

Rapid Protection Assessment, Chinegodar, Niger

(24 February 2012)

Background

This protection assessment is based on a one-day visit conducted to the Nigerien town of Chinegodar, which is located at the border between Niger and Mali. Chinegodar is a town 308 kilometres north of the capital Niamey and with a significant military base. It could be described as a garrison town. On the other side of the border is the Malian town of Anderamboukane, part of the Menaka Region. Prior to the attacks, Anderamboukane had a population of 22,000 inhabitants, according to a city council employee who took refuge in Chinegodar. Proximity to the border is reflected in the fact that the distance between Chinegodar and Anderamboukane is only 18 kilometres. Chinegodar is the biggest site of Malian refugees according to the numbers provided by the Government of Niger. The UNHCR protection team met groups of men, women and children to gain an understanding of their profile, reason for their flight and their current situation in Chinegodar.

Profile of the Population

According to Government statistics, the Chinegodar site is hosting 11,274 Malian individuals (1,611 families) and 1,731 Nigerien individuals (247 families). The registration exercise in Chinegodar is scheduled to start on the 27th February and will provide more detailed information on this caseload. The vast majority (70%) of these refugees originate from Mali, Tuaregs mainly from Tamazguida, Kiltilabeit, Kilagoyok and Forgerons tribes ("black Tamasheq"). Other ethnic groups mentioned included Peuls, Bambaras, Djerma and Haoussa. Among the caseload is a minority of Niger nationals that have been living in Mali for decades. (The mayor of Anderamboukane, himself of Nigerien origin, left the city and relocated his entire family to Tahoua, Niger.) While a small number of refugees came from regions further away from the border, most came from the town of Anderamboukane and its suburbs. Entire families are living on the refugee site, men, women and children. Some men living in the camp are Malian civil servants, while the majority are shepherds, farmers, followed by craftsmen and shop owners.

Reasons of flight

The first group arrived in the beginning of February after the town of Anderamboukane was attacked. According to the group of women and children, heavily armed insurgents ("bandits", "light skin people", "rebels" - a city council employee made reference to the MNLA) stormed into the town with cars, forced people out of their houses, and fired shots at public buildings and communication antennas. The insurgents were joined by deserters from the army or government services. No fatalities ensued but most people fled. The town of Anderamboukane is said to have been fully deserted.

The majority of refugees with whom UNHCR spoke were clear that the Malian authorities offered no protection while the bandits destroyed their belongings. Bandits were described as a separated entity, hired to supplement the rebel forces during attacks. Refugees recounted animals being killed and houses destroyed. One group of women interviewed said that the shops and houses belonging to black Tuaregs were specifically targeted. Another one stated that the authorities of the town of Anderamboukane, namely white Tuaregs, did not react while black Tuaregs were being deprived of their goods.

Access and safety in current place of asylum

Refugees came to Chinegodar by various means, on foot, riding donkeys or by commercial truck. Truck owners have increased the price from 1000 FCFA before the crisis to 3000 or 4000 FCFA since the start of February. The Nigerien military authorities did not deny access to the Nigerien territory and the refugees said the military organise patrols around the site, night and day, in order to provide safety. They said they were feeling safe at the site of

Chinegodar, despite the short distance to the border. Local authorities have provided them support since their arrival. Significantly, some men are going on a daily basis to Anderamboukane in order to water their gardens, returning back to Chinegodar with vegetables that they can sell in the market of the town. This was indicative of a broader point that some refugees stressed, namely prior to the insecurity, Malians from Anderamboukane were familiar with Chinegodar. There was regular movement of people across the border, particularly for trading purposes. However, refugee women explained that they are now afraid to return because of bandits they might meet. No tensions with their host communities were reported.

Civilian character of asylum

The refugee site of Chinegodar is located around 600 meters from the town, where all but a tiny minority were stated to be living with host families. Refugees mentioned that only the Niger military forces pay regular visit to the site for their safety. Similar to Mangaize, there was no indication either of any form of militarization in the site; however, considering the distance to the border, this will require closer monitoring.

Specific protection concerns

The main protection concern is the location of the site, 18 kilometres from the border and where there is a heavy military presence. The Force Commander raised security concern to UNHCR, especially in case of an eventual attack of rebels against Chinegodar.

Some refugees gave reports of families being separated at the time of the attacks and the subsequent flight but that they had since been reunified.

Many refugee children have now not been attending school for two to four weeks. Some teachers and secondary school students that can afford the cost have returned back to the Malian town Gao in order to continue their schooling¹. Primary school children are living at the site without access to a school². (Local authorities approached on this issue stated that the current absorption capacity of the local school did not allow them to integrate the refugee children.)

Humanitarian assistance and priority needs

Initial help was provided by the local authorities who assisted the first families that arrived by giving them food on a daily basis. Humanitarian actors are providing water, namely MSF have put in place a water trucking system. Food distribution has been organised by ICRC and the first families registered received in addition to the food, three blankets, six mats, one bucket, six wrappers and one kitchen set (comprised of two components). ICRC has also provided the refugees with plastic sheeting. It was stated that the families who arrived later did not receive the same level of assistance. With regard to health, MSF set up a small health center in the site and the refugees during the discussions expressed their satisfaction with health assistance.

The refugees stated that their priority need is food, which is lacking at the site. Some families said they did not receive food during the last distribution while those who have received said they had finished what they had.

A second priority need should be provision of education both in terms of the obvious negative impact of a lack of schooling and in the more immediate, unoccupied children at the refugee site.

Finally, there were requests for jerry cans with refugees stating there has been no distribution as of 25th February.

¹ Reportedly a directive from the Malian Education Ministry.

² In the group of children (from five to 10 years old) met, some were able to explain in French what happened and why they left Anderamboukane. Figures compiled by the local Nigerien government state that there are a total of 696 children at the site, of which approximately 80 percent are at the primary school stage (six to 12 years of age) and the remaining split between secondary (13 to 16 years of age) and lycee stages.

Intentions

Refugees made it very clear that being relocated to the proposed Nigerien site of Ouallam would not be a good option. Reasons given were:

- Ouallam is too far from Anderamboukane and their gardens, a livelihood activity, would be lost forever;
- No pasture land for their cattle in that part of Niger;
- The Nigerien region of Ouallam is well-known for its lack of economic activities precisely because Nigerien women from that region used to cross the border to go Mali, looking for small jobs. This means refugees would have no means of subsistence in that region.

Men were adamant they would have to be forcibly relocated. (It is not excluded however that should a site be designated in Abala, more refugees may decide to relocate, as it closer to their place of origin.)

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