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“2024 – Wake Up Call for the Sahel”

Friday, February 2, 2024

I could begin by describing the Sahel and its legendary kingdoms - a literal and mythical shore extending along the southern rim of the Sahara from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, with the desert above and the savannas below.

I could discuss its fascinating civilizations and their intricate social structures, the wisdom of empires that acknowledged the gift of tolerance and the necessity for decentralization, embodying values such as fraternity, equality, freedom, justice, and human dignity - principles enshrined in the Mandé constitution proclaimed by Sundiata Keita, predating by centuries our universal declaration of human rights.

I could share tales of the legendary Tuareg, the power of their matriarchy, the fearless Tebu, the noble Arabs, and the fervent Peul, the Bambara, Hausa, Songhai - all the communities and cultures that compose the rich mosaic of the Sahel - I could mention the unifying role of Islam, spreading across the desert like spiritual fire, joining all peoples under one god, yet holding on to their beliefs and traditions which thrive under date trees, in caves, in the oases and along the shores of mighty rivers.

I could touch upon the sins and errors of colonialism - the predators and masters of greed attempting to erase intricate social architectures and ways of life - drawing borders, dividing peoples, pitting one against the other, and favoring those aligned with their interests.

And I could also discuss the deeply ingrained heritage of colonialism or neo-colonialism, which continues to sow trouble even in countries that have reclaimed their sovereignty, national dignity, and territorial integrity. A legacy that does not prize the geographic human coherence of the peoples of the Sahara, as seen in the empires of old, but is based on borders and governance models inherited from the West that cut across communities with different cultural, linguistic, and traditional backgrounds - bitterly dividing black against white, nomad against farmer, farmer against herder, the desert against the savanna, and the capitals against the bush.

I would rather speak of the beauty and hope in the Sahel, where individuals labeled as "bad" can transform into "good" and where legitimate aspirations for dignity, justice, and economic opportunity are the cornerstone and the key.

The Sahel is not a hellhole of corruption, crime, rebellion, and terrorism gone astray. It is not an Eldorado of natural resources to be preyed upon and exploited by predators from near and far, nor can it be a trophy in the new geopolitical game between North and South. The Sahel is the geographic human space that connects our civilizations and seas. It is the gateway between the Mediterranean and the great continent of Africa, deserving consideration, dialogue, and respect. The peoples of the Sahel cannot be neglected, and their leaders should not be shunned or ignored.

Establishing peace and stability in the Sahel requires addressing the needs and aspirations of majorities as well as those of local communities, rebel movements and tribes that extend beyond national borders and into the vast Sahara. Conflict and violence between and within communities seed revenge across generations and the winners of today are destined to be the losers tomorrow.

But trust in Western values has been eroded by negligence, strategic errors, double standards, and propaganda. The people of the Sahel need to believe that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

A new disruptive dignity-centered approach is likely our only remaining option. Tactical agreements that do not address the truth and the root causes of conflict are not sustainable, and the Western political, social, and economic model is at stake.

The idea that a strongman is the only guarantee against anarchy is misleading. Relying on autocrats and the military to address complex societal issues does not yield desirable outcomes. Entrusting security solely to autocrats while disregarding the fundamental principles of our societies is proving to be counterproductive. And power obtained by force will always be threatened by other forces leading to further entrenchment and violence.

A new approach would include a collective effort to coordinate top-down and bottom-up diplomacy, delivering strategic and coordinated humanitarian aid, vocational and academic training, cultural protection, and economic investment in full respect of local needs and aspirations.

Terrorism is fueled by poverty, injustice, hopelessness, and fear. The stabilization of local communities, through a concrete and timely coordinated strategic plan for the delivery of social services, education, health, equal opportunity, administrative autonomy and inclusion—these are the factors that will defeat terrorism, all forms of terrorism, and keep predators at bay.

This is what will allow the Sahel to find its way towards prosperity, stability, and peace. Those who stand by their side on this journey will one day have the honor and benefit of being acknowledged as trusted partners and perhaps, one day, even friends.