

The Sahel Resists: A History of Exploitation and Struggle for Liberation

The Sahel's humanitarian crisis is a direct consequence of complex interactions between neocolonial economic systems, armed conflict, and climate change. Despite its vast natural wealth, the region continues to suffer from extreme poverty, hunger, and violence, largely due to systemic economic exploitation by foreign powers and multinational corporations.

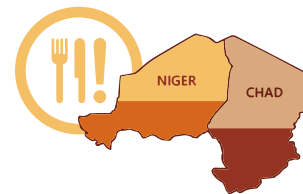
Throughout the Sahel, people face:



High youth unemployment rates and some of the world's lowest GDP per capita.



Food insecurity is reaching as high as **30-40%** in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso.



Up to 40% of Niger and Chad facing malnutrition.

Compounded by climate change-induced desertification, drought, and floods, leading to reduced agricultural productivity, millions of people are dependent on food imports that are vulnerable to market fluctuations.

Violent conflicts involving jihadist groups, insurgencies, and foreign military presence have forced millions of people to flee their homes. More than 20 armed groups — including the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS) and Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) — are killing thousands of civilians. In Burkina Faso alone, **nearly 1,000 civilians were killed** in 2020. 3.5 million were displaced by 2021, a fourfold increase within a year. 3 million Malians are in **need of humanitarian assistance**, while Niger, Mauritania, and Senegal are hosting growing refugee populations as people flee the violence.



Extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances are widespread. In Mali alone, more than **300 extrajudicial killings** took place in 2020.

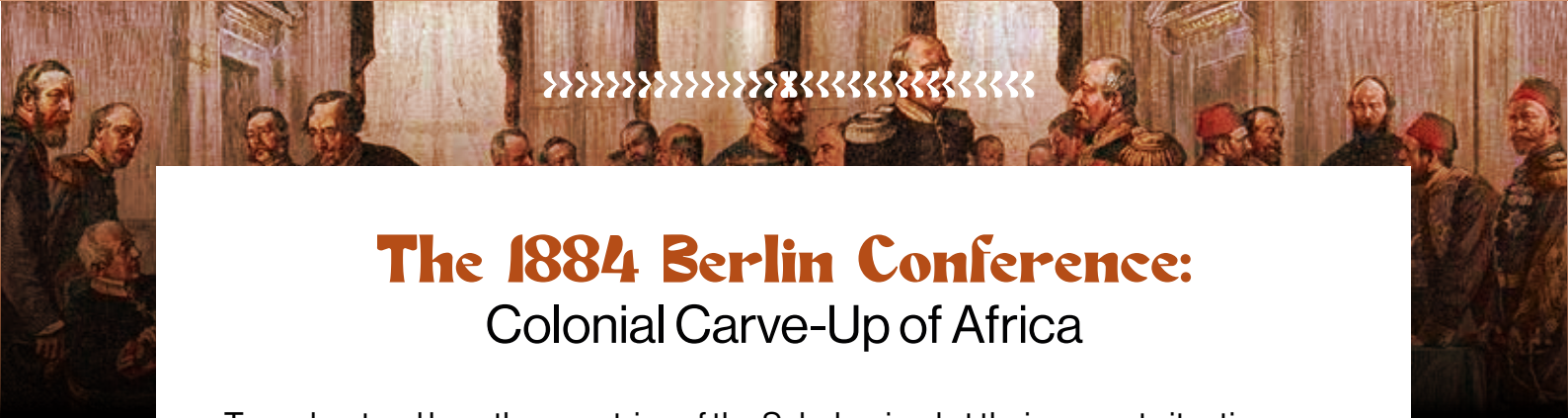


2 million women and children are affected by **sexual and gender-based violence** in the region.



Human rights violations and security constraints put aid workers at risk (10 were killed in 2020 alone), hindering humanitarian aid missions.

Tackling the crisis will require dismantling exploitative economic structures, promoting sustainable development, improving security, and ensuring that aid can reach those most in need. Only through these measures can the Sahel begin to break free from the cycle of dependency and hardship that has plagued it for decades.



The 1884 Berlin Conference: Colonial Carve-Up of Africa

To understand how the countries of the Sahel arrived at their current situation, we must return to the beginning — the 1884 Berlin Conference. [Belgium played a key role](#) in Europe's colonization of Africa, with [King Leopold II's Congo policy](#) directly prompting European countries to take a firm and decisive stance on their Africa ambitions, swiftly seizing their share of the spoils.

The Scramble for Africa wasn't only initiated by France, set on colonial expansion after its [defeat in the 1870 Franco-Prussian War](#); it was Britain that shifted the balance of power by occupying the international protectorate of Egypt. This prompted other European nations to intervene in African affairs — even [Otto von Bismarck](#) changed his previously anti-colonial stance and declared German protection over Togo and Cameroon.

The 1884 [Berlin Conference](#) was convened to resolve disputes among colonial powers, all of whom claimed the meeting's purpose was humanitarian: to develop Africa, spread civilization, combat slavery, and ensure freedom of navigation on African rivers.

However, in reality, they gathered to set common principles for organizing colonial plunder and to avoid conflict among themselves.



Thus, the revelation of King Leopold's ambitions in the Congo ignited the spread of European colonialism across Africa. Although the Berlin Conference sought to regulate relations among colonial powers through defined legal principles, in practice, it merely accelerated the colonial rush across the continent, hence the common expression: the colonial "Scramble" for Africa.

France hastened to seize the Ivory Coast; Britain took control of Nigeria and Botswana, and dominated southern Africa through the efforts of Cecil Rhodes, who founded the [British South Africa Company](#) in 1889 to exploit the region's gold mines.

The Role of Imperialism and Neocolonialism in the Sahel

The Sahel has for centuries stood at the crossroads of global ambitions, **a region where imperialism first planted its brutal roots and where neocolonialism continues to shape destinies long after the lowering of colonial flags.**

From the violent partitioning of Africa at the Berlin Conference to the military bases of today, foreign powers have treated the Sahel not as a community of sovereign nations but as a strategic prize to be conquered, managed, and exploited.

French and European colonialism redrew the region's maps with little regard for the people living there. Present-day Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Mauritania were carved into artificial territories, **rupturing ancient trade routes and fracturing century-old societies.**

Colonial rule imposed forced labor, crippling taxes, and a brutal economic system designed to extract wealth for European capitals, leaving behind a legacy of broken institutions and stolen futures.

1960s independence movements brought a wave of hope, but formal sovereignty masked continued domination; Western powers entrenched their influence through political interference and manufactured economic dependency.

The age of open colonialism gave way to the subtler tyranny of military intervention and economic domination, which deepened under the pressure of international financial institutions.

The CFA franc, a colonial relic still shackling Sahelian economies to Paris, has been a tool of financial control.

Under the pretense of “fighting terrorism,” France launched Operation Serval (2013) and Operation Barkhane (2014), embedding thousands of troops across the region.

Leaders who dared challenge neocolonial order, like Thomas Sankara, were systematically eliminated under the weight of foreign-backed coups and assassinations.

Through AFRICOM, the United States established drone bases, deepening the militarization of the Sahel.

“Security operations,” protected Western economic interests, particularly Nigerien uranium mines critical to French energy needs.

IMF and World Bank structural adjustments gutted public services, forced privatization, and triggered waves of unemployment.

These imperialist initiatives offered no real solutions to poverty, disenfranchisement, and social collapse.

Despite the [Sahel's vast riches](#) in gold, uranium, and oil, profits continued to flow outwards, enriching foreign corporations while communities across the region were left behind, struggling under the twin burdens of poverty and ecological degradation.

Politically, the hand of neocolonialism remained firm. Governments that served Western strategic interests were rewarded with aid and diplomatic cover, even as they failed to meet the basic needs of their people. **Popular movements demanding change were often met with repression, sanctions, or isolation.** When mass uprisings and military coups erupted in Mali in 2021, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger in 2023, **the reaction from the West was swift and predictable: condemnation, economic punishment, and renewed efforts to restore client regimes rather than address the deeper causes of public anger and alienation.**

Yet a new chapter may be unfolding.

The recent expulsions of French troops and the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States reflect a profound shift in consciousness, a collective refusal to remain trapped in the old patterns of dependency and subjugation.

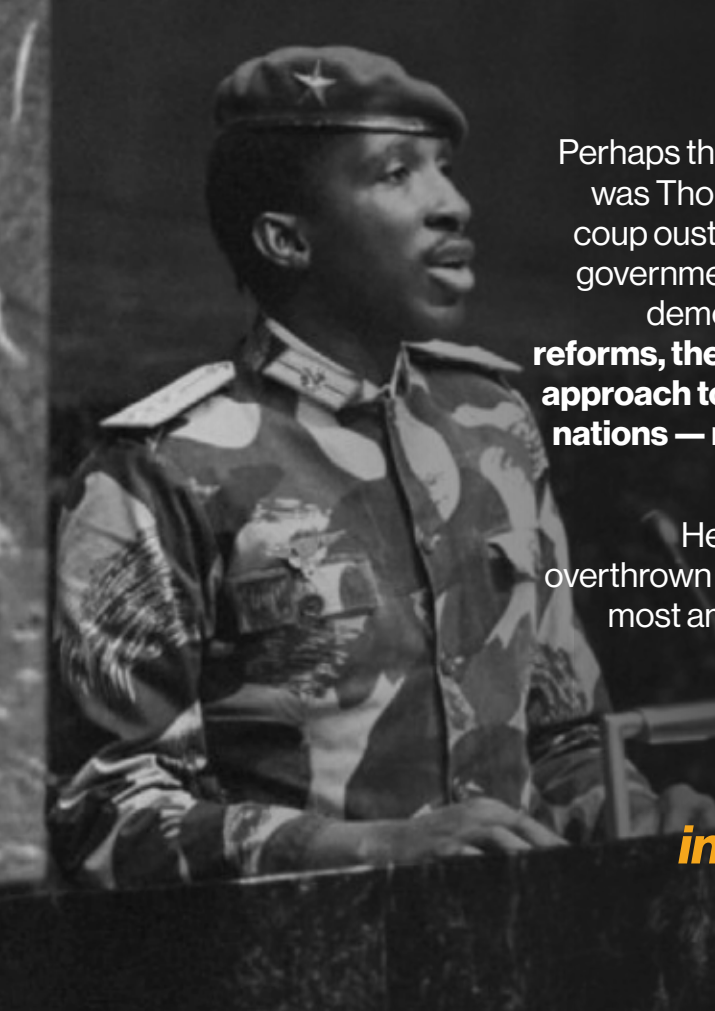
Across the Sahel, a new generation of leaders and activists is rising, determined to reclaim sovereignty, forge genuine regional unity, and end the centuries-long siege on their futures. The struggle is far from over, but for the first time in decades, the balance of power may be shifting, however slightly, in favor of the people.



The Revolutionary Struggle of the Sahel: A History Written in Defiance

The Sahel is more than a geographical region — it is a symbol of the unyielding struggle for freedom and sovereignty. For centuries, the peoples of the Sahel have resisted every form of domination, from imperialism to neocolonialism, through revolts, armed struggle, and political mobilization.

From the Tukolor Kingdom and Samori Toure's resistance against the French in the 19th century, to the explosion of national liberation movements with key figures like Modibo Keita in the 20th century, this region has consistently been the site of resistance against external exploitation and internal repression.



Perhaps the most iconic revolutionary figure in the Sahel was Thomas Sankara of Burkina Faso. Sankara's 1983 coup ousted the corrupt government and established a government centered around the idea of "revolutionary democracy." **His policies — which included land reforms, the nationalization of key industries, a radical approach to women's rights, and unity among African nations — made him a hero to the oppressed, not just in Burkina Faso but across Africa.**

He was assassinated while his government was overthrown in 1987, marking a tragic end to one of Africa's most ambitious revolutionary projects. Yet, Sankara's legacy lives on, inspiring generations to fight for justice and equality.

"While revolutionaries as individuals can be murdered, you cannot kill ideas."

— Thomas Sankara



Resistance Against Neocolonialism: What AES Means for the People of the Sahel

As the 21st century dawned, the Sahel faced new challenges, but the spirit of revolution did not die. Neocolonialism — in the form of foreign military interventions, economic exploitation, and the imposition of Western-led economic policies — continued to threaten the region's sovereignty. Through [economic sanctions and the threat of military intervention](#), Western powers represented by France and ECOWAS tried tightening the noose on the new Sahelian governments. However, countries like Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have experienced a resurgence of popular movements against French military presence and foreign economic influence.

Mali's 2012 Tuareg rebellion saw marginalized Tuareg fighters declare independence of the Azawad region, challenging the central government, which was seen as a puppet of foreign interests.

Citing issues of regional security, the spread of terrorism, exploitation of resources, and poor economic conditions, Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso overthrew their previous regimes and formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)





The AES countries' primary stated goal is to re-establish their sovereignty. For Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso, this has meant regaining domestic control over their natural resources and borders while reducing foreign ownership and control of their politics. With the emergence of the Alliance of Sahel States, a bulwark against shared threats has been formed.

Discussions have begun on the possibility of adopting a unified AES passport and currency, solidifying this alliance based on prioritizing popular demands and a national economy where the people are the primary beneficiaries of the country's wealth.

Both Mali and Burkina Faso have [nationalized foreign-owned mining operations](#), bringing millions of dollars in revenues back into their countries. Niger has [accomplished](#) the same with some of its many uranium extraction plants. All three countries are experiencing economic growth, with [Niger being the fastest-growing economy](#) in Africa and 3rd fastest-growing economy in the world.

These sentiments in the Sahel have sparked a popular movement against foreign military intervention. This massive outpouring of anti-imperialist sentiment has led to what local forces have termed “national uprisings,” helping reshape governance as people demand sovereignty and work to build a more independent future.

Burkina Faso's president, [Ibrahim Traoré](#), [stated in a speech](#) that

“We do not ask that anyone intervene to affect our destiny. The Burkinabé people have decided to fight — to fight against terrorism in order to improve our development.”

— Ibrahim Traore



Watch the **Voices from the Sahel** series

