Terror in the Sahel

What is the issue?

The recent massacre of at least 160 people in a border village in Burkina Faso is a grim reminder of the threat the *Sahel region* faces from Islamist terrorism.

What happened?

- The attack took place in Solhan village, in the Sahel's Yagha province.
- Nobody has claimed responsibility.
- But Burkinabe authorities have named the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS).
- The ISGS has carried out hundreds of terror strikes in recent years.
- The Burkina Faso attack (June 2021) occurred after 137 people were killed by jihadists in Niger, in March 2021.

What is the long-drawn security concern?

- Burkina Faso saw its first major Islamist terrorist attack in 2015.
- The security situation there has deteriorated steadily, especially along the borders with Niger and Mali.
- This has been the case with much of the Sahel region, a 5,900-km-long semi-arid territory.
- It has seen terrorist groups expanding their networks and stepping up attacks on civilians and soldiers.
- In Nigeria, Islamists control swathes of territories.
- They have carried out abductions and attacks, including gunning down 27 people in a village.
- Mali has been fighting terror groups since 2013.

Which are the groups involved?

- **Terror groups** - Four main terror outfits operate in the region:
    1. the ISGS
    2. the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)
    3. the Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin, the local al-Qaeda branch in Mali
    4. Boko Haram
- Of these, the ISGS and Jama'at Nasr are reportedly in alliance.

- Their aim is to expand the influence in the Burkina-Mali-Niger border region.
- They shoot down anyone in the region who does not declare their loyalty to the jihadists.
- Boko Haram and the ISWAP are fighting each other but control territories in northeastern Nigeria.
- **States** - France has deployed troops in the region for counter-insurgency operations.
- It is being helped by the U.S., which has a drone base in Niger.

What is driving the tensions now?

- The regime change policies of the U.S. and France are partly to be blamed for the problems the Sahel countries are facing today.
- A NATO invasion removed Muammar Gaddafi from power in Libya in 2011.
- Since then, the region lost a stable bulwark against militias and jihadists.
- Libya, having fallen into anarchy and civil war, became a jihadist breeding ground.
- When trouble spread to Mali, France made a military intervention in 2013.
- But it did not defeat the insurgency, which spread beyond Mali's borders.
- Now, jihadists find safe havens in the lawless deserts of the Sahel.
- The IS-militant infrastructure was destroyed in Iraq and Syria.
- Soon, their foot soldiers fled to Africa, regrouping themselves in the region.

What is the way forward?

- The recent attacks should serve as a warning to all stakeholders.
- Major global powers, which worked together with regional players to defeat the IS in West Asia, should not stay away from the growing threat from Africa.
- They should, along with the UN, help the Sahel countries build capacity and institutions, offer stable governance and adopt sustainable counter-insurgency strategies.

Source: The Hindu

Quick Fact

Sahel

- Sahel is a semiarid region of western and north-central Africa stretching from Atlantic Ocean eastward, from Senegal to Sudan.
- In between, it covers southern Mauritania, the great bend of the Niger River

in Mali, Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta), southern Niger, northeastern Nigeria, south-central Chad.
- It forms a transitional zone between the arid Sahara (desert) to the north and the belt of humid savannas to the south.

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