Malian refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)

Update May 2020

Niger has been hosting Malian refugees since the outbreak of the conflict in northern Mali in 2012. As of 30 April 2020, UNHCR Niger has registered 58,702 Malian refugees in its biometric database. They are living in 3 areas in the Tillabery region (Ayerou, Ouallam, Abala), in a refugee hosting area for nomadic refugees in the Tahoua region and in the capital Niamey.

The gradual decrease of the security situation has caused the internal displacement of 108,941 persons in the same regions with rising numbers every day.

Finally, the presence of armed groups in Burkina Faso has triggered the cross-border displacement of 3,457 Burkinabe at the least in Tillabery region and have added to rising numbers of internal displacement.

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1 Malians refugees in Niger can be found in Niamey (4,032); in Ouallam; (5,239); in the camp of Mangaize (2,532); in Intikane (19,992); in Ayerou (11,276) and in Abala (15,647).
Operational strategy

- After almost 8 years of presence in Niger, UNHCR and the Government of Niger give priority to medium- and long-term solutions for Malian refugees that will promote social cohesion, self-reliance and a durable integration into national services systems.

- All Malian refugee camps have been closed towards the end of 2019; this was a joint vision of the Government and UNHCR which was accelerated in the current security context. UNHCR is relocating Malian refugees from the camps of Tabareybarey, Mangoize and Abala to the villages of Ayerou, Ouallam and Abala with the support of CERF.

- With the support of the EU Trust Fund, UNHCR has set up a collaboration with the Regional Directorates of Health, Education and Hydraulics, to ensure the inclusion of refugees into national mechanisms. With the support of GIZ, UNHCR and the Government can give Malian refugees access to land in an urbanized site where Nigerien families will be settled as well. For 4000 vulnerable persons among the refugee and host population, a social house is part of the package.

- Moreover, an extensive tripartite collaboration has been developed between the World Bank, the Government of Niger and UNHCR to render refugees more resilient thanks to improved access to basic public services and support for economic opportunities. With the support of ILO, Malian refugees will be included in a market-based livelihood intervention in the area of fish production and waste management.

- A Tripartite Agreement between the Governments of Niger, Mali and UNHCR provides a legal framework for voluntary returns. UNHCR assists those who wish to return with a cash grant.

- The IDP crisis is monitored by a broad community-based network and analysis is carried out on a regular basis. Capacity building and coordinated efforts with humanitarian actors are ongoing to ensure an adequate response to the situation. National legislation for assistance and protection to IDPs based on the Kampala Convention is in place.

Main developments

Security situation

[Graph showing protection incidents in Tahoua & Tillaberi from Jan 2018 to Apr 2020]
The unprecedented rise in armed violence is forcing people to flee their homes, and further deprives vulnerable communities of critical services – including health care - as armed assailants directly target schools and health centers. The attack on the military bases nearby the Malian border and ongoing military operations nearby the Malian border and in Northern Mali had an important impact on the protection environment of people at both sides of the border, who declare being victims of extortion, forced payment of zakat, targeted killings of traditional and religious leaders, cattle theft, threats to leave their villages and intimidations. During the first quarter of 2020, UNHCR has collected a total number of 266 protection incidents causing 7509 victims.

The sweep operation conducted along the border with Mali and Burkina Faso has led for three weeks to the arrest of dozens of individuals suspected of being involved in terrorist activities or either suspected of supporting the jihadists. These arrest has been made possible thanks to information and accusations coming from neighbours or local leaders. The criminal groups in order to keep their grip on the population are now conducting revenge actions against all those who are suspected of helping the security forces.

Population movements

- While much focus of the humanitarian and development community in Niger is now on Covid 19, conflict dynamics continue causing important forced movements of the population in the areas bordering Mali. Nigeriens move from areas close to the Malian border to urban zones such as Ayerou, Torodi, Ouallam, Abala, Banibangou and Flazandeye, as well as the refugee hosting area of Intikane while Malian refugees continue to arrive, mostly in the refugee hosting area of Intikane.
- In the Tillaberry region, due to ongoing and increasing human rights violations in villages located in the triangle between Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, the city of Ayerou and neighboring hamlets have seen a dramatic increase in displacement since the beginning of April. UNHCR has reached out to the relevant human rights bodies to follow up on the situation. During the month of April, 1656 households of 8350 persons have been registered in Ayerou and the surrounding hamlets of Yassan, Famale and Moulkouch. A multisectoral evaluation is underway to evaluate needs and give a first assistance. The Rapid Response Mechanism provides essential health, food and non-food item relief but after the initial three months of assistance, the needs remain high and access and funding is limited to give additional assistance.
- Since the beginning of the year, 4323 persons have arrived in the refugee hosting area of Intikane, of which 2633 IDPs and 1690 Malian refugees. The latter are originally from Tamalet, Anderramboukane, Menaka, Gao, Inchinanane and Tankadami. Due to the COVID-19 situation, screening and registration activities are currently suspended as they imply a gathering of people which is currently prohibited by the authorities.
- 374 Malian refugees originally living in Mangaize refugee camp have declined UNHCR’s offer to relocate to Ouallam and confirmed their intent to return to Mali. Meanwhile, in Ouallam, 166 Malian refugees previously returned to Mali have come back to Ouallam following a deterioration of the security context in Tamakaza and Tinazir (Mali), their regions of origin. They will be enrolled in UNHCR’s database and will receive protection and assistance.
- An estimated 40 households (250 persons) have fled the village of Boupa, nearby the Nigerien-Burkinabe border, to Tera. Armed groups have threatened all persons who respect the authorities prohibition to pray collectively and impose all populations living in these areas to continue to go to the mosques and to organize joint ceremonies (marriages, baptisms, ..) despite the Government’s interdiction. A multisectoral evaluation is underway to evaluate needs and give a first assistance.
- In Menaka (Mali), from 25 April to 4 May, 1,014 refugees were registered (247 households; 536 women and 478 men). In Anderramboukane, 225 households were registered on 3 and 4 May.
Registration activities will continue taking into consideration sanitary and security measures, as these areas have been witnessing a rise in security incidents.

**Key activities**

- The humanitarian crisis in the border area of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger is experiencing an unprecedented deterioration at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading rapidly through the region. Central Sahel is home to some of the most fragile health systems in the world.

- Prevention and response to the global COVID-19 pandemic is key today. While UNHCR continues to deliver life-saving aid, the organization has set up a strategy focusing on increased coordination with the Government and other stakeholders. All UNHCR field representations are actively taking place in regional and sub-regional committees set up by the Government. They coordinate with other regional stakeholders, divide intervention areas and share information on capacities.

- In Ayerou, Ouallam, Abala and Intikane, UNHCR reinforced washing facilities and has distributed soap. With the support of partner organisations, UNHCR engaged in mass communication campaigns through the use of public criers, theatre and messages in languages spoken by refugees on community radios. An important scale up of medical and WASH (Water Hygiene Sanitation) staff is ongoing.

- UNHCR has donated tons of medical supplies to the regional authorities in Tillabery and Tahoua. These will be used to reinforce the health centers in the region and to protect members of the administration. In Tahoua, the authorities inaugurated a site where potential COVID-19 cases will be isolated and treated. UNHCR has donated 40 Refugee Housing Units to set up the site. In Tillabery, a health center constructed by UNHCR has been identified as the location for the set up of the isolation and treatment center.

- In Tillabery and Tahoua region, UNHCR will organize 4 trainings of health staff and train 200 persons on COVID prevention and response, including on psychosocial well-being. In both regions, protection, hygiene and disinfectant equipment has purchased and distributed in the sites, in the local health facilities and to the authorities.

- UNHCR also thinks longer-term and to mitigate the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on populations, UNHCR is discussing with the World Bank and the Government to reorient part of the ongoing project between the World Bank and the Government in refugee hosting areas. Instead of reinforcing livelihoods, cash grants would be distributed to help the populations.

>“It is the confluence of many crises, all of them complex and persistent, that concerns us. We already have three million refugees and displaced persons in an area where it is becoming less and less raining due to climate change. Now add three events that are fed back to this: the increase in violence, the arrival of the period of scarcity in which the scarce reserves of the previous harvest end and now, moreover, the coronavirus and its economic impact. We are facing a real looming humanitarian catastrophe”

Xavier CREACH, Head of Protection Service
UNHCR Regional Office for West Africa

- In Intikane, the office had a meeting with the Government regarding the extension of the town site for refugees living in Intikane. They will be given land in Tamences.
- In Ouallam, the brick factory continues to work on full speed. They produced over 12,000 bricks per week.
Today, as part of the COVID-19 prevention, all schools are closed. UNHCR is closely working with the Education Cluster and the Ministry of Education to identify and implement measures to ensure continuity of education to children during the school closure period and with the regional authorities in charge of Child Protection to ensure that the needs of the refugee and displaced children are met. A contingency plan is underway to start producing quality educational content such as self-learning programs and booklets for students in their final years, for distance education in all regions. Once finalized, UNHCR will purchase and distribute equipment such as pencils and notebooks, but also radios.

In Ouallam, UNHCR and its partner have launched the construction of 10 emergency classrooms on the urbanized site. Moreover, they have received furniture to equip the classrooms, amongst others 250 schoolbanks, 29 deks and chairs, 10 chalkboards, ... They continue to raise awareness on schooling of children.

In Intikane, 56 refugee children have received a birth certificate. With the civil registry services, UNHCR continues to identify displaced children at risk of statelessness and gives them documentation such as birth certificates and nationality certificates.

**Main challenges**

Next to the presence of armed groups, measures imposed as part of the State of Emergency and ongoing military operations, the COVID-19 crisis also has important socioeconomic consequences on populations living in the affected areas. Humanitarian access in refugee hosting areas, especially near the borders with Mali and Burkina Faso, is cumbersome. Cross-border and internal displacement is ongoing.

Additional support from development partners is needed to complete the urbanization program and to reinforce infrastructure in urbanized areas.

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**LINKS**

UNHCR country operation page - Twitter