

LiveAtState on Threats to Civilian Security in Africa

with Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights

Sarah Sewall

**May 5, 2016
Washington, D.C.**

MR BENTON: Welcome to LiveAtState, the State Department's interactive online video platform for engaging with international media. I am your host, David Benton. I'm delighted to welcome journalists and media representatives joining us today from around the world. I'd like to give a special shout-out to watch parties joining us from U.S. embassies and consulates in Conakry, Lagos, Kigali, and Kinshasa.

Today, we'll be speaking with Under Secretary for Civilian Security and Democracy and Human Rights Sarah Sewall about threats to civilian security in Africa and her recent trip to Guinea and Mali. But first, I would like to make a few housekeeping notes.

We are providing simultaneous interpretation of this event in French and Portuguese. If you would like to listen to this discussion in either of those languages, please dial in to the phone numbers provided on the bottom left side of your screen. You can begin submitting your questions right now in the space at the bottom of your screen entitled "Questions for State Department official." If you have difficulty submitting your questions, you may email them to liveatstate.gov.

We welcome your questions and we will try to get as many as possible in the time we have. Please note that we can only accept questions in English. If you would like to engage on these topics after today's program, you may follow Under Secretary Sewall at her Twitter account @CivSecAtState.

With that, let's get started. Under Secretary Sewall, welcome, and please begin with your opening remarks.

UNDER SECRETARY SEWALL: Thank you so much and thank you, everyone, for joining us. I'm really honored to have a chance to talk with you about some of the work that we've been doing here at the State Department in Africa and the role that so many of the issues that we work on within the J under secretariat here at State bear upon the future for Africans.

I've had the privilege since I've been in this job for a little over two years of visiting a large number of African countries. I'm going to read them because I'll forget them, but Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Nigeria, Djibouti, Zambia, Somalia, Tanzania, Uganda, and more recently, Mali and Guinea. And I'm reminded whenever I go to Africa of the – President Obama's recent comments that Africa is on the move and that Africa has enormous contributions to make to the global community and great strides to make in its own progress and success. When I go to Africa, I see some of the challenges that still impede that success, that slow that

movement, and that's really the focus of much of what I look at when I'm in different countries on the continent.

The first of those that I want to just touch on briefly is the threat of violent extremism. It's no secret that much of Africa, both in the east and in the west of the continent, is challenged by violent extremist groups from AQIM to Boko Haram. We've seen that conflict and violent extremism in general has extremely negative effects. It harms people, it erodes economies, it can undermine governance, and it also can take advantage of weak governance. And this is an issue of great concern to the United States and to our partners in Africa and a real focus of our partnership with African nations.

A second area in which progress will really shape the future of the continent is the role of women and girls. In far too many places in Africa, women and girls – they face inequality but they face something far more brutal. They face violence and real degradation, whether it's through female genital mutilation and cutting, which is a severe threat to their health; whether it is sexual violence committed either by intimate friends or family or by security forces operating in the name of the state; whether it's early enforced child marriage, which prevents girls from getting an education and contributing to the economic future of African nations.

So this is another area of great concern to the United States and a real focus on my trips. And related to that is, in general, the problems of impunity within African nations. Many times, whether it is sexual violence against women or other forms of crime, there is a perception of impunity. And so the United States wants to work with African nations to try to address those justice deficits which are so important. The rule of law is important for economic progress, but the rule of law is also important for social and political progress, and that's another area of focus on my trip.

So those are really three key issues that I talk to people in African countries about and work with governments to try to address, because I believe that progress in these areas is really critical to Africa making those strides and making the contributions that so clearly, as President Obama, it has the possibility of making. Thank you.

MR BENTON: Thank you very much, Under Secretary. I'd like to encourage our listeners, viewers to go ahead and submit their questions right now using the chat function on your computer screens.

We do have a question here we'd like to pose to you. You addressed it somewhat in your opening remarks, but it has to do with the difference between violent extremism in Africa versus, say, violent extremism in the Middle East. Can you comment on that?

UNDER SECRETARY SEWALL: Sure. The – violent extremism takes many forms and violent extremism doesn't know a particular religion or a particular ethnicity or a particular geographic region of the world. There are many variations of violent extremism in Africa, and some have echoes and connections to the forms of violent extremism in the Middle East and elsewhere, but some are very much rooted in alliances with local conflicts and local grievances that give them a particular form and salience within Africa. We've seen that Boko Haram's

recent declaration that it has become an ISIL affiliate gives it a particular connection to ISIL in the Middle East. We've seen AQIM in Mali maintains its ties with al-Qaida. And so these are examples of the ways in which African violent extremism can be linked to violent extremism networks that originate in the Middle East. But they definitely, in the forms of recruitment and in the forms of identifying local grievances to prey upon, identifying vulnerable youth to recruit, they certainly take a particular form depending on the country or the region in which they are occurring, and that's certainly true in Africa.

MR BENTON: Thank you for your answer. We do have – a question has come in from our consulate in Lagos from Victor Asije. He's with the News Agency of Nigeria. He poses this question: "What would the U.S. Government recommend to the United Nations and national governments for the prevention of sexual violence during conflicts?"

UNDER SECRETARY SEWALL: Thanks for that question, Victor. Fortunately, the United Nations is already working on sexual violence in conflict. I had the privilege of traveling to Mali and Guinea with the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Sexual Violence in Conflict Zainab Bangura. Her office was created several years ago as the world watched in concern as security forces around the world, armed groups, were increasingly using sexual violence – predominately against women but also against men. We've seen examples of that throughout the continent, including markedly in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Her office was created – her role was created to try to address this growing problem.

We, the United States, have joined with many others in providing financial support for her office. My travel to Mali and Guinea was to provide political and moral support for her important work. And for example, in Mali we spoke to the government about the need for justice for sexual violence perpetrated by all sides in the conflict in Mali in the north in 2011 – 2012 and 2013.

And when we were in Guinea, we spoke to the president and to the minister of justice about their very important work going forward to address impunity from a very significant case of both widespread violence but also sexual violence – the stadium massacre of September 28, 2009 in which over 150 people were murdered by security forces as they were nonviolently protesting political issues and over 100 people were publicly gang-raped. That searing experience in Guinea demands justice. And the Special Representative Bangura and I are very pleased to be supporting the work of the justice minister as he has moved toward indictments. And we discussed with the government the need to bring those responsible to trial, which will be a significant challenge, but an important milestone in African nations' ability to address impunity for sexual violence.

It's very important that African nations take these opportunities to show that their governments can provide justice for the victims, so that it's not simply left to international organizations. And the president was very firm in expressing his desire that Guinea itself show that it could end impunity for such crimes.

MR. BENTON: Very good. Thank you for that. And we – this is another question coming from Guinea. In fact, it's coming from Youssouf Bah. He's with Al Jazeera in Guinea. He

poses the following: “Do you have any plan to help Guinea to fight human rights abuse? Do you have any time limit expectation in this fight?”

UNDER SECRETARY SEWALL: Thank you, Youssouf, for the question. Guinea is recovering from a number of enormous shocks, not just the period of political violence and instability to which I just referred, the 2009 period. It is coming into a period where it has had successful elections, but the state itself is still underdeveloped. And the Ebola crisis, of course, further set back the efforts to strengthen the role of the state, governance, and economic progress.

So we remain concerned about the progress on the human rights front in Guinea and we express these concerns to the president. He shares them, and he is very eager to strengthen the justice system, to professionalize the police and the security forces, to improve services throughout the country, and particularly important to him is to jumpstart economic development. The point that he made, that of course is rational, which is you can’t do everything automatically when you’re coming from a position of very weak governance and institutions – that’s very valid. That only recommits the United States to partner with Guinea to urge them to take steps and to provide material support to strengthen their justice system, to professionalize their security forces.

So there’s not a timetable, per se. There’s great urgency on the part of the people of Guinea, who expressed a great desire for an end to impunity and economic development progress. That is shared by the government. And I think here it’s a question of capacity building, where the U.S. and other international partners and international organizations can and should do more to help Guinea in its very promising but still early path toward progress on so many of these fronts.

MR. BENTON: Thank you, Under Secretary. The next question is comprehensive. It’s from Chukwudi Nweje. He’s with Independent Newspapers in Nigeria. “Going by the definition of violent extremism as the belief and support or use of violence to achieve ideological, religious, or political goals, what are your views on the following case studies?” He’s got three cases.

UNDER SECRETARY SEWALL: Oh, goodness, Chukwudi. I’m going to have to write them down. Okay.

QUESTION: The first one is Boko Haram terrorists; the second is the Fulani herdsmen invading communities in southern Nigeria; and the third is the onslaught against the indigenous peoples of Biafra in southeast Nigeria.

UNDER SECRETARY SEWALL: That’s a great question, and what you’re really getting at is that while violent extremism in the form of international terror networks captures the attention of much of the world and certainly is a primary focus of the – and concern of the United States right now, violence takes many different forms. And the ability of any state – the United States; Nigeria, in the case of your question – to prevent, to respond to, and to punish violence when it is used against people in a criminal way for whatever purpose, whether it meets a terror definition under international law, whether it meets a violent extremism definition as you’ve just offered, or whether it simply constitutes criminal violence, as many of the examples you offered suggest they might, violence is a huge problem. And it can impede community cohesion. It can prevent international investment and local economic development. It can erode trust and people’s sense

of faith in a future in their countries. And it can cause people to feel that violence is the only route towards securing their own security and future.

These are enormous challenges for any government. We struggle with violence in the United States. Countries like Nigeria, that have perhaps fewer resources and are less capable of providing an effective police presence throughout the country, face even greater challenges. But violence in any form is a problem. Violence when it has international roots and international implications is a particular problem.

But I think the subtext of your question is is the United States concerned about violence against civilians and citizens wherever it occurs, and the answer absolutely is yes. And there we have to address government capability, government political will and commitment, issues like corruption within security forces, issues like corruption within judicial systems. These are enormous challenges, and these are challenges that we work on all over the globe with nations, but certainly in many of our partnerships with Africa, to include Nigeria.

MR BENTON: Thank you. Our next question is from Kevin Kelly, who writes for Kenya's Nation Media Group. He asks: "How do you assess the influence of ISIS in Somalia? Is it establishing a significant presence? If so, what does that suggest for the future of al-Shabaab? Is an internal armed conflict possible?"

UNDER SECRETARY SEWALL: Thanks for the question. Is – the last part of it was "is an internal armed conflict possible?"

MR BENTON: "Is an internal armed conflict possible?"

UNDER SECRETARY SEWALL: I'm not sure I understand that, but let me talk a little bit about al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab has long roots within Somalia, and it has been, I think, a real scourge throughout not just Somalia but increasingly the neighboring countries. As the international community and many key African states joined to push al-Shabaab out of Mogadishu and began to create some areas of stability within Somalia, al-Shabaab exploited seams, weaknesses, and local grievances in neighboring countries, particularly along the Swahili-speaking coast, but also in areas of northeastern Kenya, where we've seen a resurgence of attacks in Kenya – in the Garissa case in particular.

So al-Shabaab has local roots, where the Islamic courts had joined with AQIM elements, and the desire that the ISIL global network has to penetrate and compete with existing insurgencies and civil conflicts is always a real possibility that we have to be careful of. But the reality is al-Shabaab is already struggling with the need to maintain its relevance in the face of the UN's commitment to a peacekeeping mission there. And so the threat that al-Shabaab poses is very real, independent of ISIL's desires to establish itself in Somalia. So here, as in all cases, the United States and the international community remains alert to ISIL penetration, but it is already seized with the threat posed by al-Shabaab, and we will continue to focus on the current threat, even as we seek to contain it and prevent it from spreading.

MR BENTON: Thank you. Our next question: “How do you see the challenges of the peacekeeping operations in places like Mali? How can they better protect civilian populations while carrying out their mandate?”

UNDER SECRETARY SEWALL: It’s a great question, because UN peacekeeping operations have been asked in recent years to take on very significant responsibilities. Their mandates, as passed by the UN Security Council, often include language that asks them to protect civilians. And yet we have consistently seen that most of these peacekeeping missions – and I would include the mission in Mali – remain under-resourced in the context of the territory that they are asked to secure and the number of people that they are asked to protect. And that is a significant problem in Mali and, frankly, across the globe.

One of the things that I heard when I was in Mali is that the UN force there needed to do more. And one of the messages that I heard from the UN mission is that it needed more resources and more forces in order to be able to carry out its mandate. This is an enduring tension. I think that the role of the government in Mali and the role played by citizens in demanding more from UN forces has to be balanced with a recognition of the constraints that they face in terms of their troop numbers, how they’re deployed, the kind of mobility that they have, instead of simply looking at their mandate. And I spent a fair amount of time seeking to explain to the obviously frustrated population within Mali the limits that the UN force, in fact, faced.

I think it’s incumbent upon the international community to continually seek to improve the capability of UN peacekeepers. And indeed, this was the focus of President Obama’s engagement at the United Nations last September when we hosted a peacekeeping summit to strengthen contributions to UN peacekeeping, to urge more capable military forces to become committed to conducting peacekeeping operations, and to otherwise offer our own support to strengthen that capability.

But it’s a work in progress. Right now, the UN force in Mali plays an incredibly important role, but it does not play the role that many of us would like to see it play in ensuring peace. This is a responsibility for the government as well as UN peacekeepers, and it’s one that we’ll have to keep working on.

MR BENTON: Thank you. I’d like to remind our viewers to ask questions by submitting them right in your – the lower part of your computer monitors. We still have time for additional questions. And our next question is coming from the viewing party at the U.S. consulate in Lagos, Nigeria. The questioner is Thomas Uzuakpundu, and he’s with Smooth FM in Lagos, radio: “What is the U.S. doing” – it’s a two-part question. “What is the U.S. doing to prevent civilian casualties in armed conflicts?” And then secondly: “What is the U.S. doing with tracks or trails of financial transactions towards terrorism financing?”

UNDER SECRETARY SEWALL: Great questions, Thomas. Let me take them in turn. A lot of my work prior to coming to government was spent researching and seeking to improve the U.S. ability when it used military force to minimize civilian casualties pursuant to our international obligations under international humanitarian law or the law of armed conflict. And this is a commitment that the U.S. is firmly and historically grounded in, and it’s one that I’m

proud of U.S. military efforts to ensure that they abide by not only the rule of law, but that they continue to do everything that they can in terms of technology, tactics, techniques and procedures, and institutional learning to minimize civilian harm when they conduct military operations. That doesn't mean they don't make mistakes.

A great example, as I'm sure you're aware of, was the bombing by U.S. military forces of medical facilities in Afghanistan, I believe. But a very important case in which we admitted – the United States Government admitted to significant mistakes that it had made. So that kind of self-criticism and constant desire to learn and to update the way we conduct military operations characterizes the U.S. use of force. It's part of President Obama's commitment to increased transparency and accountability of how it conducts counterterrorism operations worldwide.

The way we work with partners is to encourage them to do the same. And in some cases, we have provided specific technical assistance to partners conducting military operations to help them provide more accuracy in their targeting and to reduce the number of civilians that they may inadvertently harm in the conduct of their military operations. So it's both a serious commitment to what we do and a commitment and willingness to help partners that we have improve their own performance.

In terms of tracking terror finance, this is an area that we've been working on for some time as part of our commitment to attacking global criminal networks. But we've increased it significantly since 9/11, because we've recognized the importance of finance for sustaining global terror networks. And in particular, I think the work of the Justice and Treasury Departments – not only in tracking terrorist sources, but in building an international ability of many nations and international organizations to cut off terror financing – I think is one of perhaps the unsung success stories of the recent decade.

There's obviously more to be done, because terrorists are very adaptive and technology moves very swiftly. And so the combination of encryption and money movement means that we are always seeking to catch up in terms of looking at where assets are hidden, how financing is laundered, and how we can bring people to justice for criminal activity. But I think there has been significant progress made, and it's certainly an area in which the U.S. will continue to invest its efforts. Because terrorism financing is a key reason why civilians suffer and die throughout the world, and so it's actually a very important, if often unrecognized, part of civilian protection efforts.

MR BENTON: Thank you. Our next question is from the U.S. Embassy in Conakry, Mamadou Diallo with Groupe Lynx-Lance. Here's the question: "During conflicts we see that sexual violence has become a means to conduct war. In reaction, Western nations condemn these acts. Are they enough to put an end to the violence? What else can be done?"

UNDER SECRETARY SEWALL: It's a great question. I mean, I think the first point that comes to mind, in light of your important observation that words are not enough, is that the international community needs to address the sexual violence that has been conducted in the name of the United Nations by blue-helmeted peacekeepers. This is an issue that has gained widespread attention within the UN system at the United Nations, and I think is finally beginning

to prompt some very important changes in the way that national contingents are trained and held accountable. One of the challenges for the United Nations is that it is essentially drawing on national contributions of troops for peacekeeping and national governments are responsible for punishing troops when they commit criminal acts, to include sexual violence. But I think the spotlight on these very egregious and heartbreaking cases where blue-helmeted peacekeepers have committed sexual violence, I think the spotlight on those activities is finally putting pressure on national governments to do a better job of screening and punishing those – the handful of elements that unfortunately tar UN peacekeeping by their egregious crimes.

We obviously have to do more. Most of what the United States has done through a number of initiatives that I'm very proud of, such as the sexual accountability initiative – most of what we have done is really focused on ending impunity for these crimes. But more needs to be done to prevent the crimes from happening in the first place. Their clarity about expectations of those who wear a uniform and conduct security operations is really important. It's mostly a national responsibility, but the U.S. does provide training for many national contingents of military and police forces to make them more aware of their responsibilities and ways they can contribute to preventing sexual violence in conflict.

We've also spent a significant amount of money – some \$30 to \$40 million – in helping to enhance protections for those who have been displaced. We fund the United Nations refugee organization as well as other UN entities to help protect the most vulnerable people who are internally displaced or who are refugees from sexual violence in conflict. Those are two examples of how the U.S. is working concretely to seek to do more than simply condemn these acts.

MR BENTON: Thank you. We have one more question: “You have said before that female genital mutilation is not just about the physical safety of women and girls, but their empowerment more broadly. What do you mean by that?”

UNDER SECRETARY SEWALL: Women have – girls and women have to be able to live their lives as human beings just like boys and men. That means that they need to have their health and physical integrity, which means that cutting them and mutilating them in ways that jeopardize their health and their futures cannot be excused as a tradition or a cultural practice. It also means that women and girls have to be able to fulfil their futures by attending school. And when they are shamed, when they are segregated, when they are subject to some of the practices that accompany female genital mutilation and cutting, they will not be able to realize their full potential and contribute to the future of their nations.

So some of the questions that I've heard when I travel to Africa, when I'm in countries such as Guinea that have enormously high rates of female genital mutilation and cutting – some 95 or more percent of the girls are subject to this horrific violence – sometimes people say, well, it's just a cultural practice, it's just a tradition. And I like to point out that there are many people in the United States that would have pointed to fundamental human rights violations, such as the practice of slavery, as being a cultural practice or a tradition. And I like to point out that one of the most important elements of being human is our ability to expand our notion of what it means to be human and to recognize that humanity and human rights accompany the existence of being

human, whether you are white, black, brown, yellow, whether you are male or female, regardless of the religion that you practice.

These are ways in which we've evolved as an international community. And to me it seems so fundamentally basic that girls and women should be given the same rights and protections as any other human being. And this is a significant challenge in places where tradition sometimes mitigates against that. Part of this is education – helping people understand that mutilation and cutting of girls and adult women is not – is not only not a safe practice, it's a very harmful practice, and it's one that fundamentally changes people for the rest of their lives. It's something that the President and the Secretary of State have spoken out as being a practice that Africans can and must shed as they move into the modern world and realize their full success. And I'm committing to doing everything I can to help educate men and women about the harmful effects of this practice and to talk about the need to really bring and put at the forefront of national development women and girls, because this is good for communities, this is obviously good for the women and girls, it's good for families, and it's essential to the future progress of Africa. Thank you.

MR BENTON: Thank you. Well, that's all the time we have for today. Thank you for your questions and thank you, Under Secretary Sewall, for being here.

UNDER SECRETARY SEWALL: Thanks for having me.

MR BENTON: We will be sending you audio and video files as well as a transcript of today's program once they become available. Again, if you would like to continue to engage these issues, we recommend that you follow Under Secretary Sewall at her Twitter handle @CivSecAtState.

Well, we hope you will join us again for another Live at State program soon. Until then, good day.

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