During the past half century many of the world’s developing countries have gone through a demographic transition from high mortality, high fertility, and rapid population growth to low mortality, low fertility, and a slower population growth rate. As a result of having smaller and healthier families, many of these countries have reaped a “demographic dividend.” Able to invest more in their children’s nutrition, education and health, economic growth rates have soared. These demographic/economic success stories include countries like South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Chile, Brazil and Mexico.

Not all developing countries, however, have been able to make the demographic transition. Among them are countries that are frequently classified as “failing states.” They include countries like Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen, and Sudan that have experienced violent conflict and made little or no progress in reducing severe poverty, alleviating chronic hunger, or lowering childhood mortality. Unless more is done to empower women and expand family planning services, these countries will never reap a “demographic dividend.”

Mali: The Latest Failing State
A year ago Mali’s democracy held great promise, but last summer a military coup overthrew the government in Bamako and months later an Islamic insurgency broke out in the northern half of the country. France sent troops to quell the terrorists and restore peace to its former colony. The violence has ebbed in recent months, but the fighting could erupt again if the French forces are withdrawn later this year as presently scheduled.

Mali’s troubles did not arise overnight
Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world; it ranked 175 out of 187 countries on the 2011 UNDP Human Development Index. Three out of four people in Mali live on less than $2 a day. In the past decade Mali has been afflicted by three major droughts, and drought conditions in the African Sahel are expected to worsen further as a result of climate change.
“As they debate how to tackle the threat of insurgency and unrest in Africa, Western leaders could do worse than to consider one of the most important, yet curiously underplayed, aspects of that troubled region—the dangers of rapid, unchecked population growth. It is no coincidence that in recent decades Mali’s population has been growing at an unsustainable annual rate of around 3 percent."

Such a drastic rate of population growth has profound implications. In particular it means that, in an undeveloped and largely barren land, too many people are competing for too few local resources and opportunities. Young men have limited hopes of finding employment or even sustenance and are therefore deeply susceptible to the temptation of armed criminality and insurgency and to the lure of radical preachers who seem to offer them both a sense of purpose and scapegoats whom they can blame for their woes.”

— Roger Howard, Foreign Policy, January 28, 2013

Mali’s has one of the world’s fastest growing populations

Mali’s population, currently 16 million, has tripled over the past half century and is projected to reach 45.3 million by 2050. Half the population is under 15 years of age. Unless more is done to combat child marriage—one out of four girls in Mali are married before age 15—and expand family planning services and information, Mali will never make the demographic transition.

Mali is not just a humanitarian concern; it is a threat to regional peace and stability

France’s decision to deploy troops to Mali reflected, in part, fears that the troubles now engulfing the northern half of Mali could spread to other countries in the African Sahel, many of which are struggling with severe poverty, water scarcity, and chronic hunger and also experiencing rapid population growth.

Family planning assistance to Mali has been suspended

As required by U.S. law, all non-humanitarian assistance and direct support to the government of Mali was suspended following last summer’s coup d’etat.

U.S. family planning assistance is being curtailed

Even if the suspension of international family planning assistance to Mali is lifted, the level of U.S. support for international family planning and reproductive health is falling. The recent budget agreement for fiscal year 2013 reduces America’s support for IFP/RH by $12 million. It is estimated that the resulting cutback will deny 624,000 women access to family planning services, result in 180,000 unintended pregnancies, and lead to 84,000 abortions, including 60,000 unsafe abortions.

Last year, the House Appropriations Committee voted to cut U.S. support for international family planning by 25 percent. Developing countries that would be impacted by these proposed cuts include such high priority countries as Yemen, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Nigeria, and Haiti, all of which are experiencing rapid population growth.