

MALI'S HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

OVERMILITARIZED AND OVERSHADOWED

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Cover Photo: A Fulani woman poses while she prepares a meal for her children in camp for internally displaced people set up on the outskirts of Bamako. Photo by MICHELE CATTANI/AFP via Getty Images

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SUMMARY

Mali has been the scene of perpetual conflict and displacement for nearly eight years. In January 2012, tensions in the marginalized north came to a head when rebels took over almost a third of the country. Frustrated over the government's failure to quash the rebellion, soldiers in the capital city of Bamako overthrew the president. As a mix of rebels and terrorist groups moved south toward the capital, France intervened and was subsequently joined by African Union forces. Shortly thereafter, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was launched. Together, these interventions have restored some semblance of peace and government control, but the country's northern and central regions remain trapped in cycles of violence.

In 2015, months of difficult negotiations between the Malian government and coalitions of armed groups culminated in the Agreement of Peace and Reconciliation. The accord offered hope for investment in the north, the decentralization of authority and service provision, and improved governance, but much of its promise remains undelivered. International troop contributors and donor governments continue struggling to present a unified front and convince the Malian government to fulfill its responsibilities under the peace deal or expand its authority in rural areas. As a result, the government in Bamako runs the very real risk of further marginalizing and alienating communities outside of the capital.

Nearly eight years after the onset of the crisis, the international community remains heavily focused on stabilization and counterterrorism, at times to the detriment of the worsening humanitarian situation. As insurgent violence in the north rages on, anti-government elements have spread south into central Mali, where they have exacerbated intercommunal tensions and dissatisfaction with the Malian government, dividing communities and breeding violence. As this trend continues, the number of Malians displaced by violence continues to climb. As of October 2019, 199,385 Malians were internally displaced,¹ compared to 38,000 only two years ago.²

On their part, humanitarian organizations struggle to effectively provide for the 3.2 million Malians in need of assistance this year alone.³ Aid efforts are hindered by underfunding and the complex security environment. However, opportunities exist at the local level to broker access to communities in need. Although humanitarians can do little to mitigate certain threats—particularly those posed by terrorists or kidnappers—they can improve access to certain areas through highly localized negotiations with community power brokers.

Similarly, security actors like MINUSMA struggle to gain and maintain the trust of communities. Their use of Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) to build community support has blurred the lines between the international stabilization presence and humanitarian actors. UN peacekeepers and humanitarians must strengthen civil-military coordination as part of a wider effort to more clearly delineate and communicate their roles and responsibilities to the communities in which they

1. Commission Mouvement de Populations, "Rapport sur les mouvements de populations," November 21, 2019, accessed December 3, 2019, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/rapport_cmp_21_novembre_2019.pdf

2. International Displacement Monitoring Center, "Mali," accessed December 3, 2019, <http://www.internal-displacement.org/countries/mali>.

3. UNOCHA, "2019 Plan de réponse humanitaire," December, 2018, accessed December 3, 2019, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/mali_hrp2019_version_finale_1.pdf.

operate. These efforts are essential if humanitarians are to build the acceptance and maintain the neutrality required to access populations in crisis.

There is no purely military solution to the crisis in Mali. In addition, though international humanitarian aid must be strengthened, Mali's citizens also require a government willing and able to meet the needs of its people. The state must address the grievances at the root of the conflict and implement the terms of the peace agreement in a timely and transparent fashion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Malian government must do the following:

- **Create a public and binding roadmap and budget to implement government commitments under the 2015 Agreement of Peace and Reconciliation.** Years after the agreement's signing, the government has implemented very few of its terms. The government must lead a more concerted and transparent effort to implement its provisions successfully, especially as they relate to the decades-old promise to decentralize state authority and service provision.
- **Strengthen independent oversight of the peace agreement.** The Monitoring Committee—the body composed of Algerian diplomats and the peace deal's signatories—is responsible for monitoring the peace accord and must strengthen its oversight of the agreement's implementation. When necessary, it must challenge the government and signatory groups regarding noncompliance.

UN humanitarian and peacekeeping leadership must do the following:

- **Finalize and adopt a country-wide Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) protection strategy.** As Mali's protection crisis worsens, the HCT has agreed to develop a strategy that identifies priority protection risks for high-level mobilization of efforts and funds; anticipated activities; progress indicators; and steps to prevent, mitigate, and address violations, such as trauma and gender-based violence.
- **Finalize and adopt a country-wide internally displaced people (IDP) strategy.** Under the leadership of the Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator, a task force has been created to draft this IDP strategy. Once finalized, it must be endorsed by the HCT without delay.
- **The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) should strengthen its civil-military coordination.** OCHA must, with donor support, make civil-military coordination positions long term, for deployment in Mali's central and northern regions.
- **MINUSMA should better coordinate its QIPs with humanitarian actors.** Through Local Project Review Committees, MINUSMA and OCHA must improve coordination processes to ensure that humanitarian groups are aware of planning and promote a clear delineation between humanitarian and military support.
- **UN troop-contributing countries should stop providing relief aid to communities via their peacekeeping contingents.** The UN's Department of Peace Operations (DPO) should inform troop-contributing countries that contingents may not directly provide aid to local communities independent of the QIPs program.

Humanitarian organizations must do the following:

- **Adopt a more localized approach to humanitarian access negotiations.** Negotiating humanitarian access in Mali requires actors to consider local conflict dynamics, cultural practices, community grievances, and the ambitions of leaders and armed groups.

Donor governments and international organizations must do the following:

- **Establish an international contact group of key international donors and institutions.** To incentivize the Malian government to fulfill its responsibilities to implement the terms of the peace deal, the international community must develop a shared agenda, priorities, and a plan for engagement with the government.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

A Refugees International team traveled to Mali in September 2019 to assess the effectiveness of the humanitarian response regarding coordination and implementation. Team members conducted interviews with representatives of UN aid agencies, the UN peacekeeping mission, the Malian government, foreign embassies, and local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

BACKGROUND

Mali has a long history of ethnic tensions and division between the north and south of the country. Populations in the north have long-standing grievances rooted in a history of marginalization and disputes over land, water, and grazing rights. Militant groups have exploited both of these grievances and the state's weakness to spread fear and violence.

In January 2012, groups of armed Tuaregs—a semi-nomadic ethnic minority in northern Mali—made common cause with a loose-knit group of extremist groups to seize control of the north. Together, they declared the establishment of the independent state of “Azawad.” Shortly thereafter, jihadist groups wrested control of the northern rebellion from their former Tuareg partners.

As these events unfolded in the north, Malian soldiers revolted against the government's mishandling of the situation and ousted President Amadou Toumani Toure. The coup failed to stop the rebel groups from marching south toward the capital city of Bamako. As the city came under threat in early 2013, France intervened militarily, launching Operation Serval to block the militants' advance and retake control of the north. The French were joined by a mix of regional forces under the flag of the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA). Together, French and African

forces pushed out armed groups from key towns in the north. A ceasefire was brokered in 2013—allowing the election of President Ibrahim Boubacar Kéïta and the beginning of peace talks.

Operation Serval and AFISMA were followed by a string of additional security interventions: the French-led Operation Barkhane (2014–present); the UN's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) (2013–present), which absorbed AFISMA troops; a European Union training mission (2013–present); and the G5 Sahel Joint Force (2014–present), composed of troops from Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Chad, Niger, and Mali.

In 2015, the Malian government, the Coordination of Movements of Azawad (pro-separatist groups in northern Mali), and “the Platform” (pro-government groups in Northern Mali) signed the Agreement of Peace and Reconciliation. Nearly five years later, the Malian government has not fulfilled its promises to increase development in and autonomy for the north. For their part, the armed groups that signed the accord have largely failed to disarm and demobilize.

Over the last few years, intercommunal violence has broken out in the previously stable center of the country. Unlike northern Mali, the central and southern regions have



Source: ESRI

not traditionally seen armed rebellions. However, armed groups have recently moved into central Mali, exacerbating tensions between Dogon (pastoralist farmer) and Fulani (nomadic herder) communities over access to land and water. In 2018, these tensions gave way to hostilities. Both communities formed “self-defense” militias, which have engaged in attacks against civilian populations, resulting in widespread displacement.

Aid groups struggling to operate in the dangerous northern regions of Mali pivoted to the center to respond to the intercommunal violence. This move spread thin what was already a deeply challenged humanitarian response. As relief workers redeployed to the center, aid groups lost the

local presence required to negotiate access to high-risk northern communities.

RESTORING PEACE

Despite ongoing efforts to address the security and humanitarian consequences of the conflict, the crisis will continue to worsen if grievances are not addressed and the peace process is not reenergized. In May 2015, the Agreement of Peace and Reconciliation,⁴ called the “Bamako Agreement,” was adopted after months of negotiations in neighboring Algeria. The deal was signed by three parties: the government, the Coordination of Movements of Azawad (a coalition of

4. “Accord pour la paix et la réconciliation au Mali – Issu du processus d’Alger,” accessed December 3, 2019, <https://photos.state.gov/libraries/mali/328671/peace-accord-translations/1-accord-paix-et-reconciliation-francais.pdf>.

Arab and Tuareg groups seeking the independence of northern Mali), and the Platform (ostensibly supported by government actors). Despite being designed to usher in peace, very few of its terms have been implemented.

Over the last few years, fighting between signatories of the agreement has decreased, but armed groups continue to control much of the north and clash with other armed factions. Moreover, new armed groups have formed to the detriment of the peace process. These spoilers include self-defense groups, jihadist cells, and criminal organizations—some of which purportedly maintain ties with the signatories of the accord.

Since its signing, there have been six different iterations of national government leadership—numerous prime ministers and defense ministers have come and gone—hampering the already limited trust in the state. The promises of the peace accord have yet to be realized. Part of the problem is that the government has yet to dedicate resources to fund the accord's implementation. If the peace process is to have any real chance of success, the government must prepare and promulgate a public and binding roadmap and budget for each step of the agreement's implementation.

Five years on, the accord's Monitoring Committee continues its failure to oversee effective implementation of the peace accord. The Monitoring Committee must do more to thoroughly review progress, budgets, and spending, and challenge the government and signatory groups about their lack of adherence to the terms of the agreement.

The Bamako Agreement calls for the decentralization of power and service provision in northern Mali. Decentralization

is crucial to addressing the longstanding grievances of marginalized populations in the north. Although promised in the early 1990s, authority and resources have yet to trickle down to the local levels nearly 30 years later. As the World Bank embarks on its \$50 million project for the “Deployment of State Resources for Better Service Delivery” in Mali,⁵ there is hope for improvement over the coming year. The Malian government must ensure that its engagement on this project is both transparent and sustained over the long term to ensure that marginalization is not magnified.

In recent years, the conflict in Mali has evolved and spread to the center of the country. The peace process, however, was designed to address the crisis in the north. The Bamako Agreement clearly states that its terms “will be implemented primarily in the northern regions of Mali.”⁶ NGOs and civil society groups have done important work in the central regions of Mali to broker local-level peace deals. However, the government continues to avoid leading and taking ownership of initiatives vital to its peace prospects.

Risk of Substituting the State

Under its mandate, MINUSMA is tasked with assisting the Malian state to restore its authority in northern Mali. However, MINUSMA and the humanitarian community have often been forced to substitute for a weak state to meet the needs of local populations. As explained by a senior UN official, the international community is trapped in a “dangerous game of chicken.” For example, when a community is threatened or in need of relief, the government and the international community

5. World Bank, “International development association project appraisal document on a proposed grant in the amount of SDR36.1 million (US\$50 million equivalent) to the Republic of Mali for a deployment of state resources for better service delivery project,” accessed December 3, 2019, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/214081558922577300/pdf/Mali-Deployment-of-State-Resources-for-Better-Service-Delivery-Project.pdf>.

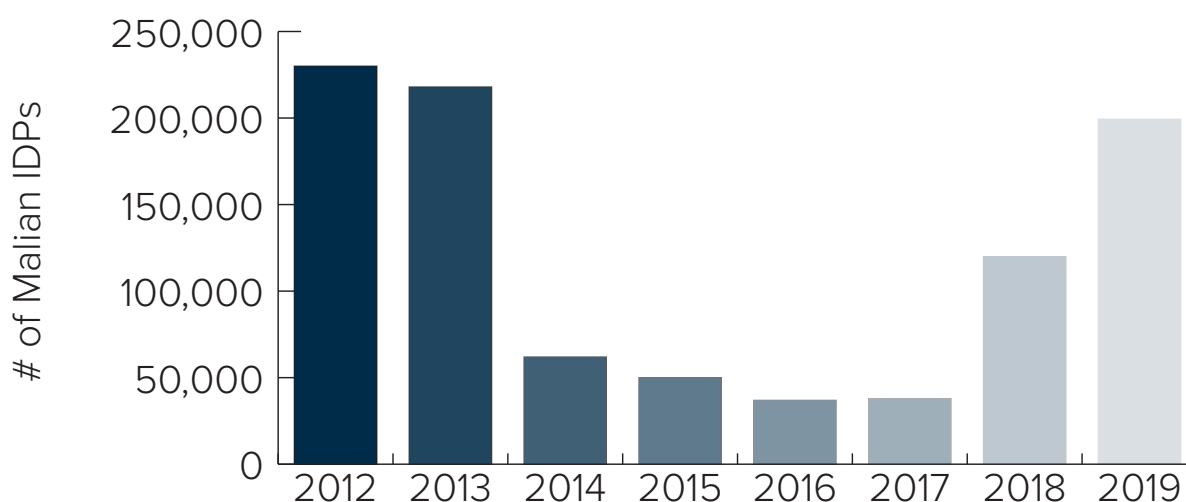
6. The original text in French is “seront mises en œuvre prioritairement dans les régions du Nord du Mali.”



An aerial shows an IDP camp in Faladie, right outside of Bamako. Photo Credit: MICHELE CATTANI/AFP via Getty Images



FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF INTERNALLY DISPLACED MALIANS FROM 2012-2019



While the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) has ebbed and flowed since 2012, there has been a sharp increase in recent years due to new cycles of violence or lack of humanitarian support.

each wait for the other to take action. In the vast majority of cases, it is the international community that blinks first, stepping in to avoid further deterioration.

In addition to meeting its responsibilities under the peace accord, the government of Mali should better provide for its people. This process should begin with affordable access to basic services and providing land to build displacement camps; however, very little is being done. A government employee explained that there has been a “dispossession of state responsibilities.” The lack of government action, increasing insecurity, and staggering gaps in service provision for its population all contribute to this phenomenon. As a UN representative explained, “the real war will be won by whoever wins over the population. And for now, the state is perceived to not even be trying.”

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-A UN REPRESENTATIVE

The country is on a dangerous trajectory. The plethora of international actors—from UN aid agencies to UN peacekeepers to regional and European militaries and humanitarian organizations—increasingly are fulfilling the responsibilities of the Malian state, which seems either unwilling or unable to provide for its citizens. The longer this problem persists, the harder it will be to rebuild state authority and trust in its institutions.

To better encourage the state to follow through on its obligations, the international stakeholder governments need to strengthen their leverage over the Malian government

through better internal coordination and greater unity of effort. One option would be to establish an international contact group of key donors and other international stakeholders to develop a shared agenda and list of priorities vis-à-vis the government. Such a group would have to identify the steps needed for relevant national actors to deliver a political solution, accelerate implementation of the peace accord, and address the spreading violence and worsening humanitarian needs.

THE OVERSHADOWED HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

Conflict in Mali has left 3.2 million of its 19.4 million citizens in need of humanitarian assistance in 2019.⁷ Over the years, the number of internally displaced people (IDPs) has ebbed and flowed (see graph above). Recent years have witnessed a sharp increase, from 38,000 in 2017⁸ to 199,385 as of October 2019.⁹ This year, 20,654 people¹⁰ were displaced in the month of July alone. Many IDPs have been repeatedly forced to move by new cycles of violence or a lack of humanitarian support.

As insecurity has spread in the center and south of the country, it has displaced populations in previously stable areas. Scores of IDPs are now arriving in the more southern cities of Ségou and Bamako. Many have

found refuge in public buildings, such as schools and health centers—thus interrupting regular provision of education and health services. Over the last seven years, more than 900 schools have been closed due to insecurity, lack of enrollment, or as structures have become displacement shelters.¹¹ Humanitarian groups are struggling to shift their approach from camp-like settings to address the needs of populations in densely populated cities.

The last seven years of violence have left much of Mali's population vulnerable. Communities are often targeted directly by armed groups or caught in the crossfire. An estimated 755,000 Malians require protection assistance in the face of this violence, or to deal with its consequences.¹² In this regard, the lack of psychosocial support in much of the country is deeply problematic. Between January and July 2019, protection specialists recorded 1,236 cases of human rights abuses and 2,021 gender-based violence cases.¹³ However, as protection actors cannot cover large sections of Mali, it is likely that the actual numbers are significantly higher.

The notable absence of state security forces and rule of law in much of the country allows the perpetrators of these abuses to operate largely with impunity. The use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) is increasing, resulting in more civilian casualties. As of July, 125 IED incidents had been reported since the beginning of 2019.¹⁴ The risk they pose slows down the delivery of aid in certain

7. "2019 Plan de réponse humanitaire"

8. "Mali."

9. Commission Mouvement de Populations, "Rapport sur les mouvements de populations," November 21, 2019, accessed December 3, 2019, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/rapport_cmp_21_novembre_2019.pdf

10. Commission Mouvement de Populations, "Rapport sur les mouvements de populations," August 8, 2019, accessed December 3, 2019, https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/rapport_cmp_08_aout_2019.pdf

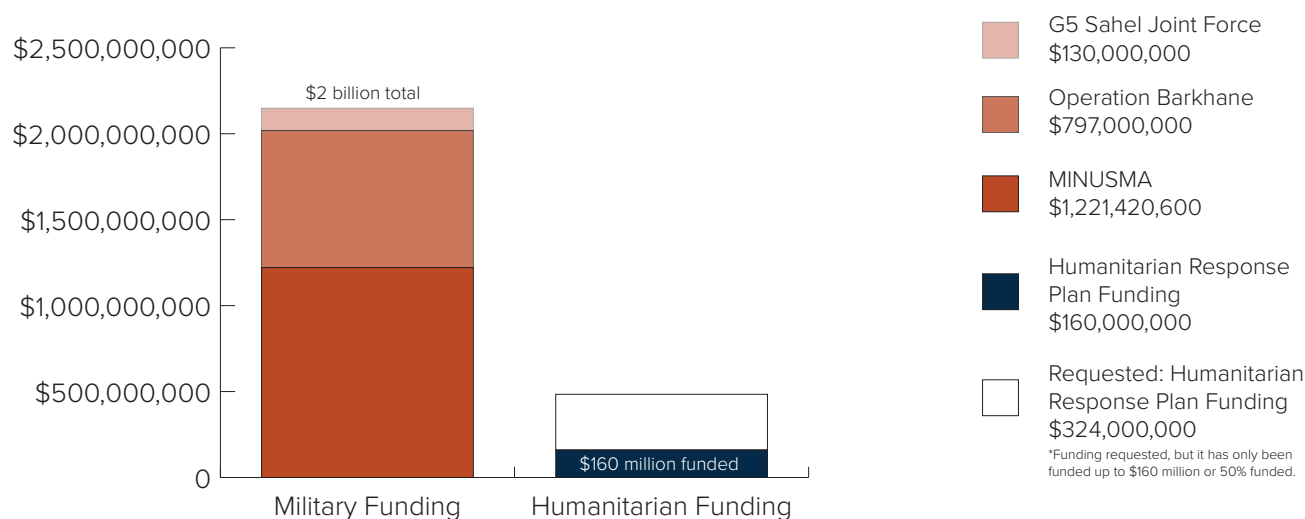
11. UNICEF, "School closures in West and Central Africa triple since 2017," accessed December 3, 2019, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/school-closures-west-and-central-africa-triple-2017>

12. "2019 Plan de réponse humanitaire"

13. UNOCHA, "Mali, rapport de situation dernière mise à jour," September 12, 2019, accessed December 3, 2019, <https://reports.unocha.org/fr/country/mali/>

14. "Mali, Rapport de Situation."

FIGURE 2: MILITARY VS. HUMANITARIAN FUNDING



In Mali, the military is funded at more than \$2 billion annually, whereas for 2019, the UN's Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) is only funded at \$160 million. Despite requesting \$324 million for Mali's 3.2 million people in need of humanitarian aid, this huge disparity between military and humanitarian funding persists.

areas and limits humanitarian access to populations in need.

Malians suffer as a result of insufficient attention given to the humanitarian consequences of this ongoing conflict. Despite escalating displacement and humanitarian needs, the collective bilateral and multilateral response to the crisis continues to be disproportionately focused on stabilization and counterterrorism efforts. A donor representative told Refugees International that this approach "makes sense on the level of global politics but does not help the Malians. There is no purely military solution to this crisis."

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The collective cost of the international forces tasked with stabilization and counterterrorism operations in Mali is more than \$2 billion annually. This number is astounding, especially when compared to the level of civilian assistance (see figure above). For 2019, the UN's Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP) called for \$324 million to provide for 3.2 million people in need of aid in Mali. To date, \$160 million

has been provided.¹⁵ This amount is less than 1 percent of the cost of foreign troop presence in the country. As the humanitarian situation continues to deteriorate, donors will need to increase or shift their commitments to adequately address the needs of the civilian population.

THE NEED FOR STRONGER HUMANITARIAN STRATEGIES

Lack of funding for relief activities is a significant problem. However, even with existing resources, the international humanitarian community in Mali can do more to organize and structure its collective response, particularly on matters of protection and internal displacement. The absence of finalized country-specific strategies for humanitarian protection, IDP response and localized access negotiation to coordinate and orient humanitarian actions is of grave concern.

Protection Strategy

For some time, the humanitarian response to protection concerns in Mali has been insufficient. Critical protection activities must be preventative, responsive, and remedial, and include identifying threats to vulnerable populations and their specific needs; ensuring their safe and dignified access to basic services; building on existing community protection strategies; and supporting access to health care, psychosocial support, and legal assistance.

Protection actors in Mali explained to Refugees International that their work is crippled by underfunding—having received only 17 percent of the \$37 million needed for a thorough protection response for 2019.¹⁶ However, in the past, the sector has also suffered from a lack of leadership, coordination, and technical expertise. Indeed, donors have flagged these issues in explaining why funding for protection has not been forthcoming.

Donors told Refugees International they were reluctant to fund protection responses in Mali because they felt there was a lack of in-country technical expertise. One donor explained that this dearth of expertise was apparent in the HRP for 2019 because the plan failed to provide a clear picture of how humanitarian actors would effectively carry out a thorough protection plan.

This lack of confidence is compounded by the lack of a formal protection strategy. Such strategies provide the Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) with clear steps to prevent, mitigate, and address violations; promote accountability to beneficiaries; and ensure that protection priorities are integrated in its decision making. Although the skeleton of such a strategy was created in 2018, the document was never fleshed out and, given the deterioration of the situation, most likely requires amendments. The HCT is expected to adopt this strategy in early 2020. Donors must make funding conditional on the adoption and implementation of such a strategy and an overall improvement of protection assistance countrywide.

Fortunately, the arrival of a Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator (DHC) and a Protection Cluster coordinator in Mali—the traditional humanitarian coordination platform

15. UNOCHA, Financial Tracking Service, “Humanitarian Aid Contributions,” accessed December 3, 2019, <https://fts.unocha.org>.

16. UNOCHA, Financial Tracking System, “Mali 2019 (Humanitarian Response Plan),” accessed December 3, 2019, <https://fts.unocha.org/appeals/716/clusters>.

comprising UN and non-UN humanitarian actors—has strengthened the prioritization and coordination of protection activities. As a result, the Protection Cluster has recently adopted a comprehensive Protection Strategy and Protection Action Plan and led a series of capacity-building activities in localities across the country. While these are welcome steps, more strategic planning and coordination is needed.

Going forward, the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General, Humanitarian Coordinator and Resident Coordinator (DSRSG/HC/RC) and Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator must ensure that the 2020 HRP features a stronger overview of protection concerns and goals. In addition, the HCT, with the help of the Protection Cluster, must prepare a formal protection strategy, which must offer a comprehensive overview of protection risks; anticipated activities; progress indicators; and steps to prevent, mitigate, and address violations. It must also prioritize more comprehensive protection monitoring in regions hit hard by conflict and strengthen mechanisms to ensure accountability.

Internally Displaced People Strategy

In the last three years, the number of internally displaced Malians has more than quadrupled—from 38,000 in 2017 to 187,139 as of September 2019—having doubled in 2019, adding new displacement to an already protracted crisis.^{17, 18} Many have been forced to relocate multiple times in the face of episodic violence or because they were pushed out of the schools or health centers in which they were sheltering. As a result, the displaced are beginning to travel greater distances, often moving to the southern parts of the country and the urban centers of

Bamako and Ségou. Despite the worsening trend lines, the Malian government and humanitarian groups alike lack a robust, coordinated, and coherent approach to the challenge of internal displacement.

In the last three years, the number of internally displaced Malians has more than quadrupled—from 38,000 in 2017 to 187,139 as of September 2019—having doubled in 2019, adding new displacement to an already protracted crisis.

The government is failing to effectively provide for internally displaced Malians despite its adoption of legal conventions and strategies aimed at better protecting IDPs. In 2010, Mali ratified the African Union Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in Africa (referred to as the Kampala Convention). This treaty calls for the prevention of such displacement, responses to it, and implementation of durable solutions for internally displaced Africans. It serves to ensure the accountability of the state in protecting the rights of its IDPs.

In 2015, the Malian government launched its own national IDP and returnee strategy. The strategy was praised for identifying the responsibilities of the government to collect and analyze data on displacement trends and assist IDPs and those returning home after having been displaced. However, the government has yet to operationalize its national IDP strategy. Mali's IDPs continue struggling to access basic services that should be provided by the state.

17. "Mali."

18. "Situation."

In an effort to improve its application of the convention, the Malian government created the Technical Committee for the Domestication of the Kampala Convention (CTDCK in French) in spring 2016. This committee is responsible for ratification of the Kampala Convention, requiring it to create and implement an action plan to enshrine the requirements of the convention into Malian law, promote adherence to it, and train government stakeholders on its terms.¹⁹ These efforts are still lagging, and the Malian government must redouble the efforts of the CTDCK's work to apply the Kampala Convention.

The government's Movement of Population Commission²⁰ (referred to under the French acronym CMP) is charged with collecting data on displacement trends. This information can provide at least a partial analytical basis for creation of the IDP strategy. However, the CMP has failed to capture some important data: for example, detailed information about the frequency of displacement for one individual. This lack could be remedied by more thorough registration of IDPs, along with the provision of identification cards. Such a system would allow the CMP to track individuals as populations move from one place to another.

Humanitarian groups must also strengthen their analysis of the trends and needs faced by IDPs, and their planning to improve their response. According to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee's Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons, it is good practice to create an IDP-specific strategy that identifies steps to address new and protracted displacement, the needs of the displaced, and how they differ from other populations. While there are reports that the HCT is in the process of creating a strategic

framework for a sustained response to situations of internal displacement, its completion and implementation must not be delayed. As insecurity spreads and low levels of assistance are causing IDP numbers to skyrocket, there is a lack of detailed data on how the gaps in assistance are driving populations to move. Identifying these gaps in the forthcoming strategy is necessary to overcome them. As populations increasingly arrive in Mali's southern urban centers (especially in Bamako and Ségou), more granular information on the needs of IDPs, who are spread around these heavily populated cities, will be required for a successful humanitarian response.

In a volatile context like that of Mali, inconsistencies in aid delivery can be extremely dangerous. Aid workers repeatedly told Refugees International that there are numerous discrepancies in how each relief organization assists those in need. An international humanitarian worker explained that in some areas, aid groups were distributing cash vouchers of differing amounts for people to buy food and goods at their local markets, an approach that has exacerbated tension inside the community. Organizations must standardize aid and service delivery in line with the Sphere Standards—guidelines that provide minimum requirements for aid provision in humanitarian crises.²¹

Localized Access Strategies

Given the highly granular nature of conflict in Mali, humanitarians must adopt a localized and context-specific approach to negotiating access with armed groups and communities in need. In each locality, traditional practices, local grievances, and community politics will impact if and how aid is delivered. These

19. République du Mali, "Décision n° 2016-0109/MSAHRN/SG portant création du Comité Technique de Domestication de la Convention de Kampala," April 28, 2016.

20. Called the "Commission Mouvement de Populations" in French.

21. For more information, see The Sphere Handbook: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response. (Geneva: The Sphere Association, 2018). <https://spherestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/Sphere-Handbook-2018-EN.pdf>.

access negotiations are time consuming, difficult, and uncertain. As alliances between armed groups shift, so do the regions they control. Thus, even successfully negotiated access may be highly temporal.

There is little doubt that the presence of certain armed groups—particularly those with a jihadist orientation—may block humanitarian access. However, a more localized approach would allow aid groups to better understand where their opportunities lie. For example, an international NGO staff member explained to Refugees International how certain armed groups would allow education assistance for populations if humanitarian organizations agreed to separate boys and girls. Humanitarian groups must be thorough both in their analysis and negotiations to determine where compromises can be made to ensure that aid is provided.

Brokering access with the civilian population is constrained by their perception that the international presence in Mali is largely ineffective and a lack of understanding of the parameters of humanitarian action and differences between security interventions and humanitarian aid. This situation can be improved only by educating the civilian population and armed groups alike on humanitarian principles. Given the constant movement of populations, these efforts need to be repeated in any given region on a quarterly basis as populations flow in and out of each area.

INADEQUATE HUMANITARIAN CIVIL-MILITARY COORDINATION

In such a securitized context, the value of constructive relationships between civilian and military actors cannot be overemphasized. Humanitarian civil-military coordination (CMCOORD) is essential to preserve the distinction between humanitarian and military actions and “protect and promote humanitarian principles, avoid competition, minimize inconsistency, and, when appropriate, pursue common goals.”²² In Mali, the lack of effective civil-military coordination endangers aid workers and can further curtail humanitarian access.

To set the terms for this engagement, it is common practice for Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) CMCOORD staff to draft standard operating procedures (SOPs) to identify the rules and restrictions of information sharing, and implementation of a humanitarian deconfliction notification system to avoid having humanitarian groups and the military in the same location at the same time. Alarming, the humanitarian community lacks operational CMCOORD experts, and staff have only been present on an intermittent basis and in short-term positions. In an effort to address this issue, OCHA has made these positions long term and will ensure that staff spend most of their time outside of Bamako (in places such as Gao, Kidal, Ménaka, Mopti, and Timbuktu, to better understand local contexts).

In contexts like Mali, where there is a multidimensional UN stabilization operation present, all UN entities operate as a single integrated

22. UNOCHA, “Humanitarian civil-military coordination,” accessed December 3, 2019, <https://www.unocha.org/es/themes/humanitarian-civil-military-coordination>.

UN presence. It is the responsibility of Special Representatives of the Secretary-General (SRSG) to call on the DSRSG/HC/RC to improve the coordination and integration of efforts of the UN peacekeeping operations and the UN Country Team (UNCT). However, in Mali, peacekeeping staff and country team members alike voiced concern that interagency coordination was limited. As one person put it, their relationship could be described as “uneasy coexistence at best.” The SRSG must immediately remedy this divide and ensure that all UN agencies strategically align their goals and efforts in the short and long term.

The time is now for effective CMCOORD in Mali. Force commanders from MINUSMA and foreign militaries have signaled an interest in defining their engagements with humanitarian actors, but this interest must be matched by the UN’s humanitarian leadership. The lack of clear and effective civil-military coordination and dialogue between MINUSMA and the humanitarian community is of grave concern. The UN leadership in Mali should move quickly to bolster coordination.

Blurred Lines Between MINUSMA and Humanitarian Actors

MINUSMA, like many peacekeeping operations, does not always enjoy a high degree of support and acceptance in many of the communities in which it operates. Peacekeeping missions often use Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) to help stabilize these communities and demonstrate that the mission can be responsive to their needs. This approach is designed to help build trust and confidence between peacekeepers and those for whom they have a duty of care. Between July 1, 2018 and June 30, 2019, MINUSMA spent \$4 million on QIPs for medical support and

access to water and education, to “meet priority needs of the population and have both a quick and long-lasting effect while building confidence towards the peace process, the Mission and its mandate.”²³

However, as is the case on other mission environments, relief groups in Mali are concerned that these QIPs may be blurring the lines between the MINUSMA and humanitarian organizations. The latter take the view that communities targeted by the QIPs program are struggling to differentiate between peacekeepers and aid workers. Humanitarian organizations rely heavily on their neutrality and acceptance to gain access to populations in need. Given MINUSMA’s mandated role to support the return of the state authority, however, it is frequently targeted for violence by armed groups.

Such confusion at the local level can create a dangerous environment for humanitarian groups. A MINUSMA staff member admitted that civilians struggle to differentiate the “blue UN” (referring to UN aid agencies such as the World Food Program and UNICEF) from the “black UN” (referring to MINUSMA), and that QIPs further confuse the population. It is of great importance that MINUSMA differentiate the nature of its work from humanitarian action to decrease the likelihood of attacks on humanitarian groups.

To this end, MINUSMA’s QIPs program should be better coordinated with NGOs to avoid overlap. Currently, the coordination of QIPs is carried out within local project review committees. Although OCHA participates in these committees, aid workers reported to Refugees International there is rarely time for it to coordinate with other humanitarian actors before the QIPs are implemented. This fact has resulted in MINUSMA troops and humanitarian actors delivering assistance at the same time in the same communities. Such events

23. MINUSMA, “Quick Access Projects (QIPs),” accessed December 3, 2019, <https://minusma.unmissions.org/en/quick-impact-projects-qips>.

have in turn led local populations to question whether these NGOs are truly independent of MINUSMA.

At a minimum, local project review committees need more time to do their work. As SOPs are drafted, they should address the issue of MINUSMA-OCHA coordination with respect to QIPs. At the national level, MINUSMA leadership should be more rigorous in ensuring that the mission's QIP programming is properly coordinated with humanitarian actors and clearly communicating to the civilian population that they are different from assistance provided by aid groups.

Even more troublesome are instances in which foreign contingents have arrived in Mali to provide goods and services not funded through UN QIPs funds. These types of situations are frequent, especially with contingents who do not speak French or local languages.

Humanitarian workers and MINUSMA staff provided Refugees International with numerous examples, ranging from one contingent inoculating cattle to another delivering grain from their country to Malians (who did not know how to cook this particular grain). These contingent-driven projects rarely are based on needs assessments. In many cases, they are conducted with little consultation with the community and no attempt to manage the latter's expectations on future activities, which in turn can lead to tensions between those who receive assistance and those who do not. MINUSMA and the UN's Department of Peace Operations (DPO) at the New York headquarters level should issue a Fragmentary Order (an operation order containing information of immediate concern)²⁴ to inform all troop-contributing countries that such (non-QIP) provision of goods and services is prohibited.

CONCLUSION

Conflict and internal displacement are once again on the rise in Mali. It appears unlikely that the violence will taper off in the near future. Given the disproportionate attention and funding dedicated to the security aspects of the crisis, humanitarian groups will need to evolve their operations to increase effectiveness in the absence of a significant increase in resources. Although this evolution presents a challenge, it is not an insurmountable one.

Aid actors must coordinate their priorities and interventions through the creation of country-wide IDP and protection strategies. In addition, the Malian crisis—complicated by a tangled web of humanitarian aid organizations and international militaries—necessitates a clear distinction between the military and humanitarian domains. Acceptance by local populations of both humanitarian aid and MINUSMA activities can be fostered only with more awareness of their respective operations, approaches, and goals.

Humanitarian groups are faced with the difficult task of finding a balance between service provision and state substitution. Donors, military partners, and aid groups must identify and use a mix of incentives to encourage the Malian government to fulfill its responsibilities, implement the terms of the peace agreement, and make a more concerted effort to rebuild state authority and trust in its institutions. For its part, the Malian government has a responsibility to protect and provide for its citizens. Continuing to ignore that obligation will only cause grievances to fester and complicate the extension of state authority.

24. UN Department of Peace Operations "Introduction to UN Peacekeeping Pre-deployment Specialized Training Materials for Staff Officers," 2011, Accessed December 3, 2019, <http://dag.un.org/bitstream/handle/11176/89583/STM%20Military%20Staff%20Officers.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

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ABOUT REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

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