

The role of security forces in the protection of populations in the Sahel

The following speech was given by Christelle Zafiryadis at a virtual senior officials meeting on 8 September. The meeting focused on 'responding to humanitarian challenges in a long-term perspective in Central Sahel – Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger' and was hosted by Denmark, Germany, the European Union, and the United Nations.

My main focus will be the role of the security forces to protect the populations, which applies both in a humanitarian crisis but also in times of peace and stability. Security forces have a double mandate, so we could say there is a paradox of policing.

On the one hand the security forces must ensure the rule of law – and with that often comes the use of force.

On the other hand, they must also provide security to the population in strict compliance of their rights.

In most countries the security actors do not have any issues or difficulties ensuring the rule of law but tend to forget about the part about protecting the populations. The protection of civilians should respect human dignity and therefore requires effective respect for human rights and humanitarian law.

Security forces are key actors in the protection of populations in the Sahel. They cannot be ignored. A better understanding of security forces and their challenges in the region will help improve the protection of local populations and the safety of humanitarian workers.

A key element is improving the trust between the security forces and the population. You cannot pretend to protect someone who do not trust you.

The Danish Institute for Human Rights has worked with security forces in the Sahel since 2001, so I will share the knowledge we have learned over the years by focusing on 3 key observations:

- 1. Security forces in the Sahel have for a long time been the security tool used by those in power**
- 2. Security forces include different institutions which do not have the same history and missions**
- 3. Security forces today face serious challenges in the Sahel**

Ad1) Security forces in the Sahel have for a long time been the security tool used by those in power

In the three Sahel countries, Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, security forces were for many years the security tools of those in power so they could keep it.

The democratization processes in the 90s tried to transform them into republican institutions serving the state and its populations but it was a tough and almost impossible task; when politicians won elections, they have often tended to continue using security forces to protect their own interests rather than those of the populations.

Nevertheless, some institutions have partly succeeded in becoming a public service for populations, especially the police.

Ad2) Security forces include various institutions which do not have the same history and missions

Security forces in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger include the army, the National Guard in Mali and Niger, the Gendarmes (a paramilitary police force) and the Police. These institutions do not have the same history, trainings and missions. The army's traditional mission is to defend the national territory against external enemies. Soldiers and officers have been trained to fulfill this mission. The national armies which were created after independence in the 1960s have not been trained to fight internal enemies, this explains why the current fight against armed groups and jihadists has demanded extra training. They have neither been trained to tackle conflicts between nationals, between civilians. They have had no training in how to protect civilians and vulnerable groups nor in human rights. This was not part of the soldiers' curricula. Soldiers were recruited in villages and towns without any specific requirements but physical fitness most of the time, they attended a military training for a few months and were then considered fit for service.

The current security context in the Sahel is a challenge for national armies which are confronted with issues they have not learned to deal with in their training - only recently (the last few years) international partners have sent trainers.

The National Guard in Mali and Niger have both military and police missions (responsible for the security and protection of populations). They receive military training but also training to cope with their police missions. In Niger, the National Guard has since 2004 developed with Danish Institute for Human Rights its own human rights training materials. The guards who are posted in

the most isolated areas of Niger are today very close to the local populations. They often fulfill basic social services in these remoted regions.

The police have become a civilian institution in the three Sahel countries and fulfill their police missions in towns and cities. The Police of the three Sahel countries have developed human rights training material with the Danish Institute for Human Rights and human rights courses have been part of their curricula for some years. Statistics shows that the population in large have trust in the national police. One statistic showed that 86% of the population in Niger trust the Police.

In general: Security actors would benefit from further training in humanitarian law, including their special obligation to protect civilians and civilian infrastructures such as schools and hospitals. This could also contribute to building trust with communities. Moreover, they have an obligation to allow and facilitate rapid passage of impartial humanitarian aid for populations in need, which is no small challenge in the current security context.

Ad3) Security forces also face a number serious challenges

The turnover at decision level

The turnover among authorities has contributed to increased confusion, especially in Mali. Decision-making and planning become difficult when the hierarchy is regularly changing – when the hierarchy is changing frequently, it has an effect on how the forces function; in particular with recruitment, behavioral change, and infrastructure and communications.

The recent massive recruitments to fight terrorism

The massive recruitments ordered by national parliaments during the last ten years, so security forces are able to fight terrorism have had negative consequences: the recruitment of thousands of new gendarmes, police or guards cannot be done properly in respect of agreed criteria. Classes of several hundred can hardly be taught efficiently in generally poor infra-structures and most of all the new gendarmes, police officers and guards cannot be followed up properly and corrected by more experienced officers during their first postings. In Niger where these massive recruitments started 10 years ago a lot of errors and human rights violations are committed by new recruits.

Time is short to change behavior

An increasing number of today's recruits in the Police, Gendarmerie and National Guards have been taught to protect populations and vulnerable

groups, they have attended human rights courses but time is needed to bring a change in behavior. It cannot be done overnight.

An important part of the work of the Danish Institute for Human Rights today is to support the inspections and the internal oversight mechanisms of security forces in the region, by supporting the institutions put in place an effective internal oversight mechanism to report violations in order to find solutions;

The lack of proper equipment (including communication and transportation)

Another challenge that security forces face is the lack of proper and adapted equipment, including communication tools and transportation (the various security forces need to coordinate and communicate to be efficient in the vast Sahel spaces). Recent reports have documented that there has been mismanagement of funds allocated to military and security, and poor planning by the hierarchy.

And then what is the way forward

Cooperation with national security forces in the Sahel needs to be improved for a better protection of the population and increased safety of humanitarian staff. This can be done through more information sharing, transparency and dialogue.

Both sides – security forces and humanitarian staff need to know and understand each other’s work, role and challenges as well as the principles behind their respective missions.

Regular dialogue forums - gathering security forces and humanitarian staff posted in specific areas will contribute to improve understanding of each other’s work.

Here the National Human Rights Institutions (CNDH) can play an important role – as an independent actor they can ensure and lead the dialogue between the security forces and the civil society to find solutions together and a better understanding of the different challenges. This will surely bring better results in the protection of populations and the safety of humanitarian staff.

Finally, to sum up: based on our experience here are the 3 main learnings:

- Security forces needs to understand their double mandate – especially their mandate to protect the populations
- The security forces - and maybe especially the army – needs more training of their role and mandate to protect the populations
- A better dialogue between the security forces and the civil society will ensures a better understand of each other’s mandates.

Thank you.
