

# CENTRAL SAHEL

## Humanitarian access and civil-military coordination

Irregular and intercommunal conflict and sudden-onset disasters have increased humanitarian needs across the tri-border region between Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Humanitarian operating spaces have also been restricted, driven by this same insecurity, government-enforced operating restrictions, poor infrastructure, and other access constraints.

Humanitarian stakeholders have been engaging with national and international military forces to ensure access to people in need in conflict areas, in line with humanitarian principles of independence and neutrality. This is being done through formal and informal mechanisms. In Mali and Niger, formal UN-facilitated Humanitarian Civil-Military Coordination (CMCoord) cells operate with regular activities and communication between humanitarian and military representatives (national and international actors). In Burkina Faso, CMCoord is currently a less-structured procedure, although some communication exists.

CMCoord is a dynamic process, requiring regular negotiation among interested parties and clear communication of negotiation outcomes to all stakeholders. CMCoord challenges include ensuring clear and trustful communication and adherence to negotiation outcomes.



Map source: ACAPS

### ACCESS OVERVIEW

**Humanitarian operational spaces are increasingly restricted** across the region because of insecurity and related government restrictions.

**More than 40 aid workers have been killed, kidnapped, or arrested** in the region since early 2020 (Aid Worker Security accessed 29/12/2020; Insecurity Insight accessed 29/12/2020).

### INFORMATION GAPS AND LIMITATIONS

The information in this report may be outdated at the time of circulation/publication because of the rapidly changing situation.

Humanitarian engagement with state actors across the three countries is sensitive; there are several severe information gaps, notably regarding inaccessible areas and areas where there is a heavy presence of non-state armed groups (NSAGs). Accessible information on humanitarian negotiation with armed groups is limited. Accessible information on CMCoord strategies and activities in Burkina Faso is also limited.

Much of the report's source material comes from interviewees' internal documentation and anonymous sources.

## HUMANITARIAN CRISIS AND ACCESS OVERVIEWS

### Regional overview

#### Humanitarian crises in the region

Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso make up the Central Sahel region. The Central Sahel's Liptako Gourma region overlaps eastern Niger, some areas in central and northern Mali, and northern and eastern Burkina Faso, covering approximately 370,000km<sup>2</sup> where the three countries' borders meet. More than 80% of the 17 million people residing in the region live in rural areas, and livelihoods are mainly concentrated around farming and herding (ALG accessed 11/01/2021). Since the beginning of 2018, this region has been one of the Sahel's insecurity hotspots. Intercommunal conflict between farmers and herders and conflict between extremist armed groups and national forces has driven over 1.6 million people into displacement across the countries' conflict regions and have led to human rights violations. Around 5,000 civilians died from intensified violence between January–August 2020 (IOM 31/12/2020). Conflict in Mali has destabilised the border areas in both Niger and Burkina Faso, and NSAGs have used porous borders to strengthen their position and lead attacks across countries, resulting in comparable conflict and humanitarian conditions. Both displaced and host communities in the region face resource scarcity, violence, and poverty, as well as increasingly restricted public service provision (education and healthcare infrastructure) and humanitarian aid.

Despite national, regional, and international efforts, governments have not been able to restore stability. This may be due to a number of reasons, including poorly trained and/or equipped security forces, long-standing lack of local governance, and limited chains of command within local armed groups and militias. The recent government focus on COVID-19 containment has also enabled increased extremist activity (UN Security Council 24/06/2020).

#### Humanitarian access in the region

Civilian access to services is restricted in some areas, as a result of insecurity or a lack of service provision. Access for humanitarian actors in the region continues to be challenging. This is driven by many factors, including environmental conditions and COVID-19 government containment measures, but is primarily a result of persistent insecurity that has resulted in the decline of public services, and which makes it a risky area for humanitarian operations. One-third of global abductions targeting aid workers occur in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso (ACLEDD 19/08/2020).

The Central Sahel region's rainy season – which, although variable, often lasts from May to October – frequently results in heavy rains and flooding (OECD and Met Office 02/2010). This worsens the humanitarian situation in the region as well as existing access constraints, and can result in floods that threaten human life, affect livelihoods, and damage infrastructure (houses, schools, and roads) (FEWS NET 20/08/2020; OCHA 09/06/2020; OCHA 11/08/2020; FloodList 08/08/2020).

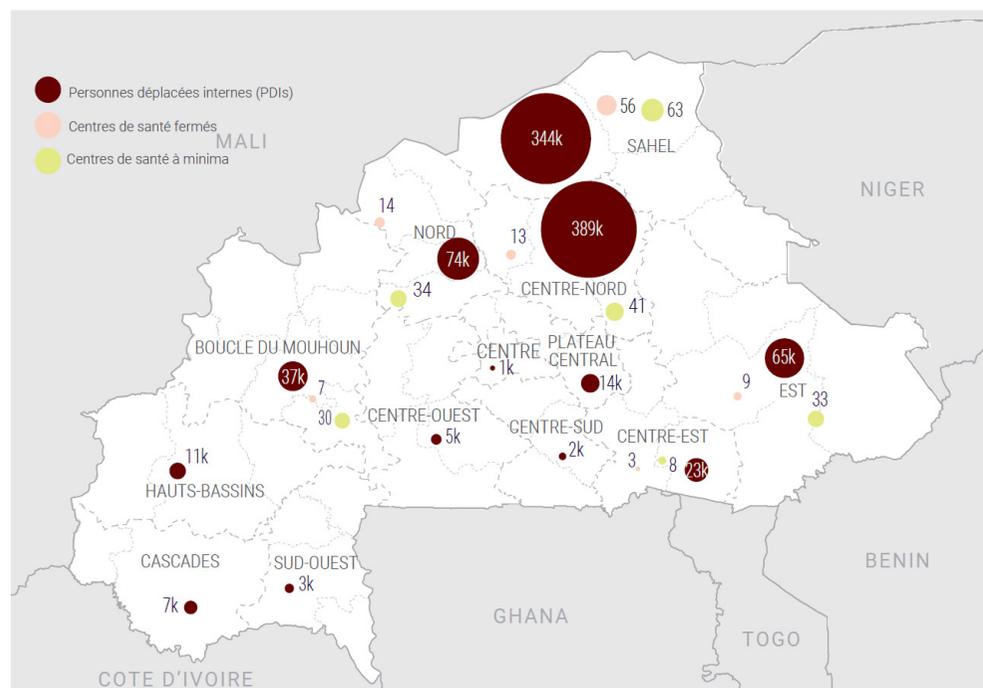
#### CMCoord in the region

CMCoord consists of sets of strategies and practices aimed at maintaining regular communication between assistance and military actors. This communication aims to: ensure humanitarian access to people in need in conflict areas, maintain respect for humanitarian principles in warfare, encourage coordination in the response activities of military and humanitarian organisations, ensure respect for humanitarian organisations' neutrality and independence, and clarify the distinction between humanitarian and military actors. Militaries often engage in humanitarian activities, either directly, indirectly, or by providing emergency response support. CMCoord strategies are applied through advocacy and dialogue mechanisms among military and humanitarian stakeholders, who plan and share tasks and information on planned or ongoing military or humanitarian activities. Strategies vary, and can stop at coexistence or extend towards cooperation (OCHA 2013).

There are a number of common military and NSAG actors across the three countries' tri-border area. CMCoord concerns across the region are similar, and related to the unpredictable spill over of violence from one country to another. CMCoord strategies and activities are distinct in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger however, although there is apparent communication between stakeholders in the three countries and one interviewee maintained that coordination across the region among CMCoord actors is a key goal. Approaches in Mali and Niger are structured, with regular meetings and engagement; in Burkina Faso there is no structured approach to CMCoord, although there are some high-level activities. Restrictions on humanitarian access because of military activity persist across the region, and CMCoord remains a dynamic process. The ICRC has acknowledged that it also negotiates with NSAGs to ensure access (ICRC 08/07/2020).

CMCoord initiatives in the region face a number of challenges. Communication challenges between military and humanitarian actors are notable and were cited by interviewees. Military and gendarmerie (police) have expressed wary attitudes towards humanitarian activities and organisations, and humanitarian organisations may be wary of military actors as many forces in the region have committed or have been accused of human rights violations. This dynamic can make negotiation and coordination – the key components of successful CMCoord strategies – difficult to ensure. There have been instances in the region when negotia-

tions have failed, and humanitarian access has not been guaranteed. Another challenge is ensuring all humanitarian organisations adhere to agreed-upon negotiations – for instance, not using armed escorts. Engagement with NSAGs, current practices, and the legality of such actions across the three regions are notable information gaps.



Map source: OCHA 18/08/2020.

## BURKINA FASO

### Humanitarian crises

Northern regions of the country have been subject to persistent attacks from extremist NSAGs since 2015; southern areas have also periodically been attacked since this time. NSAG activity spread into Burkina Faso's eastern regions over the following years. NSAGs have instrumentalised pre-existing tensions between farmer and herder communities, and conflict often becomes intercommunal. These conflicts periodically push people into displacement – over 1 million people in the country are now counted as IDPs (UNHCR accessed 11/01/2021). IDPs often have to abandon their food stocks and livelihood resources such as fields and livestock, and are likely to be vulnerable to food insecurity. Displacement is a main

driver in the country's food security crisis. Over 2 million people are currently food insecure, including 254,000 facing Emergency (IPC Phase 4) levels of food insecurity (Cadre Harmonisé accessed 11/12/2020).

Service provision has also been hampered by conflict; 25% of health facilities in Burkina Faso's conflict-affected areas are either closed or working at limited capacity (Health Cluster 12/11/2020). This has been worsened by a socio-economic crisis driven by COVID-19 government measures which included a ban on public transport, widespread general quarantines, and border and market closures (The New Humanitarian 19/08/2020).

Heavy rains and flooding since April 2020 have killed 41 people and affected over 106,000 (as at 23 September 2020). As at 11 September, the hardest-hit regions were Sahel (23,900 affected) and Centre-Nord (21,600 affected) (OCHA and CONASUR 11/09/2020; Faszine 23/09/2020). Most of the country's IDPs reside in these two regions. 1,790 IDP shelters were damaged or destroyed by the flooding (OCHA and CONASUR 11/09/2020).

### National and international response

The government is operational in providing humanitarian aid in both the Nord and Sahel regions. According to the most recent information from 30 September 2020, 54 humanitarian organisations working in seven sectors are operational in 24 provinces, with a high concentration in Sanmatenga and Yatenga provinces and a generally high concentration across the country's north (OCHA accessed 11/01/2021). Information from 16 June indicates that 12 international NGOs are present and operational in Burkina Faso's Sahel region and 12 in its Nord region. Five UN agencies are operational, as is one Red Cross/Red Crescent organisation (OCHA 16/06/2020).

### Humanitarian access constraints

Widespread insecurity has restricted the access of people in need to basic services and aid. IDPs and refugees have been subject to violent attacks by both extremist groups and Burkinabe forces, driving them away from services (GCR2P 06/05/2020). Security forces have been accused of perpetrating human rights violations and extrajudicial killings against primarily Fulani civilians during counter-terrorism operations (Human Rights Watch 06/01/2020; France 24 20/04/2020), although it is unclear if they have denied them access to aid. The Fulani are a majority Muslim, pastoralist ethnic group that has been targeted for recruitment by extremist groups, making them more vulnerable to extrajudicial killings and revenge attacks (France 24 08/07/2020).

Because of an increase in general insecurity, some areas have been embargoed, which has further limited the import of vital goods. Government measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 also restricted the access of people in need to livelihood opportunities, aid, and

public services, especially in cities and in Sahel region, which was under heavy quarantine restrictions and which had humanitarian aid suspended (Global Food Security Cluster 04/2020; WFP 23/04/2020; FEWS NET 12/2020). In this region, which borders Mali and Niger, 39% of health facilities are closed and 52% are only partially functional as at November 2020 (Health Cluster 11/2020). Around 2,100 schools are closed because of insecurity as at 5 December 2020, affecting almost 307,000 students (MENA 05/12/2020).

Burkinabe citizens – notably IDPs – also face several potential obstacles in accessing aid. They might face not only violence but also severely reduced public services and a lack of humanitarian aid.

The government has weak influence in the country's northern regions, and armed groups are active throughout the region as well as in eastern regions (The New Humanitarian 20/12/2019). NSAGs have made negotiating access for humanitarian actors difficult, as it is often unclear which NSAG operates in certain areas. Many humanitarian organisations working in Burkina Faso were focused on development programming prior to 2018 and held close relationships with government officials; now that neutral and independent crisis response is required, organisations face threats from NSAGs as they may be perceived to be affiliated with the government. Aid organisations have accused the government however of not sharing information with them, which restricts accurate programming (The New Humanitarian 20/12/2019). Government checkpoints also sometimes delay access (Freedom House accessed 15/09/2020). A state of emergency instituted in 2018 imposed curfews and movement restrictions across 14 provinces, including 12 that require humanitarian response (OCHA 2020). COVID-19 containment measures alongside travel restrictions for national and international staff also hampered access in the first half of 2020 (MSF 22/04/2020), although travel to the country is now permitted with a negative PCR test (French Foreign Ministry accessed 11/01/2021). Other government interferences in operations include the closing of 2,000 schools and 135 sanitation facilities, which reduced humanitarian resources that are not only used for health and education but which are also used as protective shelters (OCHA 2020).

Civilians have been increasingly targeted by armed actors, potentially driven by increased government arming of civilians under a January 2020 measure – which means that NSAGs may view civilians with hostility (anonymous source; Ecofin Agency 27/01/2020). The UN expressed concern that this measure would also increase intercommunal tension and potentially lead to human rights violations, as civilian forces may not be appropriately trained in laws of war. Public infrastructure, including medical facilities, markets, churches, civilian transport, and schools, is repeatedly targeted by armed groups (UN Security Council 24/06/2020). Nationwide road ambushes have also hindered humanitarian actors' capacity to deliver aid (WHO 26/01/2020; The New York Times 17/02/2020; OCHA 06/01/2020). Over ten road ambushes of humanitarian vehicles have been recorded since 2010, according to the Humanitarian Response Plan (OCHA 2020). More recently in Sahel region, aid transport

vehicles were ambushed and robbed over the course of several days in early August 2020 (The New Humanitarian 19/08/2020).

Other physical constraints around the country have also disrupted access to people in need and their access to aid. COVID-19 containment measures restricted public transport and general circulation, and included a curfew and strict policing (Le Monde 24/08/2020). Burkina Faso's road network is also severely damaged, further limiting access.

International shortages and restrictions on imports have also meant that there are shortages of medication and PPE equipment in the country. Water shortages have also been reported, as many water pumps in rural areas only work at night and curfew restrictions have limited people's access to them (MSF 22/04/2020; Reuters 10/04/2020).

The May–October 2020 rainy season resulted in flooding in many areas that host IDPs, notably Sahel and Centre-Nord. Flooding often results in inaccessible roads and damaged goods and infrastructure, further restricting livelihoods and humanitarian access (OCHA 09/06/2020; OCHA 08/08/2020).

## CMCoord

There is little publicly available information on CMCoord in Burkina Faso. There is some indication that a process of establishing a strategy or UN-CMCoord mechanism had started in 2018 and is ongoing, and that some humanitarian-military dialogue exists (anonymous source; OCHA 16/08/2018). Clusters and programme actors coordinate with some ministries and military actors. Humanitarian organisations' dialogue with state armed groups includes frequent informal exchanges with the Burkina Faso Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Security, Burkina Faso Armed Forces, the police, and the gendarmerie, as well as foreign militaries in the country such as US forces.

## MALI

### Humanitarian crises

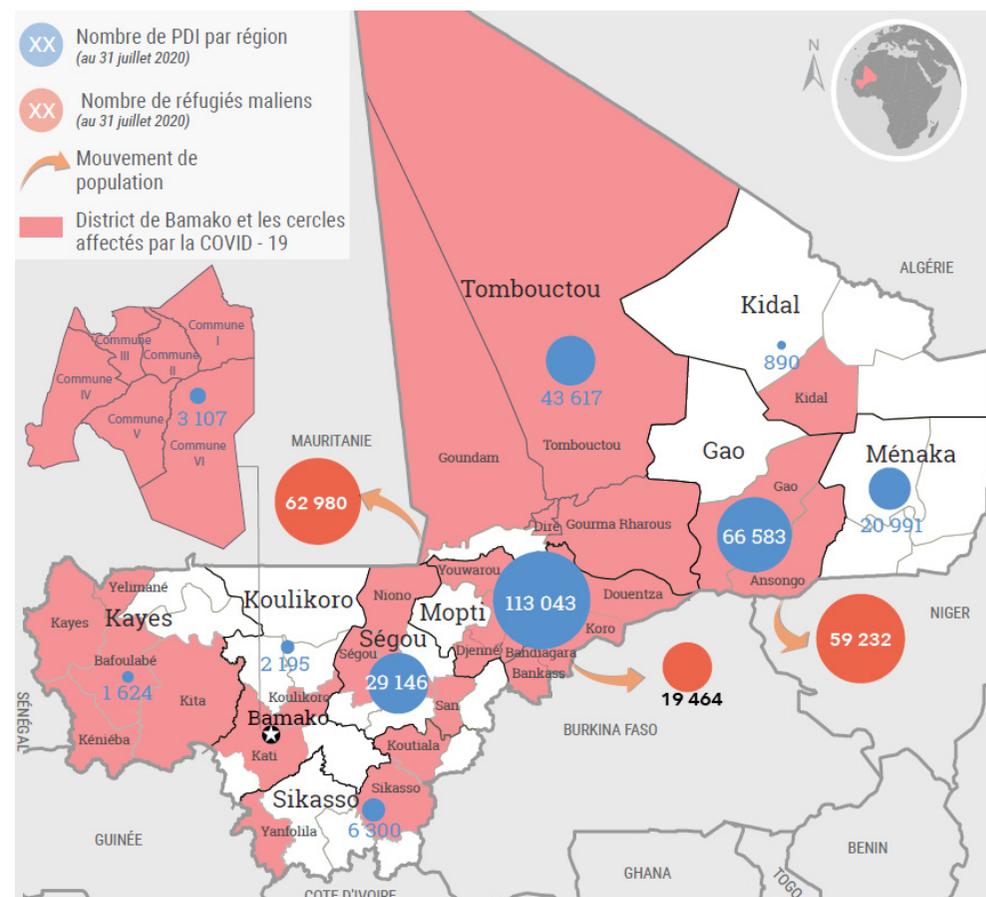
Mali has seen intense conflict in its northern regions since 2013. Since then, extremist groups have gained a foothold in the country's central regions. Although they are distinct conflicts, extremist groups have instrumentalised intercommunal violence (UN 26/06/2020). Mopti, Gao, and Ménaka have seen increasing intercommunal tensions over the past two years, resulting in a series of intercommunal massacres. Combat violence, alongside intercommunal violence, has led to civilian deaths, and has also hampered public service provision, disrupting herding and trade activities and driving food insecurity. Conflict across the country has displaced 295,000 people, with 44% of these IDPs located in Mopti, 12% in Gao, and 7% in Ménaka (IOM 31/12/2021). Infrastructure in conflict areas is also compromised: 20% of health facilities in Mali are destroyed or damaged (ICRC 14/09/2020). Improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are commonly used in the region, targeting Malian or MINUSMA (the UN peacekeeping mission in Mali) military convoys but also resulting in a growing number of civilian deaths. Between January–May 2020, 82 IED/landmine incidents killed 42 civilians (UNHCR 10/09/2020).

Food insecurity in parts of the Gao and Mopti regions of Mali are projected to remain at Stressed (IPC Phase 2) levels into May 2021, as insecurity continues to disrupt livelihoods and access to crops and cattle (FEWS NET 12/2020). Significant government COVID-19 containment measures during the first half of 2020 have also reduced economic activity nationwide, causing extensive job losses and adding to the burden of reduced remittances from abroad – also a result of global COVID-19-related economic slowdowns – which has affected 37.8% of households in the region (FEWS NET 06/2020). A military coup on 18 August 2020 and President Keita's subsequent resignation on 23 August complicates the operational context. An unclear or delayed transition to civilian rule may provoke civil unrest, which could further hamper humanitarian access. Potential humanitarian implications are unclear, however (RFI 24/08/2020; Al Jazeera 24/08/2020; ECOWAS 20/08/2020).

Heavy rainfall and flooding across the country, notably in Ménaka, have affected over 26,700 people (including 5,400 IDPs) since July 2020, destroying fields, livestock, and homes, and further hampering people's access to services (OCHA 28/08/2020; OCHA 21/07/2020; OCHA 16/07/2020).

### National and international response

200 humanitarian organisations are operational across Mali in eight different sectors (including coordination), 85 of which are national NGOs and 74 are INGOs. Other types of organisations include governmental agencies (26), UN agencies (10), and Red Cross movements (5). 119 organisations are active in the north while 112 (56%) are responding to needs in the central region (OCHA 05/2020).



Map source: OCHA 01/09/2020

### Humanitarian access constraints

Civilian mobility is limited in conflict-affected areas including the country's border regions, although recipients of aid in Mopti and Socoura indicate that they are able to access aid without too much difficulty (OCHA 16/07/2020; REACH 05/2020). Disrupted access to certain services, including healthcare and vaccination services, have been reported, however. People have also been forcibly displaced in conflict areas away from livelihoods and services (Protection Cluster 04/2020). Remote areas of Gao also lack basic services such as health and education (NRC accessed 21/08/2020; OCHA 24/01/2020). Restrictions on cross-border movement have affected trade and raised prices, limiting people's access to basic goods (OCHA 16/07/2020; OCHA 30/04/2020).

Because of government COVID-19 containment restrictions, people in need have had difficulty accessing aid, notably health services and vaccinations (OCHA 16/07/2020).

People are also frequently left unprotected and risk suffering from protection violations from NSAGs, such as murder, assault, kidnapping, GBV, robberies, and extortions (OECD 2020; UNHCR 15/01/2021).

Humanitarian operations face several access obstacles linked to conflict, the presence of IEDs, crime, and poor-quality road infrastructure. Humanitarian organisations have adapted to these challenges by increasing their communications with community leaders (OCHA 16/07/2020).

The Malian state has a weak presence in many parts of the north and central areas of the country, enabling the spread of criminality, self-defence militias, and intercommunal violence, which further worsens access barriers for humanitarian actors (Financial Times 11/2019; CFR accessed 21/08/2020). Militia groups such as Dan Na Ambassagou are known to man checkpoints in conflict-affected areas of central Mali, which makes movement more difficult for both humanitarian actors and for people in general. Although the government has called for the removal of checkpoints, Dan Na Ambassagou has refused to do so (Reuters 19/04/2019; Jeune Afrique 25/02/2020). Armed groups have also been able to completely cut off villages from the rest of the country and inhabitants' humanitarian needs have been denied (OCHA 16/07/2020; OCHA 24/01/2020; MSF 12/03/2019).

Since the last few months of 2019, NSAGs have widened the geographical area of their activities along the country's border regions and have intensified their attacks, making access and negotiation of access increasingly difficult and dangerous. In some areas, like Ansongo city in Gao region, there has been an increase in armed violence against humanitarian actors and facilities since the end of 2019. In certain areas of Mopti, access is conditioned on the consent of NSAGs. Humanitarian organisations are often subject to looting, intimidation, abductions, illegal detention, and diversion of aid, as well as other kinds of interferences into operations. Some aid operations have also been forced to focus on certain areas for intervention and recipients of aid, violating humanitarian principles (OCHA 16/07/2020; OCHA 19/03/2020). Some operations were also hindered in Ansongo (Gao) and Anderamboukane (Ménaka) because of legislative election-related security incidents targeting election organisers. These risks forced many humanitarian actors to temporarily disrupt activities during the election period from the end of April to mid-May (OCHA 16/07/2020).

Another constraint that some humanitarian organisations have faced in Ténenkou and Youwarou Cercles (Mopti region) is a restriction on mixed gender operations (it is unclear which groups have imposed these restrictions); this may have limited women's use of services and may hinder medical aid provision, as many nurses are women. Programming on education, gender-based violence, and reproductive health has also been restricted in Té-

nenkou and Youwarou Cercles (OCHA 10/10/2019). Civilians and NSAGs have also interfered with humanitarian operations; for example during the selection of aid recipients or during the hiring process of humanitarian staff. Administrative procedures also constrain access: the UN requires its agencies and partners to only move around in armoured vehicles in Mopti, which restricts partners' activities if they do not have sufficient armoured vehicles in the region (OCHA 16/07/2020).

Growing caseloads of COVID-19 and government containment measures have restricted humanitarian activities – notably through mandatory personal distancing and restrictions on groups – slowing down operations and forcing the suspension of others, as well as raising costs. Operations based in Gao, Ménaka, and Kidal were limited to those deemed to be the most 'essential' (certain kinds of health services, for example). Some humanitarian UNHAS flights were cancelled or suspended, alongside MINUSMA flights, which particularly affected operations in Ménaka. Restrictions on groups also slowed down coordination activities (OCHA 16/07/2020).

Mali's border regions count several physical and security constraints that restrict or hinder humanitarian access. Insecurity has reduced the country's provision of public services (Africa News 29/08/2019; UNHCR 03/04/2020). Aid workers have been subject to violence and criminality, which prompted organisations to temporarily reduce or suspend operations – mainly in the northern regions but also in the border regions – in early 2020 (ECHO 21/01/2020). Roads and bridges are frequently targeted by armed actors, including the Route Nationale 15 (RN15) which connects Mopti to the rest of the country. IEDs are increasingly prevalent in central Mali, damaging key infrastructure such as the third Songho bridge on the RN15 – which was blown up on 25 March 2020, hampering access to Bandiagara, Koro, Bankass, and neighbouring Burkina Faso. Civilians are often victims of IEDs and landmines (UNHCR 31/07/2020; OCHA 16/07/2020; HRW 10/02/2020; OCHA 10/2018). In general, roads tend to be in bad condition throughout the country, which further hampers access to people in need – in particular people living in rural areas (NRC accessed 21/08/2020; OCHA 24/01/2020).

Flooding and heavy rainfall in 2020 in Gao and Mopti also hindered access to people in need (OCHA 21/07/2020; OCHA 16/07/2020).

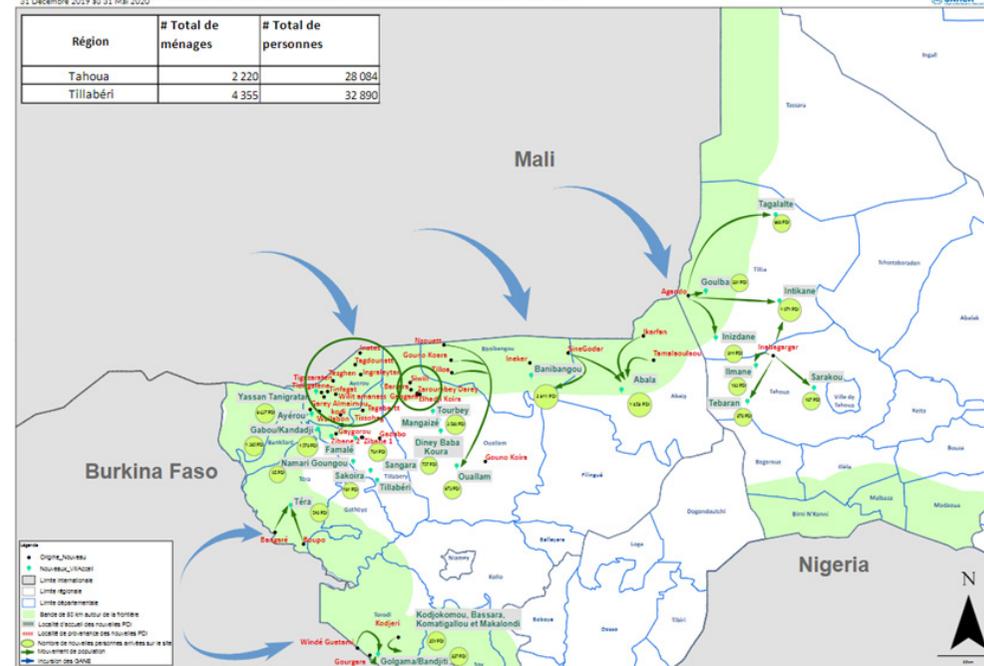
## CMCoord

Military and peacekeeping actors in Mali carry out coordination with humanitarian organisations through the UN-led CMCoord cell. These actors include the Malian Armed Forces, the French Army (through operation Barkhane), G5 forces (the anti-terrorism coalition of forces from Niger, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso), MINUSMA, and the European Union Training Mission (a coalition of 27 European forces which aims to train Malian forces and contribute to existing operations; it also undertakes some assistance work, notably in education). Key humanitarian stakeholders are OCHA (which manages CMCoord on humanitarian operations), the WFP (which manages CMCoord on logistics), and UNDSS (which manages CMCoord on security) (OCHA accessed 14/08/2020). A legal framework for engaging with all armed groups does not exist; this is hampered by a lack of hierarchy within armed groups and their fluid movement, which has made negotiation and engagement difficult (anonymous source).

OCHA organises meetings with as well as trainings for military actors to ensure that programmes and the principles of humanitarian engagement are communicated to them. Another goal is to ensure that the perceived neutrality and independence of humanitarian aid is not compromised; for example, when humanitarian organisations are required to use mandatory armed escorts, or where there is confusion over the distinction between humanitarian and military personnel in operations. OCHA and UNDSS communicate with the wider humanitarian community and the UN OCHA Logistics Cluster on a weekly basis (OCHA 22/07/2013). The national cell also includes Humanitarian Affairs Officers in Mopti, Timbuktu, Kayes, Gao, and Kidal regions, who act as representatives of CMCoord, collect information relevant to CMCoord, and set up regional UN-CMCoord cells (OCHA accessed 14/08/2020).

UN-CMCoord cell meetings with military actors occur on a weekly basis. Deconfliction – a communication mechanism to rapidly share important operational information with humanitarian organisations – and securitisation of strategic roads and bridges in Mopti (carried out with the support of CMCoord, MINUSMA, Malian Armed forces, and communal leaders) was successful in ensuring six joint inter-agency missions (facilitated by OCHA) without military escorts. These took place in Douentza, Koro, Bankass, Djenné, Bankass, and Ogossagou over the last three months of 2019 (OCHA 16/07/2020). Local CMCoord activities, which tend to be less formal, also take place: for instance, when aid workers were targeted by violence in early 2020 in Ménaka, humanitarian organisations negotiated with security forces and local leaders to establish their safe access (ECHO 21/01/2020).

NIGER - REGION DE TILLABÉRI ET TAHOUA: SITUATION ACTUELLE - RECENTS MOUVEMENTS DE POPULATIONS



Map source: UNHCR 10/06/2020

## NIGER

### Humanitarian crises

Conflict between national and international forces and NSAGs in Mali's northern and central regions has been spreading into Niger's Tahoua and Tillabéri regions since 2012; this has translated into collateral and targeted civilian deaths and damage to civilian infrastructure (OCHA 2020; ICG 03/06/2020). Violence in Liptako Gourma has driven over 140,000 Nigeriens into internal displacement (IOM 31/12/2021). Over 59,000 Malian refugees and close to 4,000 Burkinabe refugees also reside in the two regions (UNHCR 24/12/2020). Displaced populations, refugees, asylum seekers, and IDPs have high levels of needs; they often choose to move because humanitarian organisations cannot access their areas of origin. IDPs and host communities are frequently ambushed and subjected to targeted violence, extorted, or kidnapped for ransom, as well as having their livelihoods (cattle) looted. NSAGs have been forcing villages to close their schools in some departments of Tillabéri (OCHA 31/07/2020). IEDs are used in the region, often resulting in civilian deaths. The increasingly limited space available for humanitarian operations in the region and growing needs among the people

who live there are two trends that are likely to worsen the challenges facing the border regions, exposing populations to more and more protection violations, preventable diseases, and food insecurity (OCHA 31/07/2020). Humanitarian organisations' increasingly restricted movement is partially driven by respective 'states of emergencies' in the two regions, which were first declared in March 2017 and renewed every three months (Niamey et les 2 Jours 18/06/2020). These restrict free circulation and enforce curfews.

Heavy rainfall and flooding have affected around 516,000 people across the country since July 2020. 69 people died as a result of flooding, which also damaged and destroyed infrastructure and livelihoods, including close to 43,000 houses and 15,700 hectares of farmland (OCHA accessed 24/09/2020). Flooding also damaged roads, potentially impeding access to people in need (Floodlist 10/09/2020).

### National and international response

More than 173 humanitarian actors are operational across the country in ten sectors (including coordination), supporting government organs such as the Nigerien Ministry of Health (OCHA accessed 07/07/2020). The majority are national NGOs (83), while 74 are INGOs, 12 are UN agencies, and seven are Red Cross movements. 144 organisations are based in Tillabéri, Tahoua, and Niamey (OCHA 04/06/2020).

### Humanitarian access constraints

From 19 March 2020, the Nigerien Government put in place several measures to contain the spread of COVID-19. These included the closing of Niger's national land and air borders. As at 21 August, only two land entrances were accessible – Makalondi and Gaya, both in Tillabéri – allowing imports from neighbouring countries like Burkina Faso and Benin to pass into Niger. Although air traffic has resumed at all of the country's seven airports, land restrictions may inhibit cross-border trade as well as the movement of people seeking refuge from neighbouring countries, although some cross-border movement has been reported (IOM 08/2020; French Foreign Ministry accessed 27/01/2021). Strictly enforced curfews because of regional 'states of emergency' also likely obstruct people's livelihoods and access to basic goods (Le Monde 24/08/2020). There have been no reports of humanitarian exemptions for government COVID-19 containment restrictions.

Humanitarian actors are restricted in their access because of the unpredictable and volatile security situation, which has made access to several departments difficult to ensure (OCHA 31/07/2020). NSAGs (which include Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, and Ansarul Islam) do not have consistent, long-term control over large territories in Niger's Tillabéri and Tahoua regions and operate from across the border (OCHA 31/07/2020). Their activity has increasingly restricted humanitarian organisations' operating

space, however. Armed groups have also targeted public infrastructure, destroying schools, stealing cattle, looting shops, and killing mayors and local leaders along border areas (UNHCR 31/07/2020; OCHA 31/07/2020). Another impediment in Tillabéri, which may slow down or stop operations, is the presence of military checkpoints in areas with humanitarian needs (Freedom House accessed 15/09/2020).

Since the start of 2020, NSAG activity along Niger's border region has increasingly restricted the humanitarian operational space: humanitarian actors can no longer access certain areas that are deemed highly insecure and which have a high risk of being ambushed. National NGOs and INGOs face continued threats of kidnapping, alongside theft, assassination, administrative impediments, and interference in programming (anonymous source). Defence and security forces abandoned some military positions after heavy NSAG attacks, driving a resurgence of attacks on civilians in those areas. This has restricted people's access to services, as well as limiting humanitarian organisations' access to people in need (UNHCR 18/08/2020).

Humanitarian organisations face reduced access because of a persistent lack of funding, lack of trained personnel, and restrictions stemming from organisations' own internal regulations. Another limitation to access is the lack of female involvement in field activities and discussions, which may restrict strategies by excluding considerations of women's and girls' particular needs – further placing them out of reach (anonymous source).

On 2 September, the Nigerien government imposed a requirement for armed escorts for diplomatic missions and international organisations travelling outside of major urban centres. UN agencies in Tahoua suspended operations because of this requirement. A clarification on the implementation of this requirement from Tillabéri's Governor facilitated humanitarian travel along main roads linking the city of Tillabéri with the region's major departments (OCHA 16/10/2020; OCHA 21/12/2020). Previous regional escort requirements in the country led to the cancellation of some humanitarian operations, while other humanitarian actors were able to negotiate exemptions (Ministerial Round Table on the Central Sahel 11/10/2020; ECHO accessed 11/01/2020; UNHCR 18/08/2020).

Niger's rainy season runs from July–August and frequently results in impeded access to already limited roads and telecommunications networks (OCHA 14/01/2020; AA 26/11/2019). The 2020 rainy season hampered military and humanitarian access to certain conflict-affected regions across Tillabéri and Tahoua's northern areas, as extensive sections of roads became inaccessible because of flooding, quicksand, and erosion (150km of road along the Ballayara-Banibangou road, 150km along the Ouallam-Banibangou road, the Torodi road towards villages around the Sirba area, and roads leading to Téra and Goroul communes) (UNHCR 18/08/2020; OCHA 31/07/2020; OCHA 31/07/2020).



## CMCoord

Military forces in Niger – including the Nigerien Forces de Défense et Sécurité, G5 Sahel forces, Nigerien anti-terrorism forces as part of Operation Dongo, and French Barkhane forces (among other international forces) – coordinate with humanitarian actors through the OCHA-facilitated UN-CMCoord cell, which is part of the Humanitarian Country Team's platform. The national-level CMCoord cell also comprises an access working group and operational-level CMCoord cells for Diffa, Tahoua, and Tillabéri regions. At the national and strategic level, CMCoord activities – which aim to ensure 'coexistence' between humanitarian and military actors that oppose outright collaboration – work towards securing access to people in need. The Liptako Gourma UN-CMCoord operational cell was set up in 2018 after some years of increased international and national military activity in the area among an increasingly complex variety of actors. Dialogue with NSAGs is restricted, so official UN-CMCoord cannot pursue negotiations with these actors (anonymous source).

UN-CMCoord activities include undertaking negotiation, advocacy, and trainings for stakeholders, and holding working group activities and dialogues between key military actors, NGO and INGO stakeholders, UN personnel, cluster representatives, donor representatives, and embassy personnel. National meetings are held once a month, while regional meetings are held weekly or as frequently as necessary. These meetings are used to coordinate operational strategy and discuss potential recourse to using military equipment; to clarify the differing mandates of military and humanitarian work; and to coordinate strategies for ensuring a distinction between humanitarian and military actors during operations (for instance, military officials must wear their uniforms) (anonymous source).

Other activities include monitoring and analysis of the access situation and alerting humanitarian operators of any impending or ongoing military operations (it is unclear how regularly this occurs), and vice-versa. Schedules are shared four days in advance of any field activity (anonymous source).

A high-level platform was inaugurated in early 2020, with its first meeting taking place on 21 August 2020 in Kouré – 13 days after an attack on eight ACTED workers and a guide in the same area. It was attended by government, humanitarian, and military personnel and aimed to produce an official national humanitarian access strategy (anonymous source).

OCHA facilitated 562 humanitarian missions in the region during November 2020 (OCHA 21/12/2020). In Tillabéri and Tahoua, civilian-military requirements are respected by humanitarian actors, which has ensured better humanitarian access in some areas. In other areas however, this has meant that certain zones are off-limits to humanitarian organisations because of heightened security risks. Access to communes in Tahoua on the border with Mali is forbidden. In Tillabéri, access to Banibangou, Abala, and Bankilaré is not possible fol-

lowing a clarification by the region's governor on the implementation of mandatory escorts (OCHA 16/10/2020). NGO actors continue operating in the field however, while respecting procedures established by regional authorities (OCHA 21/12/2020). The imposition of military escorts is a major point of negotiation for humanitarian and military organisations, as it violates humanitarian principles of neutrality and independence – and hampers civilians' access to aid and responders' security. NSAGs have targeted civilians who are suspected of having cooperated with military and police forces (UNHCR 18/08/2020).

## GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The tri-border region where Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali meet is a volatile area where military operations, attacks from NSAGs, civilian displacement, and poor infrastructure challenge humanitarian access, including the access of people in need to public services and assistance. The three countries are different in many respects, however: administrative restrictions vary, as do the components of each country's 'state of emergency' (for example, the enforcement of mandatory military escorts) and COVID-19 containment restrictions. The composition and presence of NSAGs also varies, as does the level and extent of insecurity. The history of humanitarian assistance in the three countries as well as aid organisations' associations with government also vary – which may drive increased targeting of aid organisations by NSAGs. Humanitarian resources and funding are also distinct across Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali. Formal or informal CMCoord mechanisms have helped ensure some humanitarian access in certain areas; however, other access restrictions – related to poor or destroyed road or service delivery infrastructure, sudden-onset disasters like heavy rains and flooding, and administrative restrictions – still hamper the free circulation of aid to people in need. CMCoord in the region, although demonstrating some inter-communication, negotiates varying conditions in the three countries, including different requirements for armed escorts or reinforced vehicles, or distinct curfews. This could make integrated CMCoord activity in the border regions – where forced displacement is frequent and where needs are similar – difficult to ensure. A lack of information on CMCoord in Burkina Faso may also pose difficulties for humanitarian actors, who may not have a direct channel of information on military activities or of requirements in conflict areas.