

BLUE PEACE BULLETIN

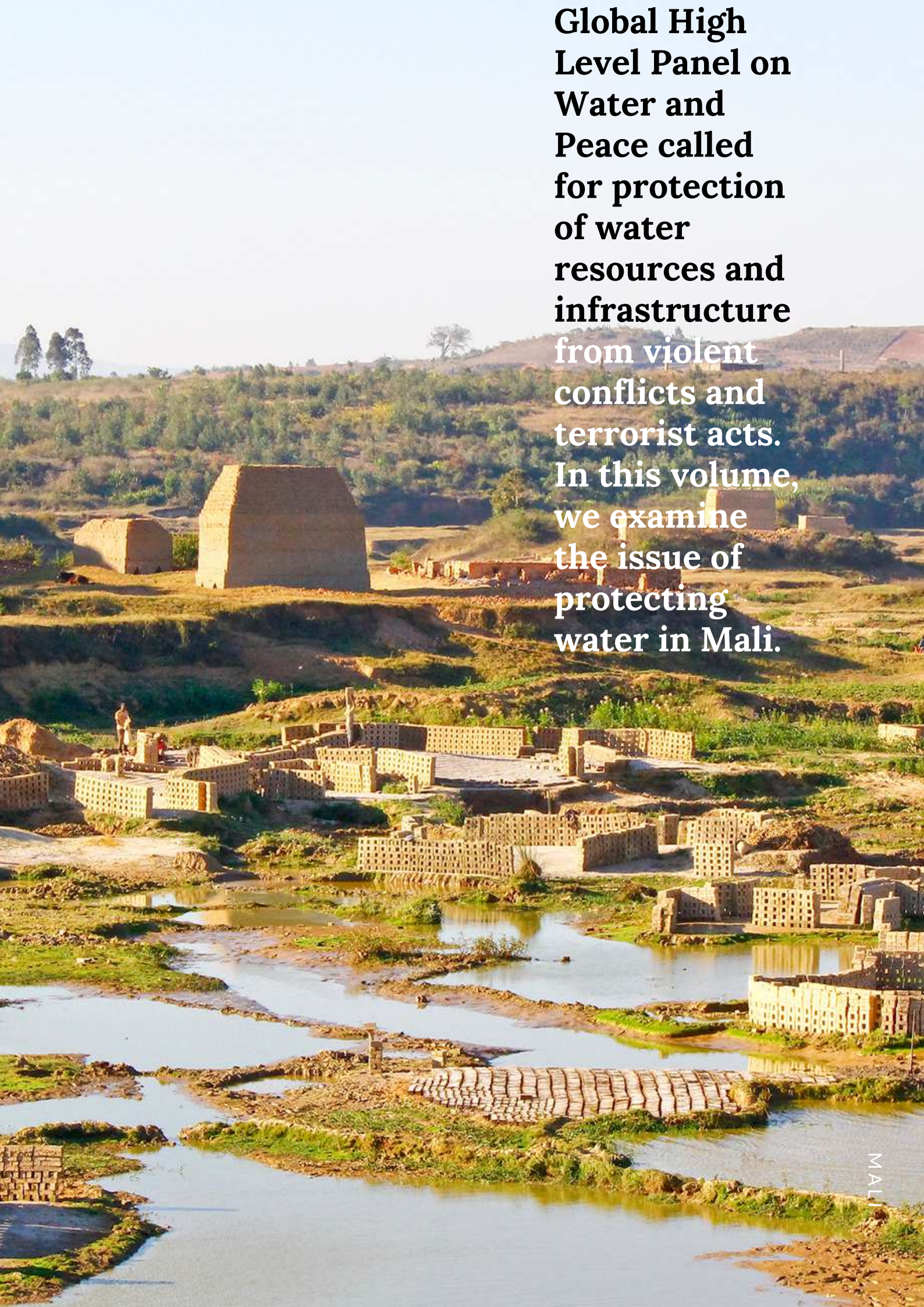
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WATER AND VIOLENCE: MALI



Strategic Foresight Group

Global High Level Panel on Water and Peace called for protection of water resources and infrastructure from violent conflicts and terrorist acts. In this volume, we examine the issue of protecting water in Mali.



MALI

INTRODUCTION

Mali is a landlocked country situated in the Sahel region of West Africa. It is home to a large number of ethnic groups that are scattered around different regions of the country. The flow of the Niger River divides Mali into two distinct regions – the arid northern region containing less than 10 per cent of the population and the fertile southern region where majority of its population resides.

In the past few years, the situation in Mali has steadily deteriorated due to a worsening conflict. The conflict, which started mainly around the northern areas of Mali, has spread towards the central and southern regions. The northern part of Mali has become the scene of a violent separatist movement and is also the stronghold of terror groups in West Africa. There are a number of drivers that have influenced the conflict in Mali. The diversity of ethnic groups in the country, the rapidly escalating threat of Islamist jihadi groups, a complex political situation, a separatist movement and the presence of foreign troops in Mali, especially the French military and a large United Nations (UN) peacekeeping force are some of the key issues.

In 2012, the ethnic and separatist political elements coalesced in the demand for a separate Tuareg homeland called Azawad (in Northern Mali), leading to political unrest, violence and ultimately a military coup. As of 2019, the separatist movement is further complicated by the presence of numerous Islamist terror groups.

Originally, three groups (Ansar Dine, Al Murabitoun and the Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)) were present over the period of 2012-2017, however, as of 2017, these three groups joined forces with the another Islamist group known as the Macina Liberation Front (MLF) to form Jama'a Nusratul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM). JNIM is considered a branch of the Al Qaeda. Reports from February 2019 state that JNIM has around 2,000 fighters in Mali.



In addition to the JNIM, the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), a group affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), also operates in Mali. ISGS is active mostly around Mali's border region with Burkina Faso and Niger; however, it has not been involved in many attacks in Mali.

JNIM's targets are primarily in Mali, although they have been known to carry out attacks in neighbouring countries, including Niger and Burkina Faso. These countries, which form a part of the G5 Sahel, have certain common issues such as ethnic clashes, porous borders and weak political institutions which have made the region highly susceptible to terrorism. In Mali, initially, the attacks by JNIM were concentrated near the northern border areas, but as the group became emboldened, its attacks have reached central Mali. There have also been few attacks in the southern region, with JNIM claiming responsibility for some and other being carried out by "unknown" jihadists.

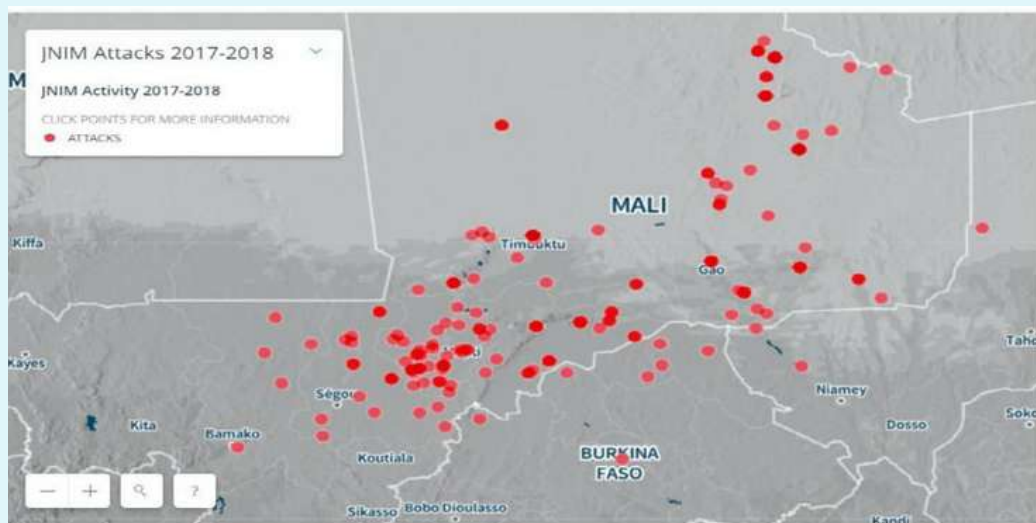
HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

The biggest impact of the conflict on the humanitarian situation in Mali has been the migration of people from the conflict zones. While some of the Malians fleeing the violence have gone to neighbouring countries, many have become internally displaced. As of February 2019, the number of internally displaced people in Mali has reached 123,574 with most people fleeing from the regions of Timbuktu, Mopti, Gao and Menaka.

It is also estimated that of the approximately 18.5 million people in Mali, around 4.1 million Malians are food insecure and about 4.5 million people don't have access to clean water.



Map of JNIM Activity, March 2017-July 2018



Source: Transnational Threats Project, CSIS

WATER

With the Niger and Senegal Rivers running through parts of the country, Mali is relatively water-rich. Mali's water infrastructure is yet to be used as a tool of violence during the on-going conflict. However, the conflict has had an impact on access to water leading to constant clashes between ethnic groups in Mali. In the past few years, the Fulani herders and Bambara and Dogon farmers (who are linked with the Donzo hunters group) have clashed over access to land and water. In January 2019, around 37 Fulani herders were killed in central Mali by armed men dressed as traditional Donzo hunters. Another deadly attack was carried out on the Fulani villagers by the Donzo hunters in March 2019 in the Mopti region in central Mali, which led to the death of nearly 160 people. Following this attack, the Mali government banned members of the Dan Na Ambassagou, a group associated with the Donzo hunters.

There have also been a few attacks in Mali by terror groups which have indirectly targeted the water supply. For instance, in January 2013, military offensive against the by Ansar Dine (one of the terror groups that formed JNIM) led to electricity, water and phone services being suspended in Timbuktu.

Mali has also actively developed its hydropower infrastructure, located mostly in the southern region of the country where JNIM does not presently have a strong foothold. Although, as of November 2018, Mali has begun to invite bids for the construction of the Taoussa Dam project in the Gao region. Gao, located towards the north, sits right in the middle of JNIM territory and the group has carried out several attacks in and around the region. Financing has been received for building of the dam, and there is a risk that even the development and construction activities could prove to be a target as long as JNIM remains active in the Gao region.

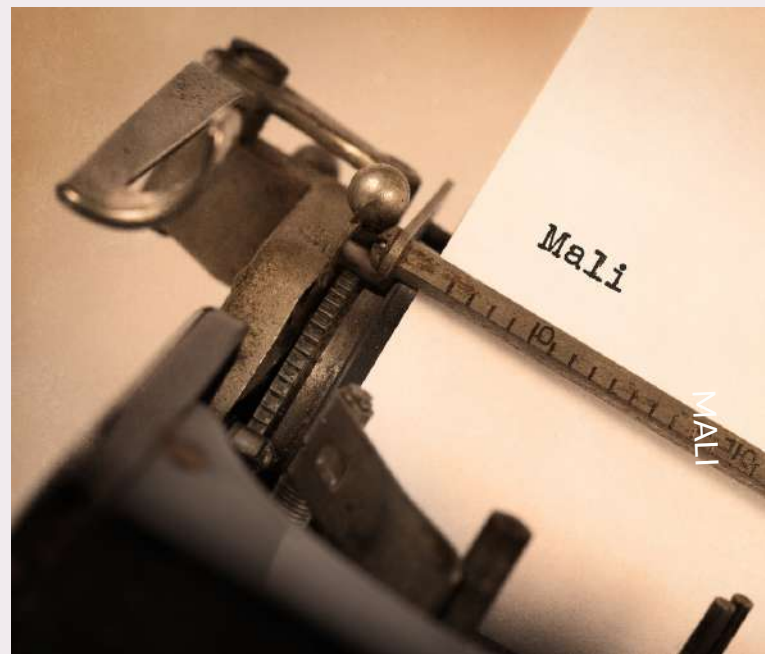
Different factors make it possible for water infrastructure to become potential targets for armed non-state actors in Mali in the next decade. Al-Andalus, the media agency of AQIM (a part of JNIM), has repeatedly stated throughout 2017-2018 that the group would target Western companies, particularly French companies, and other such installations, which could extend to the country's hydropower installations as well. Additionally, ISIS has also established a presence in Mali. Though ISIS is yet to target the water infrastructure in Mali, they have used such tactics before in Middle Eastern countries such as capturing the Tabqa Dam in Syria and Mosul Dam in Iraq.

Furthermore, in 2019, JNIM has started conducting non-water related attacks in the south. JNIM attacked a training centre of the European Union on 3 March 2019. This training centre is located close to the capital city of Bamako in southern Mali. This is a cause for concern as the JNIM may target the southern dams in Mali if it establishes a foothold in the region.

There are also a number of dam projects located in Mali that have been undertaken by the government in cooperation with its neighbouring countries. The Felou Hydroelectric Project, for example, is in southern Mali and is part of the West African Power Pool (WAPP). The electricity from the Felou project is to be shared between Mali, Mauritania and Senegal. If these cooperative dam projects were to be targeted by the terror groups in Mali, the impact would be felt region-wide. It is important that the Malian government, regional powers and the foreign entities involved in the conflict in Mali recognize the potential vulnerability of the water infrastructure and other critical infrastructure in the country and take pre-emptive steps to secure these vital installations.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Attempts have been made to end the conflict in Mali. Malian troops and law-enforcement have been unable to quell the violence, leading to heavy involvement from outside forces, primarily forces from the Government of France and a UN peacekeeping mission.





As part of its Barkhane anti-insurgency campaign in the Sahel region, France has deployed around 2,700 soldiers in Mali. Along with the French troops, 15,000 peacekeepers have been sent by the UN as part of one of its largest peacekeeping missions in Mali, known as the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). Numerous other European countries have also lent personnel or material support to the French mission in Mali, as of 2018.

Steps are also being taken to curb the rising ethnic clashes in Mali. Pursuant to the March 2019 attack on the Fulani tribesmen, the International Criminal Court (ICC) chief prosecutor, Fatou Bensouda, stated that, “the crimes could fall under ICC jurisdiction and that a delegation would be sent to Mali”. There have also been reports of a UN Security Council (UNSC) mission visiting Mali and its neighbouring countries in March 2019 to discuss solutions for ending the ethnic violence in the region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The UN has a significant presence in Mali in the form of MINUSMA. On 28 June 2018, the UNSC adopted UNSC Resolution 2423 which extended the mandate of MINUSMA to include climate change as a risk factor. It is noteworthy as this is the first time that a UN Peacekeeping Mission has been tasked with including the impacts of climate change on the security situation of a country that it is operating in. Although, it is unlikely that another UNSC resolution would be passed extending the mandate of MINUSMA to specifically include water and related infrastructure, under its current mandate of climate change, it may be possible to include the issue of protection of water infrastructure. The resolution states, in part, that there is a need “for adequate risk

assessment and risk management strategies by the government of Mali and the UN relating to these factors”. That assessment can include a threat assessment of the hydro-power installations in the country.

Another potential solution for the protection of some of the dams in Mali may lay with the Niger Basin Authority (NBA) and the Organisation for Development of the Senegal River (OMVS), both of which Mali is a member state. The NBA and OMVS are strong basin organizations. They have a full score of 100 on Strategic Foresight Group’s Water Cooperation Quotient(WCQ), meaning that not only are they excellent examples of trans-boundary cooperation, but also that this cooperation can bring about regional peace and security. The mandate of NBA and OMVS could be expanded to include a security angle, similar to that of the Lake Chad Basin Commission (LCBC). LCBC plays an active role in helping Lake Chad basin nations to achieve regional peace and security as it is not only tasked to serve as a governance mechanism to an important and life sustaining water body in the region, but also serves as a political channel for countries to discuss peace and security issues. Similarly, NBA and OMVS can incorporate a security angle which can be in the form of the protection of water infrastructure, including dams, reservoirs and sensitive water pipelines in the trans-boundary basin regions.

In 2017, the five Sahel countries comprising of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger created the G5 Cross Border Joint Force (G5 Force) to fight security threats in the region. The G5 Force can also be considered as a means of addressing this issue. The Force is tasked with dealing with trans-national threats created by terrorism, organized crime and human trafficking. However, according to the government of France, the “G5 Sahel Force is flexible in order to adapt to the changing threat environment and intervention priorities”. Thus, there is a potential for including the protection of water infrastructure in the region against violence as one of the activities of the G5 Cross Border Joint Force.

It is also possible that a hybrid of the aforementioned solutions can be formulated. It may also be possible in the short-term, when the threat has not been fully realized, to create a monitoring group based out of one of the river basin organizations that could comprise of hydro-power and river experts and security experts from the G5 Force. This inter-disciplinary group could conduct routine threat assessments on Mali’s water infrastructure and act as a bridge between hydro-power institutions, security institutions and the Heads of State.



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