployment of over 24,000 peacekeeping and counter insurgency forces. The report states, "The Sahel has seen the most dramatic escalation of violence since mid-2017. Violence by the groups in the coalition of Jama'at Nusrat al Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) and the [Islamic State in the Greater Sahara](#) (ISGS) collectively grew nearly sevenfold since that time (from 147 events to 999 events for the 12 months ending June 30, 2020). The majority of violent attacks in the Sahel in 2020 were in Burkina Faso (516 vs. 361 in Mali and 118 in Niger)."

These developments are worrying because the shift of attacks from Mali to Burkina Faso and Niger vastly increases the threat to other neighboring countries in the region. In addition, the Fulani based Macina Liberation Front accounts for most of the increase in attacks. The Fulani are a nomadic herder people of 40 million living across the Sahel from Senegal through to Chad. Governments in the Sahel have never managed well the interaction and competing interests between herders and farmers that has greatly exacerbated the rise in violence between them.

In the midst of this rising tide of violence in mid-August the Malian army overthrew the two term, duly elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita after weeks of demonstrations on the streets of Bamako demanding his resignation. This was the second military takeover in eight years and now adds to the instability. The ruling junta formed a government with civilian members. Bishop Dembele, President of the Malian bishops' conference, condemned the overthrow of an elected government and called for a civilian transition government and dialogue to resolve the countries problems. The USCCB sent a solidarity letter to Bishop Dembele to reiterate its support for his recommendations.

The Catholic Church in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger is an important actor for peace despite its minority faith community status. In Mali, Christians only make up 2% of the population; in Niger they are 1% and in Burkina Faso, Christians make up around 30% of the population with Catholics being around 2/3 of them. Despite its size, the Catholic Church is a respected and important actor in all three countries, particularly in Burkina Faso and Mali. The Church wields this influence due to its united hierarchy, its large network of schools and health structures, and the ability to develop and communicate objective, moral, and realistic policies on important social and political issues. The Church is a leading party to inter-religious efforts to address social divisions and violence.

In reaction to the spread of attacks into central Mali and neighboring Burkina Faso and Niger, the Church in the region began to speak out more forcefully and has engaged with CRS and the USCCB to help create inter-religious institutions capable of promoting greater dialogue, outreach to governments for policy change and programs to rebuild their societies torn apart by violence.

Through SPI, the Church and its inter-faith partners hope to address the root causes of violence – like high rates of poverty and youth unemployment – in the region. Young people, in particular, are vulnerable to recruitment from armed groups. Thus, SPI will increase livelihoods training for youth, including young women. The Church plans to continue collaborating with other Muslim and Christian leaders to work with the government(s) and communities to address the grievances that have given rise to increased violence.

Along with the four separate humanitarian responses delivering food, shelter and water, SPI activities also include elections surveillance in Niger, peace parades in Ghana, and peace forums convoking religious leaders from across the ideological and religious spectrum. SPI is integrating CRS' [Rising From Resilient Roots](#) (RRR) into development and humanitarian projects across the region. RRR is a resilience-strengthening workshop designed to help communities rebuild peaceful relationships by understanding and honoring their origins, experiences, and their identity. The workshop encourages self-reflection and teaches coping skills that foster hope and well-being in the participants, their families, neighborhoods and communities. CRS has trained Church commissions across the region in RRR so they can integrate RRR in all their programs. To date, 75 master trainers have begun delivering the programming.

Looking forward, SPI will begin delivering training to journalists on how to engage in conflict sensitive reporting, hosting intergroup dialogues, and reinforcing traditional conflict mitigation mechanisms. All activities are derived from the [SPI Conflict Analysis](#) and are directly overseen by country specific working groups chaired by bishops or high level church officials.

USCCB POSITION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

USCCB and CRS urge the United States to increase its funding to community-based peacebuilding programs and to strengthen civil society institutions' efforts to promote negotiations and dialogue between the governments and armed groups to address grievances and allow communities to rebuild peaceful relations and shared prosperity. The USCCB and CRS will work with the State Department's Special Envoy Peter Pham to intensify the United States' efforts towards peacebuilding, addressing the root causes of conflict and the promotion of dialogue between the governments of the region and the armed groups willing to halt the violence and negotiate lasting solutions to the conflict. The United States should ensure robust humanitarian and development programs for those who have lost their livelihoods to the violence.

RESOURCES: Visit: www.usccb.org/committees/international-justice-and-peace/
or www.usccb.org/committees/international-justice-and-peace/global-poverty/

Contact: *Steve Hilbert*, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, shilbert@usccb.org,
202-541-3149

3211 Fourth St., NE. Washington, DC 20017. Tel: (202)541-3160 Fax: (202)541-3339