

HIDDEN AND IN NEED: URBAN DISPLACEMENT IN SOUTHERN MALI

Despite French and Malian government declarations of success against Islamist insurgents in the north of Mali, successful presidential elections in August, and the partial deployment of the United Nations Multidimensional Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA), security conditions in the country have not yet returned to normal. Malian government officials have not returned to the north in significant numbers, while basic services in that region remain extremely limited. And yet, donor states and other members of the international community are eager to present northern Mali as a counter-terrorism success story. This political narrative of stability in the north obscures the urgent need for an ongoing, robust humanitarian response to the plight of internally displaced people (IDPs) in the south of the country. There are an estimated 283,000 IDPs in Mali, most of whom live in the south without adequate protection or assistance. The humanitarian aid currently provided in the south fails to consider the medium-term needs of IDPs or to address basic protection gaps. Donors and humanitarian agencies must focus their attention on the needs of these IDPs and uphold the humanitarian principle of voluntary, safe, and dignified returns.

BACKGROUND

For the past two years, a complex humanitarian emergency has unfolded across Mali with wide-ranging political and security implications for the broader Sahel region. In January 2012, Tuareg separatists, known as the National

Movement for the Liberation of Azawad, with historic grievances against the government of Mali, launched a rebellion to establish an independent state in the north. The Malian government's inability to respond to the armed rebellion prompted a coup d'état by the Malian army, leading to the establishment of an interim government.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ The Humanitarian Country Team in Mali should develop a plan of action to address the protection and assistance needs of internally displaced people (IDPs) and acutely vulnerable members of the host community.
- ❑ The United States and other donors must fund a long-term, comprehensive humanitarian program for southern Mali through the 2014 Strategic Response Plan.
- ❑ The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and its partners should develop a global guidance note on best practices in the provision of protection and humanitarian assistance to urban IDPs.
- ❑ The UN's Emergency Relief Coordinator should support UNHCR in its efforts to secure the human and financial resources necessary to provide robust leadership and coordination of the protection cluster.
- ❑ The Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General/Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator for Mali must continue to defend the Humanitarian Country Team's position on facilitated returns to the north.
- ❑ The Malian government should invite the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of IDPs to begin consultations on the development of a national IDP policy, which should include local integration options for IDPs wishing to permanently remain in the south.

In the north, this power vacuum provided an opportunity for separatists to seize control of vast areas and key population centers. The security situation rapidly deteriorated as the Tuareg separatists were pushed out by hard-line armed Islamist groups, including Ansar Dine, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and its splinter group, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa. Civilians fled the clashes between government forces, Tuareg combatants, and Islamists.

In January 2013, as the Islamist insurgents extended their area of control and moved towards the capital, France (at the request of the interim government) launched a military offensive in the north. The French intervention weakened and scattered the insurgents but failed to eliminate them as a threat.

In April 2013, the UN Security Council approved the transition of the African-led International Support Mission to Mali to MINUSMA, with an authorized deployment of 12,000 troops. There are now approximately 6,000 peacekeepers deployed, mainly in the north of the country.

Security in the north showed signs of improving until late September, when insurgents launched an attack in Timbuktu, followed later by multiple attacks in Gao and Kidal. As a result of this resurgence of violence, in late October the French resumed military operations in northern Mali with support from the Malian army.

The conflict in the north and related political instability throughout the country have had far-reaching humanitarian consequences. At the height of the conflict, civilians in the north were subjected to widespread human rights abuses, including indiscriminate killings, targeted executions, mutilations, abductions, rape and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV), and the recruitment of child soldiers.

Approximately 500,000 people are thought to have fled the north and are now displaced, either within Mali or as refugees in neighboring countries (although the accuracy of these figures is questionable). Following a successful presidential election in August 2013, the Malian government is now eager to show that the situation in northern Mali is stable. It is therefore actively encouraging IDPs to return to their homes, and tens of thousands have done so.

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN THE SOUTH

“It’s true. We are looking to the north,” one aid worker in Mali told Refugees International in September. “Donors have an interest in stabilizing the north. But we can’t forget about the south, where a majority of the needs are, and

where a majority of the needs will remain in the near future.”

From the actions of donors and the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT), it is clear that a disproportionate amount of attention is being given to northern Mali when compared with the south. Since RI’s last mission to Mali in October 2012, which uncovered significant gaps in the response to internal displacement, humanitarian capacity has, by all accounts, improved. Still, the humanitarian response in the south is far from comprehensive, and many IDPs’ basic needs – including funds to pay rent, food, and access to medical care and education – remain unmet.

When IDPs began arriving in the south, the majority lived with host families. Most of those families have since exhausted their resources, and so now the majority of IDPs must rent shelter. The influx of IDPs to the south also has led to competition for jobs and rising food and rental costs. Few organizations are providing aid to the displaced population and the little assistance that IDPs receive has largely been comprised of cash transfers. This is an innovative response to assisting IDPs living in non-camp settings, but the cash transfers are given for short periods of time and are inadequate to meet the full range of IDP needs.

Given the reality that many IDPs will remain in the south for the medium term, it is imperative that the HCT now come together to develop an action plan for the south, with particular attention given to livelihoods and food security for both displaced people and host communities. In the coming weeks, the HCT will undertake a humanitarian needs overview to inform the Strategic Response Plan, which is meant to outline a longer-term response than the current method of appealing for humanitarian funds. This will be an ideal opportunity for the HCT to analyze the needs of IDPs in the south and prioritize them within a country-wide humanitarian response.

The most significant challenge to humanitarian action in the south of Mali is the extreme poverty of the population at large. It is difficult to ensure that IDPs can access assistance and basic services when their hosts are confronted with similar challenges. That said, IDPs cannot simply be ignored: they require special support, given the trauma that they experienced in the north and the hardships associated with forced displacement (e.g., the loss of housing, assets, livelihoods and income, and social support networks; the disruption or loss of education; family separation; and psycho-social trauma – especially among children). In this context, it is vital that humanitarian assistance be provided in a way that does not lead to tensions between displaced

and host populations, particularly if the former are sharing the homes of the latter.

While humanitarian workers in Mali acknowledge that it is preferable for the IDPs to be living in the community rather than in camps, they also point out that the current guidance for IDP protection and programming is based almost exclusively on camp settings. This guidance gap must be filled, with UNHCR taking a lead in the process. Given the enormous number of IDPs residing in impoverished urban settings – both in Mali and globally – the lack of guidance on this issue is of particular concern.

PROTECTION PROBLEMS IN THE SOUTH

One of the most glaring gaps in the humanitarian response in Mali is the lack of protection programming that targets the most vulnerable IDPs, including women, children, family members separated by violence, female-headed households, and GBV survivors. One international NGO working in the south estimates that more than 50 percent of IDP households are female-headed, due to the large number of men who remained in the north or who have already returned.

During the crisis in the north, there were numerous reports of women and girls being raped in front of their families or abducted by armed groups. Some armed groups coerced girls into forced marriage with militants. In 2012, the GBV sub-cluster identified more than 2,800 cases of GBV. This figure probably represents only a small minority of the actual incidents, since many go unreported due to a fear of stigmatization and reprisal attacks. Based on interviews that RI conducted with IDPs, many survivors of GBV now residing in the south are deeply traumatized by the violence they experienced in the north and are in urgent need of psychosocial support.

IDPs living in the south face ongoing protection threats. For example, it is not unusual to have four or five families crowded together in a single house – a situation which exposes women and children to greater risks of sexual abuse. In other cases, IDPs utilize negative coping mechanisms in order to deal with the challenges of displacement. These negative coping mechanisms include forced and early marriage, as well as survival sex.

“Displaced women in Bamako who engage in survival sex will often have multiple clients to be able to pay for their rent, food, and clothes,” one humanitarian worker explained to RI. “Young girls submit to survival sex as well – sometimes of their own volition, and sometimes under pressure from a family member or the host family.”

Despite these problems, humanitarian agencies in Mali have not undertaken a detailed protection analysis or established a protection strategy for IDPs in the south. Many of the large international organizations that have appropriate expertise are focusing their efforts on the north. The few local civil society organizations with protection and GBV expertise have very limited budgets and cannot reach most of the people in need.

The weaknesses of the protection response to IDPs in the south can be attributed in part to the protection partners’ limited capacity and a lack of funding for the humanitarian response. But the primary cause of this problem is the poor performance of the protection cluster.

In November 2012, an RI mission concluded that the protection cluster in Mali was not functioning in an effective manner. That situation was temporarily rectified by the deployment and robust performance of a representative from the Protection Standby Capacity Project, who remained in the country until August 2013. At the time of writing, that position remained unfilled. While there have been discussions for several months about the appointment of an NGO protection cluster co-lead, UNCHR has failed to sign a memorandum of understanding with the agency that has agreed to assume this responsibility.

Most of the humanitarian agencies that RI interviewed in Mali voiced concern about the dysfunctional nature of the protection cluster and UNHCR’s inability to provide it with effective leadership. Cluster meetings were said to be too long (frequently more than three hours) and did not conclude with action items that could be implemented, monitored, and linked to a common protection strategy. Indeed, such a strategy does not appear to exist.

While UNHCR plans to have a new coordinator on the ground in a matter of weeks and has started to recruit additional staff to support the protection cluster, this hiatus has not reflected well upon the organization. Given the Malian government’s current push for premature IDP returns, the UN’s Emergency Relief Coordinator and High Commissioner for Refugees should work jointly to ensure that this protection gap is filled.

RETURNS AND OTHER SOLUTIONS

IDP returns have become highly politicized and are being used by the Malian government to demonstrate that Islamist insurgents are no longer a threat to the country’s stability. The government is actively encouraging IDPs to return to the north by means of radio statements and the provision of transportation and assistance packages to returnees.

Some IDPs told RI that as a result of these official initiatives, family members heeded the government's advice and returned to the north, only to go back to the south once they saw how difficult conditions were. Other IDPs explained that they had little choice but to go north, since living conditions in the south were so poor. Many IDPs informed RI that they wanted to return to the north, but that they were not prepared to relocate while the government's presence was so limited, the security situation so fragile, and basic services not in place.

If security in the north continues to deteriorate, it will become increasingly difficult for humanitarian agencies to implement an expanded program of assistance for returnees and their communities. Indeed, those agencies are already confined to town centers, where security is most reliable.

The HCT has already developed a clear position on this issue, agreeing not to facilitate returns to the north until security and basic services are in place. In order to assist spontaneous returnees, moreover, UN agencies and NGOs have decided to improve services in areas of return, targeting people on the basis of their vulnerability rather than whether they were displaced. This strategy is intended to reduce the potential for tensions between those who stayed in the north and those who fled.

The government's position on returns is also problematic because MINUSMA is structurally integrated, meaning that the UN's humanitarian work in Mali is not independent from its military and political activities. It is therefore critical that the UN Humanitarian Coordinator continue to defend the HCT's position on returns.

LOCAL INTEGRATION

A small proportion of the IDPs (roughly five percent, according to several NGOs) have expressed an interest in living in the south on a long-term or permanent basis. In some cases, this is due to the trauma they experienced during the conflict, or to the stigma experienced by those who survived GBV or engaged in survival sex in the south. Others have lost their homes and property in the north and have become accustomed to a more urban way of life.

With the situation in the north likely to remain unstable in the foreseeable future, the number of IDPs opting to integrate locally in the south will likely increase as their displacement becomes more protracted. But attaining this solution will be extremely difficult given the chronic poverty of Malians in urban centers, as well as the chronic shortages of land, housing, and basic services.

In Mopti, for example, at least 220 families have approached the mayor to request an allocation of land so that they can stay in the city. So far, they have not received it. Local integration is mentioned in the HCT's durable solutions strategy, but humanitarian agencies interviewed by RI were unable to provide details regarding this approach.

Given the potentially protracted nature of internal displacement in Mali and the absence of viable solutions, the government should invite the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of IDPs to begin consultations on the development of a national IDP policy. Such a policy should address the assistance needs of urban IDPs in the near term, and also identify more durable solutions – including safe returns and local integration – for those who chose not to return. In the meantime, the HCT and the government should work together on a framework for local integration.

Michelle Brown and Marcy Hersh traveled to Bamako and Mopti, Mali and Dakar, Senegal in October 2013 to assess the situation of internally displaced Malians.