

Escalation of conflict in Northern and Central regions

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

Coordinated attacks on 25–26 April have caused acute protection and access concerns for civilians in several urban centres and along key transport corridors in Mali, particularly in Bamako/Kati, Bourem, Gao, Kidal, Mopti, and Sévaré (ACLED 25/04/2026; RFI 26/04/2026; Le Monde 25/04/2026; BBC 25/04/2026). Reported impacts include civilian casualties, fear among residents, reduced public movement, a three-day overnight curfew in Bamako, and disruptions around Bamako's airport and other affected urban centres (RFI 26/04/2026; RFI 28/04/2026). By 28 April, at least 23 people had been killed, including civilians and military personnel, although complete casualty figures remain unclear (RFI 28/04/2026).

Tensions persisted in Bamako on 29 April, with security operations, arbitrary arrests and lynching incidents, and false alerts affecting schools and public movement (DW 29/04/2026). Active fighting, movement restrictions, and insecurity are hindering people's ability to move and report needs, and information remains limited on new displacement, damage to civilian infrastructure, access to basic services, and the operational status of humanitarian organisations in the affected areas.

The attacks represent the most coordinated offensive in Mali in recent years, involving Jama'at Nusrat Al Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), an Al Qaeda-affiliated militant Islamist group seeking to expand influence through insurgent activity and establish localised governance arrangements, and the Front de libération de l'Azawad (FLA), a Tuareg separatist movement pursuing greater autonomy and territorial control particularly in areas associated with Azawad, a region in northern Mali claimed by Tuareg armed groups (BBC 28/04/2026; ACLED 25/04/2026; Critical Threats 28/04/2026). Coordination between JNIM and FLA enabled simultaneous attacks on strategic locations, including Bamako, Bourem, Gao, Kati, Kidal, Mopti, and Sévaré, increasing pressure on the Malian military across several urban centres and exposing nearby civilians to heightened risks of violence and movement restrictions (ACLED 25/04/2026; RFI 26/04/2026). The attacks also directly affected Mali's military leadership: Defence Minister Sadio Camara was killed in Kati, while President Assimi Goïta was not seen publicly for several days after the attacks, before meeting the Russian ambassador on 28 April (DW 27/04/2026; RFI 28/04/2026). These developments risk further eroding public confidence in the State's ability to provide protection and maintain control in affected areas.

Kidal is the main area of concern because the FLA announced it had taken control of the town on 26 April, around 18 months after the Malian army and the Wagner Group – a Russian-linked paramilitary force supporting the Malian authorities – had retaken it in November 2023 (Jeune Afrique 28/04/2026; RFI 28/04/2026). With Malian security forces and Africa Corps withdrawing, civilians in Kidal are now living under the authority of armed groups, with unclear rules for movement, markets, and access to services in a location that already had limited infrastructure and high pre-existing needs (Jeune Afrique 28/04/2026; DW 27/04/2026). Because of Kidal's strategic location near the Algerian border and major supply routes, renewed clashes or restrictions in the area could quickly disrupt trade, humanitarian access, and potential displacement routes.

ANTICIPATED DEVELOPMENTS AND IMPACTS

The humanitarian impact of the escalation is likely to remain geographically concentrated but significant, particularly in Kidal and other affected urban centres in northern and central Mali (RFI 26/04/2026; BBC 28/04/2026). Civilians in these locations, especially those living near military sites, transport corridors, and contested areas, are likely to face increased protection risks, movement restrictions, and disruptions to markets and basic services.

Although the escalation is not expected to result in a nationwide collapse, even localised disruptions may have disproportionate effects on vulnerable populations, including IDPs, host communities, and poor urban households, given Mali's already fragile humanitarian context. Prior to the escalation, food insecurity, displacement, and limited access to basic services were already widespread, particularly in northern and central regions (FEWS NET 14/04/2026; OCHA 10/02/2026).

During previous fighting in Kidal in 2023, conflict triggered movements towards nearby rural areas and across the Algerian border (OCHA 21/11/2023). Similar patterns may emerge if clashes continue, although the scale and direction of any displacement remain uncertain (RFI 28/04/2026; BBC 28/04/2026).

Humanitarian access is expected to remain constrained in the affected areas because of insecurity, possible road closures, and the presence of armed groups. These constraints will likely limit the ability of humanitarian organisations to assess needs, verify information, and deliver assistance, particularly in newly contested locations such as Kidal and along key transport routes.

CRISIS IMPACTS (CURRENT AND ANTICIPATED)

Displacement

No confirmed displacement figures are available yet following the 25–26 April attacks. Active fighting, curfews, insecurity, and limited access to affected areas are likely to delay reporting on population movements and humanitarian needs. Although current figures remain unknown, previous escalations in Kidal have resulted in large-scale displacement. During the 2023 military operation, at least 11,500 people (nearly 20% of the estimated 60,000 residents) were displaced towards nearby safer localities, including Abeibara, Anefif, Aguelhok, Tessalit, and Timtaghene, as well as surrounding rural areas and across the border into Algeria (OCHA 21/11/2023; HRW 26/01/2024).

By September 2025, there were already more than 414,000 IDPs in Mali (IOM accessed 29/04/2026). Additional displacement is likely to further strain already limited access to basic services. In some IDP sites, up to 100% of children lack access to education (OCHA 05/02/2026).

Protection

Protection risks are expected to increase if fighting continues around Bamako/Kati, Bourem, Gao, Kidal, Mopti, and Sévaré. In 2025, 22% of households assessed in Mali reported serious protection-related problems, mainly linked to insecurity, psychological distress, and family separation. The proportion was much higher in northern and eastern regions assessed by REACH, including Kidal and Ménaka, where 65% and 64% of households respectively reported serious protection concerns (REACH 24/03/2026).

Civilians are also exposed to increased risks of killings, arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances, and destruction of property, as observed in previous phases of the conflict (The Conversation 31/10/2025; HRW accessed 26/04/2026). Women, girls, children, IDPs, and refugees are likely to face heightened risks, including exposure to violence, family separation, child recruitment, gender-based violence, and restrictions on movement. Access to protection and gender-based violence services remains limited. Humanitarian organisations report that funding shortfalls and insecurity have reduced the availability and geographical coverage of services, leaving gaps in assistance for vulnerable populations, particularly in remote areas (UNFPA 31/03/2026).

Food security and livelihoods

Further insecurity in northern and central Mali is likely to worsen already fragile food security and livelihood conditions. Crisis (IPC Phase 3) outcomes are expected in Kidal from March–September 2026, driven by high prices, income declines, and conflict-related livelihood degradation. In nearby eastern Mali, Ménaka is projected to face Emergency (IPC Phase 4) outcomes during the pastoral lean season from April–June 2026 (FEWS NET 14/04/2026).

Conflict-related disruption to supply routes, markets, fuel flows, or livestock movements may leave poor households facing reduced food access, higher transport and commodity prices, and fewer income opportunities. Armed groups have previously used road blockades to disrupt trade routes and fuel supplies, limiting market access and contributing to shortages of essential goods and rising prices (The Conversation 31/10/2025). In February 2026, cereal prices were already 32% above the five-year average in Kidal and 44% above the five-year average in Ménaka, indicating wider market stress in northern and eastern Mali (FEWS NET 14/04/2026). Displacement or restrictions on movement would further reduce access to livelihoods, especially for pastoralist and poor urban households already relying on negative coping strategies.

Health and access to services

Casualty figures, damage to health facilities, and the status of health services in the affected areas remain unclear. Continued fighting would likely increase trauma care needs, while insecurity, curfews, and transport disruptions restrict access to health facilities and medication. Previous conflict escalations in central and northern Mali have restricted access to healthcare, forced humanitarian organisations to suspend or reduce activities, and affected medical referrals, including for pregnant women and wounded civilians (MSF 11/12/2023).

Existing service gaps would compound the impact of renewed hostilities. In February 2026, humanitarian organisations reported increased military operations, drone strikes, improvised explosive device incidents, and targeted assassinations across Ségou and Timbuktu, while fuel shortages in Mopti and Ségou continued to disrupt logistics and limit operational capacity (UNFPA 31/03/2026). In 2025, the humanitarian context was already characterised by large-scale needs, with around 6.4 million people requiring assistance and limited availability of health services in conflict-affected regions (UNFPA 06/2025). If insecurity continues, access constraints are likely to be highest in areas affected by active hostilities and along disrupted transport routes, where insecurity, curfews, and fuel shortages limit mobility and the functioning of health services.

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

Access to information

There is limited information on the affected communities and people most at risk because insecurity and access constraints prevent systematic data collection and verification. Active clashes in Kati, Kidal, and central Mali, combined with curfews, checkpoints, and attacks along key transport corridors, restrict humanitarian movement and limit field assessments and real-time monitoring (RFI 25/04/2026; OCHA 05/02/2026).

Frequent and often untracked movements further reduce the ability to identify affected populations. The reduced operational presence of humanitarian organisations in some areas also limits reporting capacity, resulting in gaps in the availability and timeliness of information on humanitarian needs (Africa Center 29/09/2025; RFI 25/04/2026; OCHA 05/02/2026).

Humanitarian constraints

The security situation is likely constraining humanitarian access in areas affected by active hostilities, including Kati, Kidal, and parts of central Mali, where clashes and insecurity limit movement (RFI 26/04/2026). Curfews and insecurity along key routes may reduce the ability of humanitarian organisations to reach affected populations and deliver assistance (RFI 25/04/2026). There is limited information on the extent of access constraints, including road closures, checkpoints, and the operational status of humanitarian organisations.

On 29 April, JNIM announced a renewed blockade around Bamako, seeking to control the movement of people and goods entering and leaving the capital. This could further disrupt the movement of people and goods, affect markets and fuel supply, and require security forces to concentrate around the capital rather than other affected areas (RFI 29/04/2026). The targeting of transport corridors and fuel routes around population centres directly affects humanitarian operations. Checkpoints, ambushes, and attacks on vehicles, including fuel tankers and civilian convoys along the Kayes–Bamako corridor and RN1, make movement highly risky for humanitarian organisations (Africa Center 29/09/2025).

Humanitarian operations have increasingly faced constraints caused by worsening security conditions, particularly the rise in improvised explosive device incidents. Access incidents reported by partners between January–September 2025 increased by nearly 50% compared to the same period in 2024, with the majority of this rise attributed to the growing use of improvised explosive devices (OCHA 08/12/2025). At least 71 cases of violence against humanitarian personnel, property, and infrastructure were recorded in 2025 compared to 58 in 2024, representing a 22% increase. These included robberies and night-time intrusions into homes and offices across Bamako, Gao, Mopti, and Ségou (OCHA 05/02/2026).

Funding and response capacity

The overall decline in humanitarian funding has significantly constrained response capacity. By mid-March 2026, around 15% of Mali's Humanitarian Needs and Response Plan had been funded (OCHA 16/03/2026). This gap, combined with rising operational costs, has forced some humanitarian organisations to suspend or scale down programmes, prioritise limited activities, and reduce staffing (OCHA 05/02/2026; OCHA 16/03/2026). As a result, response coverage remains uneven. For example, up until January 2026, there were no humanitarian organisations providing shelter, NFI assistance, or camp coordination services in Kidal (OCHA 02/04/2026).

COMPOUNDING AND AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Climate change

Mali is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, ranking 15th among the most vulnerable countries globally and among the least prepared to adapt. It is increasingly affected by frequent and severe floods and droughts (ND-GAIN accessed 29/04/2026). Water shortages linked to drought and weak infrastructure place additional pressure on already limited services, contributing to rising social tensions, particularly in older and poorer neighbourhoods. In central and northern Mali, heavy rainfall and rising water levels along the Niger River drive recurrent floods, accounting for around 5% of internal displacement. Flooding also damages farmland and infrastructure, disrupts livelihoods, and contributes to livestock losses, waterborne disease outbreaks, landslides, river silting, and post-harvest losses (IOM 08/12/2025; WB 20/11/2024).

These climate shocks reduce agricultural production and household incomes, increasing food insecurity and weakening coping capacities. In conflict-affected areas, reduced access to water, land, and pasture can contribute to local tensions and resource competition – particularly in central Mali, where intercommunal violence has been linked to disputes over natural resources (WB 20/11/2024; REACH 24/03/2026).

Reduced economic opportunities can also lead households to rely on informal or illicit coping strategies such as artisanal mining. Armed groups, including JNIM, are reported to tax, control, or benefit from these activities, allowing them to generate revenue and expand influence in areas where state presence is limited (Africa Center 29/09/2025). Overall, climate-related shocks can worsen existing fragility by increasing exposure to conflict impacts while weakening communities' ability to cope with displacement and service disruption.

Community acceptance

Humanitarian organisations in Mali face declining community acceptance because of insecurity, misinformation, and growing perceptions of alignment with political or foreign interests, which undermine their perceived neutrality (ALNAP accessed 29/04/2026; *Insecurity Insights* 08/09/2025). Public narratives increasingly question the role and independence of these organisations, particularly in conflict-affected areas, where the presence of multiple armed groups blurs the distinction between humanitarian, political, and security roles.

As a result, access negotiations have become more complex, and humanitarian personnel face increased operational risks, including threats, harassment, and movement restrictions (*Insecurity Insights* 08/09/2025; OCHA 05/02/2026). These dynamics contribute to a reduced and uneven humanitarian presence, as organisations scale down, suspend, or relocate activities in response to insecurity and access constraints (ALNAP accessed 29/04/2026; OCHA 05/02/2026). This limits the reach and consistency of assistance in high-insecurity areas, where needs are often greatest.

DRIVERS

JNIM-FLA coordination

Despite differing long-term objectives, cooperation between JNIM and FLA has been facilitated by their shared presence in parts of northern and central Mali and their common opposition to central state authority. The April 2026 attacks follow long-standing engagement between the two groups, with reports indicating that contacts and negotiations over potential cooperation have been taking place for several years, particularly following the breakdown of earlier security arrangements and the escalation of violence from 2022 onwards (*Africa Center* 27/04/2026). The attacks can therefore be understood as part of a broader trajectory of cooperation rather than a standalone event, raising the possibility of further coordinated action. Such coordination has enabled more complex and geographically dispersed attacks across central and northern Mali, including operations extending from Bamako to Kidal. This has increased pressure on Malian security forces and, in some instances, contributed to temporary withdrawals or loss of control in specific locations, leaving civilians exposed to reduced protection and unclear authority (*Critical Threats* 29/04/2026; *Africa Center* 27/04/2026).

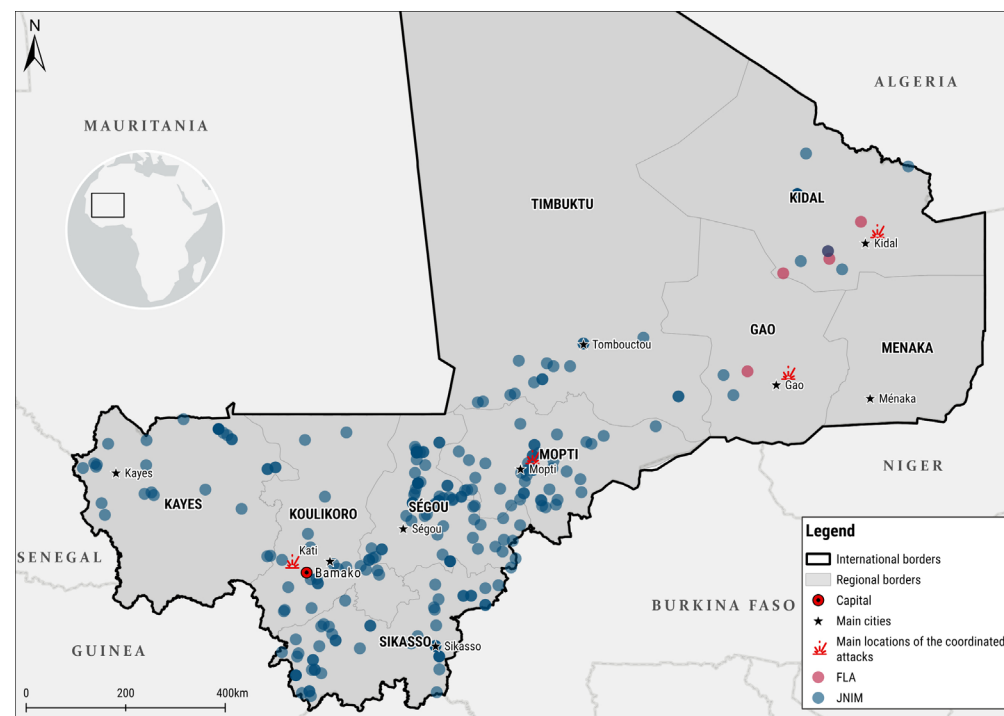
Over time, continued coordination between JNIM and FLA is likely to reshape conflict dynamics in northern Mali, potentially contributing to increased fragmentation of territorial control and complicating future peace negotiations as more armed groups become involved.

Ethnic grievances

Long-standing Tuareg grievances underpin demands for greater autonomy and self-determination. These grievances stem from limited political representation linked to minority status and perceived marginalisation within state governance structures. Concerns over cultural and linguistic erosion have further deepened mistrust towards central authorities (*Sphere of Influence* 15/02/2024).

The 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement, signed between the Government and coalitions of northern armed groups, aimed to address these grievances through decentralisation and political inclusion. The agreement progressively broke down following mutual accusations of non-compliance and declining trust between signatories, contributing to renewed clashes in northern Mali from 2022 onwards (*Human Rights Watch* 26/01/2024; *Sphere of Influence* 15/02/2024).

Map 1: Conflict events across Mali between 1 January and 28 April 2026



Source: ACAPS using data from ACLED (accessed 30/04/2026)