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Niger: Lull in conflict favours return in the north

Since the conflict between the Nigerien government and Tuareg groups intensified in 2007 following the creation of the Mouvement Nigérien pour la Justice, around 11,000 people have been displaced from their homes in mountainous areas north of Agadez. The conflict has abated in 2009, and many of the internally displaced people (IDPs) have started going back to their homes, whether spontaneously or with assistance from the local municipalities and the international community. With a state of emergency in place in the whole region and humanitarian access limited, the available information rarely gives a comprehensive assessment of the situation of either IDPs or returnees.

The conflict has severely affected people's livelihoods in the region. Displacement has disrupted many pastoralists' traditional ways of life as they have found refuge in towns. The reported use of landmines on both sides has cut supply routes and affected local agricultural production as well as threatening the security of both IDPs and conflict-affected communities. Children have been particularly affected by displacement. The humanitarian response has suffered from the lack of access and the impossibility of carrying out comprehensive needs assessments.

Meanwhile, inter-communal clashes between pastoralists and farmers, across the country and especially along the western border with Mali, have caused significant but little-reported displacement.

Map of Niger



Source: United Nations Cartographic Section

More maps are available on <http://www.internal-displacement.org>

Background and causes of displacement

Internal displacement in Niger is primarily caused by an armed conflict between the Nigerien army and Tuareg-based insurgents in the region of Agadez in the north and by inter-communal clashes between sedentary farmers and nomadic pastoralists across the country.

Niger's colonial and post-colonial history has featured frequent uprisings by various Tuareg groups driven by economic and political grievances. The Tuareg are a pastoralist group indigenous to areas of the Sahara in Algeria, Libya, Mali and above all in Niger, where they live mostly to the south and west of the Aïr Mountains (Minority Rights Group International, July 2008). Following a period of drought, famine and economic crisis in the mid-1980s and the absence of a government response to the growing humanitarian crisis, Tuareg groups in both Mali and Niger started an insurgency in 1990 in search of greater autonomy and a bigger share of the profits from uranium mining in their traditional pasture areas (Christian Science Monitor, 11 October 2007).

In 1995, after four years of conflict, the Niger government brokered a comprehensive peace agreement with the different Tuareg factions, which included an amnesty for defence, security and rebel forces involved in the conflict, disarmament and reintegration arrangements for rebel forces, and provisions for the economic, social and cultural development of the Tuareg regions (GoN, 15 April 1995). However, frustrated by perceived continuing inequalities and lack of development, Tuareg demands resurfaced in 2007 with the creation of a new militant

group, the Niger Movement for Justice (*Mouvement Nigérien pour la Justice* or MNJ), which renewed armed attacks against government forces (VOA, 25 February 2008). Niger's government responded by adopting a state of emergency in the northern region, which gives additional powers to security forces and restricts freedom of movement (Reuters, 24 August 2007).

The government has refused to recognise the MNJ and has dismissed their members as bandits and drug traffickers. However, following the diplomatic intervention of neighbouring Algeria and Libya, the government's approach has slightly softened in the first months of 2009, with President Tandja agreeing to hold talks with some of the Tuareg rebel leaders (Afrol News, 19 August 2009).

The positions of both the government and the MNJ remain subject to ongoing political developments. The President's efforts to extend his presidential mandate and powers over the government, army and magistrates have led to mounting internal dissent (ISN, 28 August 2009). Following his success in an August 2009 referendum and the subsequent revision of the constitution increasing presidential powers, the international community has expressed concerns over these threats to democracy in the country (ECOWAS, 24 August 2009; EU, 11 August 2009). Meanwhile, frictions have emerged within the MNJ, and in mid-2008 the most prominent personalities within the Movement created a splinter group. The Front of Forces for Rectification (*Front des Forces de Redressement* or FFR) was reportedly created in response to the political impasse the MNJ was confronted with, and the excessive impact borne by

civilians in the conflict areas (L'Escola de Cultura de Pau, 2009).

Niger has also been prone to displacement caused by inter-communal clashes between pastoralists and farmers. With subsistence farming and livestock breeding making up approximately 45 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (The World Bank, March 2009), and the rates of drought and desertification increasing, herders and farmers have had to compete more for natural resources in recent years. A population growing at an annual rate of 3.3 per cent (UNFPA, 4 August 2008), high demand for agricultural products in urban areas and decreased farmland per capita have contributed to the decrease in accessible grazing land due to pressures from a growing farming population, which has led to conflicts between the two groups (E. Phillips, 2007). One assessment carried out in 2005 in two departments in south-central Niger attributed more than 90 per cent of disputes between farmers and herders to crop damage caused by one group or the other (E. Mensour, 2005).

The proliferation of small arms in Niger has caused the scale and impact of armed violence in pastoral communities to rise (UNDP, December 2007). Weaker state security control and the proliferation of small arms in border and desert areas have contributed to more frequent and more violent inter-communal conflicts. In the Niger-Mali border area, constant conflicts between cattle-breeding communities have become unmanageable, with weapons particularly available since a Tuareg uprising in the 1990s (OECD, June 2007). Violence is especially recurrent in the region of Tillabéry close to the border with Mali, with consequent loss of

life and destruction of property (Les Afriques, 19 March 2009; Le Républicain, 20 March 2009; Hub Rural, 6 April 2009). Militia groups representing Malian Daoussak nomadic herders and Nigerien Peulh pastoralists have caused death and displacement on both sides of the border, in the district of Ouallam (UNDP, December 2007).

IDP numbers and patterns of displacement

11,000 people are estimated to have been displaced by fighting between the MNJ and government forces since February 2007 (IRIN, 10 December 2007), up to 5,000 of them from the town of Iférouane alone (BBC, 19 November 2007). The total affected population in the area north of the city of Agadez is of approximately 23,000 people, according to reports from 2008 (US DoS, 25 February 2009). Humanitarian organisations lack access to the region due to insecurity, and there is a "culture of uncertainty" in which "the few aid agencies working in the region are hesitant to say anything that might upset the government and hamper their relief operations" (IRIN, 22 October 2007). Therefore, reported figures come mainly from local authorities and civil society organisations and have not been cross-checked.

In general, residents of villages in the Aïr Mountains have fled to bigger towns such as Agadez or Arlit where they have sought shelter with family and friends, or they have been displaced to areas further north in the mountains. Initial reports from the region hinted that the IDPs had been prevented from congregating in informal settlements and instead kept on the move by the Nigerien Army (IRIN,

10 December 2007). As the armed conflict has started to abate in 2009, some IDPs have started to return home, either spontaneously or with the assistance of local and international organisations (OCHA, 26 June 2009). Patterns of displacement are further complicated by recurrent floods in the region (OCHA, 18 June 2009).

Even less information is available on the scale of displacement caused by inter-communal conflicts, and no assessments of the impact of the violence on the local population have been published.

Protection and humanitarian concerns

Internally displaced people (IDPs) and local communities in areas affected by the insurgency have faced a diverse range of threats to their life, safety and security. Civilians have reportedly been killed by the army as supposed rebel informers (US DoS, 25 February 2009).

The anti-vehicle mines which have been allegedly used by both sides to the conflict still contaminate areas of the north. The number of landmine casualties reported has gone up since 2007, when the conflict intensified. Although casualty patterns are not all consistent with the explosion of an anti-vehicle mine, the extent to which anti-personnel mines have been used remains unclear (ICBL, October 2008). Most casualties were recorded in the Agadez region and included both soldiers and civilians. According to a 2007 UNDP rapid assessment, drivers, IDPs from Iferouane and Gougaram, children and humanitarian workers were considered to be at most risk (ICBL, October 2008). Landmines have not only prevented the

free movement of civilians and the return of IDPs, they have also hampered the provision of humanitarian assistance to the communities affected by the conflict, by cutting off main supply routes.

Livelihoods have been affected as mines and fighting have prevented travel to local markets to trade and buy food while fuel rationing has prevented agricultural activities as water pumps cannot operate (IRIN, 9 February 2009). Displaced farmers have been unable to tend to their crops or livestock, and so have lost their basic source of income and part of their traditional lifestyle (IRIN, 10 December 2007). In Agadez, both IDPs and host families have suffered from the loss of income from the tourist industry (IRIN, 26 August 2008). By July 2009, access to food was “critical” for as many as some 20,000 people in the conflict-affected departments of Arlit and Bilma (OCHA, 2 July 2009). Loss of income and insecurity have also made access to health care much more difficult (IRIN, 22 October 2007). Mobile health clinics have been discontinued because of the violence, so communities in the mountains have been cut off from all access to health care (IRIN, 26 August 2008).

According to the Agadez regional government, the conflict has led thousands of students to drop out of school in 2008 (IRIN, 4 September 2008). For example, about 100 students between the ages of 11 and 15 and 200 younger children who were attending primary and pre-school classes were displaced from the village of Iférouane (Hed Tamat, 28 August 2009). According to the Ministry of Education, there were in 2008 approximately 700 displaced children under the age of six in the communes of Tchirozerene, Arlit and

Agadez (IRIN, 4 September 2008). Around 160 displaced children were able to integrate into classes in their area of displacement thanks to the supply of textbooks and “catch-up” courses (UNICEF, 2009). At the same time, instead of being in school, some displaced children have engaged in agricultural and pastoral work.

Return movements

Following the easing of the conflict in 2009, and faced with difficult living conditions in their area of displacement, many IDPs have started to return home. Many have returned spontaneously while in other cases local authorities have sought the help of local and international NGOs for transport and reinstallation expenses, for example to restart agricultural activities and repair homes and water points (OCHA, 4 June 2009; 26 June 2009). It is estimated that out of the approximately 5,000 people who had fled Iférouane, only around 500 were still displaced at the end of August 2009 (Hed Tamat, 28 August 2009).

The return movements to Iférouane started in January 2009 with a first group of 40 people, among them some shopkeepers, who benefited from the support of the town council. At the same time some 132 crop growers out of the 315 in the commune had started preparing their plots for a new harvest, despite difficulties accessing seeds, water pumps and fuel (CAPI, 27 February 2009).

National and international responses

With a state of emergency still effective in the region and mines laid on all the

major roads, the government has limited the access of international humanitarian organisations north of Agadez. Needs assessments are conducted by local municipal councils and the results are then passed to the Governor of Agadez, who contacts local and international partners for support. The distribution of humanitarian assistance has been managed through the same channels (IRIN, 2 September 2008). The local authorities in Dabaga, some 50 kilometres north of Agadez, ordered Médecins Sans Frontières to suspend its work in the area on security grounds in October 2007, following an armed attack on the NGO (MSF, 24 October 2007).

In response to the landmine problem in the region, the government established a joint committee composed of UN agencies and the National Commission for the Collection and Control of Illegal Weapons in November 2007 (UNICEF, 2009). However, there are no comprehensive data collection mechanisms on casualties and the military authorities do not always share information with their civilian counterparts. The government has started only recently to integrate mine risk education into its mine action strategy (ICBL, October 2008). The International Committee of the Red Cross has been the main provider of support to victims of landmines through evacuation and emergency assistance services and training activities on first-aid techniques for the Red Cross Society of Niger (ICRC, January 2009).

The humanitarian response, led by the UN Resident Coordinator / Humanitarian Coordinator (RC/HC), is being strengthened with the gradual implementation of the cluster approach. As of July 2009, six

clusters were functioning in the country: health, nutrition, food security, education, and water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), while a Humanitarian Country Team was being set up (OCHA, 2 September 2009, by email). A new RC/HC was appointed in 2007. In an effort to improve the response, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has opened sub-offices across the country including in Agadez, where it chairs regular coordination meetings with local and international humanitarian part-

ners and local authorities (OCHA, 2009). However, the local political environment remains very restricted for humanitarians.

Agencies have reported that funding has continued to decrease while needs have increased. The Central Emergency Response Fund has provided funds under both its rapid response and underfunded emergency programmes to improve the situation, especially with regard to emergency health and nutrition programmes (CERF, August 2009).

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's Internal Displacement profile. The full profile is available online [here](#).

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About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org.

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