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## Mali update

My update of April 3<sup>rd</sup> suggested that the crisis in Mali was likely to test the diplomatic and operational resources of Ecowas (the grouping of W. African states), to the limit. Regrettably events since then have more than confirmed this down-beat prognosis.

1. Things got off to a promising start with the speedy conclusion of the Framework Agreement signed by the Ecowas mediator<sup>1</sup> and Capt. Amadou Sanogo, head of the military junta<sup>2</sup>, on April 6<sup>th</sup>.
2. On its face, the agreement appeared to set the stage for an early hand-over of power to a civilian government. It provided for the appointment of the Speaker of the National Assembly as Interim President (in accordance with Article 36 of the Constitution); and the adoption of a series of “transitional” measures including, *inter alia* :
  - the appointment of *an executive Prime Minister* and leader of government business with the mandate to oversee the transition to an elected government; to “manage the situation” in the North; and to organize national elections;
  - the appointment of a *government national unity* comprised of “consensus political figures”.
3. On closer inspection, however, the five-page document turned out to be replete with loose ends and ambiguities. *Crucially, the agreement gave the Interim President a mere 40 days to hold national elections*<sup>3</sup> – a physical impossibility in a country 60% of whose territory was (and remains) under insurgent control. Worse, the document made *no provision for this contingency*, creating a potential power vacuum that the junta would almost certainly seek to exploit.
4. Then on April 17<sup>th</sup><sup>4</sup>, as if to demonstrate that the purported hand-over to civilian authority had been largely cosmetic<sup>5</sup>, *soldiers loyal to Captain Sanogo rounded up a total of 22 senior politicians and military officers – without warrant, explanation or evidence of wrong-doing*<sup>6</sup>.
5. Clearly influenced by these extraordinary events, the April 26<sup>th</sup> Ecowas Summit on Mali adopted three key measures, deciding to:
  - extend the deadline for holding elections as well as the term of the interim civilian government from 40 days to 12 months; (*Article 11 of Joint communiqué*)
  - “demand that the CNRDE submit to civilian authority” and “return to barracks [to] concentrate on their core duties of defending the territory of Mali.” (*Article 14*)

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<sup>1</sup> i.e. Djibril Bassole, Foreign Minister of Burkina Faso.

<sup>2</sup> i.e. the Comité National de Redressement de la Démocratie et de la Restauration de l’État (CNRDE) or National Committee for the Restoration of Democracy and the Reinforcement of the State.

<sup>3</sup> This provision reproduces an identical stipulation in Article 36 of the Constitution.

<sup>4</sup> i.e. the very day that the Prime Minister was appointed with ostensibly “full executive powers”.

<sup>5</sup> 24 hours later, the Prime Minister was still in the dark, and reduced to telling journalists that he would be “seeking clarification as to the reasons for the arrests ...”.

<sup>6</sup> The detainees were released - without charge – two days later, following strong representations by the Ecowas mediator.

- instruct the Ecowas Commission “*to commence, with immediate effect, the deployment of the ECOWAS Standby Force in Mali ...*” – initially to reinforce constitutional order in the area of the country under the control of the authorities in Bamako. (*Article 21*)

6. The junta reacted immediately, rejecting specifically both the extension of the transition period and the dispatch of Ecowas troops – and in the process making clear their own desire to hang on to power.

Tellingly, Ecowas’ response the next day (i.e. April 28<sup>th</sup>) was to dispatch the Foreign Ministers of Burkina Faso and Cote d’Ivoire to Bamako, where they received a decidedly hostile reception from the junta and its supporters. Captain Sanogo was nevertheless invited to send a delegation to Ouagadougou for further discussions with Ecowas’ designated mediator on April 30<sup>th</sup>.

7. However the scheduled meeting was overtaken by events on the night of April 29<sup>th</sup> when a pitched battle erupted as members of the “Red Berets”<sup>7</sup>, attacked the state radio & TV station. The firefight raged intermittently for 60 hours in down-town Bamako before the “Green Berets” (loyal to the junta) subdued the insurgents.

Even though the real trigger for the hostilities remains to be elucidated<sup>8</sup> what is clear is that *even in the Malian capital the illusion of civilian control and constitutional normality has been shattered.*

8. But if the political landscape in the Malian capital remains volatile, this pales in comparison to the absolute chaos in the North - *the self-proclaimed territory of Azawad -which for the last month has been under the unchallenged control of a mosaic of competing Tuareg separatist and Islamist groups.*

To date there has been *absolutely no attempt by Bamako*<sup>9</sup> *to assert its authority over this vast region*, even though the ATT government’s failure to confront the insurgency meaningfully was the junta’s principal justification for the March 22<sup>nd</sup> coup d’état.

9. Meanwhile, *the collapse of the established order has reduced the region*<sup>10</sup> *to a state of virtual anarchy*<sup>11</sup>, with the various armed groups accused of “numerous war crimes, including rape, use of child soldiers, and pillaging of hospitals, schools, aid agencies, and government buildings”<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> i.e. the elite unit that had served as the personal guard under the deposed President Traoré.

<sup>8</sup> While supporters of the “Red Berets” claim that they were reacting to an attempt, a few days earlier, to arrest their commanding officer Col. Abidine Guindo, the junta claims that it was putting down a counter-coup aimed at restoring ATT to power.

<sup>9</sup> It is also worth pointing out that for all its pledges to help the government of Mali reassert its sovereignty over the occupied region, Ecowas has done no more than offer to mediate

<sup>10</sup> This vast expense along the Sahara’s southern border has long been plagued by banditry and trafficking of various kinds.

<sup>11</sup> One of the most dramatic incidents to date occurred on April 5<sup>th</sup> when the Algerian Consulate in Gao was overrun by armed men who abducted the chief of mission and six members of staff and then traded them to the MUJAO, who have demanded a ransom of €15 million and the release of several “comrades” in the custody of the Algerian authorities.

<sup>12</sup> See “*Mali: war Crimes by Northern Rebels*”, Human Rights Watch; April 30, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> In a report published three weeks ago, the UN estimated that a total of 268,000 inhabitants of northern Mali had been had been forced to abandon their homes since the launch of the Tuareg insurgency in January.

10. One immediate consequence of this state of lawlessness has been *the displacement of more than a quarter-million inhabitants* of the North – both internally and across Mali’s borders<sup>13</sup>. This has *the makings of a major humanitarian disaster*, given that the Tuareg insurgency is being waged against the backdrop of a food emergency resulting from the two-year old drought across the Sahelian region.

11. In short, Mali now appears to be in *a state of slow-motion collapse* - with far-reaching implications, given that the country shares borders with seven other states<sup>14</sup>.

- For its Sahelian neighbours<sup>15</sup>, in which domestic food supplies are already under pressure as a result of the ongoing drought, the burden of a major influx of refugees could prove destabilizing.
- *Algeria could easily be drawn into intervening militarily*, especially if MUJAO acts on its threat to execute the seven hostages seized from the Consulate in Gao.
- *Senegal could be a rare ‘beneficiary’ of the crisis*. To the extent that multinational companies, international organizations and NGOs feel compelled to relocate from Bamako, Dakar would be their most likely destination – as was the case during the long-running crisis in Côte d’Ivoire.

### ***Primer on principal armed groups occupying Northern Mali***

- ***Mouvement national pour la libération de l’Azawad (MNLA)*** – the Tuareg separatist movement established under the leadership of Mohamed Ag Najm<sup>14</sup> in Oct. 2011 that launched the Tuareg insurgency in January this year. Although emphatically secular in its orientation, the group promptly entered into a Faustian alliance with its Salafist rival and has quickly found itself playing second-fiddle.
- ***Ansar al Dine (AaD)*** – an Islamist movement established in 2011 by Iyad ag Ghaly<sup>15</sup>. Denouncing the MNLA’s separatist aspirations, the group is seeking to turn Mali into an Islamic republic with *sharia* as the law of the land. Notionally the MNLA’s junior partner, AaD has quickly emerged as the preeminent power in the North<sup>16</sup>.
- ***Al Qaida in the Islamist Maghreb (AQIM)*** – active in the Sahara since its creation in 2006<sup>17</sup>, the group has long been associated with a variety of criminal activities<sup>18</sup> in the Sahara, the proceeds from which are used to finance its jihadist operations. AQIM is a very strong ally of *Ansar al Dine* and has dispatched at least three of its top commanders<sup>19</sup> to assist that movement .
- ***Mouvement pour l’unicité et le jihad en Afrique occidentale (MUJAO)*** – a small Islamist organization founded in April 2012 and based in the desert region straddling the border between Mauritania and Mali<sup>20</sup>. MUJAO is an AQIM affiliate and thus a natural ally of AaD.
- ***Front national pour la libération de l’Azawad (FNLA)*** – a secular, ethnically Moorish militia established in Timbuktu in April 2012 with the specific mission of “defending” the city from the Islamist occupation forces of AAD and MUJAO. They were routed within days and, like the MNLA before them, driven from the city.

<sup>14</sup> i.e. Mauritania, Algeria, Niger, Burkina Faso, Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea and Senegal.

<sup>15</sup> Especially Niger and Burkina Faso.

<sup>16</sup> Ag Najm had then just returned from Libya where he had served as a lieutenant in Gaddafi’s army for more than 10 years.

## NOTES (contd)

- <sup>17</sup> He had led the unsuccessful Tuareg uprising in 1996 under the banner of the secular MNA (a predecessor of the MNLA), before converting to the Salafist brand of Islam
- <sup>18</sup> No where is this more apparent than in Timbuktu, from which the MNLA was forced to withdraw (to the airport 5 km outside the city and where Ansar al Dine announced the imposition of *sharia* at the end of April.
- <sup>19</sup> The movement is comprised of the rebranded remnants of the Algerian Islamist movement Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat (GSPC) which, after a nation-wide campaign of terror that lasted a decade, was finally routed by the Algerian security services and driven into the desert. It was in these desperate circumstances that the GSPC took an inspired gamble and announced that it was placing itself at the disposition of Bin Laden and his *mujahiddin* and rebranding themselves as AQIM.
- <sup>20</sup> Primarily kidnapping and levying taxes on gangs smuggling weapons, drugs and would-be immigrants across the Sahara.
- <sup>21</sup> i.e. Mokhtar Belmokhtar a.k.a “Laaouar”, Abou Zeid and Yahya Abou Al-Hammam.
- <sup>22</sup> Founded by the Mauritanian Hamada Ould Mohamed Kheirou, the group also claims members from Senegal, Burkina, Guinea, Benin and Nigeria.

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