

# The Leading Cause of Immense Distress in the Sahel Is Imperialism

By [Bharat Dogra](#)

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*The Sahel region in Africa has experienced some of the worst distress in the world in recent times caused by violence, insecurity, hunger and deprivation. The recent crisis in Niger and the possibilities of its escalation have added to a situation that was already full of simmering tensions as seen in various countries of this region.*

The problems of this region have been increasing steadily since the events of 2011-12 in a key neighboring country Libya. Libya was the most prosperous and oil-rich country in the neighboring area ruled for several decades by the dictator Muammar Gaddafi who may not have provided any democracy to his country but certainly provided a long period of stability. He cared for his people well enough, as is evident from the fact that under his rule Libya could top the Human Development Index in Africa. The prosperity of Libya also provided several migrants from Sahel countries good opportunities for earnings.

However the USA and other western countries had serious allegations against Gaddafi relating to terrorist acts. The proper way forward would have been to examine this in a transparent and open forum where both the allegations and the defense could be heard and then suitable action taken on this basis.

What actually happened was that the USA, UK and France collaborated to help rebels in Libya to create civil war conditions leading subsequently to the torture and killing of Gaddafi. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared with undisguised arrogance, "We came, we saw, he died."

The western armed intervention was sought to be justified by claiming that but for this a large number of civilians would have been massacred. However this view was questioned even at that time and this questioning was subsequently confirmed later. A UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee found that this "was not supported by the available evidence", "the threat to the civilians was overstated" and the rebels themselves had strong presence of sectarian elements who also faced allegations of being involved in massacres

and cruelty.



The killing of Gaddafi was not followed by any new stability in Libya but instead by prolonged civil-war type conditions in which several rival forces fought each other and were used as their proxies by others. Deprivation and slave trade started being reported from a country that had earlier recorded the highest human development indicators in Africa. Obama agreed before he left office that it (the Libyan intervention by the USA and its allies) did not work and it had led to creating a “mess”. This is in line with the trend of western leaders to admit their mistakes too late, too little.

During a much earlier phase there had been a lot of criticism that in the garb of humanitarian intervention, the US led western powers had in fact attempted and conducted a regime change, but this criticism largely from the Global South was ignored by the west at that time. In fact even leaders of certain human rights organizations in the west had come out strongly in favor of this regime change which actually caused immense distress to local people.

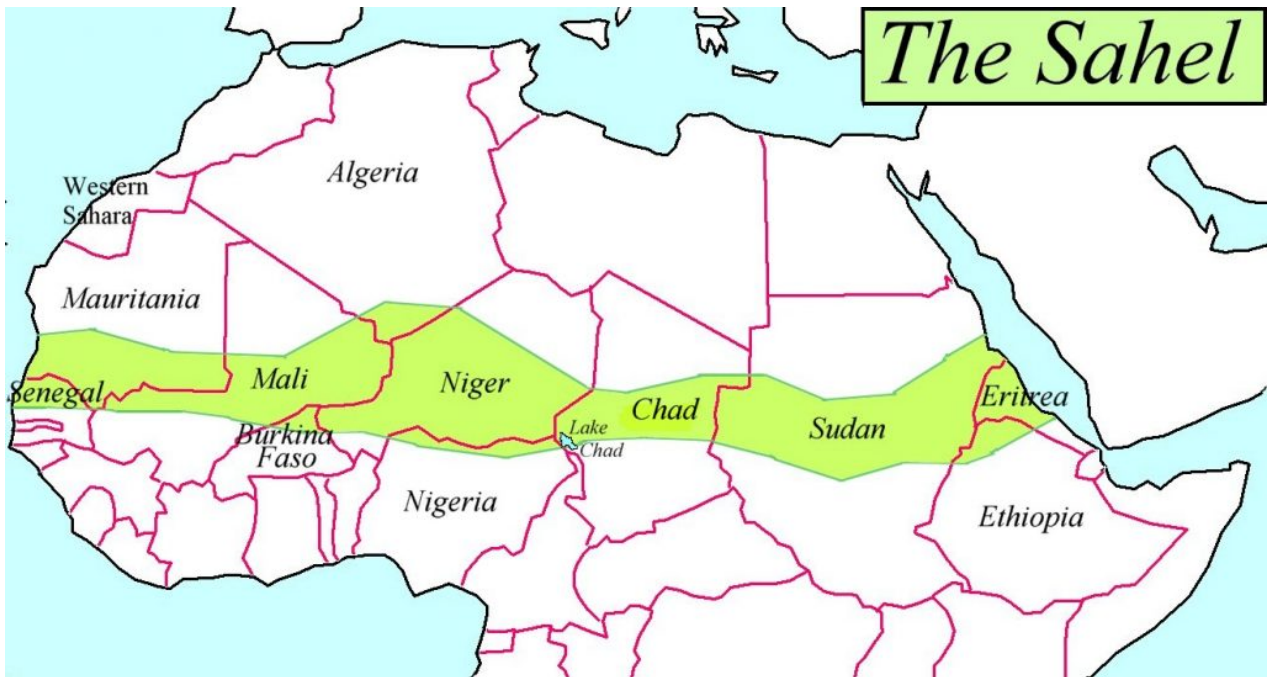
Even now after a decade the administration and essential tasks of the government are badly affected as the country is divided between eastern and western regimes. At a time of climate change when protective actions are needed, such disruption of government functions has led to increasing distress and even today, as this is being written, huge floods are devastating Libya with over 5000 feared killed, with thousands reported missing, and this loss of lives would have been much lesser if essential protective tasks had not been neglected.

Meanwhile, those from Sahel countries who were earning their livelihood in Libya as migrant workers had to return, adding to the burden in their villages already suffering from much deprivation. What is more, mercenary soldiers also returned with their arms, and in addition there was a big boom in illegal trafficking of weapons. All this led to increased violence and deprivation in Sahel countries.

This is in line with the history of the Sahel region in which the colonial rule of France in particular was responsible for a lot of the exploitation and deprivation of this region and its people. Even after this region became formally free from colonial rule, powerful agribusiness companies continued to flourish in ways that increased the distress of people. Commercial export crops were extended to many areas neglecting local food and livelihood needs. This led to highly unjust situations like vegetables and fruits being exported from this region in vast quantities while much of the Sahel region suffered from famine-like conditions.

The neo-colonial elites have been used by the former colonial masters to continue to pursue

their interests, helped by special arrangements made to link currency of free countries closely to French or European currency. While the French have promised security and aid, these promises have not been fulfilled in any satisfactory way, leading to increasing discontent with French military presence in the Sahel region.



What is more, the security situation may worsen with increasing big power rivalries. With the increasingly hostile relations between the western countries and Russia, there is an increasing possibility that this may lead to proxy wars in more and more places and the Sahel region can be one such place. This would be highly unfortunate as the Sahel region has already suffered from so much violence and conflict.

With the accentuation of climate change, hunger is becoming a serious problem in many parts of Africa and the rural livelihood crisis is worsening too. Super power rivalries fought through proxies may lead to an aggravation of these problems and so must be clearly avoided.

If we take an overview of the situation of the last century, then imperialism and neo-colonialism have been the biggest cause of the high levels of distress of people in the Sahel.

If such conditions can be created in which the people of the Sahel region can, in peace and without being disturbed by outside big powers, use their resources and skills optimally for sustainable development, then very significant and durable reduction of their distress will be achieved.

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*Bharat Dogra is Honorary Convener, Campaign to Save Earth Now. His recent books include Planet in Peril, Man over Machine and Protecting Earth for Children.*

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