

Rapid Protection Assessment, Mangaize, Niger
(23-24 February 2012)

Background

This report is based on two consecutive days of field visits to one of the four key refugee sites inside Niger. The refugee site is located approximately 75 kilometres from the border with Mali, 150 kilometres north of the capital Niamey and approximately 500 metres outside the market town of Mangaize. A series of 'focus group' discussions were conducted with different refugee groups using a combination of national and international protection staff (including partner CADEV¹) and by engaging in direct dialogue with individual refugees. The four different focus groups, all of whom are living in the refugee site (not with host families) were Tuareg men, Tuareg women and children, a particular tribe, the Peulh tribe, and youth of mixed ethnicity². While there was some spontaneous intervention by individuals who did not fit the profile, in all cases the desired profile of the people largely remained to ensure a focussed discussion.

Surrounding the camp there were Nigerian gendarmes, armed, there as part of security requirements but they remained largely outside the site and relatively discreet.

Profile of the Population

According to most recent government statistics (data updated by the local committee responsible for registering new arrivals on behalf of the Government) there were as of 23 February some 300 families (2000 individuals) located at this site. Approximately half of the caseload is originally Nigerien and the other half Malian. UNHCR's level one registration across the sites is starting 24 February, at Mangaize. Until such point more detailed disaggregated data is not available.

According to the committee, comprised of both local authorities and site residents' representatives, the population present in Mangaize is mostly comprised of Tuaregs (40%), followed by Arabs (20%), Peuls/Bambaras (10%) and Djerma/Haoussa (30%)³.

Reasons of flight

The overwhelming trend for those interviewed was that they fled from in and around the Malian town of Menaka, approximately 75 kilometres north of the Malian border (150 km from Menaka to Mangaize). Reasons given for the flight across the four groups was consistent, fleeing the violence initiated by armed insurgents and the subsequent departure of the Government troops from Menaka. Repeatedly images of vehicles, some saying as many as forty, with heavily armed persons, were described. Whilst direct witnesses of the above were inhabitants of Menaka, the vast majority of refugees from around Menaka (Wagamane, Foukratane, Tinnabaou, and Delimane) explained that they did not witness the attacks but fled in anticipation of the threat. Many of the refugees explained that they reached Mangaize in vehicles where they had to pay for the journey. Amounts appeared to vary between two and four thousand FCFA per person depending on the distance travelled (up to nine thousand FCFA from Menaka to Mangaize), albeit very small children were allowed to travel free. A minority explained that they had walked, the maximum time stated by one elderly family being nine days. Inability to pay the fare was given more than once as to why some persons were unable to flee Mali plus the elderly and the weak. Two groups said more people were continuing to arrive from Menaka at Mangaize. The group of men stated 60 persons were arriving per day but this figure was not substantiated or confirmed by another source.

¹ Caritas-Development

² Youth in this instance included ages from 18 to 30 while for the Peulh group interaction was somewhat dominated by a single male although women and their babies constituted more than half of the group. Encouragingly as the discussion progressed various women became more vocal. For the group of men there were approximately 40 men and a minority of boys.

³ This breakdown will be refined following the Level two registration.

Access and safety in current place of asylum

None of the groups said they had difficulty of crossing what was described as the unmarked border separating Niger and Mali. Reception by the hosts was described in favourable terms. No issues of tension between the adjacent town and the refugees were mentioned by any of those interviewed. As a modest example the refugees have free access to the weekly Thursday market. On the issue of security for the refugees, consistently the message was that they were not fearful of where they were located and the sites proximity to the town appears to offer a sense of security and reassurance, close to a functioning and seemingly peaceful local population and 76 kilometres from the Malian border. More general security concerns and restrictions for humanitarian actors working in the region aside, direct humanitarian access to the population of concern was not deemed an issue, consistent with UNHCR's experience thus far. There was some interest and presence from local Mangaize officials during the focus groups but in the round UNHCR was left to engage with the refugees directly without interference or close monitoring. During the visits there was some dialogue with refugees living with host families in Mangaize, who were of Arab ethnicity. The key protection trends evident in the focus groups remained the same as for those living with host families, aside from their living conditions since they are in mud structures. These better living conditions for this group of refugees reflected in their sense of well-being and general sense of health versus those living at the refugee site⁴. They also spoke affectionately of the Arab Mayor of Mangaize.

Civilian character of asylum

Consistent with what appears a calm situation, the presence of combatants or ex-combatants amongst the refugees was never mentioned and of what UNHCR observed, militarisation of the camp is not an issue. In all cases the discussions remained calm. UNHCR's regular presence and monitoring will validate this initial assessment or shed additional light on the issue.

Specific protection concerns

Those suffering the most due to their situation of displacement appear to be very young children and babies, and the elderly. Consistent with their reported sense of feeling secure, violence within the camp was not voiced as an issue and similarly no friction reported between different ethnic groups, despite the relative proximity. During the visits UNHCR did not come across obvious cases of minors separated from their families (the registration exercise currently taking place in Mangaize will provide accurate data). Some families appear to have split, with some family members having remained behind to take care of their assets or cattle.

Humanitarian assistance and priority needs

Thus far humanitarian assistance was repeatedly described as having come from two sources, the local government and UNICEF. For the former it has focussed on food items, oil, rice, maize, tea and sugar. The lead role played by the Arab Mayor of Mangaize was extremely evident, he was present during both visits and repeatedly cited as a figure of respect, both in the organising and providing of assistance for the refugees. The only other consistent message of what assistance has been given were NFI items by UNICEF. Refugees spoke of mats, plastic sheeting and clothes (pagnes for women) and there was evidence thereof. In one group MSF was mentioned, another Islamic Relief, but their assistance was not specified. The trend that emerged in terms of meeting their immediate needs centred on receiving more NFI items (e.g. kitchen sets), better shelter and more food and water. The refugees appear to have very limited shelter; at best single plastic sheeting held up with branches of wood and minimal household items. Many of the women interviewed stressed their priority were medicines for their children. Specific problems cited were eye

⁴ Discussions with ICRC prior to starting the assessment indicated that it was only Arabs that were being hosted in the town. This could not be verified although of the Arab refugees living with host families that were asked, they said other ethnic groups were also living in the town with Haoussas mentioned.

infections. In one extreme case, the mother of an extremely underweight baby of four months was taken to try and get immediate medical assistance. While some children who were at school in Mali pre their flight are now attending the Mangaize primary school (24 children between the ages of six and 12), others requested some form of schooling in the site or activities for young children. Requests came for primary and secondary education. Mangaize does contain a secondary school for ages 13 to 16 but a lack of space was stated as to why they could not host refugee children, plus their curriculum does not correspond with children educated in Mali. Others mentioned the need for livelihood activities. Although recipients of items for male headed households suggests it is the men who receive the items, it did not appear and it was not voiced that they are not shared amongst the various family members.

Intentions

The consistent message was that those located in Mangaize were content to remain at the site. No persons met offered an obvious desire to relocate further south of their current site, even if there were significantly more available to them versus their current minimal and physically exposed existence. The most positive answer given to relocation was that if they were instructed by the Mayor to move, they would. Material needs aside, based upon UNHCR's observations it is evident why the refugees would wish to remain in their current location, indeed their immediate protection needs appear to be being met. Also and as the refugees continually repeated, they do not wish to move further away from their homes in Mali nor, for those concerned, further away from the border area inside Niger (Tidinbawan) where they left their cattle.

Follow up and monitoring / immediate actions:

- CRIs distribution;
- Site residents' access to the health centre and monitoring of services by UNHCR and/or IP;
- Education (follow up with local authorities and UNICEF);
- Border monitoring / refugee movements (security permitting)

ERT/UNHCR Niamey
24.2.2012