

Interview with Ambassador Maman Sambo Sidikou, Executive Secretary, G5 Sahel

13 February, 2021

Q: Eight years after the French intervention, four years after the creation of the G5 Sahel Joint Force, would you say the situation in the region is improving or deteriorating?

A: Since the (January 2020) Pau summit, there is much better organisation between ourselves and our partners, first and foremost Operation Barkhane. There is a methodical follow-up with measurable indicators, and our heads of state are personally engaged... It's obvious that the security situation has changed. But it's not just about security. The deeper causes lie elsewhere. There is terrorism but there is also everything that creates the conditions for terrorism. We are moving forward on two legs - the security and the development dimension.

Security and defence are the responsibility of each member state, and our countries have made enormous efforts, sometimes allocating more than one-third of their national budget, which is why we need a flexible, substantial partnership with the European Union. Operation Barkhane makes a major contribution, notably in tackling the asymmetric conflict with highly mobile, elusive rebels who know the terrain perfectly and can melt into the population. However, even French strategists do not expect a military victory to put an end to the situation. So I believe we need to initiate a political process to create the conditions for a lasting peace.

No one can tell when these processes will come to fruition, just as it's hard to predict the outcome of the debate in France on the future of Operation Barkhane. We know that President Macron has decided to maintain Barkhane for a while longer. The message we have all received is that it won't last forever. So we need to get better organised, we need more resources, which is why we've created the Coalition for the Sahel.

Q: What are your priorities now?

A: The G5 Sahel mandate originally included both development and security. Then the security situation overtook us so that security now dominates the conversation. But the two must go hand-in-hand. Our action is targeted at the border zones connecting our five member states, and my humble

role, from our headquarters in Nouakchott, is to make this mechanism of inter-state cooperation work. Decisions are taken by our two governing bodies - the council of ministers and the annual conference of heads of state, plus frequent extraordinary summits.

The top priority is to implement and convince the people of the Sahel that a process is under way that will improve their living conditions. Giving people hope, showing tangible progress on the ground, whether in basic social services or local protection. We're not good at explaining that. Some people seem to think that more weapons and armoured vehicles will fix the situation. The underlying problem is also one of mentalities.

Q: So you want less obsession with counter-terrorism and more attention to public services, social inclusion and local security forces?

A: The two go together. In areas where you don't have security, you can't have development. Firstly, the people are not there, they're going to leave, and you can't get development workers, even local ones, on the ground. What we're trying to do in the Coalition for the Sahel is valuable because it combines the fight against terrorism with reinforcing the capacity of national defence and security forces, the return of the state with basic social services and justice, and both short-term and long-term economic development. We need to communicate this agenda better, otherwise people think we're only talking about guns - and there's too much talk of that.

Q: What support do you expect now from the European Union in practical terms?

A: First of all, more resources, even if they think they are already providing a lot. We need to be able to walk on both legs. Secondly, much more flexibility in the procedures for allocating support. For example, there are areas such as Liptako-Gouma, the so-called tri-border region of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger where emerging needs were not envisaged at the start. You have millions of internally displaced persons. The soil is degrading ... the climate situation is becoming more complicated. Schools have closed and education has taken a severe hit. That poses a serious problem. All those young people will be even easier targets for recruitment by negative forces. So they (the EU) have to take account of these emerging phenomena and redirect support based on what we are seeing on the ground. We need to involve local actors more - pastoralists and farmers. When you're running big projects, that's not always self-evident. So we expect more support, more attention to the local context and local actors, including more involvement of businesses. All that has led to a certain frustration.

Q: You spoke recently of the transactional cost of coordinating all the different structures dealing with the Sahel. Does that problem still exist?

A: We see a growing scepticism among the peoples of the Sahel about our ability to respond to their needs. The Sahel states and their citizens have an instrument, the G5 Sahel, which is an emanation of their political will and is delivering results, not as robust as we would like, but things are advancing. They have identified their needs and are discussing them with entities whose promises and staff frankly don't always live up to expectations. That's why I mention the need for more flexibility. I could talk about some of the bodies we see being put in place... As your question implies, the multiplication of ad hoc initiatives always gives rise to some wariness.

We all know the future of the Sahel can't be decided in Brussels. Our Brussels friends agree with us on that. They are aware of the difficulties the EU faces. The world is changing in the Sahel as else-

where. Nothing will be the same. That means that what some of our friends in Paris still call “development aid” and humanitarian assistance have to change if they are not to disappear. What we are asking for is to be listened to better, to be trusted more by our partners. A pragmatic spirit would no doubt make the EU and other partners more effective and coherent.

That would enable us to allocate our limited resources for essential action, rather than having to rush around coordinating, which does indeed have a high transactional cost for unimpressive results. If you go to villages (in the tri-border conflict zone) and ask people what has been done for them, they say “we haven’t seen anything concrete on the ground”.

On the security front ... I’ve seen for myself in the command centre of the Joint Force for the central zone that things are much better coordinated now between our partners in Barkhane and the Joint Force. That’s why we have achieved results and things are a bit calmer on the ground. What remains to be done now is what we and our friends call the “civilian surge” so that our people feel we are really taking action in justice, in the fight against corruption, on dialogue. We have to start from citizens’ needs rather than generous aspirations that clash with reality.

Too often our partners and we announce theoretical priorities but forget the essentials, which are the economy and creating job opportunities and value... In the tri-border area the West African Economic and Monetary Union and the G5 Sahel are funding a coalition of local mayors and people feel that they are involved. While the hard struggle (against jihadists) must continue, much more can be solved with a local security approach where police and courts respond to citizens’ expectations. We can’t leave soldiers, who are waging an asymmetric war, to do everything. They have to be accompanied by a stronger local administration.

I had hoped our partners would help us to achieve this result rather than asking us to take part in initiatives that may be distractions, given the scale of the challenges we face. Having said that, the EU is our number one partner of choice. They support us every day and we call on them to be more flexible, because they are also a big bureaucracy.

Q: There is talk in Brussels of the need for a mechanism to hold Sahel governments to the commitments they made to their own people, to implement the Algiers agreement, pursue genuine decentralisation, stop the siphoning off of defence funds, end impunity for atrocities and human rights violations. Are the Europeans right to demand mutual accountability in the way the funds are spent?

A: All these questions are on the table in the dialogue we are having with our European partners and the Coalition for the Sahel. We have just had a summit in N’Djamena (15-16 February), where all these things were put on paper in a very clear communique. On decentralisation, on governments meeting their commitments, it’s clear that the creation of an organisation like the G5 Sahel is a response to these problems. Five of the poorest states on the planet (though blessed with raw resources) have come together and are mutualising their efforts to do the necessary. People have to see results on the ground. We have to share best practice on decentralisation, on security sector reform, which is obviously necessary. I worked previously for the UN in Congo, for the African Union in Somalia. This takes a long time. It doesn’t come overnight. But we have to put mechanisms in place and enforce accountability. Our partners are entitled to say “let’s follow this up together”. We have a set of precise indicators. We’ll finalise that at our summit in June.

As far as respect for international humanitarian law is concerned, I was in Bamako with the head of MINUSMA, the commanders of the Joint Force and of the Malian security forces to establish a follow-up mechanism for incidents involving civilians. We created such a mechanism in Somalia to watch what our forces were doing and go as far as compensation and sanctions. The asymmetric nature of the fight against terrorism unfortunately creates grey zones and darker areas. There have to be investigations. The UN is carrying out such investigations. The Joint Force has been properly trained (on international human rights law) and now there's this follow-up mechanism for incidents involving civilians. There is a perception in the population that everything is swept under the rug, that no one is held to account or made to pay compensation, that there's no justice. This perception is even more damaging and can drive people into the arms of negative forces.

Q: Shouldn't self-defence militias such as the Koglweogo and the Dozos be shut down or brought under control?

A: Personally, I don't believe in militias. I believe in national armies having the monopoly of force. As soon as you have militias, there are risks of things getting out of control in the Sahel, as elsewhere. People are trying to find solutions to local (security) problems and governments have to live with those local solutions and try to control the situation so things don't get out of hand, leading to endless inter-community clashes. I talked about this with the Minister of National Reconciliation in Burkina Faso who said there would have to be a national understanding. That's for sure, but what is urgently needed is local reconciliation because that's where the social fabric is being torn apart fastest. We used to have functioning mechanisms to settle those sorts of disputes through moral authorities, elders and families who had learned to live together for decades, for centuries. All that has been upended. It needs to be strengthened again.

For example, I'm enthusiastic about the Emir of Liptako's call for a COVID humanitarian truce, in which he said "it is of the utmost importance that residents of Liptako act together in order to protect each and every one, whatever their status may be - resident, displaced person, refugee or nomad."

Q: Is a negotiated settlement to the conflicts possible? What about dialogue with radical armed rebel groups? Where are the red lines?

A: I was in Afghanistan with the UN way back in 2001 helping to get young girls into school. It was a different conflict, but you see what's happening today. After everything that has occurred in the meantime, they are going back to negotiations (with the Taliban) because the Americans need to get out. That's clear. So they have to find an internal solution. It was the same in Somalia. We knew that in the same family, some were with Al Shabab and others on the government side.

The fundamental problem in the Sahel is how to keep our children - our young brothers - out of the clutches of the terrorists. If you ask me - and I'm not speaking for the states here - I'm willing to go there (into negotiations). But I'm just a civil servant, I don't make the political decisions. It's essential first to identify whom we are dealing with, to see what's happening on the ground. For example, aren't the people who are taking up arms in central Mali, other than organised criminals, doing so because they need protection? A young Peul (Fulani) who wants to graze his livestock nearby may need protection, but there is no local security, so he puts himself under the protection of those (jihadist) forces, who tell him it's OK to graze his cows. Does that mean he's embraced an ideology and wants to destroy the country? I don't think so. So we need to do everything to bring those people back. If you have hard-core ideologues who come from outside and form part of a terrorist leadership, it seems to me pretty difficult to negotiate with them. But then, when you look at what is happening in

Afghanistan today, they (the Taliban) are told: “OK, let’s talk provided you cast side Al Qaeda.” That was what I was saying in 2001. So I think a formula will have to be found. There are people who are trying to do that. I don’t know the details, but we must give that approach a chance to succeed.

But then again, whom should we talk to? If it’s someone who wants to impose an ideology, then clearly no. If it’s someone who says we don’t want a republic here, then obviously not. But look, even to find that out, you have to talk to people. Who should do that? I’m not well placed myself because it’s not in my mandate.

Q: There’s a minister trying to do that in Burkina Faso and there are rumours of contacts in Mali too. We’re told that everyone is talking to everyone. Yet at the same time, President Macron at the N’Djamena summit designated some named individuals as enemies to be decapitated. Isn’t there a contradiction there?

A: It’s up to each country to decide for itself, and I imagine they will consult and see how they can help each other find the best formula. The local situation will be decisive, in my view. Because people are dying every day. When people can’t go about their business, then yes of course you have to fight the enemy with weapons, but you also have to give dialogue a chance, because not everyone is that foe. Some are simply prisoners of a system, a situation in which people are lost. When they are lost, we try to set them back on the right path.

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