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“The Growing Crisis in Africa's Sahel Region”

*Excerpts of Remarks by Rep. Chris Smith
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights, and Int'l Orgs.
2172 Rayburn HOB
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Good afternoon. Today's hearing is intended to examine the challenges faced by the nations of Africa's Sahel region, especially the spread of both terrorism and drug trafficking in the entire area. These problems alone pose a danger to the security of both the Sahel and developed countries, not only because of air traffic to West Africa that transits northern Mali, but also because of the use of the region as a base of attacks by Islamic extremists on Western targets. Moreover, the preexisting humanitarian crisis is now worsened, as are human rights concerns. The underlying political instability is becoming equally serious.

We are holding this hearing as a joint session because the threat we face goes beyond the jurisdiction of one subcommittee. It involves not only Africa's Sahel region, but also countries in North Africa, specifically Algeria and Libya. It also involves terrorist groups originating from and based in nations outside the Sahel. It is a sign of how seriously the Foreign Affairs Committee considers this matter that our three subcommittees have come together today to consider this matter.

There are various definitions of the Sahel, but for the purpose of this hearing, we mean the nations of Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad.

In early 2012, the Government of Mali was overthrown in a military coup and subsequently lost control of the northern area of the country, which constitutes more than half of its land area. Mali had long been considered a stable example of African democracy, but as we learned in our Subcommittee's hearing in June 2012, the coup and resulting loss of so much territory revealed a hollowness and rot within the Mali democratic system. The influx of well-armed terrorist groups, broken promises to neglected ethnic groups, lack of adherence to democratic principles and rampant drug smuggling all made the Mali government vulnerable to

breakdown. We must ask now whether other countries in Africa's Sahel region are also more vulnerable than we think.

Mali provided a staging ground for al-Qaeda in the Islamic Mahgreb, or AQIM, which is daily becoming an ever-greater threat in the region and perhaps globally. AQIM is considered the best funded of all al-Qaeda affiliates and, through its ties to other terrorist groups, may be funding their activities as well.

In a July Subcommittee hearing last year, we learned that Boko Haram in Nigeria is not a unified organization, but rather various factions – some of which are focused on embarrassing the Nigerian government, but others that have a more global jihadist view. It is the latter that have been present in northern Mali and pose a threat to Western interests. Boko Haram attacks led Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan last week to declare a state of emergency in three northern states in his country. A radical Boko Haram splinter group, known as Ansaru, may have attacked Nigerian troops en route to the peacekeeping operation in Mali.

In Mali, three terrorist groups dominate the rebellion that split off the North: MUJWA, a splinter group of AQIM; Ansar al Deen, an Islamist Tuareg rebel group, and the MNLA, a more secular Tuareg group. These groups have different aims and sometimes clash with one another. Nevertheless, they collectively have posed and continue to pose a threat to the peace in Mali and the region. As a result of the rebel actions in northern Mali, there currently are more than 300,000 internally displaced persons in Mali, more than 74,000 refugees in Mauritania, 50,000 refugees in Niger and nearly 50,000 refugees in Burkina Faso. The displacement of nearly half a million Malians strains already-scarce resources in the Sahel, with aid recipients often in remote areas.

French forces were able to forestall a rebel advance into southern Mali earlier this year, and an African military contingent is in the process of being deployed to Mali even now. However, chasing rebels out of Mali's major northern towns will be easier than ending ongoing terrorist attacks or reconciling ethnic groups whose enmity has grown over the last year. We look to today's witnesses to suggest how a lasting peace might be created in Mali and the rest of the Sahel.