



FURTHERING WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN COUNTERTERRORISM IN THE SAHEL COUNTRIES

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Beyond a shadow of doubt, counterterrorism warrants the engagement and empowerment of women across all communities that seek to be immune to hate speech and extremism that terrorist groups fuel by various fraudulent fashions. To this end, the Sahel Group has adopted vital policies as an important counterterrorism strategy.

Colonel-Major Nana Sangaré

Amidst a wealth of highly experienced officers and experts in counterterrorism in the training halls of the Mohammed bin Zayed Military Education Complex, G5 Sahel Defense College in Nouakchott, Colonel-Major Nana Sangaré from the Republic of Mali was an accomplished speaker, showcased her experiences and expertise, par excellence, in counterterrorism across the Sahel countries. Colonel-Major Sangaré conducts daily exercises with her fellow officers from the Sahel countries at the Military College on analyzing and discussing information and the latest developments in the conflict with terrorist groups in various areas across the region.

Colonel-Major Sangaré is the first female officer in the Defense College in the Sahel region; she has achieved a highly esteemed rank and status motivated her great competence and perseverance. Of great note, the defense system of the Sahel countries gives no room to only singlehanded patriarchal positions without women; qualifications and efficient management abilities are key factors contributory to the leadership positions in the Sahel marked with internecine wars on terrorism for years. As such, gender-oriented politics has become an integral part of the long-term strategy of the Sahel countries in their counterterrorism efforts. Aminata Ndiaye, Gender Adviser to the Sahel Command, believes that the presence of women of army and security forces in the Army Combat Uniform (ACU) in areas targeted by terrorism, is a strong motivation for the local population to promote trust and cooperate with the armed forces and security.

Sangaré has engaged in counterterrorism war since early stages; in close cooperation with her national armed forces, Sangaré has successfully weathered the most difficult stages when terrorist groups took control of the north of the country. She has sustained deep experiences in counterterrorism in defense colleges in Mali, France, China and Morocco, before Sangaré was attracted to the Defense College of the Sahel countries in Nouakchott, Mauritanian. Sangaré specializes in informatics and new technologies, which are considered today a decisive battleground against terrorism.

The G5 Defense Institute Project was first established in Mauritania in 2018; it has drawn wider support of France and other international partners since its inception. The Institute has trained the first cohort of 36 high-ranking officers in 2019. Today, they enjoy a common high military culture that enhances cohesion between the various coastal armed forces and the joint operation of military battalions.

In a video streamed live by the Sahel Group website to celebrate the counterterrorism contributions of women across the region in March 2020, Major-General Ibrahim Val Weld Al-Shaibani, Director of the Defense College of the Group of Five Countries, stated that Sangaré is more like a maestro of an orchestra among her male and female colleagues who joined the College to further share experiences; Sangaré showcases the strength of women and their excellent presence in the military domain.

Sangaré has become a quintessential paragon of the Sahel countries in creating a new generation of military leaders in counterterrorism, not only to protect women from being victimized by the bloody violations of terrorist groups, but also to show that communities in the Sahel countries stand united against such extremist terrorist groups. The empowerment of women and engagement in the counterterrorism frontlines consider the ideology of violent extremist groups in Africa; such groups always seek by all means to attract female soldiers by deceptive messages that drum up for the empowerment of women and the improvement of their social and economic status, according to a research study developed by the United Nations Development Program in 2019.

Shattering Illusion of Victimized Women

In the context of a multifaceted crisis in the Sahel-Saharan region, the G5 Sahel work in concert to best fulfill the tasks they are entrusted with to contribute to improving the living conditions of the population. Education, inter alia, constitutes a notorious challenge that must be addressed, especially education of girls alongside the increased

participation of women in all aspects of social life due to their robust engagement in maintaining and consolidating peace and sustainable development.

Today, the Sahel countries are steadily making much headway on the path to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) included in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, Africa's Agenda 2063, and the African Common Position on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, agreed upon at the Summit of Heads of State of the African Union in Addis Ababa in 2014; they are agendas that prioritize the role of women as key partner in addressing the challenges that seem to be much targeted by terrorism across the communities of the Sahel countries.

In July 2015, the participants in the regional forum to enhance the position of women in the Sahel region, in N'Djamena, Chad, expressed their deep desire to develop women's social roles to protect women from being targeted by terrorist groups. This includes the fulfillment of greater responsibilities in civil society and the People's Assembly, which created a regional body at the Permanent Secretariat of the Sahel Group to follow up on women issues and ensure the implementation of relevant international conventions and covenants.

Major-General Mohamed Znagui Sid Ahmed Ely, Head of Defense and Security Sector at the Executive Secretariat of the Sahel Five Group, believes that the Group has made quantum leaps so far to empower women, such as appointing a female consultant in the Executive Secretariat, developing a policy on gender-oriented in the Group policies, introducing and heralding females into various positions, creating a platform for women in the Group, and the implementation of the women integration plan into the military and security corps. Enhancing the presence of women in the hierarchical positions of the defense and security forces of the Group of Five for the Sahel, including the joint force of the countries of the Group, is a deep trend and an urgent policy to conform human rights in the said countries to international humanitarian law, funded by the European Union (EU) at €30.000.000 and implemented by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). The trend of the Sahel countries to empower women is a serious response to the call of Rosemary Anne DiCarlo, Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs of the United Nations, March 11, 2020, to strengthen the role of women at the core of the counterterrorism response.

Setup of Military Leaders

It is noted that misogyny is at the core of the strategies of extremist groups. Therefore, women bear a great burden of violence; sexual slavery is the most notorious manifestation. Hence, empowering women and supporting their military presence on the front lines against terrorism was a powerful manner to express the strong cohesion of the African societies against extremism, and to dispel the stereotyped image of women that groups seek to propagandize.

The suggestion was made in a preliminary setup session hosted by the Defense College of the Group of Five for the Sahel in Nouakchott, attended by the heads of services in the military and security forces, and the joint force of the countries of the Group, March 15, 2020, to enhance the presence of women in the bodies affiliated with the Group of Five for the Sahel, including the military and security forces, and the joint force of the Group, as a duty promoted by international agreements and United Nations recommendations to integrate women, which would be a strategic and practical advantage to counter terrorism and cross-border crime in the Sahel. The UN Resident Coordinator in Mauritania, Anthony Ohemeng Boamah, expressed his satisfaction with the interest of the defense and security forces and the joint force of the Group of Five for the Sahel in the presence of women in the hierarchical structures of the Group. Boamah further explained that such presence is a key factor contributory to integrating women into public life to better counter terrorism and transnational organized crime, , in addition to being a duty provided for in international treaties and UN resolutions. He further stressed that the United Nations is keenly willing to further support Mauritania and the Group of Five for the Sahel as to achieve the goals of the Group: to establish peace and security and build a solid base for development in the environment of the Group and beyond.

The G5 Sahel Group, established February 16, 2014, based in Nouakchott, Mauritanian, represents a framework for regional and international governmental cooperation to counter terrorism, transnational organized crime, and human trafficking in the G5 Sahel Group (Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad).

The heads of the five countries officially announced the formation of the joint cross-border force in Bamako, Mali, July 2, 2017, to streamline their efforts in combating security threats in the G5 Sahel Group. The formation of the joint military force was approved by the UN Security Council in Resolution No. 2359, June 21, 2017, and was supported by France.

Turning the Tables on Terrorism

Since the outset of the new millennium, and as a result of the strong blows directed at terrorist organizations in Afghanistan and the Middle East, especially Syria and Iraq, and due to the collapse of the situation in Libya, several groups found that heading to Africa may be a favorable opportunity to regroup and catch a breath, being enervated by the material and moral losses caused by the military strikes and the growth of awareness about the threats of terrorist organizations.

The poor education along with the fragile military coordination which the African societies are riddled with has been the main motive for the ubiquity of terrorist organizations in Africa, especially over the last ten years, for the emergence of extremist organizations such as Boko Haram in Nigeria (founded in 2002), and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, which takes the desert between Mauritania, Algeria and Mali as the headquarters for own camps (established in 2007), the Ansar Al-Din in Mali (founded in 2011), ISIS (spread since 2015 in several African countries), and the Nusrat Al-Islam (founded in 2017), in addition to about fifty organizations of relatively different levels of strength and influence in various African countries. All such movements capitalize on illegal sources of funding, such as human trafficking, drugs, fraud, money laundering and ransom, according to the International Criminal Police (INTERPOL), and US State Department reports. Attacks take place almost daily in the G5 Sahel Group. In 2019, about 700 attacks took place, claiming the lives of more than two thousand victims, and hundreds of injuries, according to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. Perhaps the challenges of combating COVID-19 pandemic required great efforts in the G5 Sahel Group, but counterterrorism remains the number-one concern for the G5 Sahel Group. Against such a blood-curdling backdrop of chaos, reports reveal girls being kidnapped, women raped and murdered in cold blood, causing a shock to the coastal population, as women are the poorest element in the war of extremist groups. It is clear that restoring the historical leadership role of women with robust engagement in the war on terrorism will turn the tables on the policies of combating extremism that mushrooms in Africa and the G5 Sahel Group. Weapons alone are inefficient, as the leaders of the G5 Sahel Group spelled out in the final statement of the French Pau Summit, January 2020, which gave a new vision to counterterrorism. The empowerment of women is one of the most prominent features. That is why Colonel Sangaré and her colleagues in the Joint Force of the G5 Sahel Group feel that their mission goes beyond their military field

job to establish a new presence for women, contrary to the prevailing stereotype of women.