

UNHCR Regional Strategy for the Forced Displacement of Malians: Refugees and Internally displaced Persons (2016-2017)

As of 7 December 2015



Malian refugee child in Mberra Camp, Mauritania UNHCR/H. Pes

Background

At a time when UNHCR is accountable for the protection of around 60 million persons, the highest number in its history, the presence of more than 200,000 refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) from northern Mali seems of relatively minor significance. However, regardless of the overall size of this population, there is consensus that no individual should be left behind, and that a coherent and realistic strategy should be developed to reach solutions for displaced Malians.



Malian refugees in front of their shelter in Mentao Camp, Burkina Faso UNHCR/P.Absalon

In early 2012, fighting broke out in northern Mali. With no more than two million inhabitants, northern Mali is a vast area but only sparsely populated. What started as a secessionist insurrection, later became a terrorism- war, followed by international community military intervention that helped Mali to keep its territorial integrity, the 2013 elections – a painfully slow re-establishment of security, state authority and social services in the affected areas.

Four years on, statistics show that more than 137,000 Malian refugees are still living in neighbouring Mauritania, Burkina Faso, and Niger, while more than 60,000 Malians remain internally displaced (<http://data.unhcr.org/SahelSituation/regional.php>).

Since the inception of the crisis, more than 16,000 refugees returned to Mali (source: UNHCR) while more than 420,000 IDPs returned (source: Malian Government). However, while the occurrence of armed conflicts has decreased in Mali during the second half of 2015, the security situation remains volatile due to sporadic clashes and terrorist activities resulting in new displacements inside Mali and towards neighbouring countries.

As such, **UNHCR believes that the current stalemated political and security situation prevailing in the country of asylum would tend to convert Malian refugees into rather a “protracted situation” in the countries of asylum**, thus obliging UNHCR and the other partners to:

- Maintain a limited emergency capacity to accommodate new waves of refugees and/or IDPs;
- Cater for what appears to be a stable refugee population while a closer analysis (for example of the refugee situation in Niger) shows that 20% of the caseload has arrived after the 2013 presidential elections; In this respect, it is imperative to maintain the positive protection environment in the countries of asylum by respecting the principle of *non-refoulement*, maintaining international border open, ensuring freedom of movement for refugees..etc.
- Face a steadily eroding funding base for the three countries of asylum and make up for partners that withdraw because of lack of funding or serious challenges, such as WFP which can no longer guarantee the provision of sufficient food in Burkina Faso and Mauritania, or UNICEF which withdrew from the camps in Niger;
- Accommodate the costs of a small-scale return programme and reintegration to Mali despite the fact that the overall conditions for the promotion of a voluntary repatriation programme are not yet there.

With the stabilisation of the Mali emergency and the arising of new emergencies inside and outside West Africa, UNHCR de-activated the “Mali Emergency” in summer 2015. Thus, the situation calls for a re-examination of UNHCR’s regional strategy and its activities in the concerned countries.

Vision and Strategy

In May 2015 and November 2015, the UNHCR Representatives in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger met and agreed on the following outline of a regional strategy to deal with the forced displacement of both refugees and IDPs for the period of the next two years (2016-2017).

The reality of long-term displacement requires to re-assess the quality of asylum and to plan for a responsible disengagement. While durable solutions remain the aim, and here in particular the voluntary return of all refugees and IDPs, constantly assessing established benchmarks for the progressive attainment of – even intermediate - solutions.

Building on initiatives undertaken thus far, the meeting resulted in recommending a renewed vision, updated strategies, and coherent messages regarding UNHCR’s approach to the Malian refugee situation.



Malian refugee sits on a makeshift bed at Abala refugee camp in Niger. UNHCR/H.Dicko

Scenario

Between 2016 and 2017, It is assumed for the purposes of this regional strategy that the situation in northern Mali will improve gradually but slowly and that it will take at least two more years before the political settlement (Algiers process) to be implemented, full state authority to be re-established, security and disarmament of armed groups to be achieved, and basic social services to be made available all over the territory. During this period, improvements won't be necessarily linear but setbacks that trigger new displacements should be expected. The said evolution will also be geographically uneven whereby in some areas the situation might improve while in others it may not.

Vision

The vision for UNHCR’s work in the region, as articulated by this document, can be summarized below as follows:

While working towards a durable solution for the internally displaced and refugees of the conflict in northern Mali, UNHCR will endeavour to support

- Greater State take-up of international protection and solutions responsibilities
- Greater enjoyment of rights by persons of concern

- Greater inclusion of persons of concern in national and sub-national service provision systems (state and civil society)
- Increased empowerment of persons of concern in support of their independence, self-governance, and inclusion in the local economy.

Detailed Strategy

UNHCR in the countries that make up the “Mali Situation” will implement strategic multi-year planning in relation to protection and solutions. UNHCR will make it a priority to be present and included in all existing national and international planning processes (regional, national, local). Partnerships with stakeholders (Governments, donors, UN agencies, development agencies, non-governmental organisations and civil society, private sector actors, research institutions) will be pursued on this basis.

1) Regionally-Coordinated Approach

- Maintain and systemize the coordination of the Mali Situation through a coordination by one of the Representatives of the four countries affected by the situation, on a rotating basis, so as to support the respective offices in the provision of a collective response to the needs of the affected populations. A Secretariat located in Mali UNHCR Office will support the work of the coordination.
- Thematic Working Groups (Protection, External Relations, Programme etc.) meet on a regular basis to harmonize approaches.
- Ensure flexibility in the reallocation of resources (human, financial, etc.) across borders in case unforeseen needs arise.
- Efficient cross-border coordination mechanisms with:
 - Staffs travelling in Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger to develop and monitor harmonized interventions;
 - Increased consultations among officers (videoconferences and meetings in accessible locations);
 - Decentralization of resources and decision-making for the benefit of field offices.
- Coordinate regular sharing of information collected by the registration and protection monitoring system put in place by the country of origin and countries of asylum in order to obtain harmonized planning figures.
- Exchange inter-office multi-sectoral (socio-economic, political and security, administration and justice, and operational) information on areas of conflict, as well as return to help better inform refugees. In particular, share reintegration projects underway in Mali with countries of asylum.

2) Maintain Open Borders and a Facilitated Approach to Voluntary Repatriation

- Asylum countries should continue to admit *prima facie* refugees from Mali. Improved regional exchange of biometric registration data should prevent fraud. Facilitated repatriation for candidates who wish to repatriate should continue. Hence there should be consistent messaging on asylum and the facilitation of voluntary repatriation of Malian refugees, while taking into account the different political and operational realities of each country.



Delivery of a birth certificate to an IDP in Mali UNHCR/K.Sipp

- Retain flexibility when carrying out repatriation operations in order to adapt to the context of each country, but also coherence, in accordance with the ongoing implementation of UNHCR's approved objectives by all offices of the Mali Situation.
- With regards to facilitated voluntary repatriation, manage human and financial resources in a flexible manner, taking into consideration funds availability in each operation of the Mali situation in order to respond to urgent needs.

3) Foster Resilience and Socio-Economic Self-Reliance to the Extent Possible

- Adopt a mid-term perspective that aims at tangibly empowering beneficiaries on socio-economic and legal aspects, pending the implementation of sustainable solutions.
- Embark systematically on activities fostering resilience and socio-economic self-reliance for a predominantly nomad population of animal owners. Limit humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable groups within the refugee community.
- Use the availability of development funds in Mali to fund self-reliance interventions in hosting countries.
- Move towards development-targeted methods (management, operation, funding) and solutions so as to fill resource-related gaps. Transform camps into viable communities.
- While recognising that standards of care may drop when integrating service delivery into national systems, this approach will provide for a more sustainable model of engagement (and potentially provide a development dividend), including through the systematic capacity building in support of national services and in turn building protection space.

4) Ensure coherence of programmes between countries of asylum and country of origin

- Ensure viability of self-reliance efforts conducted in countries of asylum based on opportunities (education, socio-economic opportunities etc.) in areas of return.
- Ensure continuity of resilience efforts in areas of returns taking into consideration programmes conducted in asylum countries.
- Details on the harmonized strategy of voluntary returns to Mali can be found in the Mali Situation Reintegration and Voluntary Return Strategy.

5) Partnerships

- Strengthen strategic partnerships with humanitarian and development stakeholders and share strategic MoUs within all operations of the Mali Situation. Integrate IDPs and refugee programmes into a local development strategy and embark on activities that are beneficial to both, displaced and hosting communities.
- Advocate with partners for the integration of protection issues in humanitarian and development programmes. Raise awareness on the importance of documentation (i.e. VRF, etc.) as far as their return and reintegration but also birth certificates and ID cards as far as their stay in the CoA is concerned. Strengthen the response to practices that violate human rights, and in particular traditional practices that involve the most vulnerable and groups at risk and carry out advocacy in country of origin for sustainable results.
- Rely on the cross-border capacity of some partners working in both countries of asylum and the country of origin to conduct cross-border activities and facilitate reintegration and voluntary repatriation.

6) Innovative Ways Forward

- Carry on research and development of innovating interim solutions, based on a community approach that involves local populations and ensures peaceful coexistence between communities.
- Develop a Voluntary-Repatriation approach that “accompanies” refugees from the CoA to their areas of origin, security permitting. Start assistance and protection planning in a participative manner in the asylum areas and continue working with the same community in the areas of return.

7) Communication and Messaging

- Develop consistent joint messaging to encourage governments to fulfil their obligations as duty bearers towards refugees and other forcibly displaced persons.
- Remind humanitarian donors of the continuing need to protect and assist the most vulnerable segments of the forcibly displaced population, both IDPs inside of Mali and refugees living in the three main countries of asylum. Development actors understand that investments into livelihoods and integration into local economies have positive effects on the society as a whole.
- Use of new media and enhance the quality and quantity of visual products to communicate on the Mali Situation.

Conclusion

The vision, strategy, and related activities outlined in this document have been adopted by Mr. Mohamed Alwash, Representative of UNHCR in Mauritania, Mr. Ousseni Compaore, Representative of UNHCR in Mali, Mrs. Gogo Hukportie, Representative of UNHCR in Burkina Faso and Mr. Karl Steinacker, Representative of UNHCR in Niger on 7 December. As such, it represents UNHCR's strategy for which it wants to be held accountable.

UNHCR, 7 December 2015