BURKINA FASO
JIHADIST ATTACK KILLS OVER A HUNDRED CIVILIANS
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Burkina Faso
Jihadist Attack Kills Over One Hundred Civilians

Executive Summary
- An attack on the northern village of Solhan in Burkina Faso has left more than 160 civilians dead in what is the worst violence in decades.
- The attack is the latest in a series of incidents that has increased the already high instability in the Sahel region.
- The situation remains volatile and further attacks in Burkina Faso and the wider region are highly likely. These attacks are likely to target civilians, local and international troops, as well as government interests.

Situation Overview
On 4-5 June 2021, an unidentified group of armed militants conducted an overnight raid on the village of Solhan in Yagha province. A provisional death toll of 138 people was confirmed by President Roch Kaboré, who stated that dozens of bodies had been found in a mass grave in an area close to Solhan. The death toll has since risen beyond 160. The attack follows on that occurred on Friday evening nearby, as well as attacks in April and May 2021.

According to reports, militants initially descended upon a position manned by the Volunteers for the Defence of the Motherland (VDP) – a defence force staffed by Burkinabe volunteers – and then progressed to the village of Solhan itself. Executions were conducted by gunmen and the homes of civilians were directly targeted.

The identity of the militants has not been confirmed at the time of writing. However, Solhan is located within the insecure Sahel region making it likely that Islamist-aligned militants were behind the attack. Militant groups often collaborate across state lines in the tri-border area of the Sahel region, and have conducted attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in the past.

In response to the scale of the attack, President Roch Kaboré announced an official period of state mourning on 5 June 2021. The attack also sparked international condemnation, with the United Nations calling on countries to “increase their efforts to combat violent extremism”.

Unstable Situation
Burkina Faso is facing a deep security crisis. Since the end of an unofficial ceasefire which held for the duration of Burkina Faso’s 2020 presidential and legislative elections cycle, the country has experienced a notable uptick in militant attacks. In January 2021, the unstable security environment in Burkina Faso’s northern provinces prompted national authorities to extend a pre-existing state of emergency until at least the middle of 2021. A curfew was implemented with the intention of impeding the free flow of militants through the area.

The most likely perpetrators of the on 4-5 June 2021 attack are Jama’a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Ansar-ul Islam terrorist groups. The attack was also Burkina Faso’s bloodiest incident since Islamist-aligned terror groups began operating in the northern provinces of Burkina Faso in 2015. Earlier on Friday night, 14 people were reported to have been killed in the village of Tadaryat, about 150km (93 miles) to the north of Solhan.

In May, around 30 people were killed in an attack in the east of Burkina Faso. The incident, which was largely similar to this weekend’s attack, saw a large group of armed men attack the village of Kodyel in Komandjari province in the early hours of 3 May.

In April, two Spanish journalists and an Irish conservationist were killed following an ambush by jihadists while on an anti-poaching mission in the country. The journalists had been working on a documentary on the country’s efforts against poachers.
While most of Burkina Faso has been subject to violence in recent years. Attacks in 2021 have largely focused on the country’s east, from its porous northern border with Mali, along the Niger border, and near the country’s south-eastern national parks. Further attacks of this nature are likely to continue in these regions in the coming months and years.

Regional Instability
This instability extends beyond Burkina Faso, with the entire region facing similar difficulties, most of which are interconnected, much of which is explored in our [three-part series on the region](#).

The two most likely perpetrators of the weekend’s attack, JNIM and Ansar-ul Islam, are well documented in conducting mass-casualty attacks in the Sahel region. They are known to operate in Burkina Faso’s northern territories and have conducted attacks in neighbouring Nigeria and Niger. Additionally, the recent coup in Mali has resulted in a further deterioration of the security situation in the country and regionally.

The coup in neighbouring Mali by Assimi Goita has prompted France to temporarily suspend all joint military operations involving the Malian Armed Forces. French forces across the Sahel have provided support to regional powers for several years, including both live combat assistance and direct training of national armed forces.

The temporary suspension of joint operations coupled with a threat from President Emmanuel Macron of France to withdraw from Mali completely is likely to have an impact on the porous border with Burkina Faso, further increasing the insecurity of Burkina Faso’s northern territories.

The French president has been frustrated by the lack of commitment from other European countries to support operations in Africa. However, it remains unlikely that France can, cleanly, pull out of Mali and the region. While French troops and allies have failed to defeat Islamists in Mali, Burkina Faso and the wider region, should they leave the situation is likely to deteriorate further. Indeed, a French withdrawal would see Jihadists emboldened and possibly look to threaten the Malian capital Bamako, or Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso.

The cessation of French operations is coupled with the overstretching of the Chadian Army, one of the region’s largest contributors to counter-terrorism operations. Rebels had advanced on the country’s capital.
and killed the long-time President Idriss Deby of Chad in April 2020. Chad’s military, which has been widely praised in recent years, has been instrumental in combatting instability in the region. The French operation Serval was considered a success largely thanks to the contribution of the Chadian military. However, with the country’s troops involved in a number of international missions, the increased instability and an internal revolt, the country’s troops are now extremely overstretched.

The late president’s son, Mahamat Deby but known as General Kaka, has taken over the country’s government as head of the Transitional Military Council (TMC) and claimed victory against the rebels. The young Deby has promised elections, but the country’s stability remains low, with opposition parties terming the situation a dynastic coup and clashes continuing in the country’s north.

In Nigeria, the leader of Boko Haram has reportedly killed himself in a fight with a rival militant group. While Abubakar Shekau’s death is unlikely to result in the complete destruction of Boko Haram, it highlights the emergence of Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). The group, who originally broke away from Boko Haram, have conducted a number of attacks in Nigeria and have become the preeminent group in the region.

Nigeria itself has been battling the more than a decade-long jihadist insurgency in the country’s north-east. It also saw more than 85 people killed in an attack in the country’s north-west, where attacks have increased in recent months. Up to 65,000 Nigerians have been forced to flee following a series of attacks by armed groups on Damasak town, in north-east Nigeria’s restive Borno State. Similar to Chadian forces, Nigeria’s security forces are now being stretched thin.

The instability is likely to continue for the foreseeable future without a large international troop deployment and investment. Chad, Mali and Burkina Faso now do not have the means to effectively push back militant and rebel groups in their territory. As a result of the instability in Chad, the situation is only likely to deteriorate further as the country’s military is forced to focus inwards. The recent fighting in Nigeria has also shown that even the region’s largest economy is unable to effectively counter the threat.

Solace Global Advice

- The US Department of State rates Burkina Faso a category 4 country, advising travellers to avoid all travel to the country due to the increasing threat of terrorism, armed conflict, crime and kidnapping. The United Kingdom’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office advises against all unnecessary travel to Burkina Faso.

- Further attacks in the Sahel Region are almost certain. As such, travellers should avoid all non-essential travel to the region.

- If deemed business-critical, all travel to Burkina Faso should only be conducted with enhanced risk mitigation measures in place.

- State of emergencies are in effect in portions of the country. Here, security forces have enhanced measures to enforce the rule of law. Anticipate heightened security measures and security forces operations across the Sahel Region as well as in locations nationwide. Follow all the instructions issued by the security forces.

- Individuals in Burkina Faso, or in the wider region, should keep up to date with the latest developments.

- Avoid travelling in remote areas, especially near international borders, unless an extensive journey management plan is in place.

- Travellers are also advised to use travel-tracking technology with an intelligence feed, such as Solace Secure, to stay up to date with security related events. This should enable a traveller to be alerted of any security updates within their vicinity and to update others of their movements in case of an emergency.

- Additionally, monitor media reports for the latest developments in the region. Be aware that further incidents could result in civil unrest and political instability.
Solace Global remains available to provide our full range of Travel Risk Management services to clients throughout this current pandemic. Whether you require customised reports, training, comprehensive crisis management, in-country journey management, traveller technology, tracking, response, evacuation services or something specific, we are able to tailor our services to your operational needs, wherever or whatever they may be. For further details, please email risk@solaceglobal.com or give us a call on +44 (0) 1202 308 810. Follow Solace Global’s LinkedIn account for the latest risk and travel updates.