

Rapid Protection Assessment, Miel (Department of Abala), Niger  
(29 February 2012)

## **Background**

This report is based on a one day visit to one of the three key refugee sites in the Department of Abala, Miel. There are two other significant refugee sites in this department but they were not visited due to lack of time, roads in this area deteriorate significantly the further one travels from the capital Niamey. Miel sits approximately 320 kilometres north east of the capital Niamey. Significantly, the site is only 15 kilometres south east of the largest current refugee site Chinegodar.<sup>1</sup> In a similar fashion to the previous two protection assessments, a series of focus group discussions were held; in this instance with a group of men and groups of women and children of various ethnic origins. This report is also supplemented with information gained during a discussion with the Vice Maire of Abala and with whom UNHCR met before reaching the site of Miel. Miel is approximately 60 kilometres north of the town of Abala. During UNHCR's visit there were Nigerian National Guards, armed and there as part of security requirements. However, they remained largely outside the site and relatively discreet.

## **Profile of the Population**

According to most recent government statistics there were as of 23<sup>rd</sup> February 411 families (2879 individuals) located at this site. The refugees explained that while many are Malian, some of the caseload includes Nigeriens that have been living in Mali for decades. Level one registration at this site is due to begin 5<sup>th</sup> March. Until such point more detailed disaggregated data is not available. According to the refugees, the population includes Tuaregs, Haoussas, Arabs and Peulhs. Of those interviewed, Tuaregs and Haoussas were the significant majority.

## **Reasons of flight**

The overwhelming trend for those interviewed was that they fled at night from in and around (east and west) of the Malian town of Anderamboukane. A minority explained that they came from Menaka. Anderamboukane is approximately 40 kilometres from Miel and Menaka some 90 kilometres. Reasons given for the flight across the four groups were consistent, violence initiated by armed insurgents, described as "light skinned" and "rebels". Different groups of refugees recounted hearing shooting in Anderamboukane. Some described leaving immediately while others said they waited in their home for two days and when the shooting subsided they left. The other threat after that came after the 'rebels' was described as coming from "bandits". The refugees said they "attacked houses", took their belongings and in some cases killed their cattle. The families interviewed said they were able to remain together but they had heard of some families being separated at some stage as a result of the flight yet had subsequently been reunited. One person said her neighbour from Anderamboukane appeared to get separated from her children and she had not heard anything more as to what had happened to this family. Preparation time to flee was very limited with cattle and belongings left behind and arriving with just the clothes in which they left. New arrivals at Miel continue, albeit in modest numbers and frequency. For example, a group of 18 families reached Miel 26<sup>th</sup> February. Like in other refugee sites visited by the protection team, any contact with their place of origin in Mali is dependent upon people going back; telephone communication to their place of origin in Mali has been cut.

## **Access and safety in current place of asylum**

Means of travel by the refugees to their current site included people coming by foot and animal (donkey), while others paid for vehicles transport. Travelling by foot from Menaka took

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<sup>1</sup> See *Rapid Protection Assessment, Chinegodar, Niger*, 27.2.2012.

a week, while from Anderamboukane it was less, four days. The refugees described travelling at night. Similar with what was described at other refugee sites, the cost of a journey that would usually be one thousand five hundred FCFA per person was increased to five thousand.<sup>2</sup> Significantly for this refugee site a greater proportion seemed to have travelled by foot, consistent with Miel's comparatively isolated location and access roads being particularly poor. Crossing the unmarked border was generally not described as a problem, although the Vice-Maire reported that a group of women that recently arrived in Abala claimed they had been attacked by bandits<sup>3</sup>.

Interestingly many of those interviewed said their original intention was to head to the town of Abala but when they arrived at Miel the Head of the village encouraged them to remain.<sup>4</sup> Others spoke of the refugee site at Chinegodar being full, hence they continued further south. Since their arrival, reception by the host community was described in favourable terms. In this location, refugees said that they feel secure and lack of a 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 time to reach the caseload was evident in the fact that they stressed that they welcomed the presence of UNHCR. When asked, the only other presence they could recall was that of the ICRC. For this site no refugees were said to be living with host families in the adjacent small village of Miel.

### **Civilian character of asylum**

Inline with what appears a calm situation, the presence of combatants or ex-combatants amongst the refugees was not stated to be present and of what UNHCR observed militarisation of the camp was not an issue. 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. The lack of clean/potable water and proper health care is a considerable aggravating factor. It was reported that one baby had been born the night before. 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 their relative proximity. During the visits UNHCR did not come across obvious cases of minors separated from their families and refugees questioned indicated there was no such instance.

### **Humanitarian assistance and priority needs**

Priority needs in terms of humanitarian assistance remain similar as to what has been found in other refugee sites. Some basic food assistance has been provided by the local government and the ICRC, and UNICEF (through INGO partner ACTED) supplied plastic sheeting, jerry cans and blankets. However, refugees continued to stress that they are in dire need of more food and clean water in what is a particularly isolated, barren and sandy location. The village contains one well, said to be insufficient<sup>5</sup>. Some of the women talked of having to walk four to five kilometres to gain access to another well while it was observed that the water that they collect in the jerry cans is opaque and muddy. On wider health support, the "health post" is staffed by a nurse but refugees indicated no proper care was available. A form of refugee committee was explained as having been formed meanwhile ensuring one was registered on the locally compiled list. One woman explained that since being on the list she had received NFIs but prior to this she had not been given food assistance.

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<sup>2</sup> A family of ten spoke of spending fifty thousand FCFA.

<sup>3</sup> The Vice-Maire informed that the group of refugees in Abala town was mostly comprised of women and children; their husbands had either gone to Menaka or their whereabouts are unknown. A mission is being scheduled to Abala and interviews will be conducted with this specific group.

<sup>4</sup> Though not a substantiated point, initial reading of the situation might suggest senior members of the village encouraged the refugees to remain with a view to benefit from the assistance that would emerge.

<sup>5</sup> The Vice-Maire of Abala said he had provided some water trucking to Miel.

The issue of limited resources was evident in the fact that the aforementioned family that had arrived the previous week did not settle in Miel owing to the pressure on scarce resources, in particular water<sup>6</sup>. Other pressing requests included clothes, cooking utensils and mats. Beyond immediate needs, a lack of any education facilities was also raised with some explaining that they had children at the refugee site of Chinegodar where they were staying with other family members in an effort to get access to such facilities. The school in Abala does not appear to be an option for refugees residing in Miel, due to the distance (60 km) between the two locations. In addition, the Vice-Maire stressed that both the primary and the secondary schools lack equipment and materials, and are understaffed (a number of posts have remained vacant). In terms of livelihood support from the information gathered, the refugee profile is mostly comprised of craftsmen, farmers and shepherds, the latter the vast majority. Craftsmen requested support to undertake their usual livelihood activities, which they could sell in the local market.

### **Intentions**

Unlike the other two sites where rapid protection assessments have been conducted, those located at Miel did not appear to have strong views in terms of resisting relocation.<sup>7</sup> Some did say they would not wish to move if adequate assistance was provided at Miel but at the same time did not express strong objection to relocation to Abala either. Understandably some expressed a wish to see the site before they moved.

The Abala Vice-Maire noted the arrival of refugees from Chinegodar to Abala but movements the other way around have not occurred. (In terms of relocation, this might indicate that relocation of refugees from Chinegodar to Abala would not be strongly opposed.)

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<sup>6</sup> This family are currently staying some five kilometres away at a place called Siminti, close to a water pond. They added that those not residing at the Miel site are not registered.

<sup>7</sup> See *Rapid Protection Assessment, Chinegodar, Niger, 27.2.2012* & *Rapid Protection Assessment, Mangaize, Niger, 24.2.2012*.