Navigating Troubled Waters

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Antonia Pup



The Impact of Europe's Withdrawal from the Sahel Region

With the European Humanitarian Forum taking place from the 18th to the 19th of March, EU Humanitarian engagement will be under increased scrutiny. Humanitarian aid and security cooperation are two main pillars of EU foreign policy. The Sahel region is of particular focus in this regard. The region is very susceptible to the impact of climate change and suffers from an unstable security environment.

In the past years, the EU has invested considerable resources in the region. On the one hand, EU member states, especially France, had a considerable military presence in the region. The French-led Mission

Barkhane, which had the goal of actively fighting insurgents in the region, numbered around 3000 personnel. Other missions such as the European Training Mission, or the UN-led MINUSMA operation in Mali contributed to stability through regular patrols.

The second pillar of EU engagement in the Sahel region is humanitarian aid. Since 2014, the EU has spent an estimated 8 billion € in humanitarian aid and security assistance to the Sahel region to respond to food shortages, climate change adaptation and education among other things.

However, since 2021, the Sahel region has seen a wave of military coup d'états that have toppled the civilian-led governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. Since the new military juntas took control of these countries, the security cooperation with the West has quickly deteriorated. The military junta in Mali demanded to end the UN mission MINUSMA. Under this mission, European forces, especially Germany, had large contingents of troops. The roughly 1500 German forces had to be quickly withdrawn after relations with the military junta deteriorated. In total, European countries had to withdraw around 7400 troops since the wave of military coup d'états in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Instead of relying on European partners for their security, the military juntas reportedly started cooperation with the Russian mercenary group Wagner.

Overall, the security environment seems to be deteriorating since the military takeovers. With at least 7,800 civilian deaths in the first seven months of 2023, the death toll of civilians has significantly increased in comparison to the years before the military juntas took over. International observers state that the deteriorating security environment had a significant impact on the hunger crisis in 2022. The Sahel region saw around 35 million people affected by the food crisis. This is a 230% increase compared to the 2015-2020 average. As a response, the EU has increased its humanitarian assistance, but the unstable security environment makes implementation of this assistance more and more difficult.

The military coup d'états have severely diminished the influence of European countries in the region and has worsened the security situation. This has led to an increased need for humanitarian assistance. During a time when public attention is focused on other severe global crises, it is important not to forget about the Sahel region as a critical region for European security. This is also what one expects in the aftermath of this year's European Humanitarian Forum.

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