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MALI

A cautious return: Malian IDPs prepare to go home

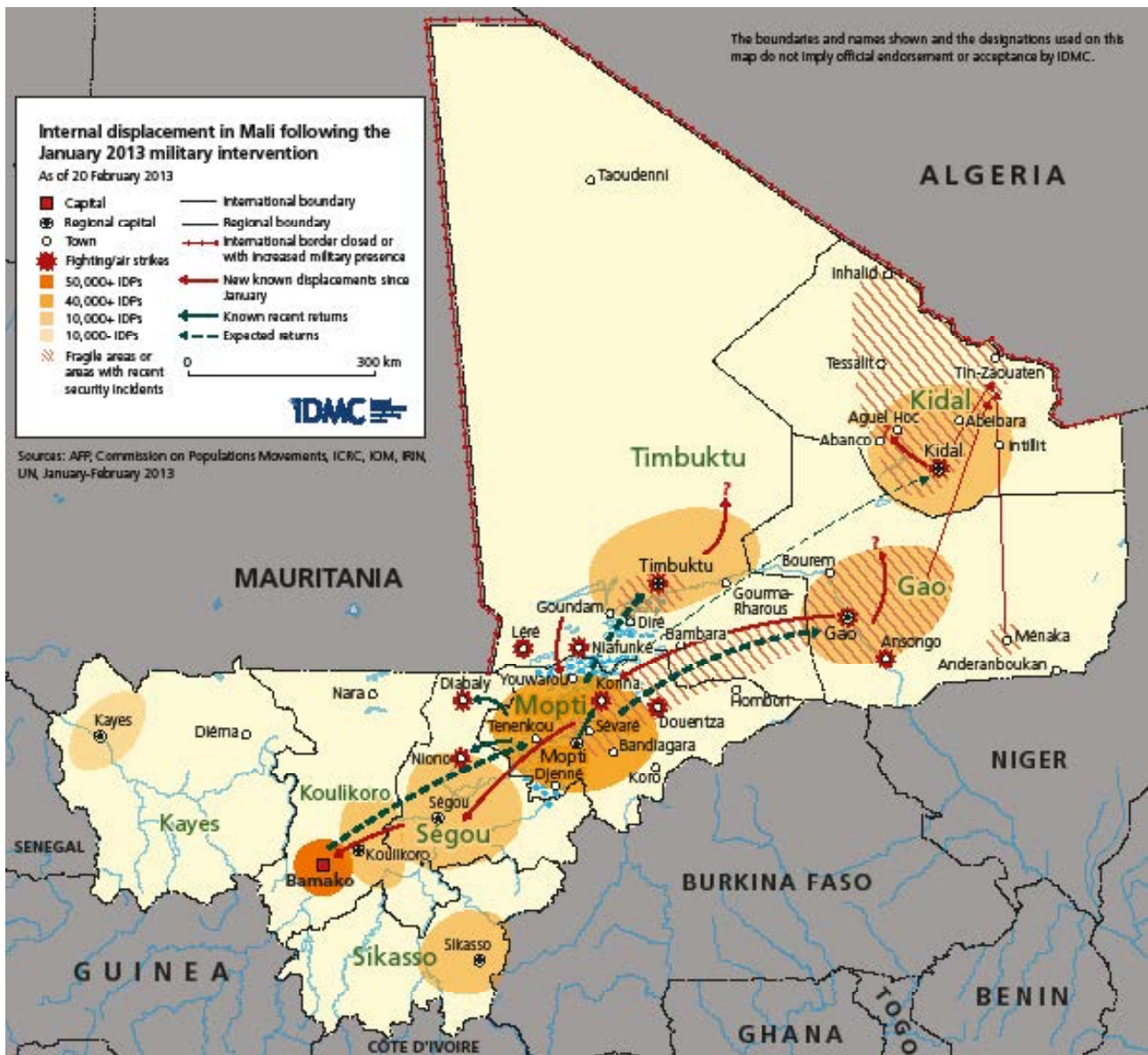
The military campaign to retake control of northern Mali from Islamist rebels has raised hopes among IDPs that they could soon be going home - but what will they be going home to?

Mali's political, security and humanitarian situations have changed significantly during the past month, with French, Malian and West African troops retaking control of much of the north of the country from armed Islamist groups, and driving the rebels out of their strongholds and into the northern mountains.

For many of the nearly 230,000 people internally displaced in Mali in 2012, these advances raise the possibility of being able to go home, a prospect for which some have been waiting for more than a year. According to a February 2013 survey on IDPs' future intentions carried out by the International Organisation for Migration in Bamako and Koulikoro, 93 per cent of internally displaced people (IDPs) plan to return to the north rather than integrate locally in their area of displacement or settle elsewhere in the country.



In terms of timing, some households base their plans to return on the agricultural cycle, with the planting season falling in early summer and harvest in the autumn. Others would prefer to wait until the end of the school year in June in order to minimise any further disruption to their children's studies. Two-thirds of households, however, are simply waiting for reassurances that their home areas are safe enough to return to in a sustainable way. Nearly 90 per cent of those interviewed believe that security conditions in the north will improve soon, which may mean significant numbers of people will make the journey home in the coming months. This forecast begs the question: when will it be truly safe enough for people to go back to the north in peace, and what kinds of challenges should they expect to find upon arriving?



Lingering insecurity raises red flags for return

Despite the recent military advances which ended the Islamist groups' year-long occupation of northern Mali, the security situation in central and northern regions remains volatile. Most of the armed groups have retreated to the Ifoghas mountains in Kidal region, where it is feared they are regrouping and planning further guerrilla-style raids such as the recent suicide bombings in Gao. Other rebel fighters have reportedly shaved off their beards and sought anonymity among the general population. Human rights violations

by all parties to the conflict, including summary executions, the recruitment of child soldiers and sexual and gender-based violence could increase if French forces withdraw and leave behind an unstable environment in the coming months. This raises the concern that conditions do not yet allow for IDPs' safe and sustainable return.

For many IDPs the long journey home could in itself be fraught with peril. Among the latest security incidents, four people were killed in an explosion on the road between Douentza and Gao, which remains closed for fear of landmines and improvised explosive devices.

Acute ethnic tensions have also generated instability, with revenge attacks being reported against members of groups associated with the rebels. Reports of the looting of shops and homes owned by Tuaregs and lighter-skinned Arabs began in Timbuktu and Gao in late January, and many of those affected have since deserted these areas to seek shelter elsewhere or to go into hiding. Recent fighting in Gao has prompted the Malian army to conduct house-to-house searches in attempt to root out any remaining rebels, leading to further fear of collateral violence against these groups and their possible displacement.

Given this dangerous climate, it is imperative that any public announcements encouraging IDPs to go home be made only when security both en route and in return regions can be guaranteed and sustained, so as to avoid people going home only to flee violence once more.

The Malian government and the international community must also develop contingency plans in anticipation of a French withdrawal and the possibility of a resurgence in violence and repeated displacement. Such plans should include the period leading up to elections scheduled for July 2013 and the vote itself.

Going home, but to what?

With roads already beginning to reopen, spontaneous return movements have begun and increasing numbers of people may take the security risks associated with making their own way home. Even if security remains stable, however, few returning IDPs expect to be able to pick up their lives where they abruptly left off a year ago.

Food remains an overwhelming priority, given that the conflict has worsened the chronic food insecurity which has plagued the Sahel region for years. The situation is particularly worrying in Gao and Kidal, where the recent departure of many

merchants for fear of reprisal attacks has further reduced already limited food supplies. Kidal region has no access to essential food shipments from Algeria as the border remains closed in an effort to reduce any continuing Islamist threat. Humanitarians predict that crisis conditions could become widespread in the north and parts of Mopti region by April, and made worse still if farmers miss another planting season in May.

Fighting and air strikes over the last month destroyed homes, shops and public infrastructure in the north. Even IDPs whose homes were not destroyed in the military action worry that their fragile mud-brick dwellings may have suffered significant damage as they have unable to carry out essential maintenance to keep the weather and termites at bay. Others will struggle to restart their livelihoods as pastoralists or small business owners, and schools will be slow to reopen as there were many teachers among the displaced. Reconstruction and recovery activities will be vital in helping returning IDPs to resume a normal life, and these must take place in tandem with early social cohesion efforts to ease the current ethnic tensions.

Meanwhile, displacement ongoing

Even while many IDPs make plans and preparations to go home, the plight of thousands of other newly displaced Malians has only just begun. Since the onset of military operations in January 2013 and the ensuing ethnic tensions and reprisal attacks, some 16,000 IDPs have fled south from central Mali. More than 6,600 people have also reportedly fled north, reaching the village of Tinzawaten near the frontier with Algeria, but they have been unable to cross the closed border to reach safety. Most of the latter group are believed to be lighter-skinned Arabs fleeing the rising ethnic tensions in their home areas. According to a joint assessment by *Médecins du Monde Belgique* and *Solidarités Internationales*, some of

them are staying with host families, while a lack of tents means that others have no other choice but to shelter under trucks or sleep in the open air.

Some of these recent displacements have been short-term. A number of people – mostly those who did not flee far away from home areas such as Diabaly or Konna in central Mali – returned in January. Others, however, remain stranded in utter destitution.

Thousands left behind

Many IDPs are preparing for return, but others prefer to wait for a realistic prospect of peace in the north or for the right time in terms of the academic year or the agricultural cycle. Others still are simply unable to afford the costly trip.

Whatever their reason for staying behind, large numbers of IDPs in southern and central regions are likely to remain displaced and so will continue to require support. The majority are living in urban or semi-urban settings in places such as Bamako, Mopti and Ségou, where they have sought shelter with family or friends or are renting short-term accommodation. Like Malians in general, the host communities are renowned for their resourcefulness and generosity, but nonetheless feel an enormous strain on their social and economic infrastructure. For their part the IDPs are frustrated by the length of their displacement and the fact that their coping mechanisms have been exhausted.

A window of opportunity for humanitarian response

Across the whole of Mali, the needs of IDPs, the communities who have hosted them, those preparing to return and those left behind are significant and in many cases unmet. The Malian government is attempting to fulfil its responsibilities

as the primary duty-bearer to protect and assist IDPs, but it is struggling to consolidate power and security both in the capital and nationwide.

Since the end of January 2013, humanitarian access has been improving slowly in northern and central areas of the country. This constitutes a window of opportunity for UN agencies and NGOs to scale up their activities and prepare for return movements. Indeed, as of 13 February, humanitarian partners had shared 12 assessments of needs identified in these areas, creating an evidence base for expanding programmes. In regions further south, where access is more or less unhindered, the ongoing work of Malian and international organisations with both IDPs and host communities is often hampered by a serious lack of funding and capacity.

The international community must increase its support for the efforts of the Malian government, civil society, and humanitarian and development organisations. At the time of writing, a mere 3% of the 373 million USD required in the humanitarian consolidated appeal had been funded. With increasing numbers setting up and expanding vital humanitarian, development and social cohesion work, there is a genuine opportunity to improve the overall response in a holistic way. Donors need to provide for such a response, so that before long Malian IDPs will be able to go home and rekindle the peace and democracy for which their country was until recently known.

About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) was established by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 1998, upon the request of the United Nations, to set up a global database on internal displacement. A decade later, IDMC remains the leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement caused by conflict and violence worldwide.

IDMC aims to support better international and national responses to situations of internal displacement and respect for the rights of internally displaced people (IDPs), who are often among the world's most vulnerable people. It also aims to promote durable solutions for IDPs, through return, local integration or settlement elsewhere in the country.

IDMC's main activities include:

- Monitoring and reporting on internal displacement caused by conflict, generalised violence and violations of human rights;
- Researching, analysing and advocating for the rights of IDPs;
- Training and strengthening capacities on the protection of IDPs;
- Contributing to the development of standards and guidance on protecting and assisting IDPs.

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

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