

# Human rights situation in the Sahel region

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Charles TANNOCK (ECR, UK) on the situation of human rights in the Sahel region.

Members recalled that the Sahel is one of the poorest regions of the world, which confronts grave problems regarding human rights, the rule of law, security and armed conflict, as well as economic and social development. The countries identified by the EU Sahel Strategy are Mauritania, Mali, Niger and relevant parts of Burkina Faso and Chad.

The report emphasised the important role played by the **EU, as the world's largest aid donor**, in addressing the development challenges faced by the Sahel region and stressed the importance of engaging other international actors in efforts such as eradicating poverty and hunger, promoting gender equality and reducing child mortality rates.

**Human rights in armed conflict situations:** Members attached particular urgency to the human rights situation in Mali and urged the EU and the Sahel countries to implement fully the following UN Security Council resolutions. They deplored the grave violations and brutal acts of violence perpetrated against children in Mali. They called on all the Sahel countries to embark on a policy of prevention and protection aimed at ensuring that children will not be recruited by force by armed groups.

Welcoming the French military operation 'Serval' and the role played by the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), Members called for strengthened aid in this country. They also stressed that efforts to **tackle impunity**, including in connection with gender-based violence in conflicts, which is an affront to women's dignity, are key to restoring stability and building lasting peace.

The report called on the EU, the Sahel countries, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the African Union and ECOWAS to coordinate their refugee policies in order to provide assistance to refugees, guarantee human security for the most vulnerable groups and establish self-sufficiency programmes.

**Accountability and reform of governmental, judicial and security institutions:** Members considered that the current human rights challenges in the Sahel cannot be disaggregated from a **general crisis of governance**, encompassing widespread corruption in public office, weak provision of basic services, poor implementation of social and economic rights, and particularly in the vast and often sparsely populated Saharan regions, profound challenges in upholding the rule of law and maintaining effective border controls.

They expressed particular alarm at the 'trafficking highways', which, helped by the porousness of the borders, stretch across Africa from west to east, and south to north from the West African coast, facilitating the transport of firearms, narcotics, cigarettes, oil, counterfeit medicine and people. Members called for a **comprehensive anti-trafficking strategy**, including the collection and analysis of data, the prosecution and punishment of traffickers, and measures for the rehabilitation and social integration of all those, mostly women and girls, who are victims of trafficking.

The report condemned the increased incidences of kidnapping and hostage-taking in the region and warned against a **perceived spread of extremism in the Arab Spring countries**. They invited the VP /HR to provide leadership in the process of cooperation with these countries' governments, institutions and civil society organisations in such a way as to support truly democratic transition processes.

Members considered it crucial to encourage the reform of institutions responsible for the judiciary, security and basic services in the Sahel countries, in order to help restore the rule of law and create better conditions for democratic transition, human rights, sustainable development and institutional legitimacy. They encouraged Sahel governments to continue the process of **decentralisation**, to transfer more power and resources to local authorities and to boost their capacity, legitimacy and accountability. Moreover, they pointed to the imperative in Mali, in particular, of ensuring adequate human and financial resourcing of the Ministry of Justice, as well as the professional training of its staff. They also called on the Sahel countries to cooperate with the International Criminal Court (ICC), cease all arbitrary arrests and improve living conditions for prisoners.

**Civic freedoms and democratic governance:** Members considered it essential to create conditions conducive to the holding of free, fair and democratic elections, in keeping with international standards. They welcomed the use of an EU election observation mission (EOM) in the Malian elections but recalled the need for the EEAS to ensure adequate follow-up to the EOM recommendations.

Members deeply regret restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly and association in the Sahel. They expressed particular concern at reports in Chad of the harassment, intimidation and arrest of journalists, political opponents, etc.

**Development, humanitarian aid and human rights:** Members reiterated that human security and development in the Sahel countries are inextricably linked, as stated in the EU's 2011 Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel. They stressed that a stable security situation, economic and political stability, and stability as regards respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms are necessary in this region.

They noted with due seriousness the extreme and pervasive poverty across the Sahel, particularly in Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso, but also in Mauritania. They acknowledged the **detrimental impact of poverty on the prospects of realising human rights** and the interdependence of development, democracy, human rights, good governance and security in the Sahel. They also reiterated that the **allocation of European development aid funding can be effective only if the Union is in a position to carry out proper scrutiny** of the way in which that funding is used, in order to satisfy itself that it is not being diverted from its intended purpose.

Members also called on the EU to support all measures being taken by Sahel countries, NGOs, and civil society to improve access to care, especially for the most vulnerable populations.

Members called on the governments of the Sahel countries to **address the root causes of the crisis** on the basis of a sustainable economic development strategy that takes account of their citizens' political, economic and social concerns, such as access to food, education, health care, employment and housing, wealth redistribution and decent living conditions. Members stressed the urgent need to grant EU humanitarian aid to help achieve the Millennium Goals. In order to alleviate the food crisis, the Commission is called upon to make optimum use of the funds earmarked for combating malnutrition (EUR 123.5 million in 2012) in order to meet the needs of the people concerned and support local capacitybuilding.

Measures have also been called to improve access to drinking water and strengthen the principle of universal access to education and improve basic infrastructures.

**Human rights situation of women, children and minorities:** Members condemned in the strongest terms the ongoing slavery, often by inheritance, in the Sahel region, and particular in Mauritania, where it

reportedly affects a sizeable minority of the population. They expressed deep concern about evidence of child labour in Malian gold mines, agriculture, forestry and other sectors of the economy as well as child abduction for ransom and sale in Chad.

Members called on the Sahel states to promote access to education for all children, both boys and girls, and for nomad peoples, with no discrimination on the grounds of race, caste or ethnicity.

As regards women, Members called for measures to combat the discrimination faced by women and girls in much of this region, the manifestations of which include forced marriage, child marriage, sexual exploitation, under-education and widespread female genital mutilation. They called in particular for the adoption of general anti-discrimination laws in all of the countries concerned.

The report emphasised the need for human rights in Western Sahara and in the **Tindouf camps** to be addressed, even without anticipating any final political settlement or expressing a view on such a settlement.

To conclude, Members made a series of **proposed EU policy recommendations to:**

- address the plight of refugees and IDPs throughout the region,
- tackle the scourge of slavery, human trafficking and other forms of trafficking and smuggling, which have proved so detrimental to human rights and security in the region,
- improve the situation of women, children and minorities,
- channell aid in an effective and efficient manner, offering added support to governments on the 'more for more' principle,
- end the culture of impunity, including by supporting measures already being proposed or put in place in Mali and elsewhere,
- protect civic freedoms and improving democratic governance through inclusive electoral processes and credible representation, and by supporting civil society,
- protect cultural diversity and heritage.

Members also recommended that the EU consider the possibility of **targeted sanctions**, through asset freezes, visa bans or other instruments, of the most serious violators of human rights, both in Mali and elsewhere in the region.