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## MALI: OUTSIDE THE SPOTLIGHT, DISPLACED PEOPLE IN URGENT NEED OF ASSISTANCE

Since hard-line Islamist groups took control of northern Mali earlier this year, regional and international attention has focused on plans for an African-led military force to drive out the insurgents. But this focus has distracted from the unmet and growing needs of displaced Malians, the majority of whom have fled to the country's south. Although easily accessible, they have received only limited assistance to date. With both the civilian government and the Malian army in a state of disarray, it will take time to get the political process on track and the army in shape to retake the north. In the meantime, meeting the needs of those displaced in the south must be prioritized. In addition, given the likelihood of a further deterioration of humanitarian conditions in both the north and south, coordination of the humanitarian response must be improved and far more emphasis must be placed on ensuring that well-developed and resourced humanitarian contingency plans are in place and ready for implementation.

### BACKGROUND

Over the past year, a complex humanitarian emergency has been unfolding in Mali with wide-ranging political and security implications for the broader region. In January, Tuareg separatists, long marginalized by the civilian government in the south, launched a rebellion to establish an

independent state in northern Mali. The Malian government's weak response to the rebellion sparked a military coup d'état in the capital, Bamako. Under international pressure, the junta's leaders handed power over to an interim government in April, but political instability persists. In December, the military forced the resignation of the prime

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ The UN Humanitarian Coordinator/Resident Coordinator must ensure that the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), in cooperation with the Commission on Population Movement, immediately develops a strategy for identifying the needs and vulnerabilities of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and the families who are hosting them. Protection Cluster leadership must be improved, additional experienced staff deployed, and a UN Global Protection Cluster support mission undertaken.
- ❑ The UN Emergency Relief Coordinator should request that an Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Transformative Agenda evaluation mission to Mali be undertaken to improve leadership, coordination, and accountability to beneficiaries.
- ❑ The current draft IASC Humanitarian Contingency Plan for Mali must be revised to address gaps and – with donor support – be made ready for implementation, in order to augment preparedness should humanitarian conditions deteriorate.
- ❑ Donor countries should provide technical support and expertise to Malian government humanitarian institutions, in order to strengthen their ability to respond to the needs of IDPs and vulnerable host families.
- ❑ The Malian government should invite the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons to provide advice and guidance to both government humanitarian institutions and members of the UN Humanitarian Country Team.

minister and the dissolution of his government. Meanwhile in the north, the power vacuum provided an opportunity for insurgents to seize control of vast areas and key population centers. Over the past eight months, the situation has rapidly deteriorated as the Tuareg separatists were pushed out by hard-line Islamists groups, including Ansar Dine, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (a regional, criminal terrorist network), and its splinter group, the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO).

The eruption of violence in Mali has had significant humanitarian impacts. Civilians in the north have been subjected to wide-spread human rights abuses, including killings, targeted executions, mutilations, rape and other forms of violence against women, and recruitment of child soldiers. In addition, approximately 400,000 people have been forced to flee and are now displaced either internally or as refugees in neighboring countries. Compounding the problem is the fact that when the conflict broke out earlier this year, Mali and its neighbors were already struggling to cope with a food crisis affecting 18 million people across the Sahel – including 4.6 million Malians. The presence of illegal armed groups has seriously hindered humanitarian access to already food-insecure populations in the north. In March, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) activated seven clusters<sup>1</sup> to coordinate the humanitarian response to the unfolding emergency: food security, nutrition, health, protection, logistics, emergency telecoms, education, and water & sanitation (WASH). The shelter cluster was activated in November.

As of writing, it appears most likely that the UN Security Council will approve plans by ECOWAS (a West African regional organization) to launch an African-led military operation with the goal of restoring Mali's territorial integrity. For that to occur, however, the splintered and disorganized Malian army will need to be reassembled, trained, equipped, and brought under civilian authority – a process that in and of itself could take six months to a year. In addition, the U.S. and other western governments have requested – and rightfully so – that any military deployment be accompanied by a parallel political process that includes elections and the restoration of a democratically-elected, civilian government.

There is a real chance that the deployment of a military force to northern Mali will be accompanied by a dramatic worsening of the humanitarian situation. Civilians are likely to be caught in the crossfire, additional forced displacement could occur, and insecurity may further hinder humanitarian access. But it is also likely that in the time it takes to ready a military force, the situation could deteriorate further; further political upheaval or the expansion of the insurgency

south are two of the many scenarios that could play out. As discussed below, the UN humanitarian country team (HCT) is struggling to properly organize itself and respond to growing needs, including those of displaced populations in the south. Without immediate improvements, the HCT will be ill-prepared for political or humanitarian contingencies.

## **DISPLACED PEOPLE IN THE SOUTH RECEIVE LIMITED ASSISTANCE**

Humanitarian needs in northern Mali are extremely difficult to ascertain and remain of the utmost concern. However, more than half of the country's internally displaced persons (IDPs) are now residing in the south and are easily accessible.<sup>2</sup> They require urgent attention.

When conflict in the north broke out, the majority of IDPs went to live with extended family members in Mali's southern regions.<sup>3</sup> Host family arrangements such as these are usually far preferable to the “warehousing” of IDPs in camps. Over time, camp conditions often become uncomfortable and/or unsanitary, vulnerable groups face increased protection risks, and limited livelihood opportunities can lead to dependence on outside assistance. In Mali, however, the host family arrangements have had a detrimental effect on IDPs by decreasing their visibility, obscuring their needs, and hiding their vulnerabilities.

In October, RI met with numerous host families in and around the cities of Bamako and Segou who were sheltering between 12 and 14 relatives from the north. This meant that many were now supporting 20 or more family members in total. RI was extremely concerned to find that few had received humanitarian assistance beyond a few bags of rice, even though most had been displaced since April. Some communes in and around Bamako were not receiving any assistance at all. Unable to find steady work or sources of income, their limited cash reserves were quickly running out.

Moreover, many IDPs who initially stayed with host families have been forced to find alternative shelter arrangements due to the strain on host families' limited resources. (In this regard, it is important to note that food insecurity and malnutrition in Mali are greater in the south than in the north.) According to a November IDP Assessment Report prepared by the International Organization on Migration (IOM), 62 percent of IDPs in the Bamako area are now renting houses (earlier estimates indicated that upwards of 90 percent were with host families). Paying rent, which is expensive in Bamako, has further depleted IDPs' limited resources. Families also told RI that they had started to relocate further away from the city to more remote neighborhoods where

housing is more affordable but where there are fewer basic service providers. RI also met with IDPs who were unable to pay their water and electric bills, and could not afford healthcare and medicine for children and pregnant women. Several IDP families told RI that some of their male relatives had chosen to return to the north, despite the risk of harm, because they could no longer afford the high cost of living in Bamako. In short, the failure to identify IDPs' and host families' needs in the south has led to inadequate assistance over the past eight months, has forced substantial numbers of displaced families to relocate to rental housing, and has further impoverished thousands of people who were poor and vulnerable to begin with, thereby diminishing their ability to cope with continued food insecurity or future shocks.

After the first surges of displacement from the north in March/April, significant time was lost as the Protection Cluster, led by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), struggled to come up with a uniform system for accurately registering and collecting data on IDPs. In July, the Commission on Population Movement (French acronym CMP) – a consortium led by IOM and comprised of UN agencies, NGOs, and relevant government ministries – was formed within the framework of the Protection Cluster to get a better handle on IDP data. In September, the CMP and the Protection Cluster finally agreed upon a methodology and form, based on IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), for collecting basic IDP data.

On the positive side, the first data set for IDPs in the Bamako area has now been completed and IOM is in the process of expanding data collection to other areas in the south, including Segou, Sikasso, and Koulikoro. Given the evidence that IDPs continue to move back and forth between the north and south, IOM is also working with Malian authorities to establish an IDP tracking system in Mopti to monitor their movements. Yet at the time of RI's visit in late October – six months after large-scale displacement began – it was not yet clear how this data would be used, if at all, for conducting in-depth IDP profiling and targeting of vulnerable groups going forward. Rather, it appeared that differences in approach within the Protection Cluster persisted, with UNHCR planning to conduct a one-off, in-depth profiling exercise in Mopti. The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) also plans to pursue another IDP assessment in the Bamako area, although it was unclear how this project would be coordinated with UNHCR's efforts. Following RI's visit, the Joint IDP Profiling Service (JIPS) was finally called in to provide guidance and technical support to UNHCR's profiling exercise in Mopti. This is a welcome development. Nonetheless, given the time it took to even

begin collecting uniform data on IDPs, and the non-complementary nature of the various activities, UNHCR should have solicited JIPS support much earlier.

The extremely slow response to IDPs residing in the south raises broader concerns regarding UNHCR's failure to prioritize protection of IDPs in Mali. The recent secondment of an experienced protection officer to UNHCR from NRC's ProCap roster is a welcome addition. Nonetheless, at the time of RI's October visit, the lack of UNHCR leadership on IDP protection was evident, and little had been done to implement the Protection Cluster Strategy developed back in May. Several key objectives remain unmet – most notably, “ensuring that profiling, registration and documentation activities are undertaken and that specific needs of IDPs are assessed and included in the humanitarian response, with a focus on women, children and the elderly.”<sup>4</sup> In addition, traversal protection objectives outlined in the Strategy to enhance accountability to and participation of beneficiaries – for example, age, gender, and diversity mainstreaming (AGDM) participatory assessments – have not yet been undertaken.

RI was troubled by the apparent widespread lack of understanding of IDP vulnerabilities among some members of the HCT, with several agency staff members taking the position that most IDPs in Mali were not really displaced because they were living with host families or were pastoralists. RI was also concerned that there has been insufficient focus on providing alternative sources of income to IDPs. Several HCT members said that they did not want to engage in livelihood activities for IDPs because they believed that would discourage IDPs from eventually returning. This approach is problematic. It is true that finding livelihood opportunities can be challenging in settings where the general population lacks jobs or sources of income. Nonetheless, denying IDPs an opportunity to earn a livelihood – and thereby forcing them to rely solely on direct assistance or host families – is not a sustainable approach, especially in a setting like Mali where displacement could be protracted.

As a way forward, the UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC), who chairs the HCT and is responsible for ensuring that it responds adequately to the needs of displaced people, should immediately request that the UN Global Protection Cluster conduct a support mission to Mali. Both a multi-functional support mission and a cluster leadership and coordination support mission would be useful in this regard. In addition, UNHCR should immediately deploy additional, experienced protection staff to support IDP programming and ensure protection is mainstreamed

across the clusters. For their part, operational agency staff and officials in charge of clusters beyond protection must be experienced and knowledgeable on IDP protection, or else immediately trained on protection issues.

Now that IOM's methodology for profiling and tracking IDPs has been adopted, CMP and UNHCR (with full support of the RC/HC) must immediately develop a joint strategy for identifying vulnerabilities and protection gaps among IDPs and host families. Finally, the recently activated Shelter Cluster must be made operational immediately to identify IDP families in need of cash assistance for rent. It must also provide host families with any assistance or materials they might need to continue housing their displaced relatives.

Developing and implementing methodologies and programs to meet the growing needs of displaced Malians is particularly urgent given the likelihood that the situation will deteriorate. According to the draft IASC Contingency Plan, significant numbers of people may be displaced in the future, with as many as 360,000 to 630,000 Malians forced to flee under three of the scenarios. According to Malian government and UN officials with whom RI spoke, there are no plans to set up IDP camps in the future. But in the absence of more robust programming, it is highly unlikely that host families will be able to absorb newly displaced relatives, or that IDPs will have the resources to care for themselves.

More broadly, the weak IDP response in Mali reflects a deeper, systemic dilemma facing UNHCR and donors. Since the onset of the Mali crisis, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres has repeatedly called on donors to increase their support for Malians displaced by the crisis, a request that RI has echoed.<sup>5</sup> Yet this has not been accompanied by effective UNHCR leadership within Mali or a strong emphasis on IDP protection. It is true that funding for the humanitarian response and the Protection Cluster has been insufficient. Nonetheless, UNHCR, as the Protection Cluster lead agency, has failed *both* to provide the leadership and staff necessary to call attention to the needs and vulnerabilities of more than 200,000 Malian IDPs, *and* to provide direct assistance to them in its role as provider of last resort. More than six months into the crisis, only 13 per cent of individuals targeted by the Protection Cluster have been assisted.<sup>6</sup> While donors do bear some responsibility for their failure to fund IDP programs, further pledges will not materialize until UNHCR backs up its IDP protection mandate with strong leadership and effective programming.

## A SLOW HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE TO AN ESCALATING CRISIS

Mali is now facing three growing and interconnected emergencies: a food crisis, armed conflict, and the political crisis precipitated by the coup. This presents serious operational challenges for aid agencies. Because most agencies working in Mali prior to the food crisis and conflict in the north were working in the development sector, many have had to rapidly scale up operations and/or switch focus from development to humanitarian programs. The continued insecurity in the north has also forced agencies working there to identify partners and negotiate arrangements that allow them to operate remotely. Finally, agencies have faced both competing human and material resource demands for emergencies elsewhere around the globe (e.g., Syria), and financial constraints due to a weak response from donors.

In such a difficult environment, effective leadership from the HCT is essential. Yet six months after becoming operational, the HCT still faces significant coordination challenges. This appears to stem in part from the high rate of staff turnover and the lack of more experienced agency staff with knowledge of complex emergencies. Several of the clusters – including both health and protection – were not fully functional at the time of RI's visit, while others appeared to be focused primarily on the north at the expense of unmet humanitarian needs in the south. The lack of coordination and differences in approach between humanitarian agencies and development actors also continues to pose problems. For example, there is evidence that development staff in some agencies are not aware of, or do not participate in, relevant cluster meetings.

These shortcomings must be addressed immediately in order to effectively address current humanitarian needs and prevent the situation from deteriorating. Specifically, agencies must deploy staff with experience in responding to complex emergencies, remote management, protection, urban IDP and host family needs analysis, and other areas relevant to the Mali situation. In addition, cluster leadership must be improved, and attention must be given to setting priorities for both the north and the south.

Finally, the HCT, with the support of donors, must avoid creating parallel humanitarian structures that undermine and potentially weaken Malian institutions. The Malian government's humanitarian institutions should participate in the clusters, and donors and agencies should support programs that build the capacity of relevant offices in the Ministry of Civil Protection, the Ministry of Social Development, and their counterparts at the commune and municipal (*quartier*) level. Donors should support programs to strengthen



the Malian government's civil service and institutions, rather than allow continued political uncertainty to weaken them. Finally, the Malian government should invite the UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons to provide expertise and guidance to both Malian government humanitarian staff and members of the HCT.

## **LINKING THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN MALI TO THE BROADER HUMANITARIAN REFORM AGENDA**

The humanitarian response in Mali has also come up short in terms of meeting the primary goals of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Transformative Agenda – namely, improving leadership, accountability, and coordination. One cannot help but ask what the point is of pursuing time-consuming, costly initiatives at the Geneva-level when they are not being linked directly to the UN response on the ground and to the beneficiaries purportedly being served. As the Transformative Agenda is rolled out, the IASC should consider making an evaluation visit to Mali, since many of the shortcomings there are the same ones the TA is meant to address.

Likewise, changing humanitarian mindsets to look beyond the emergency response continues to prove challenging. It is true that many different stakeholders in the Sahel now emphasize resiliency initiatives, which link the emergency response to longer-term, more sustainable anti-poverty and development goals. Nonetheless, the RC/HC must implement mechanisms to ensure that development and humanitarian actors are working together on the ground in Mali. Moreover, the RC/HC must ensure that programming is designed to respond not only to immediate humanitarian needs, but also to build resiliency of vulnerable households. This will not only help beneficiaries recover more quickly, but will also avoid losing ground on the resiliency and development gains made to date.

Since the humanitarian situation within Mali could deteriorate significantly before an end to the crisis is reached, the IASC Contingency Plan must be both sufficient and ready for implementation. The current draft Contingency Plan, however, is not sufficient to address the most likely scenarios and should be revised. Specifically, it must include a coherent coordination mechanism between humanitarian and military actors; plans for additional resources (human, financial, material) for individual clusters and sectors; tools to assess needs, including the Multi-Cluster/Sector Initial Rapid Assessment (MIRA); and plans for IDP camps and additional refugee camps if necessary. The 2013 Consolidated Appeal for Mali, which is expected to be launched in December, must

include programs to allow for the full and effective implementation of the Contingency Plan.

Once this appeal is launched, the HCT must clearly identify when the Contingency Plan's key provisions will be activated and what resources have been set aside for rapid response. Additionally, it should establish a monitoring system that will measure the adequacy of the response in relation to the needs. Donors, meanwhile, must increase funding for the current humanitarian response, and also commit additional funds for the implementation of the Plan. Donor commitments to provide military or technical assistance for the ECOWAS force must be accompanied by equally robust commitments for the humanitarian response and – if activated – the implementation of the Contingency Plan.

*Andrea Lari and Alice Thomas traveled to Mali in October and November 2012 to investigate the current humanitarian situation of internally displaced persons.*

<sup>1</sup> Under the UN cluster approach, "clusters," or groups composed of UN agencies and national and international NGOs, coordinate their activities in and around a specific humanitarian service (e.g., food, nutrition, water & sanitation, etc.). In each cluster, one agency is appointed to oversee all efforts as the "cluster lead." See *IASC Guidance Note on Using the Cluster Approach to Strengthen Humanitarian Response*, November 2007.

<sup>2</sup> As of late October, approximately 204,000 Malians were internally displaced, 60 percent of whom are residing in the south, primarily in and around the cities of Bamako (≈47,000 IDPs), Mopti (≈40,000 IDPs) and Segou (≈20,000 IDPs). Oct. 28, 2012 OCHA Mali Humanitarian Overview.

<sup>3</sup> As of May, 97 percent of IDPs were living with host families and communities. Of these, 67 percent were depending entirely on host families for food. May 15, 2012 OCHA Mali Complex Emergency Situation Report No. 4.

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR Bamako Mali Protection Cluster Strategy.

<sup>5</sup> See Refugees International's May 2012 report, *Malian Refugees: Underfunded Response Adds Stress to Sahel Food Crisis*.

<sup>6</sup> OCHA Bulletin Humanitaire Mali, No. 2, November 29, 2012.