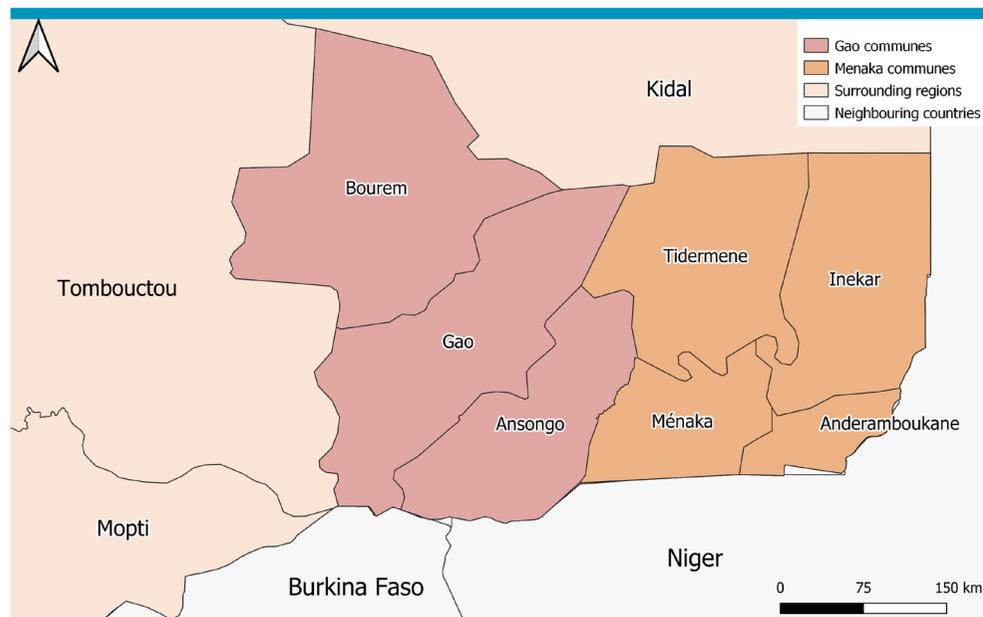


Mali: Gao and Ménaka regions



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KEY MESSAGES

- Since the beginning of 2022, Ménaka and Gao regions in Mali, along with the tri-border regions in Niger and Burkina Faso, have been experiencing an escalation of violence caused by the territorial expansion interests of non-state armed groups.
- Recent confrontations have increased incidences of violence, killing hundreds of civilians. The exact number is still unknown.
- As at 3 June, around 54,000 people (9,000 households) from Ménaka and Gao, as well as 16,000 refugees from Niger, have been displaced internally or to western Niger (OCHA 13/06/2022; ECHO 17/03/2022). IDPs are living in makeshift shelters in overcrowded conditions and need protection, shelter, food, and other basic services.
- Insecurity and direct attacks against humanitarian workers have been constraining the humanitarian response.

CRISIS OVERVIEW

Non-state armed groups have launched an offensive in the north of the country to take advantage of the current context of political instability, the withdrawal of military troops from conflict zones, and the weakness of the UN stabilisation mission in Mali. Their goal is to expand their territorial control on the border between Mali and Niger (France24 24/05/2022). Since March 2022, groups aligned with the Islamic State have increased operations targeting security forces, self-defence groups, and civilians in Gao and Ménaka (Crisis24 28/03/2022; Long War Journal 25/03/2022). They have been fighting intermittently since (Le Monde 16/03/2022; Long War Journal 25/03/2022).

The fighting comes during a period of political crisis in Mali after two military coups (one in August 2020 and another in May 2021). There are accusations of the new Government persecuting opponents and independent media (HRW accessed 15/06/2022; Crisis Group 25/05/2022). The Government has also refused to commit to a date for democratic elections, which has resulted in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposing trade restrictions on Mali (Crisis Group 25/05/2022).

With the new Government, relations with France have begun to deteriorate. France has had a military operation (Operation Barkhane) in Mali since 2014. In January 2022, the Government of Mali expelled the French ambassador in Bamako from the country (Reuters 31/01/2022). Subsequently, protests flared in Bamako against France and the EU for sanctions imposed on members of the Government (Reuters 05/02/2022). At the same time, the Government of Mali has brought private military and security companies into the country, including the Russian Wagner Group, which France and other countries have rejected (Crisis Group 25/05/2022; The Washington Post 09/03/2022; Foreign Policy Institute 10/03/2022). In February 2022, France announced the withdrawal of its troops from Operation Barkhane after official request by Government of Mali (Crisis Group accessed 14/06/2022; The New York Times 17/02/2022). On 13 June 2022, France handed back the military base in Ménaka and withdrew its troops (AfricaNews 14/06/2022). Other European countries with a military presence in Mali through the Takuba European Operation have also started withdrawing (Atlantic Council 07/06/2022; France24 28/01/2022).

The Government has also placed restrictions on the operations of MINUSMA, the UN stabilisation mission in the country. These restrictions have prevented MINUSMA from investigating incidences of violence in certain areas – specifically the accusations of Malian security forces and private security contractors killing civilians and enforcing arbitrary detentions (La Razón 13/06/2022; The Guardian 04/05/2022).

As a result of the fighting, as at 3 June, around 54,000 people (9,000 households) from Ménaka and Gao and 16,000 refugees from Niger residing in these regions had been displaced internally, including in Andéramboukane, Inékar, and Iguizragane, or across the border to the village of Abala in western Niger (OCHA 13/06/2022; ECHO 17/03/2022). Hundreds of civilians have died, although the exact number remains unknown (NRC 08/06/2022; UN 13/06/2022). Armed groups have burned and looted houses, markets, and vehicles, and some pastoralists have reported cases of theft or their animals being killed in the fighting (OCHA 13/06/2022; DW 11/06/2022; Long War Journal 25/03/2022). Displaced people need shelter and NFIs. Those remaining in Ménaka are at risk of attacks from armed groups, and violence has affected their livelihoods (OCHA 13/06/2022; allAfrica 11/06/2022). Increased fighting and attacks on civilians have also restricted humanitarian access, preventing assessments. As a result, the actual number of people affected is unknown (OCHA 13/06/2022).

At the end of 2021, there were around 350,000 IDPs in Mali. 93% of them (326,000 people) were displaced because of conflict and violence; the remaining 24,000 were displaced by natural disasters. IDPs live in informal settlements or crowded homes with host families (IDMC 19/05/2022). While there are no assessments that determine where these refugees are, some estimates show that the vast majority remain in the homes of relatives or acquaintances (ICRC 05/2022; IDMC/NRC 2020). In the past, host communities have reported a reduction in their financial resources as a result of the care they provide to the displaced (OCHA 26/04/2021; ICRC 05/2022). The crisis in the country began in early 2012, when a Tuareg separatist group (the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l'Azawad), with the backing of a coalition of Islamist groups, took over the control of part of northern Mali, declaring the independence of a region they have named Azawad (CFR 12/05/2022; DW 30/03/2022).

ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

According to the UNSG Special Representative in Mali, the withdrawal of French troops would increase the likelihood of armed groups taking over certain areas of Ménaka, leaving the civilian population more insecure (The Daily Star 14/06/2022; France24 13/06/2022). In the vacuum left by the Barkhane and Takuba operations, as well as the weakness of the MINUSMA mission, there will likely be an increase in violence against civilians and clashes between armed groups in the coming weeks.

HUMANITARIAN CONSTRAINTS

The fact that violence has remained intermittent since March means that it has not been possible to move forward with assessments to determine the needs of the displaced population and the population remaining in the area. Information is still scarce, and details on humanitarian needs are lacking.

As at March 2022, the situation in the tri-border area between Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger had considerably deteriorated, particularly in Ansongo, Talataye, and Tessit communes in Gao region, and Ménaka region (The Arab Weekly 01/04/2022). Insecurity in the area and attacks on humanitarian personnel and goods have reduced humanitarian space and created barriers to providing assistance to the affected population (OCHA 13/06/2022).

DISPLACEMENT

Displacement in Ménaka

IDPs have been taking shelter in Ménaka town with families, friends, or host community members. Others are living in makeshift shelters in overcrowded conditions (NRC 08/06/2022; UN 13/06/2022). The displaced population needs shelter and food (OCHA 13/06/2022).

There are an estimated 16,000 refugees from Niger in Ménaka; most of them are staying in spontaneous sites created nearby Ménaka commune or with host families. Others are in administrative buildings (OCHA 15/06/2022). Most refugees are women and children, and they lack food and water, NFIs, and access to basic services (such as healthcare and education) (UNHCR accessed 13/06/2022 and 04/05/2022).

Displacement from Ménaka to neighbouring countries

Between January and mid-April 2022, Niger registered more than 36,000 new arrivals from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria (UNHCR 04/05/2022). Some IDPs displaced by violence in Gao and Ménaka are arriving in Niger. In January 2022, there were nearly 50,000 Malian refugees in Niger; by May, this number had increased to 62,000 (UNHCR 17/02/2022; UNHCR accessed 15/06/2022). The refugees from Ménaka and Gao regions are arriving and settling in some of Niger's driest areas, making their situation even more precarious. These areas will likely face a poor 2022 farming season because of drought, which can put refugees at risk of food insecurity and malnutrition (UNHCR 04/05/2022).

HUMANITARIAN IMPACT

Protection needs

The number of people killed by the conflict in Ménaka is unknown. Some sources mention that between 300–400 people died in the northern regions of Mali in March (Long Wars 25/03/2022; AfricaNews 01/04/2022). Armed groups and military forces involved in the conflict in the region have targeted civilians suspected of complicity with other armed groups, detaining them and performing mass executions (The Guardian 19/02/2022; HRW 05/04/2022 and 15/03/2022). There have also been cases of child recruitment (DoS accessed 15/06/2022). The population in Ménaka is at risk of related attacks when clashes occur. Some women have reported experiencing sexual abuse during incidences of escalating violence (DW 11/06/2022). Civilians in the affected region need protection against human rights violations, and survivors of violence and gender-based violence require psychological support and healthcare.

Food needs

The population of the communes of Tidermene (6,690 people) and Ménaka (27,920 people) in Ménaka region is projected to face Emergency (IPC Phase 4) food insecurity between June–August 2022 (OCHA accessed 14/06/2020; IPC 03/03/2022). During this period, the population of the communes of Ansongo (37,080 people), Gao (106,430), and Bourem (35,270 people) in Gao region and Anderamboukane (22,290 people) in Ménaka region is projected to experience Crisis (IPC Phase 3) food insecurity (OCHA accessed 14/06/2022; IPC 03/03/2022). Acute malnutrition levels have been increasing since 2017 as a result of the conflict (IPC 03/03/2022). The violence unleashed since March may contribute to this outcome or further aggravate the food security conditions of part of the population in the regions, as displacement and insecurity prevent people from engaging in agricultural activities.

Livelihoods needs

Armed groups have been looting markets and houses. People have reported cases of theft, the killing of animals, and the burning of land (DW 11/06/2022; allAfrica 11/06/2022). These incidences imply a disruption to livelihood activities related to trade, agriculture, pastoralism, and livestock farming (UN SC 13/06/2022). Livestock farming is one of the main economic activities in Mali, with close to 80% of the population making a living in this industry (Bulletin accessed 13/06/2022). Violence in northern regions has affected livestock during previous years (WB 31/03/2022). Part of the population in northern Mali also practises subsistence

livestock farming; the burning of land and violence may be affecting crops and the harvest of farmers and nomadic populations living between different territories (OECD accessed 13/06/2022; Enact Africa 08/12/2020).

WASH needs

Over 55% of the population in Ménaka region has no access to water (OCHA 14/02/2022). Displacement further limits people's access to water and WASH facilities. Host families and schools require water supply systems, as well as latrines and showers (OCHA 13/06/2022).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Political instability: Mali has been under two military coups since August 2020, when the army evicted the elected president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (Crisis Group 25/05/2022). The Government of Mali does not have control over Ménaka region; various armed groups dispute the territorial and social control of certain areas (The Defense Post 08/06/2022). The country has been postponing elections, leading to sanctions and negative reactions from the international community (including France and the US) (Voanews 09/06/2022).

Economic sanctions: currently, Mali is facing sanctions from its regional partners in ECOWAS as it did not meet the February 2022 deadline for elections (AfricaNews 12/06/2022). The sanctions include the closure of members' land and air borders with Mali, the suspension of non-essential financial transactions, and the freezing of Malian state assets in ECOWAS central and commercial banks. There is an exception granted for essential items (food, medicines, health equipment, fuel, and electricity), but it is not clear if the border closure and sanctions will have a significant impact on food security in the coming months (WFP 31/03/2022; Al Jazeera 09/01/2022).

Food security: acute malnutrition levels are critical in the regions of Diema, Koro, Ménaka, Nioro, and Tidermene. As at October 2021, malnutrition levels were serious to critical in Ménaka region. Insecurity, intercommunal violence, and people's movement limit the provision of services to people in need (IPC 03/03/2022). Gao is also experiencing a serious level of malnutrition, especially among children, partly because of poor food quality (resulting from the inappropriate feeding practices of young children), the high prevalence of childhood diseases, and a resurgence of measles outbreaks. Across Mali, an estimated 1.8 million people are projected to experience Crisis (IPC Phase 3) food insecurity or worse. A further 4.4 million are projected to face Stressed (IPC Phase 2) food insecurity and be at risk of becoming severely food insecure (WFP 31/03/2022). Over 1.2 million children under the age of five will likely be acutely malnourished through August 2022, given the high levels of food insecurity, diseases, poor hygiene, and a lack of access to adequate sanitation

(IPC 03/03/2022). Worsening food insecurity is the result of insecurity, political instability, and the weak economy of the country. The displacement of people caused by conflict also constrains the delivery of basic social services, particularly in the regions of Gao, Ménaka, Mopti, and Ségou (IPC 03/03/2022). A significant increase in food prices affects vulnerable communities access to food and put them at risk of food insecurity (Togo First 09/06/2022; FEWS NET 31/05/2022; WFP 31/03/2022).

Pre-existing poverty: poverty levels in Mali are high, especially in the central and northern regions where insecurity levels are high. Around 45% of the population lives below the poverty line. The population of Mali has been facing a multidimensional and complex crisis since 2012. Aside from poor harvests, insecurity also limits people's access to their farms and related livelihood opportunities (Care 04/11/2021; WB 24/05/2022; Acted accessed 14/06/2022).

RESPONSE CAPACITY

The humanitarian community has been responding to humanitarian needs in Ménaka. According to OCHA, there are 39 active UN agencies, INGOs, and NGOs operating in eight different clusters within the region (OCHA accessed 15/06/2022). Organisations have started a response on food assistance, WASH, health, shelter, and NFIs. Despite active efforts, there are significant gaps in terms of shelter and NFIs, the transport of emergency inputs, and WASH for both IDPs and host communities (OCHA 13/06/2022).