



Mali: An ongoing crisis

July 2013

Introduction

The Sahel region of Africa, which stretches from Senegal to Eritrea via a large part of Mali, had not yet recovered from the drought and food insecurity of 2010ⁱ, when it was hit by another food crisis in 2012. A combination of factors, including failed rains and rising food prices, placed 18.7 million people at risk of hunger and malnutrition across the region.ⁱⁱ Of these, 4.6 million were Malian; nearly one third of the entire country was at risk of malnutrition.ⁱⁱⁱ

Although rain fell in abundance later in 2012, a seed shortage prevented many farmers from cultivating vast areas of their land^{iv}. With the added threat of desert locust infestation, the livelihoods of 50 million people across the Sahel were put in danger.^v

While Malians were initially at risk because of natural dangers such as droughts and floods - it was human activity that exacerbated an already difficult situation.

Starting with an attack on January 16, 2012,^{vi} various insurgent groups began waging war against the Malian government, seeking to gain control of the northern region. The violence and instability contributed to a coup d'état on March 21, 2012, ousting President Amadou Toumani Touré,^{vii} and on April 6, the main party driving the conflict announced an end to the offensive and declared independence of northern Mali.^{viii}

The principle grievances of the rebels were political instability, economic pitfalls and the struggle for food and water. It is important to note that before the conflict 80 per cent of northern Mali was dependent upon food coming in from the south, while the country as a whole was suffering the effects of poor governance and inequality.

Disagreements between competing parties over their vision for Mali's future led to continued disputes despite the signing of various treaties.^{ix} This continued until finally, on January 11, 2013, the French military intervened,^x followed by Nigerien and Chadian forces.^{xi} United Nations (UN) forces took over peacekeeping operations on 01 July.

The humanitarian consequences of the military conflict and intervention have exacerbated the effect of Mali's drought and food crisis. The conflict is likely to affect Mali's long-term status in terms of wealth and development: It currently ranks at 182 out of 186 on the

UN Human Development Index just five places from the bottom,^{xii} with over half the population living below the poverty line and an average life expectancy of just 59 years.^{xiii} Human rights abuses have also been reported,^{xiv} and the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has stated concern for the need to increase civilian protection, particularly for children.^{xv}

Conflict in the north of the country has forced nearly half a million people to flee their homes. More than 300,000 are internally displaced and over 174,000 have sought refuge in neighbouring countries.^{xvi} Islamic Relief Mali field staff report that a large percentage of displaced people are women and children. Any quick influx of people to a region places huge demand on food, water, shelter and healthcare. Communities hosting displaced Malians - both inside and outside of Mali - already struggle to provide for local residents due to high levels of poverty caused largely by the impact of drought, floods and rising market prices.^{xvii}

Islamic Relief's office in Bamako reports that since the conflict led to business^{xviii} traffic on the Mopti-Douentza-Gao road to be suspended in January 2013, humanitarian access to the north has been very difficult. Weekly markets were also suspended, preventing Malians who remained in the north from purchasing food or medicine. An estimated 1.4 million people require urgent food assistance, with more than 2 million more in danger of becoming reliant on food aid.^{xix}

Violence has also disrupted an already weak system of education and social services; 58 per cent of schools have been forced to shut, and the healthcare system is in a desperate condition.^{xx} Many health workers fled the northern region, medical facilities have been destroyed and looted, and a lack of funds may soon reduce the already scarce government resources allocated to healthcare.^{xxi} This could have devastating consequences, particularly in light of the cholera outbreak in May 2013.^{xxii} The reoccurrence of this deadly waterborne disease indicates the extreme deterioration of water, sanitation and hygiene provisions.

Thus far, media attention has focused largely on the political debates in the country, ignoring the large-scale suffering and the urgent humanitarian response desperately needed – an area on which Islamic Relief urges much greater focus. The political narrative may account for the underwhelming humanitarian response from state donors to date, with only 28 per cent of funding requirements received by the UN as of May 22, 2013^{xxiii}. It is hoped donor conferences appealing for funds will encourage further commitments. Various humanitarian agencies have provided much-needed assistance in food, shelter, water, sanitation, healthcare and education, including the UN Refugee Agency, World Food Programme, World Health Organisation, International Red Cross and a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Alongside its existing development projects in Mali, Islamic Relief launched an emergency response programme which included the provision of 3,000 tonnes of food aid to vulnerable households, and agricultural support (seeds, fertiliser and other equipment) to more than 2,000 farmers. As well as general relief aid, we also plan to begin disaster risk reduction work which will build the capacity of returnees to the region, enabling them to strengthen their resilience against the fluctuations of climate, drought and market prices.

As French troops prepare to withdraw and hand over responsibility to the Malian security services, it is clear that as the military conflict subsides, a humanitarian catastrophe could easily unfold in the absence of appropriate mitigation measures.

Islamic Relief has an office and staff in Mali and their assessments have identified four key humanitarian areas affected by the ongoing violence: Water provision, sanitation, shelter and food security. There is also a crisis of displaced people. In order to prevent complete deterioration, Islamic Relief calls on the international community to invest in long-term development projects alongside emergency aid to ease the suffering of the Malian people. In addition, this will develop their capacity to resist the impact of future threats.



Recommendations

To the Malian government

- Work to ensure an end to the armed conflict, bringing about peace and security in the region and without any extra-judicial persecution of non-combatants.
- Give all displaced people fleeing the violence the right to return post-conflict, in order to avoid becoming long-term refugees in neighbouring countries.
- Redouble efforts to revive political reforms introduced over 15 years ago following the last civil war and empower systems of governance that will build a sense of inclusivity, national solidarity and social justice.
- Encourage structural improvements in governance by promoting more initiatives around democratic representation and economic growth while tackling corruption, extremism and armed conflict.

To aid agencies

- Deliver impartial aid to all communities in the north, regardless of political viewpoints and based on comprehensive needs assessments.
- Provide aid in a conflict-sensitive manner, ensuring it does no harm.
- Conflict transformation programmes must be a vital cross-cutting element of future humanitarian and development programming. We must increase efforts to mobilise good representation and participation of local groups and political structures such as commune councils in the management of aid.
- Prioritise the most pressing local needs – namely food, security and water provision, including initiatives to prevent desertification. Humanitarian interventions in the north should focus on peace building to support reconciliation and prevent future conflict.

To the United Nations

- United Nations peacekeepers should not assume control in its peacekeeping mission but rather serve as a complement to a Malian led mission.
- Should prioritise and emphasise structural and governance reforms as these are key to the future of Mali.

To the international community

- Respond to the situation in Mali by funding long-term development projects, addressing the most pressing issues identified by aid agencies working in Mali.
- Play a leading role in lobbying world leaders to encourage dialogue and governance reforms in Mali.

Lack of water, hygiene and sanitation

Before the crisis began, the north of Mali already faced challenges in water and sanitation access with 30 per cent of the population relying on water pumps installed by development agencies and 60 per cent without proper sanitation services.^{xxiv} Islamic Relief has been working to provide water access in Mali- including northern regions- since 1997. We implement projects such as rainwater harvesting micro dams and underground water boreholes, which have benefitted hundreds of communities.

However, the ongoing violence in Mali has forced aid agencies to temporarily suspend or limit their work, due to access and security concerns in areas throughout the north of Mali. Research carried out by Islamic Relief indicates that the ongoing violence - and in particular intervention by armed forces- has damaged infrastructure and reduced and occasionally eliminated the availability of clean water and sanitation facilities in areas across Mali.^{xxv} One of our needs assessments showed that the occupation by armed rebels, followed by the French military intervention contributed to the damage of two large public water distribution networks in the Douentza parishes, while in Boni City, the water service – previously comprising 15 water points to serve over 6,000 people – has been non-functional since pumps and generators were pillaged during the violence. There is an urgent need for the rehabilitation of wells and for equipment to sustain water pumps and electric generators. More alarmingly, there have been reports of cholera, with at least 42 cases and four deaths reported between 8 and 19 of May.^{xxvi}

Islamic Relief also found that access to water is limited in areas across the north, including Debere, where there is only one functional water point for 6 villages (nearly 6,300 people). In a number of areas, 86 per cent of schools were found to lack a functional water source, while 13 per cent of community health centres were also deprived. This lack of water and sanitation is already causing health problems; in more than 44 per cent of households surveyed in Douentza by Islamic Relief, there was at least one case of diarrhoea in each family over a 14-day period.



Lack of water facilities also contributes to instability and violence, a cycle that is frequently seen in conflict zones. Islamic Relief found that disputes over which land to use for water facilities, disagreements over maintenance arrangements and competition between different communities for access to water are among the ways in which mishandled water provision can exacerbate tensions. But we have also found that some methods of water provision, such as rainwater harvesting, can reduce the risk of conflict by 30 to 40 per cent.

Finally, the absence of clean, safe water can also result in food insecurity. World Food Programme estimates that 1.3 million people in Mali are threatened^{xxvii} by food insecurity. Malian farmers rely on clean water for their cattle as well as for growing crops. With expectations of bad harvests in the coming years, **the people of Mali cannot continue suffering under the present conflict.**

Based on our needs assessment, Islamic Relief recommends that:

- Water provision services are rehabilitated to all areas affected by the recent violence.
- Long-term water provision projects are prioritised, such as micro dams and boreholes to contribute to long-term sustainability and development.

Food Security

The people of Mali are now facing their second food crisis in less than two years and experts are predicting a humanitarian catastrophe in the coming months if something is not done. As a result of the recurrent crises, Mali now ranks as one of the five poorest countries in the world.^{xxviii}

Before the escalation of violence, the north of Mali struggled due to food insecurity. Wracked by drought, famine and bad harvests as a result of an advancing desert, 80 per cent of food provision for people in the north came from the south of the country, as well as neighbouring nations including Algeria and Libya. The remaining 20 per cent were self-reliant, with communities growing their own food. Previous research conducted before the escalating violence showed that a large proportion of households were poorly stocked due to inadequate agricultural yields.

Following the foreign military intervention in Mali, Islamic Relief assessed areas in the north and found the food crisis had escalated further due to the ongoing violence. Almost all areas assessed indicated a struggle to obtain food. We found:^{xxix}

- The continuous spread of violence has rendered humanitarian organisations unable to venture into areas to provide aid.
- Roads into remote areas are inaccessible, making market access and procurement difficult.
- As a result, the amount of food available for purchase is insufficient in all the villages visited – 65 per cent of households surveyed indicated that the markets did not have enough supplies. Many civilians avoid markets not only due to their lack of stock, but also because of security concerns.
- In female-headed households in the parish of Haire, 82 per cent of families surveyed rely on their own agricultural production for food. 27 per cent of households had no revenue to purchase food, while 41 per cent struggled with food security.

The need for food in the north of Mali is growing rapidly and its provision or absence could make the difference between life and death for the millions of Malians at risk. Local authorities are highlighting the severity of the situation and have promised over 7,000 tons of food to be sent to the most severely affected areas.^{xxx} However, emergency aid alone will not end hunger. Islamic Relief has been fighting the root causes of food insecurity in Mali for almost ten years. The only way to improve and advance food security is to develop the capacity of the Malian people to establish domestic food production networks. This can only be done by training and equipping local communities to sustainably produce food, tackle desertification and prepare for - and mitigate- disasters.

Islamic Relief has already acted on these findings by mitigating the effects of desertification in northern Mali in 2010. The 'Turning the Desert Green' project promoted irrigation along the river Niger, ensuring food security for the communities fortunate enough to live close to this water source. Over two years later, these communities continue to enjoy adequate access to food, but sadly those further inland still face hunger. In these areas, Islamic Relief is promoting the construction of "pockets" of water retention structures, facilitating irrigation in the land-locked country.

While attempting to improve access to food and water, Islamic Relief realises that this battle may not be won unless the expansion of the desert southwards is stopped – and reversed. This is possible by "greening" the desert, as demonstrated by our 2010 intervention. However, the current conflict is hampering development in this area, and if no solution can be found in the near future, ordinary Malian people will suffer the consequences most harshly.

Based on our needs assessment, Islamic Relief recommends that:

- Aid agencies focus on increasing food security across Mali through sustainable development projects.
- The Malian government works with aid agencies to support and facilitate sustainable, self-reliant farming.

- Aid agencies work with the Malian government to prevent desertification in order to prevent future food insecurities.
- The Malian government prioritises easing access to areas affected by the conflict. This involves clearing roads, allowing NGO access and aid distribution.
- The Malian government restores local markets and establishes procurement strategies to ensure local people can access food at an affordable price.

"Most Malians are responsible for producing their own food. Since the escalation of violence, crop prices are steadily increasing, resulting in thousands of people struggling to secure food and water."

Elias Fon, Islamic Relief

Shelter

The need for temporary shelter for displaced people is widely accepted, both in and outside of Mali. The UNHCR has already committed to providing emergency shelter to Malians in Burkina Faso and Niger^{xxxix}. But the shelter needs in the northern regions are less recognised. In these areas, those not fortunate enough to escape the conflict have suffered much damage to their homes. Public buildings have also been affected.

Islamic Relief surveyed residents of Douentza City, which was hit by bombs during battles between armed rebel groups and the Malian military. This shelling destroyed civilians' homes, as well as the high school, education academy and one of the city's largest hotels, the N'Douldé Hotel.

Our research found that before the conflict began, 88 per cent of Malians in this region lived in earth houses and 90 per cent were the sole owners of their homes, meaning that any damage comes as a huge blow to their assets. Over half of the people Islamic Relief spoke to rated the condition of their homes as 'not bad' prior to the current violence, but this has dropped to just a third, with 55 per cent now describing their accommodation as 'poor'.

The prospect of repairing and improving homes is slim: our assessment found that over three-quarters live in poverty, with more than 80 per cent working in agriculture and animal breeding, the very trades which have been worst affected by the drought ravaging the Sahel region. Indeed, more than half reported that their household economic situation had deteriorated over the last year. As many people already struggle to feed their families, it is extremely unlikely that they will be able to afford repair work to their homes for the foreseeable future.

It is not only homes that have been damaged, but all types of infrastructure, including schools, wells, and ponds. These ponds were of critical importance to farmers who relied on animal breeding as a livelihood. Today, they are particularly affected by the conflict, as they have nowhere to water their livestock. For those who aspired to provide a brighter future to their children, the destruction of schools is a devastating obstacle.

Based on our needs assessment, Islamic Relief recommends that:

- Aid agencies work to rebuild the education academy and high school, as well as constructing wells and ponds to minimise the effect of drought on people and livestock.
- The Malian government and aid agencies promote the use of existing basic building materials, such as compacted earth, and facilitate access to these materials for households most in need of restoring their homes.
- Local people are trained in skilled industries that make the best use of natural materials from the local environment. This would not only help meet the imminent shelters needs, but would give these Malians the skills to make a living in the long-term. Given the vulnerability of farming in the face of the extreme climate conditions prevalent in the Sahel, the option of alternative skills would offer Malians resilience against similar future crises.



Refugees

The conflict in northern Mali has had a dramatic effect on security – over 60 per cent of people who Islamic Relief interviewed report experiencing some form of insecurity. The dangers and threats that people reported assist in understanding why so many Malians have fled their homes. More than a quarter of those who reported a lack of security cited physical abuse, 16 per cent detailed the risk of mines and explosives, and there were also reports of child soldier recruitment, rape and gender-based violence.

But while fleeing northern Mali may reduce the risk of attacks from armed groups, the 300,000 who moved to southern areas of Mali and over 174,000 who fled the country altogether^{xxxij} have also faced many risks and have put extra strain on the host communities.

Those who have sought refuge in neighbouring Niger, Mauritania and Burkina Faso have had to flee to refugee camps, or set up makeshift shelters where they wait for aid agencies to help them. Regardless of the type of settlement, all are located in the harsh, arid and scorching land of the Sahel. Living in temporary shelter in the Sahel is incredibly tough- everyday people have to deal with the food and water shortage, the unrelenting sun and wind of the day and the freezing temperatures at night.^{xxxijj} Many hope that with the bulk of the military operation over, they will soon be able to return home, though with presidential elections in July 2013 and a plethora of competing political parties, it is likely that tensions will run high with civil unrest and continuing localised conflict.

For every Malian refugee who has fled across the border, there are two internally displaced people, for whom life is not much easier. For those living in the capital of Bamako, finding a job is extremely difficult due to a lack of connections and local knowledge. Farmers have been torn away from their familiar rural environment, and even qualified teachers struggle to find jobs, despite the overcrowded schools – all of which make it a challenge to pay the high rent costs, forcing many to live in overcrowded apartments on the outskirts.^{xxxiv} Some pastoralists, unwilling to lose their most vital assets, brought their livestock with them when they fled. This has added further pressure to host communities attempting to absorb new residents and share limited resources with them, creating tensions in the very community to which they fled to for security.^{xxxv}

Both inside and outside Mali, displaced Malians are not just struggling to meet basic needs - including food, water and shelter - but also to access services that provide them with a sense of normality, such as education and psychosocial support. Children deprived of schooling are missing out on one of the key tools needed to improve the quality of their futures. Reports of recent violence in Mali include murder, rape, torture and even limb amputation.^{xxxvi} Both children and adults who have experienced or witnessed horrors during the conflict need psychological support before they are able to regain their livelihoods or contribute to the rebuilding of their nation.

With the prospect of high numbers of Malians returning to the north following the end of the military phase, aid agencies working with refugees should not only cater to their immediate needs, but prepare them for life after their return home. Fifteen years ago, during the return of refugees and displaced communities following the first civil war, Islamic Relief managed integrated development programmes across many sectors in the district of Gourma Rharous. This included repairing schools, teacher training, nutritional feeding, livelihood support, food and water security and improved sanitation, as well as building the capacity of civil society and the new local commune councils.

Today we continue to strongly advocate an integrated and collaborative approach to enabling peaceful and sustainable return. Alongside life-saving food distributions, Islamic Relief is working with returnees to help them recover and rebuild lives, emphasising more resilient methods of agricultural production. We will continue to work with returning refugees to build the capacity of local communities, as well as developing disaster risk reduction programmes to mitigate the effects of future crises. Holistic and multi-sectoral projects require dedicated funding in order to adequately transform conflicts and build peace. A particularly pressing issue in Mali is the struggle to address the fundamental tribal grievance of unequal distribution of governmental development assistance.

The need for political and governance reforms

As hundreds of Malians take to the polls to cast their vote, media and awareness campaigns will focus on the political situation. Islamic Relief believes that in order to prevent conflicts from reoccurring, there must be more discussions around the root causes of armed conflict.

We believe that poverty and poor governance is one of the root causes of the armed conflict in Mali. Through poverty alleviation initiatives, empowerment programmes and political and governance reforms, individuals can be prevented from being influenced into violence. Therefore these initiatives must be a priority for aid agencies and the Malian government.

As a result Islamic Relief calls on aid agencies, the Malian government and the United Nations to:

- Encourage structural improvements in governance by promoting more initiatives around inclusive politics and economic growth while tackling corruption, extremism and armed conflict.

Recommendations

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End Notes

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