

Rapid Protection Assessment, Ayorou, Niger

(2 March 2012)

Background

This report is based upon the UNHCR protection team's visit to the fourth and the most westerly refugee sites north of Niamey. Adjacent to the town of Ayorou (233 kilometres northwest of the capital) are two areas where refugees have congregated, Mbeidu and Gaoudel. Based upon the available information, Malian refugees settled in Gaoudel only, whereas Nigerien "returnees" can be found in both sites. Principally for this reason UNHCR's visit focussed on Gaoudel. Similar to other refugee sites visited, the protection team of national and international staff divided into different teams to hold 'focus group' discussions. One met refugee men and the other women and children¹.

The mission was accompanied by a fact finding team from UNICEF and they joined UNHCR for initial meetings with the Governor of the Region, located in Tillabery (south of Ayorou), at the Prefecture of Ayorou and with the Chef de Poste of the village of Gaoudel. Other humanitarian actors present at the Gaoudel refugee site were Plan Niger, undertaking a food distribution, plus a national staff member of Oxfam GB who was sensitizing refugees on the use of water purifying tablets.

Ayorou appears the most accessible of all the refugee sites, there is a good tarmac road for the entire route from Niamey, the road running parallel to the Niger River. The village of Gaoudel is half a kilometre from this key artery.

Profile of the Population

According to Government of Niger data from 19th February, Gaoudel has a refugee population of 2,079 individuals (300 families), 1,128 women and 951 men. The total refugee population of Gaoudel and Mbeidu was reported as 2,472 and indicative of the point that over 80 per cent of the people who have crossed the border are Malian and located at Gaoudel. As in other refugee sites, a basic registration has been done by the Government. UNHCR's level one registration is due to begin this weekend whereupon more detailed disaggregated data will be available. The Gaoudel refugee population were all said to be 'Bella Noir' Tuaregs, some called Sourghou (nobles) and others Garassa (artisans).

Reasons of flight

The refugees originate from the Malian commune of Watagona and specifically the eight villages of Sougan, Chiridan, Badaratan, Tougarantan, Tamokaza, Dabaga, Kissiridan, Karu². The refugees reported the total distance from Watagona to Gaoudel in Niger being 45 kilometres. Ayorou is only 24 kilometres from the Niger-Mali border and the actual Gaoudel site at 12 km from the border.

Explanation for the flight focussed on two key points, their villages being attacked in February by what were described as "armed rebels" coupled with a total absence of security provided by the Government of Mali. The latter was described as having disappeared around the time of the aggression. In the male group they spoke of people being "beaten" and their livestock being killed. Fleeing from their homes was not described as happening in a single collective movement, while some described leaving at midnight on the day of the attacks others said they stayed behind for a few days. However, with the feeling of insecurity not abating these families also opted to leave their homes and belongings. When asked, they said that they did

¹ At one point during the male focus group discussion there was some intervention and observation by one of the village authorities but once the focus of the conversation resumed with the refugees he opted to leave the discussion for the remainder of the focus group.

² The male group included representatives from these eight villages plus the head of the self-formed refugee committee. With respect to representation it was a positive discussion with no obvious dominance by a single individual, despite the fact that it included the head of the refugee committee. The women and children group was comprised of eight women.

not know of some family members being left behind but described families as remaining together for the duration of the flight – except for one woman whose husband went reportedly missing since the flight. When asked if there were new arrivals to the camps they said yes, qualified by the fact that they said four families had arrived the night before. The refugees were clear that since their flight they have had no contact with their place of origin. One refugee tried to return to retrieve his cattle but was beaten by what were described as “bandits” and advised not to return³.

One elderly woman stated she crossed over to Niger because she heard that food was being distributed there. Her daughter and grand-children had remained in Mali and she was hoping to return to Mali and convince them to join her in Niger, once she had shown them the food she had received in Gaouadel.

Access and safety in current place of asylum

Travel to Gaouadel was said to have been on foot or with animals, specifically donkeys and goats. Some described the journey taking between two and three days while others could not recall how long it took. Unlike in some of the other sites these refugees said they did not use vehicles. Crossing the unmarked border was not viewed as a problem and they explained how the “head of the village” of Gaouadel was originally from Mali and he was there to “greet them on the other side”⁴. This was the principal reason why they said they had opted to stay in Gaouadel and they described their treatment since their arrival favourably.

Despite it being less than 24 kilometres from the border the refugees said they felt safe and the Nigerien military presence in Ayorou was viewed as positive. While they indicated that they had not visited these areas in Niger previously, the fact that refugee and host population both speak the dialects of Tamasheq and Sonrai was also noted as a positive. In terms of where the refugee families are physically staying, they are distinctly spread out from the central point of the village such that a clearly discernable refugee site is less evident as compared to some of the other refugee sites visited thus far. As stated above, physical accessibility to Gaouadel is comparatively easy. The significant presence of other humanitarian actors, both on the day of UNHCR’s protection assessment and the refugees’ mention of previous visits by other agencies is indicative of this point.

Civilian character of asylum

Inline with what currently appears a calm situation, the presence of combatants or ex-combatants amongst the refugees was not stated to be present – despite many Bella walking in the site wearing a long knife on the side as a traditional outfit...

Specific protection concerns

While noting the relative proximity to the border, the actual concerns voiced by the refugees centred on the arduous conditions for the elderly, women and children. Examples given included the lack of play areas for children and women having to travel eight kilometres by foot to collect water from the Niger River.

While family separation as a result of the flight was not highlighted as an issue, four female headed families were mentioned; reasons were due to divorce or the husband leaving or having passed; all events that had happened prior to the violence and not related.

Other specific cases of vulnerability included people who were handicapped, had hearing or verbal impediments or mental issues. Lack of livelihoods was mentioned with some men stating that this was affecting their morale. Farming, shepherding and selling wood were stated as some of the ways they generated income prior to their flight.

Humanitarian assistance and priority needs

³ Other than in this instance, specific mention of bandits was not mentioned by the refugees. For more details on what bandits may constitute see *Rapid Protection Assessment, Miel, Niger*, 29.2.2012, *Rapid Protection Assessment, Chinegodar, Niger*, 27.2.2012 & *Rapid Protection Assessment, Mangaize, Niger*, 24.2.2012.

⁴ It was not made clear if by this they were referring to the Chef de Poste or another person associated with the village of Gaouadel.

Assistance to-date has centred on food and water and some basic non food items. The former has included rice, beans and oil, the latter blankets, buckets, mosquito nets, jerry cans mats and plastic sheeting⁵. While no clear concerns were voiced regarding distribution, concern was raised due to the fact that number of individuals in a family was not taken into account in terms of how much assistance a particular family received. For example, a family of seven could receive the same amount as a family of three. Also, men explained that only women could be deemed as the head of the family and the key recipient if there was no male head of the family. In terms of stating their particular needs, the refugees stressed water, tea, more non food items (buckets, cups, mats, blankets, tea pots, shoes, clothes) and shelter materials.

Water was mentioned by all as a serious issue – similar to Miel, the water fetched by refugees is opaque and muddy. The Governor raised his concern about a potential cholera outbreak if the current situation is not addressed.

On the issue of education needs, data given by the Chef de Poste who said there were 73 Malian refugee students of which 69 were at the primary level (ages six to 12) and four at the secondary level (13 to 16). Access to the local Nigerien schools has been possible albeit recent strikes by a teacher's union have impacted classes. Food assistance by the WFP for school children was also mentioned⁶.

Intentions

Despite the hardship of their location, the consistent message was that those located in Gaoudel were content to remain at the site. In particular, a few women expressed relief since in Gaoudel they felt safe from the fairly frequent unstable situation in their area of origin that stems from competition for resources, particularly land issues between shepherds and farmers. Relative proximity to their place of origin plus how they have been received and the fact that they feel secure were the key reasons given. No persons expressed a wish to relocate further south of their current site, even if there were significantly more available to them. Instead the answers focussed on when they would return, which would be dictated by the head of their respective village when he deemed it safe.

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⁵ UNHCR supplied non food items to Ayorou on 22nd and 26th February. Plan Niger supplied the food items between the 13th and 15th February. Oxfam GB has supplied some water. Some data on the quantity of food distributed by Plan Niger was given by the Chef de Poste: three tonnes of rice, two tonnes of beans and 720lt of oil.

⁶ According to the Chef de Poste, 29 sacs of rice have been given to the school for a total of 207 pupils, which includes the 73 Malian refugee children.