

"Sahel: Gadaffi's Bequest to Region"

A UN mission to Libya's neighbours warns that the wave of returnees is increasing social tension and the risk of more terrorism

A report to the United Nations Security Council paints an alarming picture of Sahelian countries being severely stressed by the 420,000 returnees who have fled Libya since the beginning of the uprising there. Some of them were armed - and have fuelled the Mali revolt (see Mali: Libyan arms fuel Tuareg revolt) - and others have been spreading Libyan weapons through the region.

The UN's interagency mission went to the Sahel in December, speaking to politicians, civil servants and soldiers. They found that most of the weapons which had flowed out of Libya with some of the returnees ranged from rifles up to small-calibre anti-aircraft cannon mounted on pick-up trucks. In Niger, the government told the mission, one border operation captured 645 kilogrammes of Semtex explosive and 445 detonators, which officials said had been intended for Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb.

Niamey was particularly worried by the inroads AQIM was making in the south of the country, capitalising on disaffection among young people, and its linking up with Nigeria's Jama'atu Ahlus Sunnah Lidda'Awati Wal Jihad, better known as Boko Haram, to train some of its militants in Mali last summer. The report said that although Nigeria regarded Boko Haram as a domestic problem only, other governments in the region were becoming increasingly worried by a possible convergence with AQIM. Seven members of Boko Haram were arrested while transiting Niger to Mali carrying documents on making explosives, propaganda leaflets, and names and contact details of AQIM members, Nigerien officials said.

The report also notes that at least two new jihadist groups have been set up. They are Ansar Eddin (Supporters of the Religion), founded in December 2011 by Iyad ag Ghali, leader of the 1991 Tuareg revolt in Mali (AC Vol 41 No 2, Rallying), and the Mouvement pour l'unicité et le Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest. Governments also told the UN mission that shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles may have left Libya but there was no hard evidence. Many parts of Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Nigeria have been overwhelmed by the Libyan refugees. In the absence of UN and other relief aid, some assistance came from AQIM, the mission was told, with obvious implications for potential recruitment and popular support.

Boosting military budgets

Faced with such security challenges, many governments cut spending on basic services in favour of increased military spending. This is something against which the UN report strongly recommends, for fear of increasing support for the extremists. The report quotes the International Organisation for Migration as saying that each returnee used to

support seven people while working in Libya. The regions they are returning to must cope not only with a massive influx but also with the loss of remittances. The returnees are 95% male, are mainly poorly-educated and aged 20-40, and all lost their savings during their escape. In 2010, ten million people faced a serious food crisis in the region and 859,000 children had to be treated for severe malnutrition, says the report. It adds that the 2012 harvest is expected to be poor.

The report says it is 'essential to address the sense of abandonment felt by the population closer to border areas, who often regard themselves as forgotten outcasts'. Yet Niger has increased its defence budget by 65%, while Nigeria has set aside more than 20% of its budget to fight Boko Haram. Probably the most advanced of the measures adopted to deal with the problems is northern Mali's Programme spécial pour la paix, la sécurité et le développement du nord Mali, a pet project of the outgoing President, Amadou Toumani Touré (AC Vol 52 No 24, Presidential poll wide open & Enemies in the north). The UN mission, however, reported local concern about poor management, failure to involve the local community and an overemphasis on security. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Internal Security and Civilian Protection, in conjunction with the UN Development Programme, has launched a similar programme, Gouvernance partagée de la sécurité et de la paix au Mali, but with no coordination with its northern counterpart, critics told the mission.

The report identified many areas of cooperation and expertise that need to be developed in the region and not just within the Economic Community of West African States (which does not include Algeria, Chad or Mauritania). While it is second nature for terrorists and organised crime networks to operate across borders and jurisdictions, the report makes it clear that the regional and cooperative mechanisms to combat them lag far behind. Structures are available, the report says, such as the counter-terrorist Continental Early Warning System to which all the regional countries subscribe, but it did not indicate how effective this was as a forum.

Less encouraging is the fact that in 2008, African ministers of justice adopted a Convention on Exploitation and Mutual Legal Assistance in Counter-terrorism but it remains unratified. The Ecowas Small Arms Control Programme, already mired in political controversy (AC Vol 53 No 3, Jobs for the boys) is 'deemed ineffective', the report says. Its most urgent recommendations were for the UN to increase its own security presence and to support and strengthen the Global Counter-terrorism Forum Sahel Working Group.