

A CALL FOR STRATEGIC ACTION TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY, RELIGIOUS LIBERTY, AND PEACE IN THE SAHEL/SAHARAN REGION OF AFRICA

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As a cross-section of leaders committed to human rights, we express here our deep concern about the rapidly deteriorating human rights situation in several African countries overtaken by a globally expanding conflict of religious and ideological worldviews. Much better international and interreligious cooperation is needed to reverse trends that would make countries such as Mali, Nigeria, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, and Sudan/South Sudan into proxies in an exaggerated collision between an historically Christian West and the Muslim Arab world. As it stands, violence and terror are spilling over into these sub-Saharan African countries at great costs to their national stability, cultural heritages, and the safety and livelihoods of their citizens. The tragic violence and unrest in Libya and Egypt in the past weeks point once again to the broader global religious and political tensions enveloping African nations north of the equator and to an ever widening arc of destruction. We seek to honor new efforts within these Sahel/Saharan countries to strengthen societies through democratic and nonviolent means and with greater awareness of religious dynamics that need to be addressed constructively. Pursuant to this, we are appealing for international governmental action to reinforce efforts by governmental and civil society groups within the region to strengthen democracy, religious liberty, and peace in the region.

Although conflicts along the southern border of Africa's Sahara may trace to multiple factors, including increasingly politicized religious activities and identities (locally, nationally, and trans-nationally), and competing democratic and non-democratic or moderate and extremist inclinations at each of these geopolitical levels, another clear factor has been the spillover effects from the struggle between terrorism and the war on terror. Recent events in Nigeria, Kenya, Somalia, Uganda, and Mali make clear that conflicts emanating from elsewhere in the world may impose ever greater costs on African nations, as evidenced by:

- Interreligious and inter-ethnic hostilities in Nigeria, informed by home-grown and imported Islamic and Christian fundamentalisms and resulting in thousands of deaths since 2001, with much of the violence initiated by an al-Qaeda related group called Boko Haram that is also gaining strength in West African capital cities such as Bamako, Ouagadougou, Abidjan, and Dakar;
- The emergence in Somalia of an al-Qaeda affiliate named al-Shabaab whose members (recruited from Somalia, nearby African nations, and Persian Gulf nations) have taken over large sections of southern Somalia while terrorizing Somalis across the country;
- Terrorist acts by al-Shabaab across Kenya, including kidnappings, dozens of killings, and a July 2012 attack on two churches that killed 15 persons and wounded 50 others, as well as the July 2010 massacre of more than sixty persons in Kampala, Uganda when al-Shabaab suicide bombers detonated bombs in the midst of large outdoor crowds of World Cup soccer fans;
- Systematic atrocities perpetrated by Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army, a guerilla movement rooted in historic grievances against the Ugandan government and in a mix of Christian, Islamic, and mystical justifications of twenty years of brutal terror against Ugandans and (via its recent cross-border extensions) against persons in South Sudan;
- The occupation of much of northern Mali by a combination of Tuareg rebels, former mercenaries aligned with Gaddafi's rule in Libya, and religious extremists with al-Qaeda connections, coalescing since the 2011 fall of Gaddafi in a reign of terror resulting in a massive exodus of northern Malians into southern Mali or neighboring countries, the desecration of hundreds of religious sites and repositories of cultural heritage in Timbuktu and Gao, the appropriation of Christians' belongings and institutional resources, and the attempted eradication of Christian presence from northern Mali; and

- The fact that much of this violence has been facilitated through weaponry supplied by weapons-producing nations from the North, sometimes as part of broader tactical strategies driven by northern nations.

Although there have been important governmental and inter-governmental responses to the security crises within these sub-Saharan African nations, we are aware that much more is needed from governments to ensure African peace, security, and sovereignty. Therefore, we appeal for concerted governmental action (including from the U.N.; the U.S. government; former European colonial powers; African inter-governmental organizations such as the Africa Union, ECOWAS, EAC, and IGAD; and from individual African governments) pursuant to the following objectives:

- (1) A redefining of public policy priorities in ways that embrace mediation of interreligious and inter-ethnic conflicts within the Sahel/Saharan region as a matter of vital strategic importance for international stability and for the stability of each African nation in question;
- (2) Observance of African Union and United Nations protocols that deny recognition to any regime coming to power through a coup d'état and that impose sanctions on such regimes pending restoration of democratic rule;
- (3) Immediate intervention in northern Mali to halt destruction, displacement, terror, and the fallout from regime change in Libya, preferably via peacekeeping activities in accordance with Chapter VI of the UN Charter;
- (4) Stronger insistence on the restoration of civil liberties, religious and social freedom, and the right to secular educational and legal frameworks within areas of northern Mali, northern Nigeria, and southern Somalia currently occupied by religious extremists; and
- (5) Greater emphasis on African democratic reform and its religious dimensions within western nations' approaches to Africa, and a more systematic focus within these approaches on governmental partnerships with democracy oriented African faith-based and community organizations.

We appeal to you to for a policy approach that embraces these urgencies and priorities.

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