

“I STILL SEE THE TALIBÉS BEGGING”

Government Program to Protect Talibé Children in Senegal Falls Short





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Children in Senegal Falls Short

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-6231-34952

Cover design by Rafael Jimenez

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JULY 2017

ISBN: 978-1-6231-34952

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The main routes of migration in Senegal and Guinea-Bissau for boys in Quranic boarding schools marked by forced child begging. © 2010 John Emerson/Human Rights Watch

Summary

Across Senegal, an estimated 50,000 boys living in traditional Quranic boarding schools, or *daaras*, are forced to beg for daily quotas of money, rice or sugar by their Quranic teachers, known as *marabouts*. Children in these *daaras* are often beaten, chained, bound, and subjected to other forms of physical or psychological abuse amounting to inhuman and degrading treatment.

In June 2016, the government demonstrated meaningful political will by introducing a new program to “remove children from the streets” (known in French as the “*retrait des enfants de la rue*,” or the “*retrait*”), intended to crack down on forced child begging. Over the first year of the program, headed by the Ministry of Women, Family and Children (“Ministry of Family”), police and social workers led over 60 street operations that picked up more than 1,500 children found begging in Dakar. The children were placed in shelters, in most cases the government-run Ginddi Center, while their parents or guardians were traced and warned about the laws prohibiting forced child begging and exploitation.

However, one year later, the program has hardly made a dent in the alarming numbers of children subjected to exploitation, abuse and neglect daily. Hundreds of the children picked up from the streets were returned to the very Quranic teachers who had forced them to beg in the first place, officials involved in the program told Human Rights Watch. The impact of the program was further undermined by the government’s insufficient allocation of resources and lack of coordination with other ministries and actors in the sphere of child protection.

More broadly, the program failed to trigger investigations or prosecutions of Quranic teachers implicated in forced begging and other abuses. Despite promises of sanctions by the president and the minister of Women, Family and Children, not a single Quranic teacher was arrested or prosecuted for forcing *talibé* children to beg during the first year of the program, which was carried out exclusively in the Dakar region.¹

¹ For promises of sanctions, see Twitter post by Macky Sall, President of Senegal, July 1, 2016, https://twitter.com/macky_sall/status/748927604720340992 (accessed June 20, 2017); see also Ankou Sodjago, “Retrait des enfants de la rue : des bourses de sécurité familiale octroyées aux familles,” *Senego*, February 21, 2017,



Two *talibés*, ages 7 and 8, take a short rest from begging in Dakar, Senegal. The youngest *talibé* had untreated, infected wounds on his leg. May 12, 2017. © 2017 Lauren Seibert/Human Rights Watch

In the month following the program’s launch, aid workers, rights activists, and government officials observed a dramatic drop in the presence of children begging in both Dakar and Saint-Louis. However, the failure to investigate and prosecute abusive teachers ultimately led to a return of the status quo. “Honestly, in June and July 2016 there were fewer children in the streets,” said Etienne Dieng, manager of Ginddi Center. “But when the teachers saw that there would not be punishments, they started to send children back into the streets.”²

Based primarily on interviews and observations in Senegal between April and June 2017, on accounts of victims of abuses and others, and on other information from secondary

http://senego.com/retrait-des-enfants-de-la-rue-des-bourses-de-securite-familiale-octroyees-aux-familles_441855.html (accessed June 20, 2017).

² Human Rights Watch interview with Etienne Dieng, manager of Ginddi Center, Dakar, Senegal, May 3, 2017.

sources, including credible media reports, this report examines the successes, challenges and failings of the first year of the program. It documents the ongoing abuses faced by *talibé* children in Dakar and four other regions since the “*retrait*” was introduced, including forced begging, violence and physical abuse, chaining and imprisonment, sexual abuse, and rape. The report also discusses the ongoing challenge of ensuring justice for these abuses, highlighting the key steps identified by Senegalese civil society and many government officials to ending the widespread exploitation and abuse of young boys at certain Quranic schools.

In the course of conducting research for this report, Human Rights Watch observed hundreds of *talibés* living in squalid *daaras* and begging in plain sight in the cities of Dakar and Saint-Louis, often in front of police and gendarmes, near government buildings and along busy highways.

In the year since the program’s launch, at least two *talibés* were killed allegedly as a result of abuse in Quranic schools, according to news reports and sources interviewed by Human Rights Watch.³ In the same period, Human Rights Watch documented five cases of actual or attempted sexual abuse by Quranic teachers or their assistants, as well as 28 cases of *talibés* beaten, chained, or imprisoned in their *daaras* – in four cases for a period of one to two years. These abuses occurred in the regions of Dakar, Saint-Louis, Louga, and Diourbel.

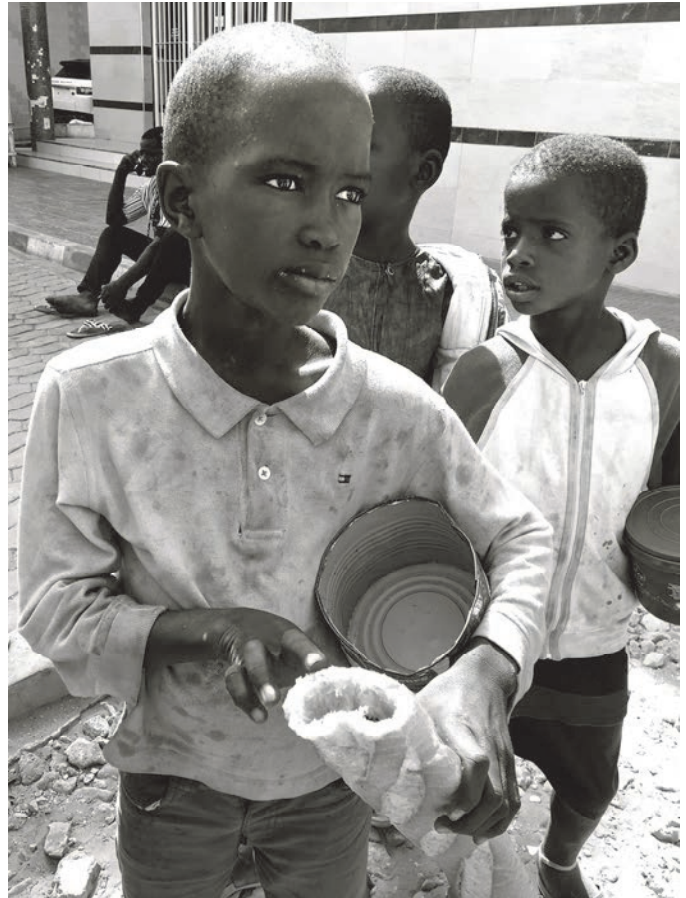
From May to June 2017, Human Rights Watch and the Platform for the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights (PPDH), a coalition of 40 Senegalese children’s rights organizations, observed hundreds of children living in squalid, unsanitary *daaras* in Dakar and Saint-Louis. Nineteen of the 43 current and former *talibé* children Human Rights Watch interviewed on the streets and in children’s shelters said that they are beaten if they fail to study, try to run away, return late to the *daara*, or fail to bring back daily quotas. Several *marabouts* interviewed in Quranic schools admitted to beating their *talibés* for the same reasons.

³ Mamoune Tine, “Mbacké: La police interrompt l’enterrement d’un jeune talibé,” March 25, 2017, https://www.senenews.com/2017/03/25/mbacke-la-police-interrompt-lenterrement-dun-jeune-talibe_185399.html (accessed June 20, 2017); Mamoune Tine, “Diourbel: Un autre maître coranique poursuivi pour homicide involontaire sur un de ses disciples,” SeneNews Actu, April 1, 2017, https://www.senenews.com/2017/03/25/mbacke-la-police-interrompt-lenterrement-dun-jeune-talibe_185399.html (accessed June 20, 2017).

In the northern city of Saint-Louis, Human Rights Watch and social workers from the children’s shelter Maison de la Gare encountered a 9-year-old *talibé* hunched over in pain at the bus station around 1 a.m., his T-shirt pulled over his head. Tears streaked the child’s face as he described the severe beating he had received, administered by the Quranic teacher’s assistant, after failing to meet the daily quota. “I didn’t give the *grand talibé* my payment, so he beat me with a stick. He also did it to four other *talibés*,” he said. Open wounds and scars from previous beatings marked the child’s back.⁴

Over the past year, the government’s “*retrait*” program achieved some impact. According to the Ministry of Family, 1,547 children – including 1,089 identified as *talibés* – were withdrawn from the streets of Dakar between June 2016 and March 2017. At least 450, including 83 *talibés*, were returned to their families.⁵

However, the Ministry of Family and the children’s shelters ultimately returned more than 1,000 *talibés* to their Quranic teachers without any official inspection to ascertain the living conditions at the *daaras* or any formal investigation of teachers for forcing the *talibés* to beg.⁶



Talibés begging outside a pharmacy in Dakar, Senegal, May 7, 2017. © 2017 Lauren Seibert/Human Rights Watch

⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with 9-year-old *talibé*, Saint-Louis station, Senegal, May 2, 2017.

⁵ Ministry of Family, Child Rights Directorate, “Etat des lieux des initiatives de lutte contre la mendicité des enfants talibés au Sénégal,” March 2017 (document on file with Human Rights Watch); and Human Rights Watch interviews with government officials from Ginddi Center and the Ministry of Family, May and June 2017.

⁶ Human Rights Watch interviews with government officials, May and June 2017.

“To pick up children and then return them to the Quranic teachers – that’s just undoing all the work,” said the coordinator of a children’s shelter.⁷

Officials involved in the “*retrait*” program told Human Rights Watch that a decision was made to cease returning *talibé* children to *daaras*, but it is not clear whether this has been implemented as a formal protocol. Officials said children were returned to *daaras* as recently as April 2017.⁸

As the program enters its second year, Human Rights Watch and PPDH call on the government to ensure that no child picked up while begging is returned to any Quranic school that has violated the rights of the child through forced begging or other abuses.

During the “*retrait*,” the ministries of Family, Justice and the Interior should strengthen coordination so as to better facilitate investigations and prosecutions of Quranic teachers found to be abusing or exploiting children. All children living in abusive *daaras* should be removed immediately and returned to their families, or placed in appropriate alternative care if no family members can be found.

Senegal has ratified all major international conventions on children’s rights. Its penal code criminalizes physical abuse and willful neglect of children, and a 2005 law prohibits forced begging and human trafficking.⁹ However, a law drafted in 2013 to establish legal status and regulations for *daaras* had yet to be passed at the time of writing.

Human Rights Watch, PPDH, and other Senegalese civil society activists call on the Senegalese government to strengthen the “*retrait*” program, investigate and prosecute abusive Quranic teachers, and pass the draft law to establish a legal framework to regulate the Quranic schools.

⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with coordinator of a children’s center in Dakar, Senegal, May 8, 2017.

⁸ Human Rights Watch interviews with government officials, May and June 2017.

⁹ Penal Code of Senegal, art. 245; Law no. 2005-06 of May 10, 2005, relating to the fight against the trafficking of persons and similar practices and the protection of victims, art. 3.

Methodology

This report is based primarily on a two-week research mission to Senegal's Dakar and Saint-Louis regions in April and May 2017, a one-week research mission to Dakar in June 2017, and phone and email interviews conducted with sources in the regions of Dakar, Saint-Louis, Diourbel, Louga, and Thiès from January to June 2017. Research assistance was provided by members of *la Plateforme pour la Promotion et la Protection des Droits Humains* (PPDH) in Senegal. Some information was obtained from credible media reports.

Human Rights Watch interviewed more than 90 people in total to assess the extent of ongoing abuses in Quranic schools, trends regarding the presence of children in the streets, and the effectiveness of current government efforts to address forced begging, unsafe living conditions, and other abuses in certain Quranic boarding schools. Interviewees include 43 *talibé* children, ages 5 to 18, and 14 Quranic teachers. Interviews were conducted in the streets, in five children's shelters, and in 17 Quranic schools. Human Rights Watch also interviewed 40 Senegalese civil society activists, social and aid workers, experts in human trafficking and child protection, representatives of the United Nations, and government officials in the ministries of justice, family, and the interior.

Interviews were mostly conducted individually, and in the presence, in some cases, of Senegalese civil society activists who knew and introduced the interviewee to Human Rights Watch. Occasionally, an interpreter assisted in interpreting between French and either Wolof or Pulaar during interviews with *talibés* and Quranic teachers. Human Rights Watch did not offer interviewees any incentive, and they were informed that they could end the interview at any time. Throughout the report, names and identifying information of some interviewees, including current and former *talibés*, have been withheld to protect their privacy. Some people spoke on the condition of anonymity, out of fear of repercussions for voicing criticisms.

This report builds on four previous Human Rights Watch reports. *“Off the Backs of the Children”: Forced Begging and Other Abuses against Talibés in Senegal* (2010) provides a more detailed account of the history of Quranic education in Senegal, the rise of exploitation and abuse in certain schools, and the experiences of young boys in such

schools. Human Rights Watch published three subsequent reports in 2014, 2015, and 2016.

The terms “Quranic school” and “*daara*” are used throughout the report to refer to the unregulated, traditional and informal Quranic boarding schools in which *talibé* children live and study. Many Senegalese civil society activists and religious authorities routinely refer to the abusive and exploitative *daaras* as “so-called Quranic schools” or “self-proclaimed Quranic schools,” to distinguish them from the thousands of *daaras* where children do not beg, are well cared for by the Quranic teacher, and receive a strong religious and moral education. However, because the places present themselves as “Quranic schools”—and the children do spend some time learning the Quran, even if significantly less than they spend on the street begging—it remains the most appropriate terminology.

The terms “Quranic teacher” and “*marabout*” are used interchangeably throughout this report, reflected common parlance in Senegal, though it should be noted that some Quranic teachers do not consider themselves “*marabouts*.”

The term “*talibé*” is used in this report to refer to children and young adults studying at a traditional Quranic school (“*daara*”). Many *talibés* live at the *daaras*, though some do study at the schools during the day and live elsewhere. “*Grand talibé*” is used to refer to an older *talibé*, typically age 17 or older, who serves as the Quranic teacher’s assistant.

I. Background

Thousands of children from regions across Senegal and from neighboring countries, notably Guinea-Bissau, Gambia and Guinea, are regularly sent to *daaras* in Senegal's major cities. Rooted in the widespread West African cultural tradition of “confiage”—entrusting one's child to another adult to raise—and combined with overpopulation, poverty and the importance placed on learning the Quran, the *daara* system has become deeply and increasingly entrenched. The Quranic teachers, entrusted with dozens or even hundreds of *talibé* boys, serve as unofficial guardians and often transport the children hundreds of miles away from home. Girls also study at *daaras* but to a far lesser extent. The majority of female Quranic students do not beg and do not live at the *daaras*.

Many of these teachers, or *marabouts*, do respect the rights of the children in their charge. However, in many other cases the so-called “teachers” use Quranic “education” as a pretext for exploitation. Such teachers set up *daaras* in abandoned or unfinished buildings in conditions of extreme squalor. Medical conditions and wounds regularly go untreated; even deaths sometimes go unreported. The children's days consist of Quranic studies alternated with long hours of begging on the streets for food or money.¹⁰

A 2014 mapping led by the government's anti-trafficking unit found that over 30,000 *talibés* were forced to beg in the Dakar region alone, and a 2016-2017 census documented over 14,000 begging talibés in Saint-Louis.¹¹ Considering that each of Senegal's 14 regions is home to hundreds of *daaras*, which operate completely outside any official regulatory framework, the total number of *talibés* forced to beg in Senegal is likely even higher than the 50,000 estimate made by Human Rights Watch in 2010.¹²

Few *talibés* receive any formal education at these *daaras* beyond memorizing the Quran. Lessons are often punctuated by corporal punishment, and failure to bring back daily quotas of money can result in severe beatings. The boys typically suffer severe

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Exploitation in the Name of Education: Uneven Progress in Ending Forced Child Begging in Senegal*, March 19, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2014/03/19/exploitation-name-education/uneven-progress-ending-forced-child-begging-senegal>.

¹¹ Maison de la Gare, “14,779 Begging Talibé Street Children in Saint Louis,” <http://www.mdgsl.com/actualites/engmar201714779.html> (accessed June 22, 2017).

¹² Human Rights Watch, “*Off the Backs of the Children*,” April 2010.



A Quranic teacher's assistant watches over talibés at a daara [Quranic school] in Saint-Louis, Senegal. Around 50 talibé children, some as young as six years old, live at this Quranic school. They spend their days begging in the streets and studying the Quran. At night, they sleep outside under the structure in the background. May 1, 2017. © 2017 Veronique Koentges

malnutrition, while the hours on the street undermine their ability to study and put them at risk from car accidents and physical or sexual abuse.¹³

Such *daaras* violate the children's rights to protection from abuse and the worst forms of child labor, in addition to their rights to basic health care, education, rest and recreation. The physical abuse and terrible conditions drive hundreds of children to run away from their *daaras* each year. While many children in the streets are current or runaway *talibés*, social workers have also noted an increasing number of street children who have run away from their families due to violence or other problems, as well as children begging with a family member.

¹³ Human Rights Watch, "Off the Backs of the Children", April 2010.

Government Program to Remove Children from the Streets

Senegal has come under considerable international—and, increasingly, national—pressure to stop the widespread abuses and exploitation of *talibé* children. On June 22, 2016, President Macky Sall announced to the Council of Ministers his intention to end the phenomenon of child begging. He followed this with two posts to Twitter on July 1: “To protect the rights of vulnerable children and groups, I ordered the urgent withdrawal of street children,” he wrote. “To save the *talibés*, the state imposes fines and jail sentences for those putting their children in the street.”¹⁴

The program, known in Senegal as the “*retrait des enfants de la rue*,” or the “withdrawal of street children,” was rolled out in Dakar during the first year, with the other regions to follow. Though condemned by a number of religious leaders, the initiative was widely welcomed by Senegalese civil society, rights activists and diplomats. According to the Ministry of Family, the objective of the “*retrait*” was to “end the phenomenon of street children in the Dakar region with a view to protecting them from all forms of exploitation and promoting their social welfare.”¹⁵

While the program was designed to assist all street children, it was understood to have been specifically intended to address the widespread forced begging and exploitation of *talibés*. Nonetheless, the program did not incorporate measures to address the many other serious abuses perpetrated inside certain *daaras*, nor did it ensure information collected during the program was used to support investigations or prosecutions.

The program was designed to address the social welfare aspects of the problem at various levels, including removing the children physically from the streets, reuniting them with their families, educating parents or guardians on the laws banning child begging, and providing social support to families and guardians to ensure the children would not be returned to the streets.

¹⁴ President Macky Sall of Senegal, Twitter post, July 1, 2016, https://twitter.com/macky_sall/status/748927604720340992 (accessed June 20, 2017).

¹⁵ Ministry of Family, Child Rights Directorate, “Etat des lieux des initiatives de lutte contre la mendicité des enfants talibés au Sénégal,” March 2017 (document on file with Human Rights Watch).



Talibés begging in downtown Dakar, Senegal, May 11, 2017. © 2017 Lauren Seibert/Human Rights Watch

However, children’s rights activists viewed this as an incomplete strategy to address such a complicated and entrenched problem. They noted that the initiative should have been accompanied by a commitment and strategy to investigate and prosecute teachers forcing children to beg, along with passage of the law drafted in 2013 that would establish a regulatory framework for *daaras*.¹⁶

Three government structures currently manage the “*retrait*”: the Ministry of Family’s Child Rights Directorate (*Direction des Droits, de la Protection de l’Enfance et des Groupes Vulnérables*, DDPEGV), at the head; Ginddi Center, the state-run children’s shelter in Dakar, responsible for processing and returning the children to their families and guardians; and the Juvenile Justice Unit (*Brigade des Mineurs*) of the National Police, in

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch interviews with children’s rights activists, Dakar and Saint-Louis, Senegal, May 2017.

charge of leading the street operations and interviewing the children’s parents or guardians.

On June 30, 2016, just days after the president’s announcement, the Ministry of Family and the Juvenile Justice Unit commenced operations. A typical operation consisted of a team – police officers from the Juvenile Justice Unit, a security agent, and social workers from Ginddi or the DDPEGV – driving a bus around Dakar to collect children seen begging in the street, whether they were alone or accompanied by a relative. Several hundred children were picked up in the month of July 2016 alone.¹⁷

In some cases, children who attempted to run away were forced into the bus, as captured in a video and denounced by several humanitarian workers.¹⁸ Some social workers, aid workers, and civil society activists described the methods as occasionally “brutal” or “brusque,” fearing the tactics had further traumatized the children. A police spokesman for the Juvenile Justice Unit emphatically denied these allegations.¹⁹

Once on the bus, the children were delivered to Ginddi Center or one of two private children’s centers selected to assist with the program, Yakaaru Guneye and SOS Village d’Enfants. Human Rights Watch visited both Ginddi and Yakaaru Guneye, where the children appeared healthy and well cared for. Both centers looked clean and well maintained, and both appeared to provide the children with food, medical care, shelter, and educational or recreational activities.

During 66 street operations conducted from June 2016 to March 2017, 1,547 children were removed from the streets. Of these children, 440 were accompanied by a family member

¹⁷ Ankou Sodjago, “Retrait des enfants de la rue : après 430 enfants récupérés, le Gouvernement annonce un modèle de projet de Daaras,” *SeneNews Actu*, July 28, 2017, http://www.senenews.com/2016/07/28/retrait-des-enfants-de-la-rue-apres-430-enfants-recuperes-le-gouvernement-annonce-un-modele-de-projet-de-daaras_163038.html (accessed June 20, 2017).

¹⁸ RTS, “Opération de retrait des enfants talibés dans les rues,” YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8oy-gLcMc4> (accessed June 20, 2017).

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch interviews with social workers, aid workers, and civil society activists, Dakar, Senegal, May 2017; interviews with police official, Juvenile Justice Unit, Dakar, June 2017.

who had also been begging.²⁰ The 1,107 unaccompanied children included 1,089 *talibés*, Ginddi and the DDPEGV reported to Human Rights Watch.²¹

The children typically remained at these centers for several weeks while background investigations and family tracing were conducted. The police summoned the children's parents, guardians, or Quranic teachers to the Dakar Central Police Station, where they were interviewed, educated on the 2005 anti-trafficking law, and warned not to send the children begging. The adult then proceeded to the center to recover the child. Tracing and returns of children hailing from other regions or countries were conducted by the humanitarian organization Enda Jeunesse Action, via the West Africa Network for Child Protection.

²⁰ Ministry of Family, Child Rights Directorate, "Etat des lieux des initiatives de lutte contre la mendicité des enfants talibés au Sénégal," March 2017 (document on file with Human Rights Watch).

²¹ Human Rights Watch interviews with officials from Ginddi Center and the Child Rights Directorate, May and June 2017.

II. “Retrait” Program Fails to Ensure Children's Rights, Justice

Children Returned to Daaras

The most serious problem with the “*retrait*” program was the sheer number of children returned to the care of the Quranic teachers who had subjected them to forced begging in the first place. The government published a report in March 2017 stating that 1,456 of the children had been “returned,” and the media has reported this as “returned to their families.”²² This is a mischaracterization, as 1,006 children picked up during the street operations and brought to Ginddi Center were in fact returned to their Quranic teachers, who then took them back to the *daaras*.²³

A government official and a social worker involved in the returns of the children justified this decision to Human Rights Watch by saying that for “the majority” of the *talibés*, the Quranic teacher was “family” – uncle, father, or cousin.²⁴ Based on the research Human Rights Watch and PPDH conducted with dozens of *talibés* and *marabouts*, it seems highly unlikely that over 1,000 *talibés* picked up from the streets were all directly or even indirectly related to their Quranic teachers.

Not only were the *talibés* returned to their Quranic teachers, but up to 85 of these *daaras* also received money or supplies from the Ministry of Family when they came to recover the child. Sixteen *daaras* whose *talibés* were picked up from the streets received grants totaling around 950,000 CFA each (US\$1,600), according to information obtained from the Ministry of Family.²⁵

²² Mansour Sy Cisse, “Journée nationale du talibé : 1 547 enfants retirés de la rue,” *Le Soleil*, April 21, 2017, <http://www.lesoleil.sn/2016-03-22-23-29-31/item/63688-journee-nationale-du-talibe-1-547-enfants-retires-de-la-rue.html#sthash.U4JyLeES.dpuf> (accessed June 20, 2017).

²³ Human Rights Watch interviews with Senegalese government officials, May and June 2017.

²⁴ Human Rights Watch interviews with government official and social worker, May and June 2017.

²⁵ Human Rights Watch interviews with government officials from the Ministry of Family, May and June 2017.

Government workers implementing the program told Human Rights Watch that they took the child's opinion into consideration, only returning a *talibé* to his *daara* if he voiced a desire to return.²⁶

While international standards on child protection and separated children stipulate the importance of the child's opinion and participation in decisions particularly as they approach the age of 18, the ultimate consideration should always be the best interest of the child. A very young child does not have the capacity to understand the circumstances surrounding his return to the *daara*. The child may fear retribution from his teacher if he does not return; he may not even remember life prior to the *daara*, if he was entrusted to the *marabout* at a very young age. After only days or weeks at the center, “of course the child is going to say he wants to go back to the *daara* – that's all he knows,” said a U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) director who worked extensively on *talibé* projects in Senegal.²⁷

Etienne Dieng, manager of Ginddi Center, noted that the center has been overwhelmed with the number of children brought in during the “*retrait*,” and while they felt it was not the best strategy to return the *talibés* to their *daaras*, the staff at Ginddi felt they had little choice. Dieng said the government had originally “thought that if they warned the *marabouts*, they wouldn't do it again.” Unfortunately, after several months, “evaluations found that the same children were back in the streets again,” he added.²⁸



A poster in Dakar, Senegal that reads, in French: “Abused: child begging severely undermines Senegal's future. Act against child begging and exploitation.” Photo taken May 2, 2017. © 2017 Human Rights Watch

²⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with government official, Dakar, Senegal, May 3, 2017.

²⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with USAID official, Dakar, Senegal, May 2017.

²⁸ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Etienne Dieng, manager of Ginddi Center, June 2017.

Imam Elimane Diagne, a Quranic teacher, president of Senegal's Daara Modernization Collective, and member of PPDH, said that he was aware of several children who were returned to *daaras* in the Pikine suburb of Dakar which he knew to have extremely unhygienic conditions, run by *marabouts* who continue to force their *talibés* to beg. He told Human Rights Watch:

The state never went to see if the child was placed back in a good *daara* or not... In some of those *daaras* the conditions are not good. They are in zones that flood when it rains, so the ground is damp, which spreads germs and disease. At some of these *daaras*, the children sleep on the ground. There are diseases like scabies. Some have no water and no latrines... And aside from all that, the child continues to beg.²⁹

In order to ensure children's rights are respected, Human Rights Watch believes that no *talibé* children should be returned to any *daara* that had sent them begging in the first place. Considering that over 1,000 children picked up for begging were returned to their *daaras*, it is even more concerning that the vast majority of these *daaras* were never inspected, either before or after the return of the child, and none were officially investigated for forced begging.

The only Quranic schools visited by government officials during the year-long program were several of the 16 *daaras* selected to receive grants in 2016.³⁰ These visits were neither systematic nor conducted for purposes of investigation prior to returning the children.

When questioned about the lack of inspections to determine the level of abuse taking place at a given *daara*, personnel from each of the three government structures deflected responsibility, suggesting a lack of clear guidance and protocols on how the program should be implemented. A police official stated they had not received orders to visit or investigate *daaras*; officials from the DDPEGV and Ginddi Center both said that they lacked

²⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Imam Elimane Diagne, Quranic teacher and President of the Daara Modernization Collective, Dakar, Senegal, May 6, 2017.

³⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with the Child Rights Directorate, Ministry of Family, Dakar, Senegal, May 2017.

the personnel, time, or financial means to conduct such visits on a systematic basis. Each suggested that one of the other structures should have done so.³¹

Insufficient Investigations, Prosecutions for Forced Begging

Numerous members of civil society and several government officials working in the area of child protection told Human Rights Watch they were disappointed that the “*retrait*” program had failed to result in increased investigations or prosecutions of abusive *marabouts*. Many characterized the lack of sanctions as a missed opportunity to deter abusive teachers.

Dr. Mody Ndiaye, permanent secretary of the government’s national anti-trafficking unit, told Human Rights Watch that failure to prosecute abusive Quranic teachers for forced begging is a weakness of the “*retrait*” program. “There are no ‘good’ and ‘bad’ daaras if they practice begging,” Ndiaye said. “A ‘good’ daara does not force children to beg. This is a violation of the 2005 anti-trafficking law and very harmful to vulnerable children.”³²

Despite existing laws banning the practice, both police and justice officials interviewed by Human Rights Watch justified their failure to investigate and prosecute forced begging in several ways. Some said they had received no specific instructions from higher authorities to do so; all said they had insufficient time, funding or personnel. Some also cited the daunting pervasiveness of forced begging and the lack of facilities to handle all the *talibés* if they were removed from such *daaras*.³³

Child protection workers in Saint-Louis and Dakar reported that immediately after the President’s declaration a year ago, Quranic teachers had rushed to the police stations to ask for details of the program, clearly fearful of penalties or prosecution. However, as the months passed and no sanctions were applied, this fear – and respect for the ban on forced begging – dissipated, and *talibés* returned visibly to the streets.

³¹ Human Rights Watch interviews with officials from the Ministry of Family’s Child Rights Directorate, Ginddi Center, and the National Police; Dakar, Senegal, May and June 2017.

³² Human Rights Watch interview with Dr. Mody Ndiaye, permanent secretary of the National Anti-Trafficking Unit, Dakar, Senegal, May 3, 2017.

³³ Human Rights Watch interviews with a police official, public prosecutor, and judge, Dakar, Senegal, May and June 2017.

Many believed there had been insufficient involvement of the Ministries of Justice and the Interior during the first year of the “*retrait*” initiative, which contributed to the lack of investigations into child exploitation and abuse.

According to the DDPEGV, the Ministry of Family sent letters requesting increased engagement in the “*retrait*” to the Ministries of Justice and the Interior. The Minister of Justice reportedly responded by sending a letter to prosecutors and/or presidents of Dakar’s tribunals, instructing them to accompany the “*retrait*” with investigations and prosecutions. Human Rights Watch was unable to obtain a copy of the letter in order to verify these instructions. The Ministry of Family said they had received no response from the Ministry of the Interior.³⁴

“The President announced his decision to withdraw all children from the streets at the Council of Ministers in June 2016,” said Mamadou Wane, president of PPDH. “It is therefore up to each sector of the State to implement this decision immediately. There is no need for any other administrative correspondence in order to act.”³⁵

Role of the Police

Human Rights Watch and PPDH also expressed concern with the failure of the Ministry of the Interior to ensure sufficient police participation in the “*retrait*” program, as well as the failure of the police to enforce existing law by investigating *marabouts* who had forced their *talibés* to beg or committed other abuses, with a view to referring the teachers to the public prosecutor.

During the first year of the “*retrait*,” despite the 2005 law criminalizing forced begging, despite President Sall’s promise to “impose fines and jail sentences” for those sending children to beg, and despite scores of interactions between the police and Quranic teachers, not one single case of a *marabout* forcing the children under his care to beg was either investigated at the *daara* by the police or transmitted to the judiciary, who

³⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with government official, Ministry of Family, Dakar, Senegal, May 11, 2017.

³⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Mamadou Wane, president of PPDH, Dakar, Senegal, May 7, 2017.

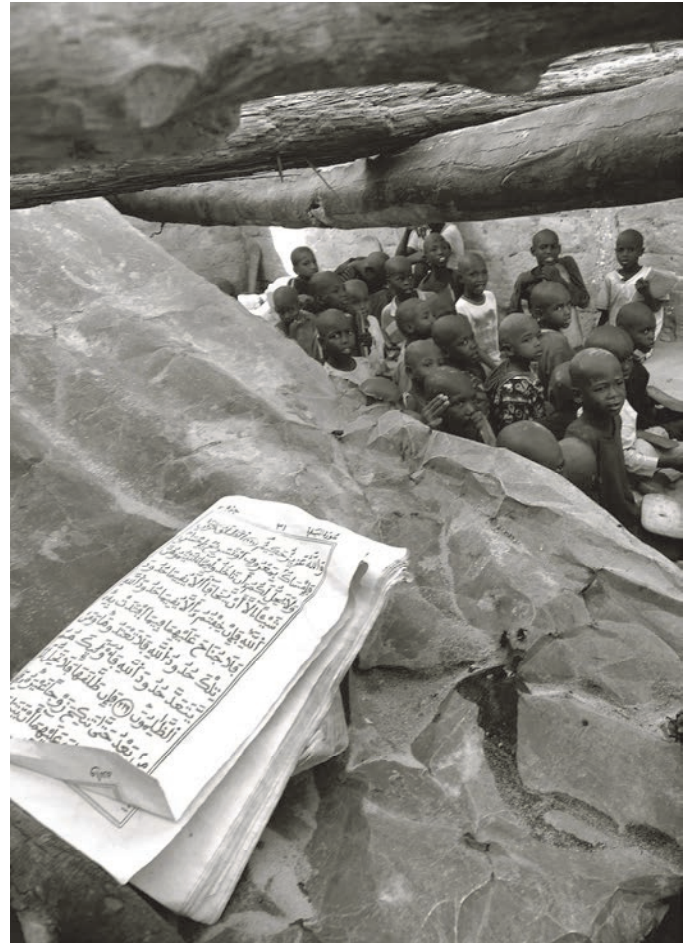
themselves could launch an investigation. When asked why not, a police official told Human Rights Watch, “Begging... it’s complex. We need instructions in order to proceed.”³⁶

According to the police official, written instructions to participate in the “*retrait*” were sent from the Director General of the National Police and the Director of Public Security to all the police services in Dakar. The police official described the orders as follows: to participate in the operations to remove children from the streets; to identify the children; to interview the responsible adult; and to direct the adult to Ginddi Center to pick up the child. No instructions were given to investigate *daaras*, make arrests, or administer fines or other sanctions, he said.³⁷

The police official said he met with over 100 Quranic teachers whose children had been picked up off the streets, as well as many other family members, from July 2016 to March 2017.

The purpose of these meetings was to obtain information about the child, to explain the 2005 anti-trafficking law, and to issue a warning not to send the child out begging again. The Quranic teachers were not required to sign any agreement committing them to desist from forcing *talibés* to beg.³⁸

The police official told Human Rights Watch that the “large majority” of Quranic teachers he interviewed admitted to sending their *talibés* begging, for both food and money. “Their response was that they did it, but only because of necessity, because they had no



Talibés studying the Quran at a *daara* [Quranic school] in Saint-Louis, Senegal, May 1, 2017. © 2017 Lauren Seibert/Human Rights Watch

³⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interview with police official in Senegal, June 2017.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

resources,” he said; the *marabouts* routinely justified their actions by claiming that “the parents contributed nothing for the child.”³⁹

When the “*retrait*” program was first announced, police across Dakar—and even, some civil society activists reported, in other regions across Senegal—began to participate in the “*retrait*.” However, the other police services gradually stopped participating in the initiative. For the majority of the past year, only the Vices Unit (“Brigade des Moeurs”), which totals only 9 personnel and includes the Juvenile Justice Unit, has participated in the street operations of the “*retrait*.”⁴⁰

Human Rights Watch was informed by child protection experts and civil society activists in early 2016 of the Ministry of the Interior’s intention to install special offices for minors’ affairs in every central police station across Senegal. At the time of writing, no such offices were operational.⁴¹

Insufficient Funding and Resources

Following the President’s declaration on ending child begging made to the Council of Ministers in June 2016, the Ministry of Family proposed a budget of 14 billion francs CFA (US\$24 million) for a national program to end child begging, and a budget of 2.89 billion CFA (\$5 million) for the “pilot phase” in Dakar region. According to the DDPEGV, the program has thus far received but a fraction of that: a total of 141 million CFA (US\$240,000) in funding – 100 million CFA from the president, 33 million CFA from the Economic Community of West African States, (ECOWAS), and 8 million CFA from the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).⁴²

Gindi Center, which has a maximum capacity of 80 children, reported that they did not receive any additional funding from the government for the “*retrait*” to accommodate the surcharge of children they received, though the DDPEGV contributed some supplies and

³⁹ Human Rights Watch phone interview with police official in Senegal, June 2017.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Human Rights Watch interviews with an official from the Child Rights Directorate, Ministry of Family, May and June 2017.

provided two additional staff for a short period.⁴³ The Juvenile Justice Unit of the Police was not allocated any additional funding or personnel from the Ministry of the Interior.⁴⁴

Niokhobaye Diouf, the director of the DDPEGV, largely faulted Senegal's development partners for their lack of support to the program. He told Human Rights Watch in a written statement:

The president of the republic has repeated four times...his will to put an end to the exploitation of street children by begging. A program framework has been proposed to technical and financial partners for funding, but it has not yet been implemented. The plan for the withdrawal [of children from the streets] has not been consistently supported by partners since the start of its implementation. There is a strong political will of the State that is not supported by international cooperation.

Nevertheless, a critical number of *daaras* have returned to their place of origin; others have drastically reduced their numbers [of *talibés*]. The initial results showed that it was possible to eradicate child begging, but the challenge of mobilizing resources remains in order to sustain the operations, to ensure accompanying measures, to conduct a behavior change communication campaign, and to ensure regular case monitoring; not to mention multilateral cooperation between Senegal's border countries to manage child mobility.⁴⁵

⁴³ Human Rights Watch interviews with Ginddi Center officials, May and June 2017.

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch phone interviews with the Juvenile Justice Unit of the National Police, June 2017.

⁴⁵ Email statement, Niokhobaye Diouf, Director of the Child Rights Directorate, Ministry of Family, Senegal, June 10, 2017.

III. Resurgence in Child Begging

In April, May and June 2017, Human Rights Watch observed hundreds of children begging in the streets of Dakar and Saint-Louis, evidence that the key objectives of the “*retrait*” had hardly been met. As in past years, the majority of the children were dirty and appeared malnourished, their clothing in tatters. They carried a yellow begging bowl or tomato can to collect coins, rice, sugar, and anything else they received while begging. Many had no shoes, appeared ill, or suffered from skin infections.

The children were observed approaching pedestrians as well as cars in the middle of busy traffic to beg – on four occasions, directly in front of gendarmes regulating traffic. On five separate occasions, Human Rights Watch encountered large groups of 13-18 *talibés*, often from the same *daara*, begging together.

Numerous children’s rights activists, members of civil society, and humanitarian workers told Human Rights Watch that the number of children begging had only diminished during the first month of the initiative, in July 2016, when many Quranic teachers still feared sanctions. They said many *marabouts* instructed their *talibés* to avoid the “*retrait*” operations and hide from police.⁴⁶ For example, “They hid in different neighborhoods, wore cleaner clothes, and used bags instead of begging bowls,” explained the coordinator of a children’s shelter in Dakar.⁴⁷

After a few months, and in the face of government’s failure to investigate and prosecute offending Quranic teachers, the situation returned to the status quo. “There are even more children begging in the streets of Dakar now. And in the suburbs of Dakar and other cities across Senegal, absolutely nothing has changed,” said Mamadou Wane, who described routinely seeing large groups of *talibés* begging.

During a visit in May, Human Rights Watch encountered a group of 18 *talibés*, ages 6 to 15, begging near a popular bakery in Dakar. The older boys explained they had all been

⁴⁶ Mamadou Diallo, “RETRAIT DES ENFANTS DE LA RUE : La banlieue fait de la résistance,” *Sen360*, July 29, 2016, <http://www.sen360.fr/actualite/retrait-des-enfants-de-la-rue-la-banlieue-fait-de-la-resistance-539408.html> (accessed June 20, 2017).

⁴⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with the coordinator of a children’s center in Dakar, Senegal, May 8, 2017.



A group of *talibés*, ages 6 to 15, sit with their begging bowls near a bakery in Dakar, Senegal.
© 2017 Lauren Seibert/Human Rights Watch

brought from Guinea-Bissau to the same *daara* in Dakar. Several were holding baguettes they had been given, which they said were for the *marabout*.⁴⁸

In addition to the state-run Centre Ginddi, Human Rights Watch visited four other centers providing assistance and shelter to at-risk children, including *talibés* and other street children. These centers are run by humanitarian organizations – in Saint-Louis, La Maison de la Gare; in Dakar, Yakaaru Guneye, Empire des Enfants, and Samu Social Sénégal.

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch interview with group of *talibé* children, Dakar, Senegal, May 5, 2017.

Personnel at all four children’s centers in Dakar told Human Rights Watch that based on their observations, the numbers of children in the streets have not diminished.

“Here in Ouakam [district of Dakar], every morning I still see *talibé* children begging – in front of the stores, in front of the Brioche Dorée, in the Ouakam market, at the entrance to Ouakam,” said the coordinator of the Samu Social center. “You can also find many *talibés* in Mamelles [district]. In Nord Foire [district], I have the impression that the children forced to beg in the streets are again very numerous; the children are begging there from the day to the night.”⁴⁹

Of the 43 current and former and *talibé* children interviewed by Human Rights Watch in April and May, 37 spoke of being forced to beg or were observed begging. Twenty three children said they were forced to bring quotas from 100 to 1,000 francs CFA, and 19 said they had been beaten at their *daaras* for not meeting these quotas. On three occasions when visiting a *daara*, Human Rights Watch observed the whip used to beat the children – usually a wooden baton with a rope attached.

On May 12, Human Rights Watch spoke with three *talibés* begging on the streets of Dakar who were observed to be in terrible physical condition. The children, ages 7, 8 and 9, were from Kolda, in the south of the country. They appeared extremely thin and malnourished. The two youngest had no shoes; one had a skin infection on his head, and the other had infected wounds on his legs. They needed to find 1,000 CFA for the *marabout*, they said. If they did not bring it, they would be beaten. The youngest child at first refused to go to the clinic to get his wounds treated; the other *talibés* explained this was because he had not yet collected 1000 CFA.⁵⁰

All five children’s centers visited by Human Rights Watch reported that a large percentage of the children they assisted in 2016 and 2017 were current or former *talibés*. Of the 278 children received at the Empire des Enfants center in 2016, the majority (182) were *talibés* who had left their *daaras*. From January to June 2017, the center took in 108 new children, of which 78 were *talibés*. Alassane Diagne, coordinator of the Empire des Enfants center, told Human Rights Watch: “98% of these *talibé* children we took in had been forced to

⁴⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with the coordinator of Samu Social center, Dakar, Senegal, May 9, 2017.

⁵⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with group of *talibé* children, Dakar, Senegal, May 12, 2017.

beg. Every *talibé* that we questioned claimed to have been beaten by his *marabout* or by the other assistants at the daara, whether for failing to contribute the daily quota or failing to recite verses of the Quran.”⁵¹

Samu Social, a humanitarian organization that provides shelter and medical, social and psychological assistance to street children, said that around half (248 of 506) of the children newly identified in the streets in 2016 had at some point attended a Quranic school. In the first five months of 2017, they said, 68 out of 198 children had attended Quranic schools.⁵² Yakaaru Guneye Center, located in Guédiawaye, Dakar, sheltered 12 children at the time of Human Rights Watch’s visit, including 9 *talibés* ages 6 to 15. Ginddi Center hosted 35 children, including 29 *talibés*, at the time.⁵³

“We returned hundreds of *talibés* to their families in 2016,” said a staff member at Maison de la Gare. “Sometimes the parents cried when they saw the state their child is in now.”⁵⁴

Alassane Diagne, coordinator of Empire des Enfants, recounted the story of a child the center had helped return to his family in Guinea-Bissau in late 2016:

The *talibé* was from a village in Guinea-Bissau... Someone went to the village and said he was from Dakar, that he had learned the Quran. He said, ‘If you give me your children I will teach them the Quran.’ The villagers didn’t know any better – for them Dakar is a good place to send a child... These children ended up begging in the streets. The father had a friend here who saw his son begging and called him... so he came to get his son. He had no idea that his child was in this condition – dirty, sick, begging; and he had learned nothing... This is child trafficking, to take a child 1,000 kilometers away and force him to beg for money, and to beat him if he doesn’t bring it.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch email interview with Alassane Diagne, coordinator of Empire des Enfants, June 6, 2017.

⁵² Human Rights Watch email interview with Samu Social Sénégal, June 8, 2017.

⁵³ Human Rights Watch interviews, Yakaaru Guneye and Ginddi Center, Dakar, Senegal, May 2017.

⁵⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Maison de la Gare, Saint-Louis, Senegal, May 1, 2017.

⁵⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with Alassane Diagne, coordinator of Empire des Enfants, Dakar, Senegal, May 8, 2017.



A *talibé* begs for money in downtown Dakar traffic in Senegal, May 5, 2017. © 2017 Lauren Seibert/Human Rights Watch

Some of the Quranic teachers interviewed by Human Rights Watch said they would not send the children begging if they had the resources to feed them. Others claimed simply that begging was a rite of passage for the *talibés*, an essential part of Quranic studies. “My own father sent me out begging like my *talibés* do,” said a *marabout* in Saint-Louis whose *talibés* begged three times a day. “It’s the education of the street... you have to complete it in order to understand life.”⁵⁶

The *talibés* interviewed in the streets and at children’s shelters put it differently. “In the daara, it’s education in violence only,” said a 16-year-old former *talibé* in Dakar.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with Quranic teacher, Saint-Louis, Senegal, May 1, 2017.

⁵⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with 16-year-old former *talibé*, Dakar, Senegal, May 10, 2017.

IV. Violence and Abuses Against Talibés

In many traditional Quranic schools, violence, corporal punishment, imprisonment, and other abuses have become a part of daily life. In some cases, the abuse is so severe that it has led to the child's death. Such abuses, documented by Human Rights Watch, have remained pervasive and ongoing in Dakar, Saint-Louis, and many other regions across Senegal over the past year, even as the "*retrait*" initiative was carried out in Dakar region.

In the first half of 2017, at least two *talibés* died as a result of alleged abuse in Quranic schools in regions across Senegal, according to media reports and sources interviewed by Human Rights Watch. One child died in a fire in December 2016, after his teacher left him chained up in a *daara* in Louga region. Another *talibé* was allegedly beaten to death in March by a Quranic teacher's assistant in Diourbel region.⁵⁸

A staff member at Yakaaru Guneye center recounted a traumatic experience witnessed by one of the *talibés* treated at their center in 2016: "Last year, a *talibé* from Yeumbeul [district in Dakar] saw a *talibé* beaten to death and buried, so he was traumatized and ran away."⁵⁹ The Quranic teacher was arrested last year and the case is currently still under investigation.

In addition to the 9-year-old *talibé* whose back was covered in wounds from a beating in Saint-Louis, Human Rights Watch observed two other *talibés* with wounds and documented dozens of other cases of physical abuse in 2017 in both Saint-Louis and Dakar. "If I didn't bring 300 CFA, the teacher would beat me with a cord," said a 10-year-old *talibé* in Dakar who ran away from his *daara* in Kaolack. "Or if I didn't learn the lesson well, he would hit me. I didn't like being there because they hit me often."⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Human Rights Watch interviews with Diourbel prosecutor; Mamadou Ndiaye, Diourbel Child Protection Committee Coordinator; and Magatte Mbaye, consultant for Association des Juristes Sénégalaises, May-June 2017. See also: Mamoune Tine, "Mbacké: La police interrompt l'enterrement d'un jeune talibé," March 25, 2017, https://www.senenews.com/2017/03/25/mbacke-la-police-interrompt-lenterrement-dun-jeune-talibe_185399.html (accessed June 20, 2017); Mamoune Tine, "Diourbel: Un autre maître coranique poursuivi pour homicide involontaire sur un de ses disciples," SeneNews Actu, April 1, 2017, https://www.senenews.com/2017/03/25/mbacke-la-police-interrompt-lenterrement-dun-jeune-talibe_185399.html (accessed June 20, 2017).

⁵⁹ Human Rights Watch interview, Yakaaru Guneye center, Dakar, Senegal, April 29, 2017.

⁶⁰ Human Rights Watch interview with 9-year-old runaway *talibé*, Dakar, Senegal, April 29, 2017.

A 12-year-old boy, originally from Diourbel region, said he attended a Quranic school in Kaolack region where the marabout demanded a quota of 150-250 francs CFA: “Life at the *daara* was difficult, because they would hit you when you didn’t have the sum demanded.” The preferred form of punishment for failing to meet the quota, he explained, was to “*faire par quatre*” – holding the child’s arms and legs to prevent him from moving while he is whipped.

“When they took us *par quatre*, they would hit us until we had marks and blood on our back,” the boy said. “Sometimes we would be sick after. ...When you’re injured you can rest for two days, but you have to go back out begging after that. ...I left the *daara* because life was hard there.”⁶¹

A runaway *talibé*, around age 6, said he was beaten by the *marabout* and the *grand talibés* [*marabout’s* assistant] at his *daara* in Ouakam, Dakar, if he failed to bring back his quota of 300 CFA. Human Rights Watch observed several faint scars on the child’s back.⁶² Another boy, 10 years of age, told Human Rights Watch that he ran away from his *daara* in Colobane, Dakar because of all the violence. “On Sundays, I had to bring back 500 CFA; on the other days it was 1000 CFA,” he said. “If I didn’t bring it, the marabout himself would hit me... He whipped me with a rope attached to the end of a baton. It cut me in the side.”⁶³



This 9-year-old *talibé* was found hunched over in pain at the Saint-Louis bus station at 1 a.m. on May 2, 2017. He said he was severely beaten with a rod by the Quranic teacher’s assistant, after failing to meet the daily quota. © 2017 Human Rights Watch

⁶¹ Human Rights Watch interview with 12-year-old runaway *talibé*, Dakar, Senegal, April 29, 2017.

⁶² Human Rights Watch interview with 6-year-old runaway *talibé*, Dakar, Senegal, May 12, 2017.

⁶³ Human Rights Watch interview with 10-year-old runaway *talibé*, Dakar, Senegal, May 12, 2017.

Another child, also age 6, lived at a *daara* in Dakar where he was required to beg for an unusually high quota of 2,000 CFA per day. The child ultimately made his way to a children’s center in Dakar. A professional working at the center told Human Rights Watch:

We returned the child to his family, but then the *marabout* went to them and asked for the child back. After that, when they would call him, the *marabout* would pass the phone to another child. Here in Dakar our team found him in the streets again. If he [the Quranic teacher] had 10 children he would be earning 20,000 CFA per day minimum; and it’s certain he sends more than 10 children out begging.⁶⁴

An 8 or 9-year-old runaway *talibé* from Saloum told Human Rights Watch he had spent two years in a *daara* in Dakar. He stared off into the distance as he recounted: “We begged for money and rice. The *marabout* asked for 400 CFA each day. On Wednesday it was 500 CFA, to pay the rent and electricity. If we didn’t bring the money, or if we didn’t recite the verses, the *marabout* would beat us. He hit us with an *ardoise* [wooden slate used to write verses of the Quran] broken in half.” The child said that he had seen *talibés* tied up at the *daara* if they tried to run away.⁶⁵

Chaining and Imprisonment

Chaining, tying up, or imprisoning the child are all-too-frequent methods used by abusive Quranic teachers, amounting to inhuman and degrading treatment. Five *talibés* interviewed by Human Rights Watch described being chained or locked up, or witnessing other *talibés* in such a situation. An additional four children had recounted similar stories to child welfare workers interviewed by Human Rights Watch.

An 18-year-old former *talibé*, who had sought refuge at a children’s center in Dakar, told Human Rights Watch his horrific story of imprisonment:

In my *daara* in Diourbel, I was imprisoned in a “cell” for two years because I didn’t want to learn. I did everything in that room – ate, went to the

⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with professional at children’s center in Dakar, Senegal, May 9, 2017.

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch interview with 8 or 9-year-old runaway *talibé*, Dakar, Senegal, May 12, 2017.

bathroom. There were many other *talibés* in the room with me, who had also refused to learn or tried to run away. All our legs were attached with chains, even the young ones, who were maybe 11 years old. The ones who tried to run away were punished, beaten. Finally, on December 28 [2016], I was released, because I had served my sentence. I stayed at the *daara* until March [2017], and then I took advantage of the hours of begging to run away.⁶⁶

A professional working in a children’s center in Dakar recounted the story of another former *talibé* who arrived in April:

We received a 16-year-old who had been in a *daara* for five years and imprisoned for two years in a *daara* in Saloum [Kaolack region]. It was a prison built for all the recalcitrants – the children who had run away several times, or who hadn’t succeeded at their studies, or who didn’t bring back enough money. It was a room built like a prison in the center of the *daara*... There were sometimes so many children that they couldn’t sit down, so they had to stand up all day. They were starving... What really struck me was that some tried to commit suicide... The children imprisoned in these cells are in such a state of psychological distress and dehumanization that they look for any possible way to escape... This child had slashed his veins so that he would be taken to the hospital. Others put products like *jumbo* or salt into the wounds so that they would get infected.⁶⁷

The professional also described how two *talibés* who arrived at the center in May 2017, ages approximately 16 and 18, had been imprisoned in a Touba *daara* for a year as punishment. “They were left in a room attached ankle-to-ankle with chains or iron shackles,” the professional said. The children had said they were also beaten and subject to sexual abuse during this time.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Human Rights Watch interview with 18-year-old former *talibé*, Dakar, Senegal, May 11, 2017.

⁶⁷ Human Rights Watch interview with a professional at a children’s center in Dakar, Senegal, May 9, 2017.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Rape and Sexual Abuse

Over the past year, Human Rights Watch has documented five cases of rape, sexual abuse, or attempted sexual abuse by Quranic teachers or their assistants.

In Saint-Louis in February 2017, a *grand talibé* (*marabout's* assistant, around age 19) was convicted and sentenced to one-year prison term for sexually abusing a 12-year-old *talibé*. A Human Rights Watch researcher and Issa Kouyate, PPDH member and director of Maison de la Gare, visited this *daara* and spoke with the Quranic teacher. Research conducted by Maison de la Gare suggested that several other *talibés* had also been sexually abused in this *daara*, housed in a crumbling, filthy and abandoned building without latrines or running water. Kouyate lamented that even after he had conveyed his suspicions to the local authorities, they had not conducted further investigations. "It's completely unacceptable; this *daara* should be closed," Kouyate said.⁶⁹

Magatte Mbaye, a consultant for the Association of Senegalese Jurists, told Human Rights Watch that a Quranic teacher in the Keur Mbaye Fall district of Dakar (Pikine department) was convicted in March 2017 and sentenced to 10 years in prison for the rape of three *talibés*, all around the age of 12:

One *talibé* had been raped by the teacher for a long time, but he never told anyone; and eventually he left the *daara*. Then two other *talibés* were raped – the marabout did this many times. One day when the teacher came to rape one of them, the *talibé* refused, so the teacher grabbed his head and smashed it against the wall, which resulted in a fracture. After that the *talibé* told his father what happened... The father of one child, as well as the grandmother of the other, pressed charges. The third *talibé* who had already left the *daara* was brought in as a witness. We don't know how many times he had raped them.⁷⁰

Most recently, in May 2017, a Quranic teacher was sentenced to six months prison in Touba for "*détournement des mineurs*" (attempting to lure or entice several *talibés* for

⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch interview with Issa Kouyate, director of Maison de la Gare, Saint-Louis, Senegal, May 1, 2017.

⁷⁰ Human Rights Watch phone interview with Magatte Mbaye, consultant, Association des Juristes Sénégalaises, June 2017.

purposes of sexual abuse). Though the media reported the story as rape, there was allegedly not enough evidence for a rape conviction.⁷¹

Female students at *daaras* have also been sexually abused. Girls also attend traditional Quranic schools in Senegal, though in much smaller numbers than boys; in most cases they do not live at the *daara*, though some do. In mid-2016, a *marabout* in Diourbel was arrested for raping one of his female students and sexually abusing two others. In December 2016, a Quranic teacher in Guédiawaye, Dakar was convicted for sexually abusing another female Quranic student, age 9, in November.⁷²

Miserable Conditions and Willful Neglect in Daaras

In April and May 2017, Human Rights Watch visited 17 *daaras* in Dakar and Saint-Louis, the vast majority of which were in unfinished or crumbling, abandoned buildings. Many were swarming with flies and mosquitoes, clogged with trash, and had no latrines, mattresses, running water, or hygienic supplies. Quranic teachers in 15 of these *daaras* forced *talibés* to beg for money or food. Nearly all of the children observed appeared malnourished, with visible skin diseases. Several had untreated wounds.



The “bathroom” area for *talibés* living at a *daara* in Saint-Louis, Senegal. The children urinate here on the ground; for anything else, they “go to the river.” May 1, 2017. © 2017 Lauren Seibert/Human Rights Watch

One child rights activist showed Human Rights Watch a slum-like area just behind the Grand Dakar police station, where five or more small *daaras* operated in such conditions. Another *daara* in Guédiawaye, Dakar is also notorious for its horrific conditions. The Quranic teacher, who claimed his *daara* had 70 *talibés* (though others said there were more than 100), refused Human Rights Watch entry into the school. “Why should I allow

⁷¹ “Touba : le présumé marabout-“violetur” de ses *talibés* interpellé par la police,” *ActuSen*, May 5, 2017, <https://actusen.com/touba-le-presume-marabout-violetur-de-ses-talibes-interpelle-par-la-police/> (accessed June 10, 2017); Human Rights Watch phone interviews with Diourbel prosecutor and child protection committee coordinator, June 2017.

⁷² Human Rights Watch phone interview with Magatte Mbaye, consultant, Association des Juristes Sénégalaises, June 2017.



At this daara in Saint-Louis, Senegal, up to 50 young talibés sleep outside on the sand at night, sheltered only by this structure constructed from sticks and plastic. The children spend their days begging in the streets and studying the Quran. May 1, 2017. © 2017 Lauren Seibert/Human Rights Watch

outsiders into my *daara* to know my secrets?” he said.⁷³ In contrast to the squalid living conditions of his talibes, the *marabout* wore an extravagant *boubou* and watch, carried a smartphone, and arrived in a car. He did not live at the *daara*, which resembled a fortress – an unfinished building with no windows, completely enclosed. Five *grand talibés* stood guard outside to prevent unwelcome visitors. Flies and mosquitoes swarmed in the air.

⁷³ Human Rights Watch interview with Quranic teacher, Guédiawaye, Dakar, May 7, 2017.



This *daara* in Dakar, which houses from 70-100 *talibés*, is notorious among child protection workers for its horrific conditions. Sleeping mats and blankets are seen stacked against the exterior walls of the *daara* [pictured at left], which are spotted with holes at the base [pictured at right] “so the children can breathe,” according to a local child protection worker. May 6, 2017. © 2017 Lauren Seibert/Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch observed sleeping mats and blankets outside of the *daara*, propped against the walls.

Abdourahmane Kane, a child protection expert familiar with this *daara*, told Human Rights Watch:

There are so many children there that they even have to sleep outside because there is not enough space. There are no toilets, there is no water, there is no electricity, there are no windows. The children made holes at the bottom of the wall, just so they can breathe.⁷⁴

Limited Progress on Justice for Physical Abuse

Compared to past years, 2016 and 2017 have seen an increase in the number of investigations, prosecutions and convictions of Quranic teachers or their assistants for severe abuses against *talibés*, including violence, abuses leading to the child’s death, rape, and sexual abuse.

⁷⁴ Human Rights Watch interview with Abdourahmane Kane, Dakar, Senegal, May 5, 2017.

In January 2017, two Quranic teachers were convicted for causing *talibé* deaths. The first, charged with involuntary manslaughter, received a sentence of three years in prison for tying up the *talibé* in Darou Mousty who died in a fire; the second, charged with “assault and battery inducing unintentional death” of a *talibé* in the Parcelles Assainies district of Dakar in June 2016, was sentenced to 2 years in prison.⁷⁵

In February, the Quranic teacher’s assistant who had sexually abused one or more *talibés* in Saint-Louis was sentenced to 1 year in prison.⁷⁶ In March, the Quranic teacher who had raped three *talibés* in Keur Mbaye Fall, Dakar, was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 5 million CFA (\$8,500) in fines.⁷⁷

In 2016, the two Quranic teachers who had sexually abused female *talibés* in Guédiawaye and Diourbel were both tried and convicted, with one sentenced to 10 years in prison.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Human Rights Watch interviews with Mamadou Wane, president of PPDH, and Magatte Mbaye, consultant for the Association des Juristes Sénégalaises, May and June 2017.

⁷⁶ Human Rights Watch phone interviews with Issa Kouyate, director of Maison de la Gare, Saint-Louis, Senegal, June 2017.

⁷⁷ Human Rights Watch interviews with Magatte Mbaye, consultant, Association des Juristes Sénégalaises, May and June 2017.

⁷⁸ Human Rights Watch interviews with a Diourbel prosecutor and Mamadou Ndiaye, Diourbel Child Protection Committee coordinator, May and June 2017.

Recommendations and Next Steps

The “*retrait*” program rolled out in June 2016 demonstrated meaningful political will on the part of the government to address widespread abuses and exploitation of *talibé* children. However, the return of children to exploitative *daaras* and the failure to ensure justice for victims of forced begging more generally has emboldened abusive Quranic teachers and represents a missed opportunity to deter future abuses.

While the police, prosecutors and judiciary can and should act irrespective of the “*retrait*” program, greater coordination between the Ministry of Family and the ministries of Justice and the Interior would ensure that *talibé* children's rights to justice and protection are prioritized throughout the program.

The initiative to remove children from the streets inspired a great hope amongst both Seneglese civil society and the international community that the abuses against *talibés* would cease, and the children's most basic rights would finally be restored. This hope must not be betrayed.

Human Rights Rights proposes the following recommendations to ensure that the rights of *talibé* children are fully respected, both during the “*retrait*” program and in Quranic schools across Senegal.

To the Senegalese Government

- Ensure that the Ministry of Justice, the National Anti-Trafficking Unit, and the Ministry of the Interior are fully involved in the planning and operations of the “*retrait des enfants de la rue*” initiative, with a view to ensuring investigations and prosecutions of adults, including Quranic teachers, forcing children to beg for profit or committing other abuses.
- Enforce current domestic law that criminalizes forcing another into begging for economic gain—specifically, article 3 of Law No. 2005-06—including by investigating and holding accountable in accordance with fair trial standards *marabouts* and others who force children to beg.

- Enforce anti-trafficking provisions under Law No. 2005-06, which criminalizes child trafficking in accordance with the United Nations Trafficking in Persons Protocol.
- Enforce article 298 of the penal code that criminalizes the physical abuse of children, with the exception of “minor assaults,” including by investigating and holding accountable in accordance with fair trial standards marabouts and others who physically abuse talibés.
 - Amend the law to include specific reference to all forms of corporal punishment in schools, in accordance with international law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.
 - Amend the law to ensure that it holds responsible a Quranic teacher who oversees, orders, or fails to prevent or punish an assistant teacher who inflicts physical abuse on a *talibé*.

To the National Assembly

- Pass the draft law establishing legal status and regulations for *daaras*.
- Hold parliamentary hearings to discuss the impact and challenges of the “*retrait des enfants de la rue*” program, as well as the broader issue of child exploitation of through forced begging, including by Quranic teachers.

To the Ministry of Women, Family and Children

- Issue an official, public commitment that any children placed in protective care as part of the “*retrait des enfants de la rue*” program will no longer be returned to Quranic teachers and *daaras* that have forced them to beg or violated their rights in any other capacity. While in protective care, initiate systematic family tracing and reunification processes for all children, including *talibés*.
- Ensure the children’s centers utilized during the “*retrait*” program, such as Ginddi Center, have the budget necessary to adequately support and staff their operations.
- Ensure that periodic evaluation and follow-up is conducted for every child picked up from the streets and returned to a parent or guardian, in order to assess the well-being of the child and verify that the schools are not forcing children to beg or violating their rights in any other capacity.

- Ensure that all government personnel participating in the “*retrait*” (including police and social workers) are trained in existing laws banning forced begging and other abuses, receive child protection training, and are instructed on the appropriate referral mechanisms for any and all such violations encountered during the “*retrait*” operations.
- Immediately cease public funding and grants to any Quranic schools in which children are forced to beg or live in unacceptable conditions, and refer any such cases encountered to the police and/or the public prosecutor in the relevant district.
- Request the children’s centers utilized over the course of the “*retrait*,” including Ginddi Center, to review the files of children picked up from the streets and to refer any cases of suspected forced begging or abuse to the police and/or public prosecutor.

To the Ministry of Justice

- Instruct all judges and public prosecutors, in addition to the presidents of the Tribunals, to work closely with the Ministry of Family to actively investigate, refer and prosecute cases of *talibé* abuse and forced begging encountered during the “*retrait des enfants de la rue*.”
- Enforce the anti-trafficking law (no. 2005-06) by ensuring that police, prosecutors, and social services report, initiate, and pursue cases of children forced to beg.
- Enforce article 298 of the penal code, which criminalizes the physical abuse and willful neglect of children, by investigating and holding to account all those who physically abuse and neglect *talibés*, notably Quranic teachers and assistants.

To the Ministry of the Interior

- Explicitly instruct all police officers, including the Juvenile Justice Unit, to proceed with investigations of forced child begging for purposes of profit and exploitation, banned under the 2005 anti-trafficking law, with a view to referring such cases to the prosecutor. Such investigations should include visits to the Quranic schools in question.
- Allocate sufficient resources and adequately trained personnel to the Juvenile Justice Unit of the National Police in support of the “*retrait des enfants de la rue*” operations.

- Implement a strict no-warning, no-negotiation policy for any Quranic teachers found to have forced *talibés* to beg or committed other abuses; ensure that all police personnel are aware of this policy and enforce it without exceptions, and that all such cases are referred to the prosecutor.
- Install and fund special offices to deal with cases involving children (“*bureaux des mineurs*”) in all police stations in Senegal.
- Instruct all prefects, mayors, and governors to investigate any problematic *daaras* in their district that come to their attention; to submit reports to the local public prosecutor on any violations of children’s rights encountered at such *daaras*; and to proceed with administrative closure of any *daaras* in which children are in danger.
- Instruct all gendarmes assigned to traffic duty to report their observations of *talibé* children begging, and to prevent these children from begging in dangerous traffic zones.
- Send instructions to all border control officers to ensure that every individual attempting to cross the border with a group of children provides parental authorization and identity information for each child.

To International Partners and the Senegalese Government

- Increase funding and support to organizations providing legal assistance to *talibé* children who are victims of abuse, exploitation, and trafficking.
- Consider providing increased support to the Child Rights Directorate (DDPEGV) within the Ministry of Family, to Ginddi Center, to the Juvenile Justice Unit of the National Police, or to the Justice Ministry’s anti-trafficking task force.

Acknowledgments

This report was researched and written by Lauren Seibert, West Africa Associate for the Africa Division at Human Rights Watch. Research assistance was provided by members of *la Plateforme pour la Promotion et la Protection des Droits Humains* (PPDH), a coalition of Senegalese civil society organizations working on the *talibé* issue. The report was edited by Corinne Dufka, Associate Director for the Africa Division. Elin Martinez, Children’s Rights Researcher; Clive Baldwin, Senior Legal Advisor; and Babatunde Olugboji, Deputy Program Director, provided thematic, legal and programmatic review respectively. Production assistance was provided by Olivia Hunter, Photo and Publications Coordinator; Fitzroy Hepkins, Administrative Manager; and Jose Martinez, Senior Coordinator.

Human Rights Watch is especially grateful to all the current and former *talibé* children who courageously agreed to be interviewed for this report. Human Rights Watch also thanks all individuals and organizations who contributed to this research, including: Issa Kouyaté and others from *Maison de la Gare*; Abdou Fodé Sow, from *Yakaaru Guneye*; Isabelle de Guillebon, Isabelle Diouf, and others from *Samu Social Sénégal*; Magatte Mbaye, consultant for *Association des Juristes Sénégalaises*; and Alassane Diang from *Empire des Enfants*. Human Rights Watch greatly appreciates the openness shown by religious leaders in Saint-Louis and Dakar. Abdourahmane Kane, Yahya Sidibe of *SOS Talibés*, and Issa Kouyate of *Maison de la Gare*, all of whom facilitated meetings and visits to Quranic schools, deserve special thanks.

Human Rights Watch is also grateful for the openness and cooperation from Senegal’s government throughout the time this research was conducted, particularly from officials at at Ginddi Center; from the Ministry of Women, Family, and Children, particularly the Children’s Rights Directorate; from the Juvenile Justice Unit of the National Police; from the National Anti-Trafficking Unit; and from the Ministry of Justice. The collective efforts of civil society, religious authorities, and certain government officials inspire confidence that progress toward ending forced child begging is finally within reach.

“I STILL SEE THE TALIBÉS BEGGING”

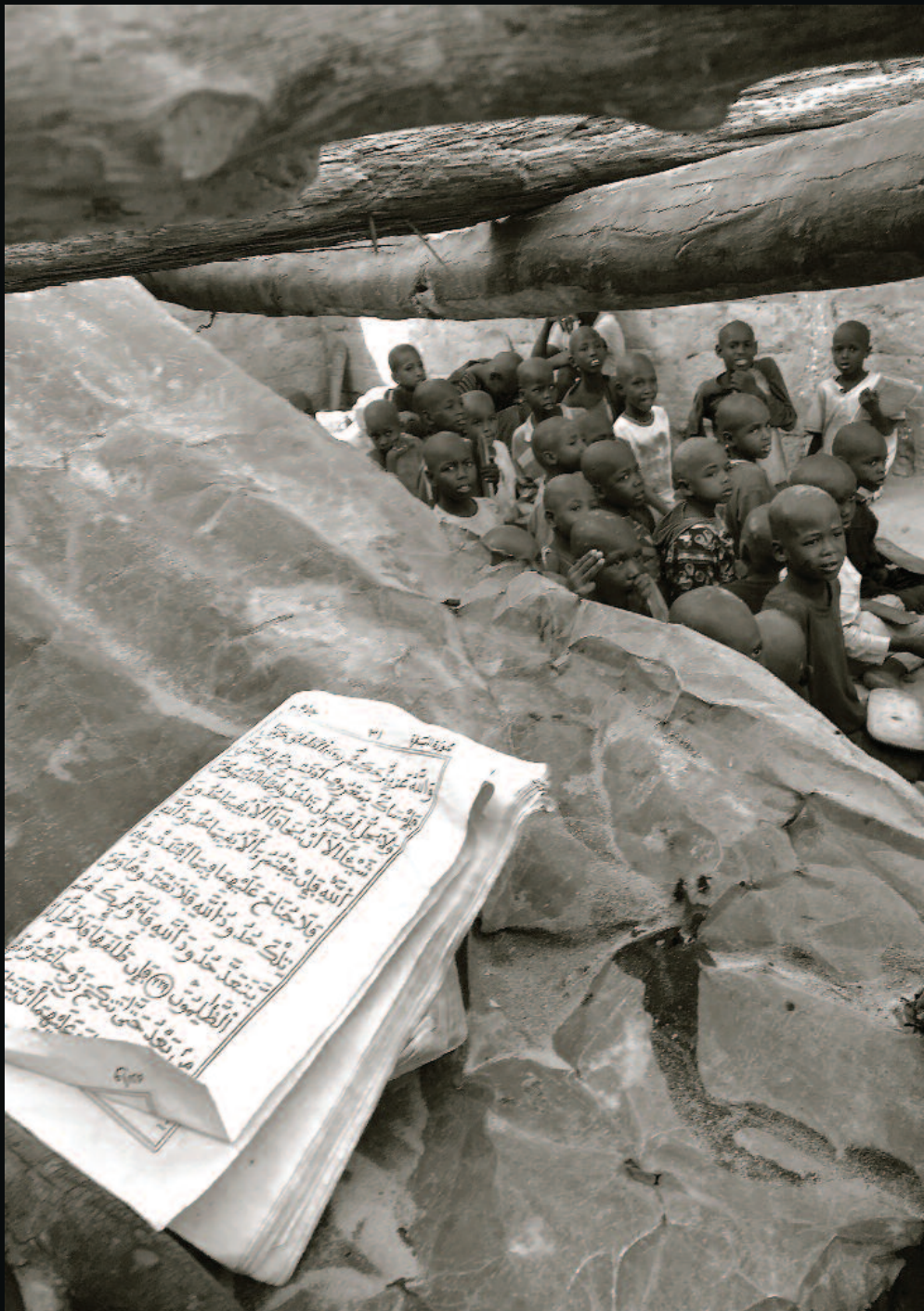
Government Program to Protect Talibé Children in Senegal Falls Short

Across Senegal, more than 50,000 *talibé* children living in traditional Quranic boarding schools, or *daaras*, are forced to beg for daily quotas of money, rice or sugar by their Quranic teachers. The children are often beaten, chained, bound, and subjected to other forms of abuse.

In June 2016, the Senegalese government demonstrated meaningful political will by introducing a new program to “remove children from the streets” and crack down on forced child begging. One year later, the program – implemented exclusively in Dakar – has hardly made a dent in the alarming numbers of children subject to exploitation, abuse and neglect daily. Hundreds of *talibés* picked up from the streets were returned to the Quranic teachers who had forced them to beg in the first place, and the program failed to trigger any investigations or prosecutions.

“I Still See the Talibés Begging,” based on interviews with more than 90 people conducted in Dakar, in Saint-Louis and by phone, examines the successes and failings of the first year of the program. It also documents the ongoing abuses faced by *talibé* children in Dakar and four other regions, including forced begging, violence, chaining and imprisonment, sexual abuse, and rape.

The report calls on the Senegalese government to ensure that no child picked up during the program to “remove children from the streets” is returned to any Quranic school that has violated the rights of the child through forced begging or other abuses. It recommends that the government take measures to strengthen the program, investigate and prosecute abusive Quranic teachers, and pass the draft law to regulate Quranic schools.



(above) Talibés studying the Quran at a *daara* [Quranic school] in Saint-Louis, Senegal, May 1, 2017.

(front cover) Talibés begging on the streets of Saint-Louis, Senegal, May 7, 2017.

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