

PAM 10th Plenary Session Tirana, Albania, 18 February 2016

Statement by H.E. Mr. Toby Lanzer, United Nations Assistant Secretary-General and Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel - audio transcript

It is very heartening to see so many people still in the room, which is certainly half-full and not half empty, and it is great to see that the most important people are still here.

I know that when you woke up this morning, you all woke up thinking “Thank you Albania” for hosting this meeting and I know that you all woke up thinking “what a great thing that we are at the 10th plenary session of the Parliamentary Assembly of Mediterranean”.

So I wanted to congratulate both Albania and the PAM for this meeting, but what surprised me when I come in the room, I felt particularly welcomed because just here on the stage there was a big “S” and all around me I have seen these big “S” and I thought how nice that they put this “welcome for the Sahel”.

I am sure that when you woke up this morning you did not only think “thank you Albania” and “thank you PAM”, but you were also thinking to the Sahel.

Now just in case one or two of you were not thinking about the Sahel, let me give you a couple of reasons why I am here and why I thank you for being here and why you might think of it this evening.

Just below the Mediterranean bordering countries there is a gigantic region that spans from the West Africa roll over to the East of Africa, and it depends how you count but today there are 150 million people in the region, now imagine this: in 20 years that number would have climbed to 300 million people. The population is set to double in 20 years.

Now, why should you care about that? Why does that matter? Well, it matters because that population whether today or tomorrow or in 20 years is trying to survive and trying to live under what I call a “triple peril”.

The first peril is that here we are talking about arguably the poorest of the poor anywhere. If you look at the human development index of 187 countries, which countries are in the bottom? It is countries like Niger, it is countries that span all across the Sahelian belt. Again, why does that matter? Well, it matters because they are very poor and yet the population is growing fast.

Second thing that I thought it was interesting when I first started working across the Sahel was that climate change - we talk about it every day - climate change is biting hard, it's biting and eating away, and all of these communities' abilities to survive. 80% of the population across the Sahel are agropastoralists. Well, if there is less water, if there is advanced desertification, if amazingly there are flash floods because of “el Niño”, your livelihood could be wracked. Climate change is biting hard.

The third reason, in case I haven't interested you yet, the third reason that I think we should be concerned about is what is going on across the Shaelian belt is violent extremism. It really does not

matter the way you look, starting in the East you see how Shabab move forward the West you came across the Seleka, let's go up to the lake Chad basin, Boko Haram, I just been there for the 7th time in 8 months.

Why did I go there for the 7th time in 8 months? Because Boko Haram, has already forced 2.8 million people from their homes. In the month of January, one month, in one tiny territory, Northern Cameroon, we had 63 suicide bombers who detonated themselves, 63 in one month, and over half were women. As you go West you came across Al-Qaeda and in the Maghreb you came across The Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (Mujwo) etc.

Now, violent extremism is something that we heard a lot about today and if you are amongst the poorest of the poor and if your population is set to double and if climate change is biting hard and if violent extremism is wracking your life, and by the way I spoke about Boko Haram having displaced 2.8 million people across the Sahelian belt we got 4 and an half million people who have been displaced, forced from their homes, tufted out from their villages, everything lost. If that does not matter to us, in Europe or to the Parliamentary Assembly Mediterranean, then I do not know what would matter. Now, what are we doing about it and what I would like you to do about it, is the good news. There is not good news.

What I've been looking for is a much more coherent and much more collaborative approach by those who are engaged on the political track, those who are working in terms of stabilization whether it is, France with "operation BARKHANE", MINUSMA in Mali. Closer collaboration between development practitioners, and that was a fabulous announcement by the World Bank this week, closer collaboration by environmental practitioners, looking at stopping and reversing the contraction of the Lake Chad which has lost 80% of its water, in the last 50 years 80% of the water it is gone, and closer collaboration with my own branch of work which is the humanitarian track.

If we collaborate, if we reduce the extent to which we are stuck in our silos, than I think we could stabilize things, we can reverse the trend, and we can provide the population of the Sahel a much safer and better chance for a prosperous future at home. But if we do not, I guarantee one thing, you will not have 4.000 young men going through the city of Agadas in the centre of Niger on their way through Libya to the Mediterranean every week. If you go to Agadas I use to think as Shakespeare wrote "all roads lead to Rome", they do not, in central and western Africa all roads lead to Agadas and from Agadas, in the middle of Niger, the poorest country on Earth "young men go north".

4000 a week, I guarantee all us one thing, if we do not collaborate across the political, the security, the development, the environmental or the humanitarian tracks, if we do not collaborate we do not have a comprehensive approach, we will not be able to reverse this trend and enable people to stay safe and prosper at home.

So that is what we are doing now, this is what I would like you to do, and this is my closing remark. Parliamentarians, you have such a key role, please help me.

Please travel to Senegal, to Cameroon, to Chad, to Mali, to Mauritania, to Niger and Nigeria and share the experience from your own countries, share the experience that “if you invest more equitably in the population of a country, your country has a greater chance at surviving and prospering tomorrow”. If you invest more in education your generations have a chance of maybe trading internationally in the future, if you invest in health and in agriculture, countries can self-sustain themselves even when threatened by climate change.

But the other message I would like share with the parliaments across the Sahel is: allocate some of your budget for preventive measures that can be taken today.

Senegal has just learnt to invest in an insurance policy which is helping farmers in tough times, that if the harvest doesn't quite make it, they can still get by and maintain their ability to invest in the next cycle of sowing crops and the next agriculture cycle and it is this types of preventive measures that I think would be very very useful and necessary, and if you can engage with the parliaments of the region across the Sahelian belt, and advise, encourage, control, those parliaments to make budgetary allocations – which I think will give the civil servants and will give the countries across the Sahelian belt, a better chance and a safer and brighter future - that would be very good.

And I think, as we heard this morning, this is a comforting thought we hope this morning in the southern shore of the Mediterranean fields, and I think rightly so that it is doing more than the northern shore of the Mediterranean. What I saw in the South-east of Niger three weeks ago, was the poorest people on earth opening their homes to the displaced who have been forced to flee because of Boko Haram, that was a such poignant lesson for all of us in Europe. Yes, we are under a tremendous pressure when it comes to the migration question, but actually there is so much more that those of us across Europe could not should be doing today. So I think this has been a wonderful opportunity to exchange with all of you, it has been fascinating listening to colleagues from institutions across this spectrum whether it is the World Meteorological Organization or as we just heard from the Counter-terrorism professionals with the UN, all these silos have to come together and preserve what I think is ultimately in all of our interest.

Thank you