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Crisis and Conflict in Mali: Recognizing the Inseparable Pair

The African state of Mali has previously been a huge success for democracy in West Africa. Possessing little rainfall in the sun-beaten Sahel region of Africa, however, the Malian people have always struggled for adequate food resources. That is why, when stability and democracy failed at the beginning of 2012, Mali has fallen into chaos. Mali currently experiences the worst food situation in the Sahel, the northern portion of the country in a state of extreme food insecurity as the result of current conflict, the Tuareg Rebellion (Food and Agricultural Organization). The crisis has reached a critical point within which the Malian people will face great suffering if conflict in the region is not resolved. Between two semi-unified rebel factions in the north fighting against the transitional government of the Republic of Mali, influenced by an internationally condemned military junta in the south, the country is hugely disorganized and requires foreign intervention. Promotion of governance based on principles of democracy, accountability and transparency in public institutions, and the rule of law that is basic to reducing the number of vulnerable members of society are a major factor in determining food security. Therefore, diplomatic initiatives for conflict resolution on the part of the international community are required to not only restore stability and democracy to Mali, but ensure food security for its people.

The dry Sahel region where Mali is located is a difficult place to achieve proper nutrition. One million children are at risk of severe acute malnutrition across the Sahel and one in five families in Mali is struggling to support a child with severe acute malnutrition (ACF International). This is an unacceptable fact in a country where 80% of the labor force is dedicated to agriculture (Central Intelligence Agency). Malnutrition is undoubtedly further provoked while Mali remains in crisis, as mentioned by Rafael de Prado, Action Against Hunger's Desk Officer for the Sahel, who says, "These [population] movements, along with the obstacles they pose to the access of humanitarian aid, will make the situation even worse for the most vulnerable families" (ACF International). Even if aid to Mali is increased, many people will not get the food security that they need. Over three-hundred thousand in Mali have been displaced, refugees fleeing the conflict to either neighboring countries or within Mali, a number reaching one-hundred fifty thousand in mid-May (UNHCR). Therefore, a proper resolution of the conflict is the only solution for achieving food security in Mali, allowing people to return to their homes, fields, and pastures, as well as allowing aid to flow.

The typical farm family in Mali is quite large. Most married sons live with their fathers, most brothers continue to live with their brothers, and many men are polygamous; the average number of individuals over age twelve in a particular study was eleven per household (Goetghebuer). Farm plots often consist of a collective family plot (commonly used to sell crops) in addition to individual plots or garden plots (commonly used as subsistence). Collectives are often operated by men and the garden plots are often operated by women. The primary crops in Mali are cotton, millet, rice, corn, vegetables and peanuts with cattle, sheep and goats used for livestock (Central Intelligence Agency). More often than not, the typical Malian family only eats millet grains with some sort of peanut condiment, selling cotton as a cash crop. This monotonous diet is part of what contributes to malnutrition in the country. The majority of Malian children leave the compulsory educational system by age twelve, and less than a third of the country is literate (Library of Congress Federal Research Division). This indicates that family structures in Mali place more value on the family farm than on education, creating a traditional cycle that entraps rural Mali in its current state, lacking the skills and innovation necessary to improve farming techniques, necessary in the drought-ridden country. Access to medicine and medical facilities outside of the capital of Bamako

is practically nonexistent, and proper healthcare is typically achieved through access to foreign aid. Therefore, when the current conflict limits and halts foreign aid, Malians experience a significant lack in healthcare access. Without proper education and healthcare, as well as an inefficient and ineffective family farm structure that is heavily focused on a cotton cash crop incapable of nourishment, rural Mali is left completely vulnerable to all-too-common droughts and other natural disasters that often place the country in food crisis. Agricultural progress is unachievable and living wages are dependent upon the success of the cotton crop. This unsuccessful system is best cured by creating democratic and accountable institutions, which are only possible through a stable democratic government. Mali has potential resources such as gold, and even the cotton cash crop, that could lead it to the economic growth necessary to implement a proper social support system with proper education and healthcare, but this cannot be accomplished without a stable political environment, like that achieved in Ghana or Botswana that has made those African nations so successful.

Due to the current Tuareg Rebellion, many Malians have been sent fleeing from their homes, pastures, and fields. The three-hundred thousand plus refugees are incapable of producing their own means of living, dependent upon foreign aid for food and water. This aid is strained by the overwhelming nature of the rebellion. Resolution of the conflict and restoration of a stable democratic government, as aforementioned, allows Malians to return home and continue to produce food, as well as easily receive aid if necessary. The severity of the current situation is rapidly increasing as the rebels gain more successes, as described by Elisabeth Byrs of the World Food Programme:

This is an emergency operation, and the cost of this special emergency food assistance operation is 77 million dollars. The rebel occupation in the northern areas of Kidal, Gao and Timbuktu has exacerbated an already precarious food security situation. There are still reports of looting, markets remaining closed, limited access to food, clean water, medical supplies (United Nations Radio).

In addition to continued violence, the desired implementation of Sharia law by Islamist militants of the rebellion have further destabilized northern Mali, armed forces firing upon demonstrators in Gao (The World). If the militant faction succeeds, women will undoubtedly suffer further from implementation of Sharia law that is Afghanistan-Pakistan oriented, rather than the more moderate desires of Tuareg nationalists who began the rebellion. In southern Mali, the government was overturned by a military junta in March and later replaced by a transitional government; however the ex-junta still maintains much of the influence. In both the north and south, the trend is clear: things in Mali are moving farther from democracy. As the situation worsens, the number of displaced persons increases, indicating further food insecurity as less and less Malians till the fields and tend to their livestock. Combined with closed markets, the rural farm family has no choice but to turn to the barely accessible foreign aid, putting them in an increasingly degrading food situation. Resolution of conflict in the country would certainly end the looting, open the markets, and make Mali safe for the return of families and the arrival of foreign aid. Additionally, democratically governments are more capable of implementing social policy. Education and health initiatives are more likely to be implemented in a peacetime democracy. The international community is more likely to open diplomatic channels with such nations as well, cultivating political and technological innovations for agriculture, the environment, and the economy. And without Islamist militants in control, the civil rights of all citizens, including women, would be more easily upheld. Of course, these positive results are not guaranteed by a successful resolution of the rebellion. Almost certainly, these results, which coincide heavily with the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), could not possibly be achieved by 2015. However, it must be recognized that, prior to the Tuareg Rebellion and the military coup, Mali was considered a growing African state and a success story for African democracy (Mann). Prior to the conflict, Mali was on track. So logically, upon its resolution, things may once again be made easier for the troubled African nation.

It must also be recognized that the Tuareg Rebellion and associated conflicts are not solely responsible for affecting food security in Mali. Climate change is a major factor that influences droughts in the Sahel region, putting the largely agricultural Mali at odds with the powerful force of climate change (Badal). Droughts in the Sahel, largely believed to be a result of climate change, can not necessarily be stopped or reversed at the time. However steps can be taken in communities to limit growing desertification by restoring irrigation in areas such as Lake Faguibine (Harding). Genetically modified crops can also promote more sustainable practices; innovations in adaptations for Mali's crops would make the harvest hardier and hopefully more plentiful. Population growth may be another issue for Mali in the coming years. With an age structure that over-represents youth, Mali may be in for a major population boom in the next decade (Central Intelligence Agency). This will unquestionably strain Mali's already difficult food situation. Dealing with this future situation requires preemptive planning that revolves around improving Mali's social institutions in order to better support its populace.

When faced with these future issues, as well as the current threat of extreme food crisis, it seems imperative that the current conflict in Mali be resolved. Currently, Mali is incapable of addressing the conflict, its military as of yet incapable of quelling this rebellion and its government unwilling to negotiate with the MNLA, the political body of the Tuareg rebels, who currently seek peace given that they keep their current borders. The MNLA, though seeking peace with the Republic of Mali, is currently at odds, having broken a pact with, Ansar Dine, the Islamist militant group (affiliated with Al-Qaeda) that wishes to impose strict Sharia (Palus). The MNLA is moderate, opposes terrorism, and is now opposed to the extremist group in Mali. If the MNLA's terms of an independent state of Azawad are agreed to, the conflict may be immediately resolved. Therefore, though it may not be the most desirable solution, negotiation with the MNLA and subsequent ousting of Ansar Dine is perhaps the most effective and possible solution for resolving the conflict and moving on to the urgency of the food crisis in Mali. Upon resolution of the conflict, the MDGs in Mali are more easily attainable. The way is opened for the region to receive food aid in a secure fashion, at least somewhat restoring food security. Medical care will also become available, and the currently deteriorating state of gender equality in the north would be eliminated with the ousting of Ansar Dine. The previously mentioned initiatives for irrigation and crop adaptation are perhaps the most viable to pursue to combat food insecurity in the country at this time in order to reach the MDG of improvements in food security. Such actions also progress toward achieving environmental sustainability. Proper irrigation in some regions of Mali restore devastated land within a mere year, so achieving this before 2015 is actually possible. Other initiatives that may be restored after the conflict is resolved include the "Fight for Girls" group that meets near Bamako in Mali, an initiative that strives to keep girls in school, a major problem in Mali, where girls are more likely to leave school early (Harilela). Such hopeful programs thrive off of a democratic government, and may be essential to furthering the MDGs for primary education and gender equality.

The most essential players in meeting this factor and resolving conflict are the governments and international organizations involved with the conflict now. The current Malian government needs to overcome its stubbornness and recognize that it cannot achieve a positive outcome on its own and must negotiate with the MNLA. This is entirely evident in that, in 52 years, there have been four Tuareg rebellions for independence and autonomy of Azawad (The World). The Tuareg people are persistent in their goals for self-determination, a democratic principle that Chapter 1, Article 1, Part 2 of the United Nations Charter states quite clearly as one of the organizations main purposes: "To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, and to take other appropriate measures to strengthen universal peace (The United Nations)."

Secondly, it is the responsibility of international mediation to resolve the situation. The United Nations is the most capable body for this. If the region is not secured, the Security Council should heed the African Union and other bodies' current pleas for intervention (Irish). Upon securing peace and stability in the region, the United Nations should organize a plebiscite in order to determine if the MNLA's pleas for autonomy are backed by the population of the Azawad region. This plebiscite, if successful should

determine the viability of Azawad as an independent state. Such actions taken by the international community should secure peace and democracy in the whole of Mali, as the MNLA supposedly seeks democracy. The people obviously would have a key role in determining the outcome, and the rural farm family, the majority of the population of Mali, would likely decide the fate of Azawad and Mali. Regardless of the outcome, the current conflict would resolve, and stability would be achieved under democratic principles, and Mali would be on track once again for achieving governance based on principles of democracy, accountability and transparency in public institutions, and the rule of law that are basic to reducing the number of vulnerable members of society. This change from the present would allow Mali to bring in the innovations of the international community as well as begin to address food concerns on its own, allowing it to reduce its food insecurity issues.

As said before, the proposed recommendation may be undesirable to many. However, if implemented through proper democratic processes, it meets the goal of restoring stability and democracy to Mali and allowing the country to come closer to restoring food security. The current cycle that persists in Mali is one of drought and food insecurity and its people suffer from the seemingly complete lack of change. A significant change may spark the needed steps for agricultural growth in Mali. It may cultivate the innovations necessary to feed the world of the Malian people. A renewal of freedom and democracy in the country may once again make it an African success story. Prospective business may once again move into Mali, curious of its potential resources for gold and oil. Such businesses will also return to operations in crops such as cotton and sugar. And regardless of the fears of some nations or the words of some leaders, this is entirely possible through the proposed recommendation. The perspective of this recommendation is mirrored in the eyes of Fatoumata Oylet Aybala, a women's leader at a refugee camp in Burkina Faso: "Once our leaders are in charge, once we have a country, a government and allies, then we'll be able to fight for the traditions and values of the Tuareg people" (The World). And the Tuareg desire an end to the conflict, a return to a normal lifestyle, and the freedom of their people. It isn't a fight of any serious amount of value or resources; it is a fight of ideology and independence. And a different kind of resolution may not only be the best way of stemming the chaos, but also of attaining freedom.

This examination of Mali's food crisis and Tuareg Rebellion were made in Summer 2012. However, the situation in Mali has not improved in any way, and is in fact escalating in the present. Ansar Dine has assumed control of the Azawad region and drought continues. Additionally, the Malian government considers military assault. United States Secretary of State Hillary Clinton says of the situation, "This is not only a humanitarian crisis; it is a powder keg that the international community cannot afford to ignore" (McClanahan). The urgency grows as reports of human rights abuses grow and cultural wonders like the mosques of Timbuktu are desecrated. And as the crisis wears on, refugees continue to flee and people continue to starve. Such increasing urgency only further justifies the proposed solution as the most sensible option. European spokesman for the MNLA, Mossa Ag Attaher, writes that the MNLA is "the only objective, credible and unavoidable ally in the struggle against the dark forces implanted" in Northern Mali (Radio Netherlands Worldwide). And one cannot help but to see Ag Attaher as the one who represents a just cause.

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