

Voluntary repatriation of Malian refugees in Niamey

In 2014, UNHCR Niger launched the second operation to facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Malian refugees. The process began with urban refugees in Niamey and will concern any areas where refugees seek UNHCR assistance to return.

Sensitize and inform

"Good morning dear moms, dads, sisters and brothers. Welcome you all." This is how Maurice, voluntary repatriation coordinator in Niger, affectionately begins all meetings with refugees before leaving the floor to an elder or an imam for the Fatiha¹. But today is a special day. The meeting aims to inform urban refugees in Niamey on voluntary repatriation.

For some time, requests for repatriation are made by refugees. For UNHCR as well as the Niger government, the situation in northern Mali does not allow for a promotion of return. But the free and informed decision of the refugees must prevail. The responsibility of UNHCR is to sensitize and inform. Maurice insists again and again on the fact that the choice to return is unique to each person, each adult member of the household, and once

they cross the border, they will become again Malian citizens under the protection of their country.

As individual assistance comes to an end, many of them are looking forward to community interventions in their areas of origin they might be beneficiaries.



In the middle, Maurice (back), with white turban Kili Wala (right)
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In the meeting room of the *One-Stop-Shop*, reception center of all urban refugees of Niamey, the attention is deep, the audience is silent. Each statement by Maurice and translated by Kili Wala (refugee and volunteer at the *One-Stop-Shop*) is punctuated by the approval through the typical guttural sound of people living on both sides of the border between Niger and Mali. When comes time for questions, there is a hustle in the room. We must continue to explain and explain again, and this until everyone has both feet on the bus that will take them home.

101 families, 482 persons

The first day of the registration of the departing candidates, the courtyard of the *One-Stop-Shop* is full. Many women and many children. The organization set up by UNHCR is well established, the day goes smoothly despite the crowd and heat. For each family, information on the destination is collected and fingerprints captured. We then begin to prepare the *Voluntary Repatriation Forms*, travel documents for refugees to cross the border without incident, and *Cash Grant forms*. For each refugee, adult as well as child, UNHCR provides assistance up to 35,000 FCFA (70 USD) as transportation fees to Mali. On the second day, *One-Stop-Shop* courtyard is much less crowded. The operation will be shorter than expected. 105 families have decided to return, i.e., 482 persons out of the 7096 Malian refugees in Niamey

The following week, all families willing to return come for the last time at the *One-stop-Shop* venue. The time has come to give back the attestations of refugees. Families leave

with their *Voluntary Repatriation Forms* and transportation fees. The money is given to women. This is a symbolic choice and a guarantee of better management in the hope that the banknotes do not change hands against their will as soon as they get out of the *One-Stop-Shop*.

Last smiles and last "good lucks" to the candidates for departure.



Sahadatou, registration assistant UNHCR, handing in the *Voluntary Repatriation Form* to a family. ©UNHCR/B.Moreno

¹ The Fatiha is the opening Surat of the Quran that is recited at the opening of a ceremony

What brings refugees to make the choice to leave or stay? It would be risky to propose preconceived answers. There are as many answers as life stories.

About those who return

Sidi Ahmed is the Imam of the Grand Friday Mosque of the fourth district of Gao. He is Arab. It's been almost two years to the day he arrived in Niamey. Here, Sidi Ahmed is not the worst off. Members of the Arab or religious community care for his needs. He rejected all the implicit and explicit calls from the Islamists. He was forced to flee. Today, the followers of the mosque as well as the Malian authorities at all levels are asking him to return. Sidi Ahmed explains that *"the return of the Imam is a symbol of trust. If the imam does not return, few people will want to do so, let alone those who are like me in the Arab community. It is my responsibility to return."*



Sidi Ahmed. ©UNHCR/B.Moreno



Oumou and her children. ©UNHCR/B.Moreno

Oumou has 4 children. The last two are twins, Aoua and Adama. The father has given no sign of life when Oumou became pregnant. In Mali, Niger, as in many countries, the arrival of twins is always a special event. They are seen as the result of a blessing. The birth of her twins is one of the triggers that lead Oumou want to return: *"My twin girls were born in Niamey, my family has never seen them. They have not been well received. I want to go because I know that there they will be better welcomed. I am proud to go and introduce them to all my kins."*

For Ranatou, isolation and loneliness have recently led her to choose to leave. Her mother has decided to return. Ranatou does not want to be alone with her 2 children. Both are suffering from a rare genetic disorder that makes them highly sensitive to UV. The disease is at an advanced stage and the children have a tiny chance to reach adult age. UNHCR through its partner CADEV supports all health care costs of the children. Until the last day before departure, visits to Ranatou and children are carried out by the protection team

and UNHCR's doctor to provide comfort, guidance, and provide specific support for the return.

About those who stay

Mariama is divorced. She lives alone with her daughter in Niamey. She wants to return merely because she wants to be home. But she does not feel ready. She is sick. Her medical expenses are also covered by UNHCR. In her hometown of Ansongo, south of Gao, her family will not be able to help her financiall: *"I expect to get better. When I'm healed, we can go. I must receive treatment here as there, at home, it will not be possible and I do not want to be a burden to my family."*

If one refugee was the last to leave, it would be Kili Wala, our volunteer: *"the war is over, I want to go. But at the same time I have to finish what I've started here, i.e., I have to stay with my brothers and sisters to support them physically and morally. I will be the last if necessary."* Kili Wala hopes to receive a turban with UNHCR logo, and he mainly hopes to continue working as a paid employee at UNHCR's office of Gao. So, his decision not to quit is twofold: stay and help those who are still in the camp, and remain with UNHCR to prepare his own return.



Kili Wala. ©UNHCR/B.Moreno