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Geneva Centre
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Governance

Critical Human Security Issues in BURKINA FASO

01/
07/
2021

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CONTEXT

Burkina Faso has been increasingly exposed to the threats and attacks of violent armed groups, targeting symbols, institutions and representatives of the state, including the defence and security forces, local leaders and political figures.

With a history of several coup d'états, the country has entered a cycle of more frequent terrorist attacks since 2014. The northern parts of the country, bordering Mali and Niger, are particularly at risk as a result of conflict spill-over. In December 2018, a state of emergency was declared in several regions, granting extraordinary powers to the security forces and restricting freedom of movement and assembly in the country. The State of Emergency was renewed twice in January 2020 and June 2021.

This short knowledge product aims to address emerging concerns for human security in a country of high interest to ISSAT Members. It builds on DCAF's operational programming, open-source documents, as well as the learning ISSAT captures from its Governing board Members engagement in the country and maps out the top challenges and actors impacting the hybrid security landscape in the country. This note also aims to be a conversation starter and ISSAT welcomes comments and contributions from its members and Community of Practice.

> **Urban areas are particularly affected, with an unemployment rate of 50%**

FOOD INSECURITY

Burkina Faso is one of the world's poorest countries with more than half of its population living on 1.90 USD per day. It is a traditionally rural country and agriculture is its main source of income. Farming and forestry employ 80% of the population. Despite recent economic growth, poverty levels remain largely stagnant. This is partly driven by population growth rates, combined with recent climate shocks, affecting crops and food security . Urban areas are particularly affected, with an unemployment rate of 50%. Poverty, combined with an overstretched state apparatus, leads to significant gaps in access to state security and justice services and creates a breeding ground for social tensions and violence. This gives credibility and space for non-state armed group to operate, in particular in areas where the community expresses perceptions of exclusion, especially amongst the youth, namely in relation to corruption and unequal distribution of resources and wealth. This could be compounded by unharmonized access to public services between the capital and regions.

COMMUNITY LEVEL TENSIONS

The broader security landscape in the Sahel region needs to be taken into consideration when examining the worsened security situation in Burkina Faso. Following the conflict in northern Mali, the armed groups have contributed to the rise of intercommunal violence in central Mali, but also in Niger and Burkina Faso.

While their areas of operation were at first concentrated in the administrative provinces of Soum and Oudalan, in the northern Sahel Region bordering Mali and Niger, the attacks have now spread into other administrative regions notably the Est, Boucle du Mouhoun and Northern Regions and are also threatening the capital, Ouagadougou, and the border areas with Benin and Ivory Coast.

These armed groups have been mostly targeting civilians and state security forces and committing serious human rights violations, leading to massive population displacement and intercommunal tensions. The heightened security risks across the region could lead towards further militarisation within Burkina Faso. As armed groups recruit and arm (male) civilians, the State is trying to compensate for its shortcomings by also widening the access to weapons for reasons of national civil defence. As a result, regional human security is undermining prospects for peace and development in Burkina Faso and the Sahel region.

POPULATION DISPLACEMENT

Indiscriminate attacks against civilians in Burkina Faso have led to the displacement of more than a million people as of December 2019. Compared to 50,000 in January 2019, this is a number, experts expect to continue increase.

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) face several critical human security challenges such as food insecurity and limited access to the land resources and markets. Access to basic services such as health, education, water, sanitation and justice is also a major concern. Their presence weighs on the resources of host communities and puts an extra burden on an already stretched out

national resources and public services infrastructure, leading to increasing tensions among the communities and risk of intercommunal violence. These tensions were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has globally affected the most vulnerable hardest.

Population displacements also impact the security of the territory, and the ability of the security forces to track members of the armed groups, while there are growing concerns that IDPs and those living in refugee camps are vulnerable to recruitment by violent extremist groups.

Nanoro, 2007 © Roberto Vi, Pixabay.

Displacement of
1/2 a million people
as of Dec 2019

OVER-STRETCHED STATE SECURITY INSTITUTIONS

Burkina Faso's security forces are considered inadequately equipped and lack sufficient operational capacity to perform their duties in line with the country and population's needs. They have sometimes been accused of disproportionate use of violence, extrajudicial killings and human rights violations, including towards civilians. Concerns were also raised regarding the composition of the army and auxiliary forces under its control and the risk of the current events affecting the coherence and resiliency of this institution. Furthermore, corruption, lack of accountability and weak legitimacy undermines the legitimacy of the security forces. National security personnel may also be members of non-state forces such as the Koglweogo, which is one of the largest non-state security actors in Burkina Faso. Koglweogo groups gradually became important players in Burkina Faso's security and political landscape, questioning State authority and legitimacy.

Despite the recent creation of a new special forces body, the path is still long and challenging before their role and impact become clear. The previous elite unit, the Presidential Guard, was dissolved in 2015, leaving an institutional and human resources gap as it had represented around 10% of the total military body and a large margin of the defence budget, training and equipment. The international community, including the EU, UN, US, and the Joint G5 force for Sahel are supporting armed forces' capacity development, including skills and equipment provision. However, lack of sufficient attention to management and accountability aspects in a country where those are perceived to be corrupt, politicised and abusive of their powers, makes this a risky endeavour.

LACK OF ACCESS TO STATE SECURITY SERVICES

A 2018 donor-led assessment conducted through ISSAT's support in Burkina Faso showed that security forces were absent in 36% of the regions. The ratio of security personnel of 1/758 is well below the international standard of 1/400. With a total strength of 5,219 gendarmes, the gendarmerie ratio is 1/2,685. The country has 350 administrative regions in total, 156 of which do not have any internal security force unit established. 24% of the administrative regions have at least one police station and one gendarmerie unit and 31% have one gendarmerie unit or a police station.

The inconsistent coverage of all the territory has led to unequal distribution of State services across the entire population, in particular in rural areas. At the core of this institutional challenge are multiple drivers, including inefficient use of human resources, unclear institutional mandates, blurred lines of management and weak national coordination. Burkina Faso still lacks clear plans to organise and restructure the territorial distribution of its security forces.

The National Police is placed under the authority of the Ministry of Security and organized around the General Directorate of the National Police. It is responsible for public security and consists of civil servants. The National Gendarmerie is technically under the authority of the Ministry of Defence but reports to the Ministry of Security, with weapons and equipment still managed by the Ministry of Defence. It is a military force with similar ranking system to the army. The police and gendarmerie perform their activities across the country. While the law provides that a decree shall specify the respective areas of territorial jurisdiction, both police and the gendarmerie often end up working in the same locations at the expense of certain regions. The traditional role of the police to operate in urban areas and the gendarmerie in the countryside, has been blurred during the last years, leading to a shift of the National Police outside urban areas and the 'urbanization' of Gendarmerie units.

WEAK OVERSIGHT AND ACCOUNTABILITY OVER A HYBRID SECURITY LANDSCAPE

Initially locally formed to respond to rising insecurity in the northern regions, non-state armed groups such as the Koglweogo, Dozos and Rugas have evolved to key players in the security and political landscape in Burkina Faso. These groups have established semi-formal relations with the security forces with whom they collaborate. In 2018, the government launched several initiatives to strengthen the dialogue with the Koglweogo and adopted a decree formally allowing them to participate in the fight against insecurity alongside the State forces. The option to transform these groups into a community police mechanism was also scoped.

Adding to the hybridity of Burkina Faso's security landscape, in 2020, the government adopted a decree creating the status of 'Defence Volunteers', according to which, these contribute, by force of arms, if necessary, to the defence and protection of persons and property in their area of residence. The volunteers undergo a swift military training, are armed and placed under local leadership structures. These have been loosely placed between state security institutions and non-state armed groups. They have as a result been victims of attaches by non-state armed groups and unable to seek shelter in military camps.

The Koglweogo and other non-state armed groups have been able to implement their own rules and pass sentences. They have already been accused of committing human rights violations and their activities are often inconsistent with the respect of basic rule of law principles such as the presumption of innocence. Despite their perceived effectiveness in dealing with insecurity at the local level, the legalisation of such groups questions the ability and credibility of the State to oversee armed groups' practices. The community's frustration with armed groups' human rights abuses could further expose the State's incapacity to oversee them and hold them accountable in the framework of Rule of Law.

Sahel, 2013 © Anton Wagner, Pixabay.

WEAPONS PROLIFERATION

The trafficking and diversion of weapons and ammunition are fuelling the conflict in the Sahel and continue to threaten community safety across the region, in particular in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Burkina Faso is located along some of the most important weapons trafficking routes in West Africa. To prevent the deterioration of the situation, the Burkinabe government suspended the sale of firearms to the civilian population at the end of February 2019. However, after only a few months, the measure was lifted in June. In early 2020, the government took a reverse approach by creating the Defence Volunteer status, therefore giving civilians access to weapons and legalising their use of force to supplement the security forces.

However, arming civilians could negatively contribute to a complex security landscape and fuel conflict. Burkina Faso's intercommunal tensions soared due to the multiplication of armed groups as the perceived association of Fulani communities with Islamists groups generated resentment and mistrust among the rest of the population. Therefore, arming civilians in a tensed security context where government control is limited could likely foster the proliferation of weapons and heighten probability of intercommunal conflict.

ELECTIONS VOLATILITY

Burkina Faso has a long history of coup d'états. In the current security situation, the international community could be concerned that non-state armed groups could seriously impair the election process. Due to increased violence and terrorist attacks, entire villages have been displaced from regions in the north and east. As a result, electoral constituencies have undergone significant change in inhabitants, reflecting an emerging imbalance between number of candidates and sizes of constituencies. The electoral law and the possibility for displaced voters to vote outside their constituencies is also under scrutiny.

Armed groups have also been playing a key role in the political space in Burkina Faso. As a prominent actor with an increasingly important role, armed groups have been using their influence in shaping the future of Burkinabé elections and politics.
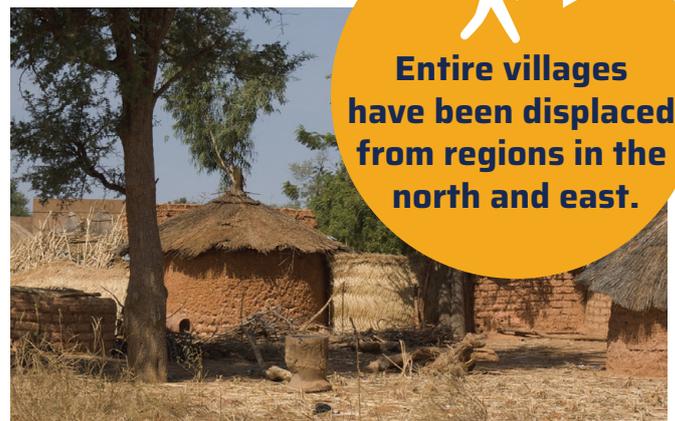
Entire villages have been displaced from regions in the north and east.

SSR PROCESS FACING SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES

The worsened security situation in the country, increased violence, high number of IDPs and lack of access to State services across the whole country are some of the main challenges facing the security sector reform process in Burkina Faso.

In October 2017, a National Security Forum held in Ouagadougou with over 600 participants from ministries, agencies and civil society kicked-off the Security Sector Reform process led by the National Defence and Security Council (CSDN). The country set itself on a reformative agenda to elaborate on a new national security policy and strategy, develop an anti-corruption strategy, increase governance of the security sector and develop a strategy to combat violent extremism, among other commitments. DCAF has been supporting this process through contributing to the drafting of a national security policy and a national security strategy.

One of the key priorities currently in Burkina Faso is preventing violent extremism and a national strategy to prevent radicalisation and violent extremism was adopted in May 2021. Whilst the pressing need in Burkina Faso is the stabilisation of the country and building the resilience of its community in view of the millions of IDPs and overwhelmed public sector, longer-term reforms need to remain important for the donor community in this country. The synchronisation between crises response and investment in SSR for sustainable conflict prevention and peacebuilding is the biggest challenge facing reform across the Sahel region ∎
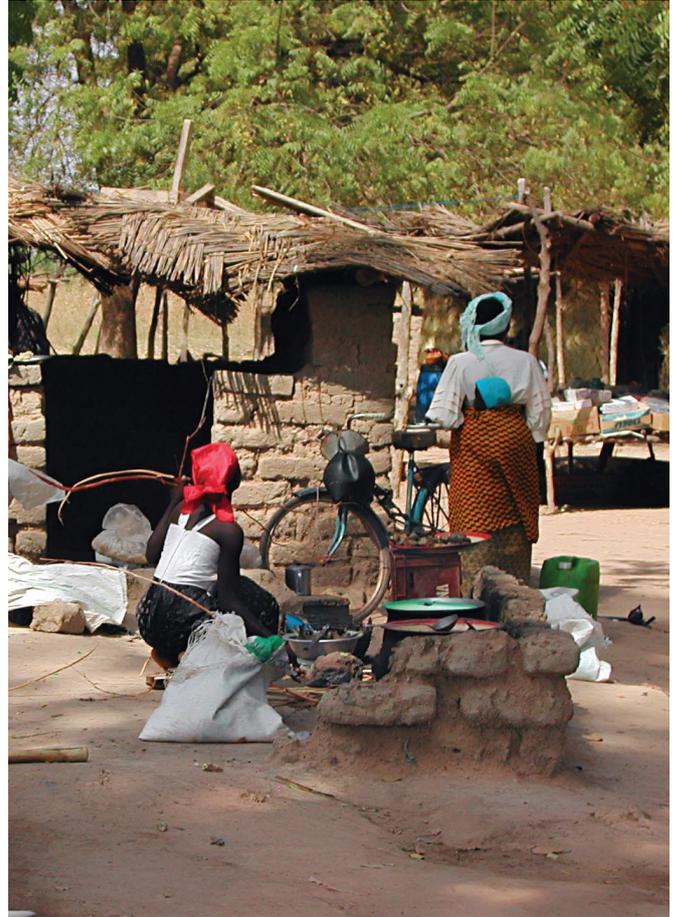
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