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SAHEL AND GREAT LAKES: FRENCH OFFICIALS DISCUSS FRENCH POLICY WITH INR/AF

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Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Greg D'Elia, 1.4 (b/d).

1. (C) SUMMARY: French officials at the MFA and Presidency stressed the importance France is placing on the Sahel and the GOF's efforts to promote stability in the region, during meetings on May 7 with INR/AF Director Don Koran and analyst Rick Ehrenreich. The MFA is leading a GOF-wide effort to coordinate security and economic assistance programs on a regional rather than bilateral basis. Romain Serman at the Presidency also reviewed French policy towards the Great Lakes and France's efforts to encourage cooperation between the DRC and Rwanda. He indicated that France-Rwanda communications were good despite the break in diplomatic relations, with Rose Kabuye serving as a test case that could

render France's arrest warrants against her and other senior Rwandans moot. END SUMMARY.

2. (C) INR/AF Director Don Koran met on May 7 with MFA DAS-equivalent Christine Fages and Sahel desk officer Marie Audouard to discuss the Sahel, and, separately, with Romain Serman, AF-advisor at the French Presidency, to discuss the Great Lakes. INR/AF analyst Rick Ehrenreich attended the meeting with Serman.

SAHEL

3. (C) Fages outlined GOF concerns centered on increasing levels of terrorism, trafficking in arms and narcotics, and illegal immigration associated with the Sahel region. These combined to threaten directly French interests -- "the Sahel is in some ways our southern border," she remarked. (Serman, at the Presidency, later commented when asked about the Sahel that defeating terrorism and securing access to natural resource markets were France's top priorities in Africa.) For the French, the term "Sahel" encompassed Mauritania, Mali, and Niger. Fages said that France began looking at the Sahel on a regional and not simply bilateral basis a few years previously. The GOF conducted a threat assessment in 2007 and in 2008 began devising a regional strategy.

4. (C) Fages said that the GOF's regional approach was now in the process of being implemented. As she described it, this strategy would seek to coordinate French assistance, mainly in the security and economic assistance areas, by treating Mauritania, Mali, and Niger more as a unit than as separate bilateral partners, as had previously been the case.

Fages said that Audouard was now "Ms. Sahel," responsible for Mauritania, Mali, and Niger; previously, two and sometimes three different desk officers handled the three countries. Audouard would be the first desk officer responsible for all three. Fages said the French hoped to identify common needs in each country and then tailor GOF programs so that the three could move forward at roughly the same pace, taking into account the different situations and points of departure in the three countries.

5. (C) Fages noted that France would keep Algeria and Libya apprised of its activities in the Sahel, but would not invite their participation. She said that both had obvious strong interests in the Sahel region but she cautioned that France did not want to give either the impression that France welcomed their cooperation or sought their support. Both could create problems in the region and France would be content with informing them of French policy without encouraging their active engagement.

6. (C) According to Fages, the GOF was also considering the possible development of a maritime program aimed at providing better control over the West Africa region's coasts and waterways, as a means of discouraging traffickers, pirates, and kidnappers operating at present on several stretches of

Africa's Atlantic coast. She suggested that the French had been giving considerable thought to this problem and might soon be ready to trade ideas with others concerned about the security of the oceans off Africa's west coast.

7. (C) Although relatively small in numbers, AQIM's influence across the Sahel seemed to be growing, Fages noted. Several troubling new developments were emerging, such as the apparent decision to pay ransom for certain AQIM hostages. Fages commented on the correlation between AQIM's success in recruiting new followers and worsening economic and social conditions where AQIM was seeking new followers. She commented that disaffected Afro-Mauritanian youths were as vulnerable, if not more so, to AQIM's recruitment efforts than were "traditional" Mauritanian Arabs.

8. (C) Serman later commented that what was missing from the "Sahel Plan" was a military strategy. In particular, the

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GOF needed to define its goal -- was it to contain or destroy AQIM? Having defined a goal, the GOF could consider the means to achieve it.

GREAT LAKES

9. (C) Serman outlined France's approach to the Great Lakes much as he had in reftels. Serman said that when the Great Lakes region plunged into violence in the second half of 2008, advocates of sending more troops to the region, including within an EU context, failed to convince President Sarkozy. Instead Serman said that the GOF decided to approach the issue from the Rwandan side, trying to determine "what Kagame really wants and needs" to shift from a war-oriented stance to one of peace. Serman said the French signaled to Kagame that continued Rwandan support for the "war option" -- aiding Congolese rebels -- would only perpetuate the conflict at ever greater political and economic cost to Rwanda, especially as international sympathy for Rwanda as genocide victim would gradually recede in the coming years.

10. (C) Serman said that the French had been encouraging Kagame to see the benefits of the "peace option." In occasional phone calls between Sarkozy and Kagame and more regular communication between Deputy Diplomatic Advisor Bruno Joubert and Serman at the Presidency with Rwandan intelligence chief Ndahiro, the French pointed out that Rwandan cooperation with the DRC could facilitate Kagame's plans for economic development and eventually enable cross-border migration that could relieve the demographic pressure in Rwanda. Serman said the French suggested a regional approach that could be modeled, loosely, on the European Union, starting with relatively modest joint ventures akin to the original European Coal and Steel

Community. Serman said that France was searching for concrete projects to support, preferably local, that would yield quick and visible results. Eventual larger projects could include a telecommunications network in the region.

11. (C) After winning Rwandan support in principle for the "peace option," Paris moved to press the DRC. Even after Congolese military setbacks in North Kivu forced Kabilia to agree to allow Rwanda in January-February to deploy its troops onto Congolese soil, arrest Nkunda and chase Rwandan Hutu rebels of the FDLR, the DRC remained very reluctant to embrace cooperation with Rwanda. "They have political and psychological problems," Serman noted, and tend to blame others -- especially Rwanda, France and MONUC -- for all their setbacks. The Congolese feared that the "French plan," as it was originally floated towards the end of 2008, involved a "sell-out" of DRC sovereignty or control over its eastern regions. Sarkozy used his short March 26 stop in Kinshasa to confront the Congolese head on and press home the need for DRC "leadership" in building peaceful regional cooperation.

12. (C) The French were delighted with the results of the Sarkozy trip and believe that since then "the Congolese clearly understand" the need for regional cooperation. Paris was especially pleased that Sarkozy's speech -- including its explicit praise for Kabilia's move to invite Rwandan military intervention -- was so well received by the Congolese. Serman noted that the popular former President of Parliament Vital Kamerhe, who had criticized Kabilia's decision to allow Rwanda to intervene, applauded the speech, and that subsequently local parliaments in eastern DRC had proposed joint ventures with Rwanda (NFI).

13. (C) According to Serman, the French were pleased that the DRC-Rwanda relationship had improved so much in recent months but they believed that sustained, coordinated international pressure was necessary to keep the process on track, i.e., to keep the Congolese from back-tracking and the Rwandans and their Congolese rebel allies from overreaching. In order to maintain momentum, Serman said the French would propose periodic meetings and events where the two sides would be able to reaffirm and advance their cooperation. This "roadmap," he hoped, would be a way to hold their feet to the fire and discourage backsliding. Serman mentioned a possible visit by DRC President Kabilia to Paris "before July," an international conference on the region before the end of 2009, and G-8 focus on the Great Lakes at the 2010 G-8 meeting and the run-up to it.

14. (C) Serman said that to promote the peace process the U.S., France, and UK needed to refocus their energies in the P-3 context, hopefully in pursuit of a common strategy. Serman confided that P-3 leadership in the Great Lakes had lost impetus since the elections in the DRC.

15. (C) Serman said that both Kagame and Kabilia presented

differing leadership styles. The former was a "chess player"

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who seemed to know Rwanda's national interest but was difficult to read. Kabilia was shy and uncommunicative. Part of Sarkozy's objective during his March visit to Kinshasa was to encourage, if not goad, increased leadership by Kabilia, and he may have succeeded to some extent. Serman noted that immediately before the Sarkozy visit, Kabilia had, most unusually, spent more than two weeks traveling around eastern Congo touching base with local leaders, and a week after the visit he had given an unprecedented interview to the New York Times. "He appears to have gotten the message," Serman said.

16. (C) On France-Rwanda relations, Serman said that the two sides "were in no rush to normalize" and were able to carry out productive exchanges despite the break in relations in November 2006, caused by the Bruguiere Report, the arrest warrants it engendered, and the Rwandan report in retaliation with its intimations of warrants against the French. Serman said Sarkozy came to office determined to "solve" the judicial problems stemming from the Bruguiere Report.

Serman suggested that the case of Rose Kabuye was a de facto test case that would enable the Rwandans to have full access to GOF files on Kabuye. Both sides understood that this was Bruguiere's weakest case and a failure to prosecute it successfully could in effect derail the other warrants.

17. (U) INR/AF Don Koran and Rick Ehrenreich have cleared this message.

PEKALA

References to this document in other cables

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