



Congress of the United States House of Representatives

August 12, 2026

The Honorable Marco Rubio
Secretary of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Rubio,

As Co-Chair of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, I am deeply troubled by the crisis of security, governance, and human rights now facing the Central Sahel—Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. In a Commission hearing held on May 14, 2026, human rights experts testified to the precarity and violence of life in the region, which boasts the world's fastest growing theaters for armed Islamists allied to Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. I urge you to ensure that United States engagement in the region contributes to a resolution of the ongoing crisis and the defense of the fundamental rights of the region's inhabitants.

Since 2020, military juntas have seized power in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Despite initial promises of transition to civilian rule, the military governments have since refused to hold elections and become increasingly authoritarian in nature. In all three countries, all political parties and associations have been suspended, freedom of the press has been curtailed, and human rights defenders, political opponents, and dissidents have been intimidated, detained, and disappeared.

The juntas have used persistent insecurity to justify their claims to power. They have enjoyed varying measures of popular support, motivated in part by grievances about the failures of previous civilian governments to protect civilians from Islamist armed groups and address bad governance. Armed groups including the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP) and the Al-Qaeda allied Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) commit forced recruitment, kidnappings, and mass killings. JNIM has besieged the Malian capital of Bamako and other localities across the region. In many cases, these actions have risen to the level of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Security forces in the Central Sahel have adopted an aggressive counterterrorism approach and themselves been implicated in widespread violations of international humanitarian law. In 2026 alone, conflicts have killed over 2,600 people across the Central Sahel and displaced nearly three million more, with state forces now reportedly responsible for the majority of civilian deaths.¹

The region's largest single atrocity by any group—the 2022 massacre of 500 men—was perpetrated by Malian and Russian-linked Wagner Group soldiers.² In Burkina Faso, state security forces and allied local militias have committed extrajudicial killings and torture.³ The targeting of Fulani communities by pro-government actors⁴ has resulted in war crimes and crimes against humanity. Hundreds of civilians have also been targeted or killed by pro-government militias. And in Niger, an indiscriminate military airstrike on a village market killed at least 17 civilians, including children.⁵

¹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "[Burkina Faso, Mali and Western Niger - Humanitarian Overview](#)," May 6, 2026.

² Amnesty International, "[Mali: The perpetrators of the Moura massacre must be prosecuted and tried by a competent court](#)," May 17, 2023.

³ Human Rights Watch, "[None Can Run Away': War Crimes and Crimes Against Humanity In Burkina Faso by All Sides](#)," April 2, 2026.

⁴ Jon Temin, "[Between Armed Groups and Military Governments: Escalating Violence Against Civilians in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger](#)," December 2025.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, "[Niger: Military Drone Strike Kills 17 Civilians](#)," February 9, 2026.

Human rights violations and war crimes by government forces and their allies are significant drivers of recruitment into armed groups.⁶ For this reason, meaningful improvement in the regional security situation cannot be achieved unless human rights and civilian protection are treated as the non-negotiable foundation of engagement with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger.

I urge the Department of State to take the following steps to that end:

- Ensure that any provision of foreign assistance occurs in strict compliance with human rights conditions, including the Leahy Laws⁷ and coup-related appropriations restrictions,⁸ in U.S. law;
- Designate human rights violators for targeted sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act⁹;
- Provide public explanation of the lifting of sanctions on individuals who could be implicated in serious human rights abuses, such as the February 2026 delisting¹⁰ of three Malian officials linked to Russia's abusive Wagner Group;
- Consistent with the Elie Wiesel Act,¹¹ assess the risk of future atrocities in the Central Sahel and report to Congress on regional atrocity prevention;
- Demand the immediate release of arbitrarily detained political figures, journalists, and civil society figures, beginning with former Nigerien president, Mohamed Bazoum, and his wife, Hadiza Bazoum; Nigerien human rights defender Moussa Tiangari, Burkinabé journalist Atiana Serge Oulon, and Malian journalist Chahana Takiou;
- Support inclusive, local peace processes by recognizing that local governments may need to negotiate with armed groups and actively advocating for the inclusion of civil society and affected communities in peace talks to safeguard civilian interests; and
- Increase humanitarian and development aid for essential services, including education, psychosocial support, and formal justice systems, to minimize the grievances that extremist groups exploit.

Absent a comprehensive strategy to discourage repressive behavior, address human rights violations and war crimes by all parties, and support affected communities, United States engagement with Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger risks undermining the long-term security of the region. I stand ready to support the development of such a strategy.

Sincerely,



James P. McGovern
Co-Chair, Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

⁶ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "[The Widening Scope of Africa's Militant Islamist Threat](#)," April 6, 2026.

⁷ 22 U.S.C. § 2378d and 10 U.S.C. § 362

⁸ P.L. 118-47, Division F

⁹ 22 U.S.C. §§10101 et seq.

¹⁰ Office of Foreign Assets Control, U.S. Department of the Treasury, "[Recent Action: Russia-related Designations Removals; Lebanon Designation Removal](#)," February 27, 2026.

¹¹ P.L. 115-441