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## **Working Group on Space, Security & Defence**

### **Humanitarian Help in the Sahel Zone**

Statement of **Agnes VENEMA**, Programme Coordinator EastHumanitarian Help in the Sahel ZoneWest Institute / Parliamentarians Network for Conflict Prevention

"Dear Sir, Madam,

I would like to thank the previous speakers for their interesting points.

Though the Sahel is a difficult region to describe, with no one country falling entirely into this region and with many influencing states surrounding the actual Sahel, it remains a fact that it is one of the poorest and least developed regions in the world, where democratic progress is slow. Many point towards underdevelopment as an underlying cause for the region's problems: Failing agricultural systems resulting in food shortages even in years of relatively good harvest are not uncommon and the problem is exacerbated by climate change impacting a region already confronted with regular droughts.

Foreign policy of Western states, particularly the EU and the USA, tend to focus on the region as one on the brink disaster, in terms of civil strife, conflict and radicalization, which in part is due to lacking governance structures in many countries falling in this region. The lack of effective border control in the Sahel region has led to concerns over an influx of weaponry and has many Western governments fear that this region is a breeding ground for terrorists.

The former, however, is a much bigger risk than the latter and if issues of economic prosperity are not adequately addressed, resorting to terrorism might just become one more stable source of income, rather than trying ones hand at failing agriculture one season after another. It is therefore imperative that trade and development aid is committed on a long-term approach, resulting in a more stable economy, thereby increasing the development of the entire region.

New policies are needed to ensure sufficient food and water supplies are available in the future; the lack of these basic needs do not only constitute a violation of the most basic rights, but resource scarcity also forms a source for potential armed conflict. This is where the water-food-energy nexus needs to be further examined; whereas food and water are both essential for human survival, water is a basic necessity for agricultural processes, such as raising crops and farming animals. Energy is needed in order to have water sources available in remote and arid areas in the Sahel region and is a prerequisite for ensuring this water is of usable quality. They are, therefore, inter-dependable and can hardly be viewed as separate commodities.

Now that the needs have been identified, it is important to look for those who can bring about change. Generally speaking three major groups can address these issues: national governments in the region, G20 governments and investors, both individuals and consortia. Given the often lacking governance structures in many countries situated in the Sahel, the G20 countries are best situated to provide leadership in undertaking programs which connect these diverse policy areas with sufficient urgency. Consortia are still hesitant to invest in countries with political instability, although we do see increased interest from, for example, Chinese investors, whereas the Europeans are generally speaking more cautious. And whereas there is a lot of expertise within international organizations, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), their capacity to deal with such an interconnected problem is small, as their work is often times fragmented and highly specialized, lacking the overview and cross-cutting approach which is needed.

Policies focused on increasing nation's resilience – the capacity to deal with imminent change, such as that cause by climate change – have the potential to diminish the need for traditional aid and the dependency this creates and can increase self-reliance in the face of the diverse challenges which need to be faced. Many countries and communities struggle with responses to current climate threats,



regardless of the prospective climate change threats of the future. Certain developing countries or poor communities faced with recurring large-scale disasters (heavy flooding, persistent drought, typhoons/hurricanes, massive earthquakes, wide-spread disease, etc.) find it almost impossible to rebuild before facing new disasters or their consequences. These communities have little interest in complex and obscure arguments about the uncertainty of future climate change or elaborate plans for future climate change adaptation that will be handled through notoriously slow and inefficient mechanisms for delivering international economic assistance. For these communities, and for many others, reliance on building national resilience can provide a more compelling line of policy engagement even as it prepares them for the consequences of climate change.

Priority for such policies must be given to strengthening the resilience of developing countries which face the largest challenges in terms of security of water, food and energy, as these challenges create socio-economic problems of the dimensions which can become politically destabilizing. The ultimate goal ought to be to achieve sustainable responses to resource scarcity, climate threats and natural hazards.

Achieving this goal can only be done by focusing on short-, medium-, and long-term measures, such as:

1. Strengthening relevant scientific research and linking it more effectively and consistently to policy development (through more intense sharing of information)
2. Empowering national and local actors, with special emphasis on women, youth, and institutions, for greater leadership in climate adaptation (forging partnerships)
3. Implementing innovative development finance based on each country's unique needs
4. Promoting linkages between national and international private sector actors, especially through renewed efforts to integrate the private sector more closely into existing international organizations with roles in water and food security
5. Mobilizing the private sector, community leaders, and civil society organizations for education about resilience needs
6. Strengthening innovation and technology transfer, especially at local levels

The international community is increasingly integrating threats from non-traditional sources (like scarcity of water and food) into broader strategic security concerns. However, up to this point, the G20 nations have hardly conferred on non-traditional security threats, for example water security and national security linkages. Food security was addressed in the first ever meeting of G20 Agriculture Ministers in June 2011.

At the global policy level, there are still fundamental disagreements over global resources and how to manage them. For example, is water really a human right or 'just' an economic commodity? Within the global resource and security community, consensus does not exist. Moreover, there is a void in global leadership, inhibiting concerted action towards common goals.

If we are to adequately address the humanitarian situation in the Sahel, we ought to move away from thinking in traditional security paradigms and our focus on the potential of this region to become a terrorist safe haven. Instead, we ought to focus on the water-food-energy nexus and the viability of economic life in the Sahel. Assisting governments in becoming more resilient and to better 'arm' themselves against the whims of nature will diminish the risk of political instability and deteriorating socio-economic circumstances. If we take away the tinder, a spark will no longer set an entire region alight. We, however, need leadership and initiative to come together globally on how to manage resources and in order to move forward towards increasing resilience, both in the Sahel as well as globally.

Thank you."

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