

Rapid Protection Assessment, Karkatchia¹ (Department of Tera), Niger
(18 March 2012)

Background

This report is based on a one day visit to a refugee site in the Department of Tera, Karkatchia. Significantly, this site was reported to UNHCR through local authorities, last week. Karkatchia sits approximately 270 kilometres northwest of the capital Niamey and west of the Niger River, unlike all other sites visited that are located to the east of the river. According to the local authorities the site is 40 kilometres from the Mali border. In a similar fashion to the previous rapid protection assessments, a focus group discussion was held; in this instance with a group of men.² The mission also included UNHCR's public health expert, which included a visit to the local health post.

This report is also supplemented with information gained during a discussion with the *Préfet de Téra* and with whom UNHCR met two days before the rapid protection assessment.³ Karkatchia is twenty kilometres from Bankilaré and approximately 90 kilometres north of the town of Tera, however due to significant deterioration of the road after Tera, the last ninety kilometres is the longest part of the journey. During UNHCR's visit there were Nigerian National Guards, armed and there as part of security requirements. The refugees, local authorities and the *Préfet de Téra* all stated that the site had not experienced any previous visits from humanitarian actors, national or international.⁴

Profile of the Population

According to most recent government statistics there are 33 families (268 individuals) located at this site.⁵ The refugees explained that they are Malian and there are not Nigeriens amongst the caseload. According to the refugees, the population is solely Tuareg.⁶ They described themselves as *éleveurs*, a literal translation being 'breeders of cattle'. Compared to other refugee caseloads visited, they were less forthcoming and dialogue remained slow and reserved.

Reasons of flight

The refugees explained that they all fled the Malian town of Tiamey, approximately one month ago. Interestingly what they explained was that the place from which they fled was not because they personally experienced violence initiated by armed insurgents, rather because of the insecurity in the region and the stories of violence that they had heard. They described the movement as happening in two groups and since both groups arrived in Karkatchia, there have been no new arrivals. They said they were able to remain together and they had not heard of families being separated. Although since leaving they had no contact with their point of departure, they did not think everyone had left the area of Tiamey, particularly those who were described as leading a highly nomadic existence.

¹ Karkatchia sits under the administrative post of Bankilaré.

² The six hours travelling time in each direction made additional focus groups, for example a focus group with women and children, not possible.

³ The visit also included a meeting with the Head of the Village of Karkatchia.

⁴ Of note, when UNHCR arrived at the site, the President of local NGO ORDH arrived on the site and spoke briefly to some of the refugees and the local authorities.

⁵ Visually it did not appear that there was this number of refugees at the site. When asked, refugees explained the difference by the fact that some of the male refugees had travelled to the surrounding areas in search of food.

⁶ Specifically Bella Noir Tuareg

Access and safety in current place of asylum

Means of travel was by foot and with their donkeys. The journey was described as taking 15 days, travelling at night. Crossing the unmarked border was not described as a problem and the reason they headed to Karkatchia was because they have family in the area. Furthermore, some had visited and stayed in Karkatchia in previous years. Since their journey required crossing the Niger River they said that they had been forced to sell their donkeys, albeit this was qualified with the fact that they also needed the money in light of their displacement. Since their arrival, reception by the host community was described in favourable terms. In this location, refugees said that they felt secure and lack of a close by military presence for security was not deemed an issue. Equally, humanitarian access to the population was not cited as a problem albeit its remote location and small population was evident in the fact that according to the refugees and authorities, UNHCR was the first humanitarian agency to visit this caseload. Concerns were also raised in terms of access during the rainy season.

On the issue of the local village, what emerged was that when they had arrived they had spent approximately two weeks staying with host families, described as *éleveurs* and farmers. However, after two weeks the *Chef de Poste* of Bankilaré had instructed the refugees to live outside the village, in part so they could be easily identified, distinguishable in terms of humanitarian assistance. It was also suggested that the timing of the separation was due to a pre-existing food for work programme in the area being stopped, thus placing more strain on the local community. Following the site visit, UNHCR returned to Bankilaré where it was agreed with the *Chef de Poste* that if both host and refugee communities were content to live together, this should not be discouraged. Not least in terms of the highly exposed conditions that refugees were living in by not staying with host families. It was also agreed that UNHCR would follow-up this week to see if this message had been conveyed to host and refugee communities.

Civilian character of asylum

In line with what appeared a calm situation the presence of combatants or ex-combatants amongst the refugees was not stated to be present militarization of the camp was not an issue. When probed on this issue, some of the refugees appeared to laugh at the suggestion.

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 amongst the refugees was not voiced as an issue or indeed any friction. During the visit UNHCR did not come across obvious cases of minors separated from their families and the refugees, when questioned, indicated there were no such instances. Some single headed households were noted, male and female, but the reasons were not linked to their recent displacement.

Humanitarian assistance and priority needs

Priority needs in terms of humanitarian assistance remain similar as to what has been found in other refugee sites with both the local authorities and the refugees stressing that they are in need of food, water and shelter in what is a particularly isolated, barren and sandy location. Brief mention of livelihood assistance was stated but the repeated message was that their basic needs were what they required.⁷ With respect to education, they explained that none of the children were attending school but it was a need they would like met. To-date the only assistance they had received was private assistance from the host communities. Thus far they had not put in place any form of a refugee committee.

⁷ For more details on the health situation see *Health situation, Karkathia*, 19.3.'12.

Intentions

Similar to the closest refugee area of Ayorou, which is located east of the Niger River and of a similar latitude and through which they passed on their way to Karkatchia, the refugees did not indicate a willingness or interest to relocate.⁸

ERT/UNHCR Niamey
19.3.2012

⁸ See *Rapid Protection Assessment, Gaouel, Niger*, 2.3.'12