MALI CRISIS: MAJOR PROBLEMS AND KEY ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to show, what happened in the Sahel region, especially in Mali after the French operations Serval " in 2013. The aim would also be to point out what the pros and cons were of this operation, what the current problems are in this region today, and the possible ways in which to solve them and where are the peace talks in terms of progression today. The topic is split into four key areas.

The first part moves on to describe what caused the crisis in Mali, why it happened and how the European Union and especially France reacted. The second part is about the current situation in Mali today and explains the current dangers in which the citizens of Mali find themselves embroiled in and how drastic the current situation is. In the third part of this article are the main strategies and activities, which have been put forward and implemented by the European Union to help Mali deal with the conflict. The final part has specifically detailed what the difficulties are with signing a peace agreement and why these negotiations have been unsuccessful.

KEYWORDS: Operation Serval, Sahel Region, Tuaregs, EU Sahel Strategies, Ansar Dine, Jihad

INTRODUCTION

Mali is one of the poorest regions in Africa with estimates stating that more than 60% of people there live below the poverty line. Mali doesn't have a prosperous economy, it doesn't sit on vast natural reserves of resources with the exception of salt and it is also a landlocked country without direct access to the sea. However, many countries not only within Africa itself, but also within Europe are keeping a watchful eye on the situation there and are fearful of the repeated trouble that keeps surfacing. One of the main reasons causing great concern for European countries is that Mali is a large country (almost double the size of France) with seven neighboring countries and long poorly protected borders. Many of these neighboring countries have been victims of the aggression and riots. For example we can mention Algeria in the North and the Ivory Coast in the South, where they as countries themselves are not very well equipped for solving such crisis situations as the one currently present in Mali. On the west side of Mali is Mauritania, which has its own problems with Islamic militants cooperating with al-Qaeda and also Niger which is the same as Mali often a victim of ethnic Tuareg rebellions.

As is the case in much of West Africa the lack of state authority creates an ideal base for extremist and criminal groups. The huge Muslim region of the Mediterranean Sea to the North of Nigeria with its extreme poverty and corruption create ideal conditions for recruiting armed Islamic groups such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Jihad and Unity in West Africa (MUJAO), Ansar Dine and Boko Haram. The connection of smuggling weapons and drugs in Northern Mali also created favorable basis for terrorists, which use all the available options to finance their activities including corruption and taking hostages. The situation is also becoming more serious because terrorist groups such as AQIM learned how to develop more dangerous and deadly explosives. These are currently being

placed in areas, where they can cause more devastation and wider disruption. Members of AQIM are mainly Algerian, Mauritanian and Malian nationalities (Lister 2013). Reports suggest that the number of members have reached hundreds, if not possibly more. The demise of the Gaddafi regime also caused the black market trade of weapons in Northern Africa to increase, which allowed Islamic groups to obtain guided missiles, other heavy weapons and vehicles, which provides them access to adverse terrain.

THE START OF THE CRISIS IN MALI

Mali gained independence from France in 1960. Since then the Tuaregs found themselves in conflict with neighboring African groups and also in conflict with the newly formed government. The first uprising of Tuaregs happened in 1964, when they were protesting against discrimination of their religions and the way of life by the government. This Uprising is known as the first Tuareg rebellion and caused many deaths on Tuareg sides. Resentment for the government's harsh suppression of the uprising resolved in second uprising in 2012. Since then the clashes between Tuareg rebels and the Malian government in Mali continue to this day.

Isolated countries of West Africa have gone through lots of problems since the era of colonization like the droughts, riots and years of dictatorship. The first democratic elections, however, happened to be in 1992, more than 30 years after independence. However, the future for Mali looked quite stable until January of 2013.

The crisis in Mali started in January, when the riots of ethnic Tuaregs started to erupt (with the help of weapons from Libya). Afterwards the commissioned officers of the Malian army started a coup to overthrow the government and seize power, which they considered as weak, defected and in more cases also cooperating with militant groups, for financial gain. This attempt to overthrow the government radically weakened the rising national economy and social stability of the country. The main reason this situation happened was that the army blamed the government for not providing adequate equipment to fight against ethnic Tuaregs in the desert in the North. The riot began in an army camp just a couple of kilometers from the presidential palace in the capital city of Bamako. The army walked into the palace and a couple of hours afterwards people saw on national television soldiers, who announced that the country was now under military control (Boukhars 2013). Tuareg rebels used this situation to their advantage when there was no government leading the country and began to take control of some areas in the North. These rebels have always been fighting for independence since they have always felt discriminated against for their wandering lifestyle and for their attempts to gain independence of the region in the north of Mali. They have carried out various riots since the 1960s. After the Libyan leader Gaddafi was killed, they also started to use weapons which became available and were easily acquired from this area. Later, when the Tuaregs took over the North they started to fight against the local Islamic radicals. These radicals split the tribe apart and took over control of the area. The militant group Ansar Dine (Islam defenders) was especially profiting from this chaotic situation. This group was established and led by Iyad ag Ghalu, Tuareg which radicalised during the fighting in Saudi Arabia. By that time the main Tuareg rebellion group MNLA did most of the fighting when the crisis started, Ansar Dine took control of Timbuktu, till the government was little by little depleting in power. By the spring of 2013 Northern Mali became the biggest area controlled by Islamic extremists in the world. In the end Ansar Dine made a movement to the South and occupied the city of Konna, while they started to threaten other strategic cities such as Mopti. France decided to react immediately, because of the fear that the whole of Mali would fall under the rule of armed groups, which would pose a threat not just for the whole of Africa but also for Europe.

That´s one of the main reasons the crisis is often interpreted as a crisis in Francophone Africa and neighboring countries. It was even more intensively seen as a Francophone case since it was directly influenced by French speaking parts of Africa including Central Africa and the Gulf of Guinea. For these countries, it was a real threat that was happening in Mali could also happen in their countries. For neighboring countries, it had catastrophic economic and human consequences. Niger which shares not only borders, but also history, trade and Northern population of Tuaregs was immediately influenced by the instability of Mali. That means peace in Mali is also critically important for the internal stability of Niger. Also in Senegal where they´re fighting against the increase of drug smuggling and organized crime these problems are increasing due to the country being surrounded by liable neighbors (Guinea-Bissau and Mali).

However, the strong influence of the EU and French planning structures opened a new door for new forms of cooperation between the EU and ECOWAS. Operation Serval was from the French point of view very similar to the operation on the Ivory Coast. Armed intervention in the Ivory Coast, Libya and Chad just showed that neither the EU or AU or African RECs couldn't act as a main and a single security force in this part of Africa. That means that African organizations and states started to tolerate interventions and initiatives from formal colonial powers, not just France but also the UK and Italy. This demonstrates a few true situations. First of all the danger in this region was not just a problem in Africa, which needed only an African solution, but also a threat for the whole region and for Europe. The second fact is that there could still be an effective partnership based on security issues between Europe and Africa at least in the short-term. Malian citizens understood France was in their country as a representative of the EU but it was only welcomed by ECOWAS and AU. AU was less involved in this conflict than it was in other conflicts on the continent (Alonso 2014).

The case of Mali indicated that what would be important for its future would be not only the existence of strong leadership in Africa, but also in Europe with fully functional diplomatic and security channels and well prepared contingency plans on how to react to cross border and cross regional challenges. The fact that an intervention was welcome and cooperated by western African countries shows that relationships between Africa and Europe changed. The case of Mali became a joint challenge of how to cooperate with available sources and financial, military and technical asymmetry on both sides. It is highly possible that experience with the crisis in Mali will lead to a stronger European effort to keep peace and security in West Africa and in the Sahel region. On the other hand the French intervention could have a negative impact on the confidence of western African organizations. This situation brings to light the fact that African, European relations need and effective geographical differentiation and strict solutions not only for aid development, but also to deal with common threats and interests. (Andrew 2014)

The highest risk concerning the situation in Mali is that the crisis would be ongoing. Islamic groups are recruiting rebels with the idea of a holy war against the enemy in Muslim countries. The real danger exists also for France, which has 5 million citizens of Muslim origin, which could also seek their revenge for French intervention. Neighboring countries which supported the intervention are at an increased risk of danger too. The militant group well known as Qatiba under the leadership of a veteran Algerian jihad, Mokhtar Belmokhtar attacked the gas installation in eastern Algeria and later also attacked a lot of foreigners. The group claimed that the attack was in reaction to the fact that Algeria permitted France to use their air space during the intervention in Mali. Other militant groups from Mauritania attacked various cities in Mali. There is also a high possibility that the militant group Boko Haram is connected with AQIM. If this is true, it is possible that Boko Haram will increase their violence in Niger to help to win the fight of their Islamic brothers.

SITUATION IN MALI TODAY

The situation in Mali since January of 2013 is not much better. The International community expressed concerns over al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb and its increasing presence in Mali. The link between the Jihad groups in Mali and people close to the Boko Haram Movement in Northern Nigeria have been mentioned by a couple of sources, but there is no clear evidence about the direct affiliation or cooperation. Soon after the intervention in Mali, Nigeria joined the campaign for the fight with Boko Haram and with the President Goodluck Jonathan declared special conditions in three states. Tuareg rebels also started to understand the concern of the situation and promised to help fight against the Islamic groups. However, Tuaregs always wanted their own country in the North, which they called Azawad, which created problems with their cooperation.

At a time when the world was struggling to find a solution to the crisis, the Islamic groups were busy implementing their strict interpretation of Sharia. The major problem is that the local citizens are not defenders of strict Sharia. Most Malians are Sufi-tradition, which is the mystical interpretation of Islam, which honors the saints and is hated by purist Sunnits. The city of Timbuktu used to be the religious and educational centre in the 15th and 16th centuries. Its libraries stored thousands of precious Islamic documents and books. The tombs and mosque are in the UNESCO list of world heritage sites and they attracted scholars and tourist from all over the world. Ansar Dine destroyed these tombs and there were reports about Malian citizens, which were lashed in public and had their limbs amputated. The attack against these people, and their history and values is their attack against a physical argument that peace and dialogue is possible.

Years ago Mali was one of the six developing countries that was invited to the G8 summit in Italy and was seen as an example of civil government and stability in Africa. Thousands of Malian citizens are now refugees in camps outside their own country or they have been relocated within their country. More than 150 000 refugees live in neighboring countries and more than 50 000 in one camp in Mauritania, where doctors are fighting with chronic malnutrition, malaria and diarrhoea in children. Around 200 000 Malians escaped to the south because of the Islamic groups. Lacking the basic needs of food and water is a condition which helped militant groups to recruit kids in the hundreds with promises of a little money and food. That could mean that without a quick end to the fighting and a resolution to the crisis the younger generation of Mali could also become a serious threat in the future.

The desperation of the citizens with the current situation in Mali could be also felt in the speech of Dlamini Zuma, which in the name of the African Union commission (AUC), thanked the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), member states, their commissions and other African countries for their ambition to accomplish an African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), for which AU committed 50 million dollars. She also thanked France for their intervention in Mali. This statement underlined the change of African regional and continental politics after serious disagreements about French intervention in 2010 in the Ivory Coast (which was rejected by Angola and South Africa, but on the other hand was supported by Nigeria) and the intervention of NATO in Libya (also criticized by South Africa). Surprisingly, in the case of Mali South Africa and Nigeria reached a consensus. However, the tension between ECOWAS and AU were visible until the end of French intervention. AU, apparently didn't react to the situation fast enough, because it is full of politicians who don't have a common vision for the future in Mali which slows down its development. However, one expert from the region put it like this, on the Mali dossier *everyone agrees with the failure of AU after all the other crises.*" Not only did the AU struggle to find some legitimacy in addressing the crisis, but it seems to have lost credibility with the United Nations (UN) which will be the leading organization in the future of Mali. Existing

reports are arguing whether or not the French operation Serval opened a Pandora's box, which led to the spread of the terrorist groups all over the region. However, even though there are mixed opinions on this topic. Yet according to public opinion research the intervention in Mali was perceived by citizens of Mali as positive. This creates a question about the functioning and role of the army in the region and its relation to the political elites in each country (Faith 2013).

EU SAHEL STRATEGIES

The region of the Sahel is one of the poorest in the world. That´s why the EU established strategies which should help this region with fighting extreme poverty, inside tensions, weak institutions, high birth rate, changes of climate, famine, lack of political organizations, drug smuggling, radicalization and violent extremism. The situation was critical even before the crisis in Libya, which just worsened the consequences. In March 2011 the EU implemented the complex strategy in the Sahel region as a reference strategy for security and development (Sahel strategy), which was relying on consideration that development and security are influencing themselves and the problems which are in the Sahel region need mostly a regional answer. This strategy created four key areas of activities:

- Development and good public administration and conflict inside the region

- Political and diplomatic measures

- Secure and legal state

- Fight against military extremism and radicalism (European Council 2015)

From the start of the crisis in Mali, the Council was repeating that the EU would solve and speed up the implementation of this strategy to help with the regional crisis. This strategy was demonstrated to be a very good tool to strengthen cooperation between EU politics, with a special focus on Mauretania, Mali and Niger. On 16th February 2015, the EU decided on increasing the humanitarian aid in total 156 million Euro in 2015 for the area of Sahel (UNHCR 2015).

The next couple of years will be extremely difficult for the countries of Sahel because of lack of rain in the second half of 2014, which damaged the crops and increased the prices of food which is already a difficult commodity to get. Then the situation is further complicated by conflicts in Mali and Nigeria and also by the epidemic Ebola. These countries are still trying to recover from four extremely bad nutrition crises (2005, 2008, 2010 and 2012). The EU is playing an important part during the creation of AGIR, which is a global alliance which should strengthen the resilience of West Africa. The aim is to accomplish Zero Hunger by 2032. From the beginning of 2014 The European Commission has supplied the finances which helped more than 350 million people in Sahel (European Commission 2015). The Commission and member states also coordinate activities in the area of security and development and created an action plan which was submitted in March 2015.

The complex strategy of the EU for development and security in region Sahel also involves the Missions under the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) actions: EUCAP Sahel Niger, EUCAP Sahel Mali and EU training mission in Mali (EUTM). EUCAP Sahel Mali started in January 2015. The aim of the mission was mainly the support of internal security forces. EUCAP Sahel Mali helps the Malian state to make sure the constitutional and democratic rule, to fulfill the conditions for lasting peace and to keep power in the whole area. The mission advises and trains the three internal security forces in Mali, i.e. the police, Gendarmerie and Garde Nationale, and coordinates with international partners. The mission should keep going until the 15th of January 2017. At the request of Mali in line with the proper international decision

including, UNSC Resolution 2085 (2012), the EU started the EU training Mission in Mali (EUTM) in 2013. The mandate of this mission is till 18th of May 2016 (EEAS 2015). The goal is to support the rebuilding of the armed forces and help them with professional knowledge, information mainly about control, management and guiding of the logistic chain of human sources and international humanitarian law and helps to train armed forces.

CREATING PEACE IN MALI

On 01/03/2015 the Malian government signed a peace treaty with Northern rebels to solve the long lasting conflict in the North of the country. The treaty was created on the base of conclusion of the mission of the African Union Peace and Security Council (AU-PSC) and the European Union Political and Security Committee (EU-PSC). They together visited Mali between 11th and 13th of February 2015. The decision about starting the combined AU-EU mission was created in residence of Commission in Brussels last year (AU Monitor 2015). Delegations lead a couple of consultations with representatives of Malian government, with the president, vice-president, minister of defense, political parties and civil association. The aim was to meet treaties and common solutions for national reunion, security and peace in Mali. The mission also met with a variety of EU groups, whom are specialized in the region and with the UN mission in Mali (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali MINUSMA). The joint operations in terrain react on the increasing need to solve the complex crisis. It started to be obvious that any acting party could not sort out the security questions by itself. That´s why the mission paved the way for AU-PSC and EU-PSC to learn from each other's institutional approach, create a shared understanding of the challenges facing Mali, and find a way in helping Mali overcome these challenges.

The joint mission in terrain between AU and EU is the first of its kind. However, in terms of future peace missions in Africa the mission in Mali creates a strong precedent for future multi parties cooperating to solve conflicts and peace building. It can also influence the future missions where EU-PSC could possibly work closely with AU-PSC and how the relationship between the AU and the UN Security Council will develop. Last but not least this mission will deepen the institutionalization allowing that the joint terrain mission will be the successful tool for solving crisis and harmonizing the politics with partnership organizations.

The current incidents have shown that especially the peace treaty and arranged truce are in serious danger. Tuareg rebels were for a long time fighting for their own independent state in northern Mali and the fresh conflicts forced the General Secretary of OSN Ban-Ki-Moon to issue a warning over the situation, which looks like it's going to collapse again. President Ibrahim Boubacar hoped that the treaty could be signed after months of intensive dialogue. However, the CMA and the coalition of Tuaregs fractions and other separatist groups didn't sign the treaty because the treaty didn't fulfill their claim for geographical, political and law.

The problems with signing a treaty is that there are groups on both sides between rebels and government which won't take a step back. Most of the rebels won't be satisfied with something less than an independent state and there is still an existence of very strong opposition in Bamako. During the never-ending government and rebel fighting the security situation in Mali is getting rapidly worse. The Security Council of OSN appealed three main separatist groups to sign the treaties until 15th of May or they´ll face the sanctions and consequences. The speaker of the CMA said that the rebels were ready to sign the treaty which was prepared in Algeria in February but there has to be a space for some future dialogues and changes (Höije 2015). However, the fact is that Mali's main separatist Tuareg groups boycotted the signing of the

treaty. Three groups in the coalition, including the Tuareg-dominated National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, did not sign the treaty either. (Reuters 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

The last couple of years were crucial for Mali as it was occupied, declared independence, there were riots and attempts to overthrow the government, there was occupation of the north by Islamic groups, there was a French intervention, hostage taking, guerilla campaigns and failure of a peace trety. The failure over creating peace in Mali can be mostly blamed on the inability of elites from the South and North of the country to find a common dialogue. Negotiations are not very popular in the south and are considered as very suspicious in the north. The situation in Mali is becoming even more critical because of problems with smugglers and traffickers, which are trying to do everything to stop the peace treaties. However, signing the peace treaty by some of the Tuareg groups brings a little hope to the country. One of the plans of the treaty was to create a more decentralized state. Which should be done by transferring 30% of the budget to local assemblies and authorities. This could also bring the government closer to the Malian people. However, International mediators hoped that the peace treaty could finally bring peace to northern Mali after so many chaotic years. But a number of attacks before signing the treaty just showed that lots of groups are still not interested in peace. Mali is still deeply divided with the Tuareg and Arab populations of the north accusing sub-Saharan ethnic groups in the more prosperous south. The only real solution for the conflict will be if all the important parts of it will join and work together on establishing peace. That means cooperation between the pro-government militias, the separatists in the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, and its various allies within the HCUA could be settled.

So what could be the possible solution for Mali? From the situation in the past it is obvious that only foreign intervention and the fight against terrorism won´t be enough to secure stability in the region. It woul be crucial for Mali´s future to focus also on the historical background of the country and creating a sucesfull political dialogue. It would also be crucial to solve the problems and issues caused by the infrastucture, social services, political representation and creating peace between the communities. One of the solutions for Mali could be the decentralization of the political power and reform of some already existing institutions. These institutions could include various communities from Mali that could also help to create better conditions for citizens from pheriperia. On the other side it could also show the problems with legitimacy of Barmako and it´s lack of interest in effective solutions for citizens from pheriperia of Mali. Another solution to the problem could be to let traditional leaders of Mali gain legal function like it is for example in Burkina Faso. Traditional leaders have a moral status amongst the citizens which could help to regulate the tensions between comunities. According to their part in the dictatorship regimes the haven´t been curretnly permitted to be part of the democratic institutions. The compromise could possibly be to also to give the right to vote in regional assemblies to the leaders in the north and the higher number of representatives from the north in governmental institutions. Another idea is to give to the Tuareg rebels some kind of autonomy secular state in the north. It should be a compromise which doesn't consist of the rebels independent dream country Azawad or state of strict Sharia law.

However, the problems surrounding the signing of the deal has only just proven and demonstrated that Mali has a long way to go in establishing and keeping peace and it shows as Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamrasaid said that the mission in Mali is accomplished but far from resolved.

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