The Situation in Mali

**Topic Background**

**Country Background**

Mali is a landlocked country located in Northwest Africa. Its economy is largely based off of agriculture and mineral mining, and it is one of the poorest countries in the world. The dry geography and long distance from water keeps Mali dependent on foreign aid, and currently is exacerbating food shortage issues and famine. Since its independence, the country was ruled by a ruthless dictatorship until 1991, when a successful coup brought forth a period of democratic peace. However, by 2011, ethnic tensions and violent uprisings by rebel groups ended political stability in the region\(^1\). As of 2018, Mali’s human rights violations have risen substantially as Islamist terrorist groups have started to attack both civilians and raid supplies. As of now, the instability rocks mostly the northern and central parts of the country, though all other areas remain weak as well. There is no solid military or police force, and the federal government is still unable to reign in centralized control of its country\(^2\).

![Map of Mali](https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ml.html)

**Ethnic Violence**

Mali is diverse with ethnic groups, and no one group takes monopoly of any region. 34% of the population are Bambara, around 14% are Fulani, and about 8% are Dogon, among others. Most Malians identify as practicing Muslims, with a small Christian minority\(^3\). Though many people

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wish to live in peace throughout the country, in recent years, tensions have built between the Fulani and Dogon groups. Both rebel and terrorist organizations contribute to the violence within Mali’s borders. Currently, as al-Qaeda affiliates calling themselves the Islamic State of Greater Sahara chip away at the northern borders of Mali through brutal killings, tensions between Fulani and Dogon ethnic groups are coming to a head in central Mali. The fighting is mostly retaliatory and accusatory; both sides claim only to be acting out of self-defense\(^5\).

The presence of the religious extremist groups in the north brings forth extra complications. The Fulani ethnic group have been accused of working with the terrorist organizations to attack the Dogon, while the Dogon have been accused of working with the Malian government to kill Fulani civilians. Neither claim has evidence to support it, but these rumors have almost permanently divided the two. Naturally, the civil skirmishes have led to mass displacements of people. More than 60,000 refugees\(^6\) are fleeing to nearby countries such as Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Niger, all of which are under increased duress from the influx of people\(^7\) in need of shelter and homes.

**Past Actions**

In 2013, the United Nations Security Council unanimously voted to create the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in order to provide support for its transitional government and for infrastructural reform. As of 2019, there are 161 UN volunteers and over 13,000 military troops on the ground trying to keep peace in the region\(^9\). While these personnel help ease immediate tensions and assist with humanitarian efforts,


\(^6\) Ibid.


they have not been very successful at easing the ethnic tensions in West Mali. Peacekeeping missions continue to face attack from rebel forces and death tolls continue to rise.

Different sides of the conflict have attempted ceasefires and peace treaties in order to quell the violence in the region. In 2015, the Malian government negotiated the Malian Peace Accord with the Platform and the CMA, which were two large armed rebel groups creating skirmishes across Mali\textsuperscript{10}. Both groups had previously been saying they had rightful claim to government leadership, and the peace treaty aimed to bring increased representation for marginalized groups and to lower corruption within the Malian government\textsuperscript{11}.

**Possible Solutions**

Clearly, sending shipments of humanitarian aid and putting more peacekeepers on the ground are like putting Band-aids on a knife wound. Much more needs to be done to help the country recover and get back on its feet. A successful combination of short-term and long-term solutions will likely bring lasting peace to Mali, but the United Nations must work hard to find a good balance of the two.

Most immediately, the world must come together to solve the humanitarian crisis facing the Malian people. Civil war has created both a famine and refugee crisis in the northwest region. Providing aid to neighboring countries so they have the resources to safely harbor refugees is the first step toward protecting Western Africa from further chaos. Furthermore, Malians need a more sustainable food source that does not come from agricultural exports, so that they can stimulate their own domestic economy and feed themselves. Two notable challenges are the rough, arid terrain of most of the North, as well as the guerilla attacks that rebels have repeatedly

\textsuperscript{10} https://www.sipri.org/node/385  
\textsuperscript{12} https://insight.wfp.org/one-mans-fight-against-malnutrition-in-northern-mali-5ffdcae451fc
made on farms and food stores. A peace treaty is not enough; there must also be enforced disarmament. One model to follow may be the Colombian government’s deal with FARC. Working with the United Nations, President Santos has been collecting weapons from FARC members for years in exchange for peace, reintroduction into society, and an end to the cartel violence. Though the peace deal was not perfect, it was much better enforced than the Malian 2015 peace deal and the actionable steps taken by both the UN and the government could apply for both the northern extremist groups and the ethnic militias.\(^\text{13}\)

Second, no peace can come to Mali if the government remains unstable. Although much progress has been made by the United Nations and other regional groups in lowering corruption, there is still a long way to go in making sure the Malian president and prime minister can hold down power and do right by their people. This is somewhat of a paradox - the Malian people need a strong central government in order to grow as a country, but the government needs the trust of the Malian people in order to grow as a bureaucracy. Mali needs long-term, sustainable funding that will bring them independence and autonomy rather than increase their dependence on foreign aid. In addition, building up Mali’s domestic infrastructure such as roads, hospitals, schools, stores, and police units will increase chances of long-term stability. As of now, most of Mali’s police backup are a part of peacekeeping missions or from neighboring countries. The more these entities begin supporting, training, and hiring Malians, the more empowered they will become.

Solutions must consider Islamist terrorist groups along the Northern border, which currently ensure instability in the region. Individual countries such as the United States have been fighting long, hard wars against Islamist extremist groups, yet in those situations it is impossible to prevent civilian casualties. Additionally, launching strategic bombings or other military exercises against these extremists will only fire up their recruitment efforts and increase their aggression against Malian villagers. That action would also likely violate Mali’s national sovereignty. The most direct action that the Security Council could take would be to expand economic prospects of northern Malian residents and improve conditions in the region to bottleneck Islamic State recruitment. This way, fringe militias will have no incentives to entice new soldiers to join their reign of terror. The Security Council could also advise and provide resources for the Malian military and police force so they can make their own decisions on how to proceed against these terroristic acts, and bring the perpetrators to justice.

**Further Research**

To continue researching the background of and the instability in Mali, here are some helpful websites and articles that may stimulate your research:

- [https://www.globalpartnership.org/country/mali](https://www.globalpartnership.org/country/mali)

Guiding Questions

1. What is the Security Council’s role in battling terrorism worldwide, when its agenda is to promote peace through peaceful means?
2. How can the Security Council prevent ethnic violence while respecting cultural differences between the Permanent 5 and Malians?
3. What might different members of the Permanent 5 disagree on when discussing how to bring peace to Mali?