



Conflict in Focus

Burkina Faso

What happened in June? In what could amount to the deadliest attack on the army since anti-jihadist operations began in 2015, the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) reportedly killed on 11 June over 100 soldiers in an attack on a military base in Mansila town, Yagha province, Sahel region. The following day, artillery fire hit state television headquarters near the presidential residence in the capital Ouagadougou. Although President Ibrahim Traoré said a soldier had accidentally mishandled a weapon, unconfirmed rumours swirled that the Mansila attack had provoked an army mutiny. Attacks by security forces and jihadists causing mass civilian casualties continued.

Why does it matter? The 11 June attack and rumours of growing discontent within the armed forces serve as a stark reminder of Traoré's inability to halt jihadist violence and stop Burkina Faso's downward spiral. While the military government publicly insists that it is restoring security, the massacre at Mansila, as with other deadly attacks against the army in the weeks before, illustrates that it has thus far been unable to do so. The attack has exposed and fuelled divisions within the military, leading to speculation of threats to the regime's grip on power. Caught between jihadists and security forces, civilians are meanwhile paying a heavy price.

What to watch in the coming weeks and months? The government's security failures could threaten its survival. Long-standing divisions within the military are likely to become more prominent, and reports of budget shortages could mean that parts of the security forces are not being paid. President Traoré may increasingly rely on outside support from Africa Corps and Sahelian allies, especially Mali and Niger, to stay in power. Still, if the security situation continues to deteriorate at its current pace, a power struggle could erupt within the military, and lead to Traoré's ouster. A leadership vacuum could benefit jihadist groups and worsen an already catastrophic humanitarian crisis.

As they struggle to get a grip on security, the authorities are likely to continue their heavy-handed crackdown on dissent. They have banned almost all foreign broadcasters and blocked their websites for reporting on human rights groups' allegations that the security forces are responsible for slaughtering civilians. Some local media have also been banned. Critics of the military regime have been forcibly conscripted or disappeared. Repression will likely increase as the junta tries to bury reports of jihadist attacks on soldiers like the Mansila massacre. The recent extension of a general mobilisation decree means the government will continue to rely on forced conscription to suppress any critical voices.

Meantime, villagers across the country – especially in the Est, Centre-Est, Sahel, Centre-Nord, Nord, Boucle du Mouhoun regions – find themselves trapped between jihadist groups and security forces, both of which often use indiscriminate violence. Widespread displacement – with at least two million currently on the move – is unlikely to end soon as civilians fear returning to areas recently recaptured by the government for fear of persistent insecurity and as jihadists maintain a blockade on dozens of towns.

What should be done? Recognising that it will need popular support to defeat the jihadists, the government should place a much higher emphasis on protecting communities and curbing abuse within its ranks.

Western partners should continue to engage with the military regime in Ouagadougou in non-security sectors, particularly promoting social cohesion and community dialogue as part of an effort to convince the authorities of the utility of non-military solutions to insecurity. To ensure that massacres of civilians are not forgotten or silenced by state-controlled media, Western partners should also make public statements whenever large-scale massacres are committed by one of the parties to the conflict.

Western partners should also continue to help humanitarian actors and relevant ministries provide humanitarian assistance to populations in need, notably internally displaced people, that are an estimated 10 per cent of a total population of 22 million.