Michael Heath, Deputy Assistant Secretary West Africa and the Sahel, Washington DC, Dec 11

Bureau chief.

Global Engagement Center…

Huge challenge, a number of trends prevalent in west Africa. With the wave of coups we had in the Sahel. We have been grappling with a rise of anti-French sentiment, associated with a decline of the various populations confidence in democratic institution. Of course economic, trials and tribulations, exacerbated by climate change and drought. Young ppl esp. lack opportunities, lack jobs, vision of their future so susceptible to outside influence blaming their ills on the west and francophone west Africa on France as well. Much stronger than what I thought (antifrench sentiment). When this instability occurs, outside groups, veos, take advantage of conflict and can be intercommunal conflict like Nigeria, farmer herder conflicts in Nigeria. In the Sahel that has also been exacerbated. Groups outside try to spread extremist messages and host countries try to repel that and try to get out help and if they can’t bc of sanctions then they go to the Russians. Russians taking advantage of that instability. Documented massacres of civilians, killing high profile Muslim leaders on occasion and generating backlash on the population. So Russians more entrenched in Mali. Burkina Faso and Niger have held the line only at Russian advisors who train them in small arms but no big ticket defense items. Bf has strong attachment to their own sovereignty. Amidst all of this a wave of propaganda a troll farms, in Russia and expanded. Not only Russians doing this work but coopting local influencers and journalist. Some local reporters brought back to Moscow for training. In some cases outright fabricating documents, foment against France. See in Benin, these documents started circulating about a French plan to overthrow the gov, documents suggesting US and Africom in that together jointly. Blatant misinformation a challenge. Do we publicly contradict or disprove this allegations. When the USG makes a statement it draws a lot of attention. The Barbara Streisand effect. You don’t want to publicize fake letters to ppl that they didn’t know existed but need to keep channels of communication open with gov so the embassy can say blatantly false. The gov then becomes reliant on us to prove or disprove every piece out there.

When we look at overall approaches to this. Guiding principle not to get into gutter with these ppl.. not disseminate our own disinfo or refute everything out there. Get our positive message out. In almost all of these countries we are the number one donor in humanitarian assistance and not many ppl know that including the local populations. Malnutrition. So we have to be out there and publicize more thorough public relations, Amb speeches. A number of ideas floated to brand assistance so pallets of USAID get the US flag on them. Some talk that the old style logo too subtle. Had to look closely to make sure it is the usg. Amb said we need to do better in branding. A lot of discussion on our side if we should engage in the same activities (as Chinese)?

**Implementation**

Thru GEC and USAID, we promote critical literacy among journalists. We do workshops in the countries themselves and we train them on how to judge resources and sort chaff and propaganda. GEC, ask them about their framework for countering disinformation which they sign up countries for. First is with cot’d voir. Set of principles on how they will combat disinformation. Another area we exploring is our social media companies are number one in the world.

**Social media companies**

WhatsApp, inst, meta, fb, they all have own offices that focus on disinfo, they focus a lot on the us but also countries on where they are present in w. Africa and in many cases their employees are former usg/law enforcement. They can do analyses and take them down on their own networks and liase with host gov on what is happening and how to counteract that. So we **posted a seminar with our tech companies in cot’dvoir and Senegal where the companies did a review of lessons learned and tactics that have been effective**. Something we need to be careful of, we don’t want to get a position with companies on what to and not take down. That is controversial. So we try to leave it to the companies to engage with the host governments.

What can be done to help with host nation capacity? What else done from state on host nation capacity space and env on how permissive?

**How open they are to us?** Cot’d voir, first to sign up to this framework is most receptive and their tech capacity is high and same with Ghana. Bf and Benin is lower. Benin is not subject to sanctions. The three with sanctions are Niger, BF and Mali. Benin and Togo the health of the democracy is in question where leaders want to stay in power. Our democratic like minded partners. Ghana has successful election this weekend. (?). when we expose other countries and gov with tools, we want to make sure they are not used to suppress local civic movements. **One person’s facts and figures another person’s disinfo. We need to be cognitive of that to make sure the pushback against Russia not used to entrench democratic forces.**

**I would say the challenges we face and still grappling are the speed of which disinformation travels.** In a number of cases situations where we cannot prevent st from going viral and by the time it has reached thousands of ppl. We are not equipped to handle on rapid fire and if we can still a matter for debate, esp with AI.

Bureau CDP

It will get very complicated, my depth and knowledge in this area is not as deep. If look at the GEC but the new bureau the cyber and digital policy, CDP, brand new bureau, est. two years ago. And their mission is cyber security and digital policy. Might want to talk with relative ppl there. They organize teams to go out when host gov face cyber security attacks. We have competitive advantage if country hacked and concerned about data loss the companies most capable to help are US companies. A couple of companies owned or operated by diaspora. Also sought out assistance from the us. development finance corporation… all this stuff happening so face, defense interested in this, we are interested. In France their own MFA come up with an anti disinfo office and the EU has their own team. Someone from the European external action talking about it. Everyone is on the same track but they are all grappling with the same issues and I’m not sure we have found a silver bullet with…

Again, fact that so much anti French sentiment on the continent. So we have to create some distance there to have more positive outlook. We are not a traditional colonial power. But if the French are having a difficult time we want to help them where that bleeds to anti western sentiment. They see it as their patch and we know these countries better than you do so leave it to the professional.

In places like cotdvoir, the gov seems less concerned about that. They got a law enforcement academic, training facility for law enforcement, border patrol and the French are a partner in managing that and they asked us to channel our efforts. So we will be collocated with them. In general, getting away from disinfo and looking at the military, after our withdrawal from Niger and asked to leave, we made the decision that we cannot replicate that.. our military presence in Niger. It presents a target, spent hundreds of millions dollars setting that up and got kicked out and any other country there is risk that the gov gets overthrown and we get kicked out and our presence could make a country unstable. So we need to be more flexible, nimble and smaller and… so **intelligence sharing which would include information about disinformation networks will be part of that**.

On the st

Operationally we are in touch with diplomatic security and judge the safety of our operations constantly. When the coup in Niger happened we had to look at level of which local pop targeting us. Shortly after the coup happened the demonstration crowds went past us to where the French were and the host gov said we have great respect for you. We have not seen dramatic uptick in that at any particular location.

Bf… visas. All the three.

How big a threat? It is high. I am more concerned about disinfo threat than Russian physical presence to include weapons they may be providing. Their p… thru their disinformation they have been successful for a low cost at fomenting instability and not just in sahel already unstable but in stable democratic countries. They increasingly turn to us and ask for help. In Ghana with election , major successes. Senegal had successful transition of power. When the elections happened the worst case scenarios not happened. Riots and coups and contested elections and several recent elections peaceful. In some way they are still relatively healthy.

Ghana, cot and senegl

**Regional strategy?** Our broader strategy, we know we can’t engage directly with the three coup country and a fourth coup country, ghiny (but they are moving toward elections). As we take a look at overall Sahel strategy, we decide we need a west Africa strategy. It is intertwined with what is going on, you have the three Sahel and threats from Sahel into coastal states. Coastal, all trying to stem the tide and difficult to control the borders bc you have ethnic groups similarities across borders. Ethnic, family commerce ties across borders. So difficult to control migration. Fighting against groups trying to foment… so to sum up west African, we keep door for dialogue with the aes countries but we will prioritize increased engagement with west Africa and like minded… democracies**. Senegal, cot’d voir, Ghana, they are democracies, held elections, we can say without reservation they are like minded partners, we have interest and greater private investment vs. sahel where zero**. We don’t see direct AQ threat to the homeland from these groups. If there were it would be long term but we do perceive threats by partners. … protected from extremism and protected from inroads of disinformation purveyors.

They have a lot of legitimate economic interest. I would not kneejerk everything as malign. Bribing officials to win contracts. The gov last year issued a long report on the nefarious actions of the peace corps. But the actual disinformation is not as bad as Russians but the economic influence is bad. We have good relations with the Chinese embassies (vice Russia).

Question. I don’t know if I could quantify that. The ones linked to the Russians are better trained. It is common with anti French protests Russians waving flags. It is also possible some are doing this on their own. They may not have affinity at all for Russia.

In these countries

What about meeting with local partners? What are their viewpoints? Civil societies pretty cognizant of the issues. Different sentiments for the US. At the same time a lot of the journalists know that in the west we have a free press. Most journalists and civil society leaders recognize that. Also elements that believe we have more negative impact. So it is going to be mixed really. In the coup countries in Niger, civil societies are well developed. Say one thing public and in private say stay engaged in our country bc we want your help but if we said this in public we’d be cracked down.

Monitor threats? Public affairs, local staff, tribal languages. They are also the ppl engaged on radio programs. Esp if you reach out to rural villages their main source is radio. **We have funded news program in local languages to talk about dialogue in local communities.** Develop an early warning system of incipient violence. Our public affairs section are the ones who would know. I think we need to devote more resources. That is an area we need to bolster our presence, increase in local staff that have their finger on the pulse of local society. Whether that means we hire contractors but something we should be exploring.

Global engagement center. Cdp bureau, usip, Dr. Sany who conducts outreach.

Daniel Kimmage, can we recommend you said we reach out to him?