



Transcript

Mali: From Crisis Intervention to Potential Recovery

Ibrahima Diane

Editor, BBC Afrique

Paul Melly

Associate Fellow, Africa Programme, Chatham House

Camilla Toulmin

Director, International Institute for Environment and Development

Chair: Dr Claire Spencer

Head, Middle East and Africa Programme, Chatham House

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Claire Spencer:

I'm very pleased to see you here this evening and also welcome our panel for what is an issue that is currently being covered by both my own programme – I'm Claire Spencer, head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme here at Chatham House – and also the Africa Programme, of which Paul Melly is an associate fellow: namely, what is happening in Mali. As you know, it filled our screens in the media all the way through January, when the surprise intervention of French forces took over. What I think we're going to try and focus on today is an update on where things are in Mali and the wider region – because Mali is not alone in the kind of issues and threats that we have seen arising there over the last year or more.

So I think we will move on straightaway with our speakers. Ibrahima Diane is editor of BBC Afrique, the BBC World Service's French-language service broadcast in Francophone Africa. He has also worked as head of the BBC Afrique's Dakar bureau in Senegal, so obviously knows the wider region of West Africa extremely well. He will then be followed straight on by Paul Melly, who as I said is associate fellow of the Chatham House Africa Programme and also an expert on Francophone Africa, including Mali, as well as French and EU policy toward Africa. He has recently returned from France so I think he will be giving us some insights into French thinking and policy at the moment. Then last but by absolutely no means least, Camilla Toulmin is director of the International Institute for Environment and Development. She is an economist by training but her work has focused on social, economic and environmental development in dryland Africa. She will be talking about the prospects ahead. The meeting is on the record, I should say.

Ibrahima Diane:

Speaking about the regional implications of the Malian crisis, because of the number of countries bordering Mali and the Malian neighbours, is a bit complicated to talk about now. But I have one or two questions that I just want to highlight. The fact that in Mali the crisis started with a rebellion, the MNLA (Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad) rebellion, the Tuareg rebellion, which is a community – there are a lot of studies on this community. That community is not just particular to Mali but to the whole region. That is one of the implications: how do you solve the situation of the Tuareg community only in Mali, knowing that the situation might be elsewhere?

The other situation about this is the radicalism in the Islam of that region. If you take Mali, Niger, Mauritania and other countries in that region, you have a

big community of Muslims and also Islam. So how did that Islam, which is usually tolerant and also not that radical, become so radical? So those kinds of emulations might be going to those countries, like Mauritania and also other countries in the region.

Of course the first implication was the humanitarian situation in that region. If you know the number of refugees and displaced people in that region – the UN is talking about 400,000 – but some of those populations were already displaced several years ago because of the number of Tuareg community – crises and rebellion in Mali. Also in Niger – some of those populations were already displaced once or twice, several times, in those regions. So they had to go back to those areas.

The implication is not only humanitarian, but the security situation affecting the region, where I'm not sure the army are that strong, if you take out the situation in Algeria where the army intervened very quickly and very strongly to solve the hostage situation in that region. But what about the other countries? You take Mauritania, you take Niger, you take Burkina Faso – the implication is also security-wise.

But you have to take also the regional political situation, because we were all surprised by the *coup d'état* in Mali in March last year. Mali was presented as a beacon of democracy at that time, so the same thing might be said today about some countries in that region. Do we know that in those countries in the region, Burkina Faso, Niger and others – even if Niger recently had an election I think two years ago – are those democracies well-implemented, strong? Are they respecting all the rules? Are the population's voices taken into account in those countries? Because of the fact that the Tuareg communities – of course Niger had its own Tuareg rebellion several years ago but solved it. Is that solution a definitive one? Is Mauritania safe enough today? Yesterday I was reading that Mauritania has become a drug trafficking point. Then you have the drug situation in that region again. You have countries like Guinea-Bissau, very fragile in terms of security and almost non-state in those countries.

So I think the security, the humanitarian and the political situation – but also the rule of law and the democracy in that region need to be taken into account. Then probably we will talk about this later – what can be the solution? Because we saw that the French intervention kind of saved Mali from what could have been a new republic of – Islamic republic in that area. That would have posed great risk to the region because countries further south – Guinea and Ivory Coast – today claim to be democracies, because of

recent elections in those countries, but are still facing security issues. Also there are still opposition who are not happy in those countries. So the security situation is not only in the Sahel region but the southern part of the countries further – because if we compare Mali and Algeria and Morocco you will see that Mali is a bit south, but Guinea and Ivory Coast and other countries in that area are also to be watched in this situation now.

So those implications, security – but as I said, it's important that people don't just say Mali is being solved, so they think that everything is all right. That I think has been the mistake in the past from the Malian side before. They kind of neglected what was happening in Mauritania before, because before Mali we had radical Islamists taking hostages in Mauritania and Niger and also using Malian territory to attack in Mauritania. The Mauritanian army then fought them back up to Mali. So now that the French army and other armies – because European armies are trying to train now the Malian army – I don't think that just focusing on Mali will be a solution. The solution should be regional and not just from one country or one group – the EU, for example – but from the whole international community.

Then you have the humanitarian situation. People today are not paying much more attention to that. Even the media, we are all focused on what's happening in the north of Mali and we are forgetting that there are several hundred thousand people living in Mauritania and Burkina Faso mainly, but also in Niger, and we don't know how many in Algeria, who are frustrated because of what's happened to them for several years, who might be coming back at some point in Mali, and because of that frustration might take arms and fight because they are not happy with their conditions. So the situation is also a development issue. You don't just focus on the security and just focus on all the big policies about terrorism and other things; you have also to focus on development. The MNLA at the beginning was claiming they are taking arms because their area is not as developed as the other part of Mali. That, most of the time, is what people argue when they take arms in that region – they are not happy with their development projects or politics in their region or they are not happy with the politics in their country.

One thing, as a journalist, that I have observed is that the international community is sometimes complacent and doing double standards in their treatment in that region. You take countries where you have a president winning election after election for 20, 25 years, even 30 years, and he is still being seen as a democrat. Mali was in that situation for 20 years. Only 30 per cent of Malians were going to the election polls because they were not happy with the system.

Of course today the situation is that we need to focus on the security situation in the north of Mali but that might even take longer than we thought. I think it gives an opportunity to everybody to focus on those areas in that region – security, development and politics – because by playing double standards in that region – of course diplomacy is another aspect of this. Not only will people continue to consider their own interests in terms of diplomacy but also in terms of economics. You take all these areas, they are rich in minerals. Last time I was laughing at the report from one of our reporters in the region saying that Standard & Poor's was saying something about the gold in Burkina Faso. That was my first time since the financial crisis started that I saw one of these agencies talking about that area, the situation in that area. They were saying that because of the crisis in Mali, the gold mining in Burkina Faso might be getting much more attention from businessmen.

So I don't think we can just play one country isolated. We have to take this whole thing together. That's why I think it's important not just to always talk about Mali but also to talk about the region. As I was saying, behind Mali you take Nigeria, where you have Boko Haram. It poses also, as I was saying at the beginning, the question of Islam in that region. I'm not an expert on religion but I think that's a big question that researchers like yourselves need to think about, because you take countries like Mali, where 90 per cent of the population, maybe more, is Muslim – you take Guinea, same thing, you take Senegal, same thing. You have a minority there, but they are living in harmony in those countries. Some people will come from – I'm not sure where exactly – of course there are Malians among them but they are also coming from somewhere else, and they will hijack that Islam. If we don't pay much more attention to this, as Africans of course but also as an international community, then that Islam will have an issue, and that's not in the interest of anybody.

I think I will just stop at that point, saying that the political issue – of course the security is affecting much more of the region because of the tourism. Some of those countries were well known for their tourism. I think the Paris–Dakar [rally race] stopped several years ago, and the Paris–Dakar was driving tourism in that region. It doesn't work anymore. We talk about Timbuktu because of the heritage but there is also Djenné in the other part, but they are not anymore visited because of the security situation. And this is in the south of Mali. So the security and the politics in that region and also the international community aspect need to be taken into account. This needs to be a coordinated action, not just on the military front but also on the development front from everybody.

Paul Melly:

I think when we look at the role that France has taken in the crisis, this has been something of a possibly defining moment for François Hollande, who as I'm sure you will have seen in media coverage before was perceived as rather weak and perhaps having not thought through how he could deliver his domestic political programme. Then suddenly – you can compare it almost to what happened with Margaret Thatcher with the Falklands or with George Bush with 11 September. He's been confronted with an international crisis that could define his presidency. The big question is what he makes of this situation and how he handles it, and what that implies particularly for France's role in tackling the Mali crisis and the way it operates in partnership with West African governments.

Today we've had three events that, if you like, have highlighted the complexity of the challenge he faces. Some good news: Germany has announced it's going to send 300 troops to join the military training and support mission in Mali. One of the big worries in Paris has been that the Germans weren't really interested in Africa and it was very hard to get them to take African crises seriously. So to put 300 troops on the line, especially given Germany's past political history of caution about foreign engagements, is a pretty big endorsement.

But this afternoon we've had news which is a shocking reminder of the difficulties of tackling problems in this region for the French. Not only have they seen one soldier, a member of the Foreign Legion, killed in the fighting with the jihadists in the far north, but much more worrying: armed men crossed the border from Nigeria into northern Cameroon today – or the news has emerged today, so it may have been late last night that this happened – and they seized seven French tourists in a region of northern Cameroon that nobody had thought of previously as insecure or part of this crisis. There had been localized problems of crime in northern Cameroon but this appears to be probably an offshoot of Boko Haram or something related to the crisis in northern Nigeria. So it's a reminder of how astonishingly complex this crisis is. In one go, that's increased the number of French citizens held hostage in the Sahel from eight to 15.

It's a domestic political problem for Hollande because he's got to try and maintain support for his Mali intervention but it's also just a practical reminder of how astonishingly difficult it is to manage this crisis. In a sense, what's happened so far has been the easy part. When I was in Paris last week, yes, people's self-confidence was buoyed up by two things. One: that they'd got involved in Africa in a way that was broadly welcomed by most African

opinion as well as the international community. After all the years of scandal about deals with corrupt oil regimes, etc., and all of that, suddenly they'd done something that was not controversial and was strongly welcomed and was seen by West Africans as a very positive endorsement of a partnership with the region.

They'd also gained a bit of self-confidence because they'd done an international intervention which people were saying in Paris – and I'm not a military expert, but it seems a plausible claim – nobody else could have done it. One official said to me the US couldn't put 4,000 troops into the Sahel and Sahara in a week, at two days' notice and over a week, with 60 armoured vehicles and all the rest of it. So for the military it's given them a big confidence boost. They had a difficult situation in Kidal a few days ago, a week or so back, so they just flew in some parachutists from the Pyrenees. It sounds like a sort of *Boy's Own* exercise but for the military it's been a huge lift to their self-confidence and their self-belief that they can act abroad. And the fact that it's happened in a political context that works, as it were, and is seen as legitimate is very helpful.

But everyone you talk to in Paris says, 'This has been the easy bit; we realize how very difficult this is going to be.' There is a general view that the Malian state wasn't conquered by some sort of foreign invading army of jihadists – it collapsed when they pushed at it, like a pack of cards. The state structure just crumbled. Faith in the state machine, self-discipline and self-belief in the Malian army, just disintegrated. One of the reasons why it's felt to be so important that there are troops from other West African forces with the French and the Malian army is because there's a genuine fear that there could be human rights abuses committed by Malian troops against light-skinned people, Arabs and Tuaregs from the north of Mali, who are accused – often wrongly – of being collaborators with the jihadists.

So there's a huge rebuilding job to go on. As Ibrahima mentioned, drug smuggling has been a massive problem in northern Mali. One district of Gao was known as Cocaine Bougou – 'cocaine town' – because of the amount of drug money that had allowed its affluent merchants to build nice houses and develop a smuggling economy across the Sahara.

So for the French the challenge now is not just to sustain the military strategy. Yes, they'll have their special forces, their paratroopers and all the rest of it, up in the north continuing a campaign against the jihadists and hoping to try and rescue hostages, who are thought to be held in the *Adrar des Ifoghas* – uplands just near the Algerian border. That will be difficult. It will be slow, and

people are beginning to think that it won't just be a few weeks or a few months. If they want to get the hostages out alive and actually ensure that the jihadist groups are defeated, rather than just melting away, that's going to be a long, hard job. But it's a military thing and the military kind of know what they're doing about it. As one official said to me in Paris last week: 'People were wondering whether we'd been planning all this.' And of course that's what the military are for – they have contingency plans, they know how to do that logistical, technical, fighting stuff. In a sense, that's not the issue.

The much more difficult job is how to work with Mali to rebuild a viable, stable political state, without being seen as a sort of neo-colonial interfering power. I had somebody suggest recently that perhaps the Malian government would have to invite French advisers into every ministry to sit alongside officials. People in Paris are very aware of the sensitivities of France's history in Africa and they are certainly not going to suddenly re-establish the post-colonial system of invigilating the Malian civil service. That would be crazy. But there is a practical problem: how do you assist Mali to rebuild? Money isn't so much of a problem; they are freeing up budget aid, the IMF will presumably draw up a programme. That will get channelled into refugee programmes, rebuilding basic services, etc. But it's how you cooperate with Mali in rebuilding the viability and the legitimacy of the security forces without undermining national self-belief and generating antagonism. Because Captain [Amadou] Sanogo, the leader of the former putschists, sometimes looks a beaten man but the next day he always manages to stage a political comeback. You can't just assume that that very determined nationalistic reaction, which at first didn't want any foreign assistance after the collapse early last year, has disappeared. So the French are going to have to be sensitive.

It's probably just as well, in this sense, that actually Hollande is a rather unglamorous president. He may be quite popular but it's just as well that he's not a sort of Barack Obama-style, rock-star politician, or even a sort of ego-trip [Nicolas] Sarkozy type. He is a rather painstaking official guy who reads his dossiers and does things in a fairly uncharismatic way, and that's probably the kind of French partner that Mali needs. But it won't be easy.

Camilla Toulmin:

Well it would be very different, wouldn't it, if we still had 'President Bling'. Sorry, that was probably very tactless. But Sarkozy would have had a very different style, I think, in terms of this particular adventure. This meeting is on the record so I should have really been a bit more careful about what I said.

I've been working in and out of Mali since 1980. It's just been fascinating watching both the political and economic process in that country, and I think like everybody was rather taken aback by the events of the last 12–18 months. I want to talk about three things. One is the current situation and what's happening on the ground. The second is some of the political developments – elections and so on. And third is what kind of development pathway might make sense, starting now but particularly in a post-conflict situation.

In terms of events on the ground, you will have seen that the town of Bourem was liberated yesterday or the day before by French and Malian troops, so there's this continuous push northwards by the military front. There's increasing concern, as Paul mentioned, that there are now a whole number of cases of people being arrested and taken away and not reappearing; worries about reprisal killings of various sorts. But also worries about the close association between the army and the narco-traffickers. Last week there was a press report of two of the big narco-traffickers having been brought in by, I think, the French army to Gao and then subsequently being released and put on a plane by the Malian army. So a sense that the links between the people making a lot of money out of the narcotics trade and those in power in the army today are still extremely strong and collaborative.

I've just been sent a letter from a group of Tuareg calling for recognition by both the army and by the Malian political classes that most Tuareg are not interested in independence, not interested in being part of a jihadist movement. It's a plea for recognition that most people from the Tuareg community really want peace, development and reconciliation.

The second thing, on the politics: this political roadmap was issued a couple of weeks ago I think by President [Moussa] Traoré's office, establishing a roadmap for elections. Their home secretary announced that plans are now underway for elections in July – 7 July. I find it slightly improbable given that that's really the height of the rainy season. For anybody who's lived out in the bush in Mali, you know that for two or three months really the idea of getting farmers out of their fields and into the electoral office, wherever elections are taking place, does not make sense. I think there's been a lot of pressure to show that elections are going to take place nice and soon, because that would free up the possibility of the US to come in behind support for what happens in Mali. But that seems to me to be an acceleration of the timetable which is far too extreme.

At the same time, there's been this process of reform of the army, which has been given to Captain Sanogo – or is he General Sanogo, I forget. Anyway, Sanogo, the coup leader, has been put in charge of the reform of the army, something which I think a lot of us would have serious concerns about, particularly if you're looking at trying to hold people to account for how the army's behaved in recent months.

There's a whole set of issues around looking at different political reforms: structural reforms, decentralization, what level of autonomy different regions of the country might seek to establish. Having had a big decentralization programme in the late 1990s and the establishment of local elected government in 1999, I think there's very much an appetite among some people for pushing much further than that, not only in terms of the level of autonomy of the regions but also having real substance in terms of resources behind that greater level of autonomy.

There's a whole set of issues around peace and reconciliation, because both people in southern Mali and those in the north have both got extreme resentments and a long list of abuses and of issues that they are taxing the other side with. So getting a bit of thought into how that peace and reconciliation process might work I think is pretty critical.

Finally, on the whole development piece: the whole number of donors who are now pitching in, wanting to help Mali – obviously the French, the UK government, the European Union, the Nordics, Germany has had a very substantial programme of development in Mali and is seeking to continue that, and the US, as well as of course the various UN agencies. I think the big challenge, if you like, for the north in particular is how you help re-establish an effective state that can operate and deliver services on the ground, particularly health and education. I think there's a total loss of confidence in the Malian government's ability to do that, so work needs to be done on that. Maybe learning lessons from other pastoral areas where you've needed to establish mobile schooling and health facilities, so that those people who rely on mobile livestock production can gain access to those services.

The big piece I think is really seeing how you can offer hope, employment, income, prosperity – particularly for younger men – that compares anything like with the cash that you can get by signing up as a jihadi fighter, or the cash that you can get from being involved not only in the narcotics trade but also in other various smuggling activities.

I think there's a whole set of issues around how you can get a combined push by a re-established, more legitimate Malian government, with a high level of

decentralization, backed by international support, for investment in a more resilient pattern of livelihood in that area. There would be some important work to do in particular around how you make use of the river Niger, which is a real lifeline in the south of the north of Mali – a lifeline for irrigation, a lifeline for grazing and livestock, and a lifeline for particularly hydropower generation which could provide the energy on which a whole range of broader industrial and economic development might be based.