Remarks by H.E. Blaise Compaoré

At an Atlantic Council Event: "A Discussion with the President of Burkina Faso
and the ECOWAS Commission President"

The Army and Navy Club, Washington, DC

Thursday, August 7, 2014

Dear Atlantic Council board members; General James Jones; Kadré Désiré Ouédraogo, president of the Community of West African States (ECOWAS); Dr. Peter Pham; distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen, and friends of Burkina Faso: after coming to Washington for the Congressional Black Caucus and the Wilson Center in 2013, it is my pleasure, on the margins of the historic US-Africa Leaders' Summit, to speak on this stage at the US Army and Navy Club.

 I would like to thank this prestigious club for hosting me and for giving me the opportunity to speak to America and the world about questions of strategic interest on diplomacy, defense, and international development. I would also like to thank Dr. Peter Pham and General James Jones for their excellent work that made this morning's open conversation possible.

At this beginning of the second millennium, Africa is affected by various challenges that are likely to impact, if not profoundly jeopardize, its trajectory and emergence.

It's a question of being capable or not of facing the challenges of:

1. Constructing a continental space of peace and security.
2. Transitioning towards economic emergence.
3. Democratic transition.

The challenge of Constructing a Continental Space of Peace and Security

Today, Africa is confronted by:

- The emergence and multiplication of conflicts within countries and between communities. These conflicts either reveal a desire for more inclusive governance or identity concerns.
- The emergence of asymmetric conflicts tied to international terrorism, religious extremism, and cross border crime.

- The entire Sahel-Saharan Strip, which runs from Mauritania to Somalia, is confronted by this violence that also threatens regions outside of Africa (especially Europe).
- In addition, we are also witnessing that conflict and instability in certain countries north of the Sahara, which stemmed from chaotic democratic transition, have been exploited by terrorist and criminal movements.
- Lastly, we are witnessing changes and developments pertaining to religious extremism in Africa and the strife between the different types of Islam: Sunnis, Shiites, Salafists, etc.

Peace and security are vital for Africa's socio-economic development for the wellbeing of all its populations.

Concerning local conflicts that are tied to questions of political governance, Africa has invested itself in choosing mediation as an approach to conflict resolution. I have been privileged to lead such mediation efforts with successful conclusions in Togo, Niger, the Ivory Coast, Guinea, and Mali, maintaining the consensus among all political parties needed to hold presidential elections.

On such occasions, we have appreciated the role that the United States has played – contributing to the mobilization of the international community, especially the United Nations – in giving an international legitimacy to the mediation process and in enforcing the agreements that resulted. We encourage the United States to continue to support these processes and to further their engagement in the region.

Concerning asymmetric wars tied to international terrorism, religious extremism, and cross border crime that disrupt the continent, the response must be part of an uncompromising global fight, led by the international community, against global terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

We are pleased to say that the United States is part of this approach, and we welcome and support all the actions and initiatives it leads to strengthen peace and security in Africa – particularly those in the Sahel-Saharan zone. More specifically, we appreciate the support the United States provides to the defense forces of African stakeholders in this struggle, in addition to the close coordination established between all governments concerned. Once again, we encourage the United States to strengthen the methods adopted.

In this regard, we await help from the United States in:

- Support for the professionalization of national armies and the police.
- The formation of special forces dedicated to this fight.
- The implementation of an effective information system.
- The strengthening of our logistics capabilities.
- Support for the African Union's Rapid Reaction Force (CARIC, which is still in formation).

The Challenge of Transitioning into an Emerging Economy

Today, everyone agrees that Africa is an emerging market that tomorrow will be a major contributor to global growth. Africa has many assets with regards to its abundant natural resources, the improvement of its macroeconomic framework, the rate of its growth, and the force of democratization that has already shown through.

However, despite these performances, the human development of these countries remains the lowest in the world, and we have seen no significant decline in poverty.

The reality is that the current economic model is not developing because: on one hand, [economic] growth is not inclusive because it is based on the exportation of basic commodities (minerals, petroleum products, precious metals, etc.); on the other hand, the continent serves as a big market to the rest of the world for the exportation of nearly all kind of products, including food products.

To break away from this tendency and lay the foundations for substantial economic development, Africa needs large investments in infrastructure in order to expand its production capacities and strengthen the competitiveness of its economies. Examples include: Roads, railroads, dams and water projects, energies, telecommunications, information and communication technologies (ICT), etc.

The African Union's New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), in addition to other sub-regional organizations, offers a portfolio of these big transnational projects. Moreover, the realization of the majority of these infrastructure projects lends itself to the participation of the international private sector, as part of a Public-Private framework to which many African countries are open.

We are aware of the vigorousness of the American business world, its ability to project itself worldwide, and its ability to efficiently contribute to the development of other countries by means of its investments on a "winner-winner" basis.

That is why Africa expects American businessmen, under the encouragement and support of the US government, to organize more investments in the continent.

The challenge of democratic transition

African countries are still in the process of democratic transition. The level of democratic advancement varies from country to country; however, the continent, on the whole, has witnessed a significant change. The United States has strongly supported these processes through the work of the administration and various civil society organizations. We hope that this assistance will continue with the efficiency and climate of mutual understanding that have always characterized the US-Africa partnership, especially in the realm of political governance.

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, I will now share my experience in matters of regional peace, security, and stability, especially in regard to the mediation and management of conflicts that were assigned to me and to which I was committed over the past two decades. Of course, I will stick to the basics to encourage an interactive debate.

Burkina Faso is an isolated country of West Africa without access to the sea. In order to survive, my country needs constant and unhindered access to the maritime corridors of the south. At the same time, the peace, security, and stability of Burkina Faso's neighbors to the east and north is important for the stability of Burkina Faso. In other words, my commitment to the mediation, prevention and management of conflicts, in addition to my desire for regional security and stability, manifests itself as an essential preoccupation for the very existence of Burkina Faso. That is why my country continues to support the efforts of the international community to fight against all threats, be they caused by terrorism or by conflict due to lack of inclusive governance.

As you know, poverty and lack of democracy form the roots of terrorism, crises, and instability.

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, allow me to reference two examples of successful intervention: Mali and the Ivory Coast. Each crisis has its specifics. The only constant is the mediator and his/her understanding of the history, geography, and culture of the people and countries in conflict. It is also [the mediator's] understanding of [relevant] political and social actors. As you know, Burkina Faso is aware of its limitations and does not perceive itself to be a great power. Given this, it cannot use gunboat diplomacy to make everyone agree. I always reverted to the essence of African culture, which uses "under the palaver tree" as a means to regulate crises. It is why we have been able to bring peace and stability to the Ivory Coast, which has bounced back thanks to economic growth over the last few years. For Mali, the first Ouagadougou accord of June 18, 2013, triggered the return to normal institutional life in this brother country that was once occupied by jihadist and terrorist groups.

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, to conclude, remember that diplomacy and defense contribute to security and stability that are, ultimately, the fundamentals of human security and development.

Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, after being constantly reminded by African state leaders about this crucial question of security and the fight against terrorism, the American president confirmed the commitment of the United States to the region.

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you for your time and your kind attention. I now invite you to join the interactive discussion.

(This unofficial translation of President Compaoré's remarks was prepared by Atlantic Council intern Jonathan Gass.)