Atrocities and Displacement in Burkina Faso

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Cover Photo: A displaced woman walks with a kettle in the Kaya camp, Burkina Faso. Photo by AP Photo/Sophie Garcia
Introduction

Weak governance, chronic resource scarcity, and violent non-state actors—many with affiliations to the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda—continue to destabilize the Central Sahel. After nearly a decade of insecurity in Mali and Niger, violence began spreading into neighboring Burkina Faso in mid-2018—affecting all 13 of the country’s administrative regions.

While the small country may be the newest frontline of the Central Sahelian conflict, Burkina Faso quickly became the epicenter of the region’s rapidly deteriorating displacement and humanitarian crises. Clashes between armed groups and national security forces and attacks on civilians are feeding revenge-reprisal cycles. These dynamics are also increasing distrust both between communities and between citizens and the government.

Today, among Burkina Faso’s population of 20 million people, rampant insecurity has left 3.5 million people in need of humanitarian assistance and forced 1.2 million Burkinabés out of their homes. The number of displaced people in the country has more than doubled compared to early 2020. Burkina Faso also hosts close to 20,000 refugees and asylum seekers from the wider region. With violence intensifying daily, aid organizations face constant challenges in reaching people in need.
Civilians face atrocities from both state (military and police forces) and non-state armed entities. The latter range from Islamist groups to ethnic militias and state-supported self-defense groups. Reported atrocities include murder, rape, torture, and violent persecution based on ethnic and religious grounds. Since 2018, there have been more than 2,500 civilian fatalities.

To understand the link between atrocities committed by Burkinabé security forces and armed factions and the steadily increasing number of displaced civilians, Refugees International convened a group of civil society leaders from Burkina Faso and international researchers for a meeting in December 2020. This report describes information and perspectives that were exchanged during this discussion, and presents key trends and possible ways to prevent further atrocities.

Atrocities and Displacement

Although Burkina Faso was once known for its peaceful coexistence among ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups, the 2014 ousting of former President Blaise Compaoré created a power vacuum that destabilized the country. Despite democratically electing President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré in 2015, insecurity continued to worsen; creating the right conditions for homegrown groups like Ansarul Islam to form and for regional factions of the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (known under the acronym
JNIM) and Islamic State in the Greater Sahara to spread from Mali and Niger into Burkina Faso.

Initially, these groups targeted government institutions and national security forces, but they quickly turned to vicious attacks on civilians and leveraged local dissatisfaction with the government to capture towns and territory. Since 2018, members of armed insurgent groups have used abhorrent tactics to intimidate, subdue, and control local communities. These groups routinely loot and attack villages, damage or destroy health and education facilities, use powerful improvised explosive devices, and carry out summary executions of people they believe to support the government of Burkina Faso.

Since the onset of the crisis, the government of Burkina Faso has struggled to contain the violence and meet the needs of its population. In response, communities across the country began to organize local self-defense militias. Over time, the government moved to train and finance many of these militias. However, this decision appears to have increased the number of the parties to the conflict and to have intensified the overall level of violence against the civilian population. Both national forces and the state-supported militia have increasingly targeted civilians they believe to be affiliated with insurgent groups. The country’s military and police forces stand accused of some of the deadliest attacks on civilians. Together with the local self-defense militia, these state security forces are believed to be responsible for more than half of the country’s civilian deaths since the onset of the crisis.

Significant population displacement began in late 2018 as the insurgent threat caused 80,000 Burkinabés to flee within their own country. Militants have continued to target civilians, forcing more people to flee their homes and attacking those already displaced. However, aid workers in Burkina Faso reported that displaced people are increasingly citing attacks by the Burkinabé security forces as the main reason they abandoned their homes. At the beginning of March 2021, 1.2 million people were internally displaced and 3.5 million required humanitarian assistance.
The Law on State-Sponsored Self-Defense Groups

In January 2020, the country’s parliament passed the Volunteers for the Defense of the Homeland law to support the thousands of local self-defense groups created since the onset of the crisis. This program offers volunteer fighters a brief two-week training session, after which they are given communication devices and weapons to fight against armed factions in their regions of origin.

Civil society actors in the December 2020 discussion explained that some of the population views the tactics of self-defense groups as state-sanctioned violence with “permission to act with impunity to do the government’s dirty work for them.” This ill-conceived law is fueling brutal tit-for-tat violence, which is damaging social cohesion between Burkina Faso’s diverse communities. A local human rights activist described these volunteer groups as “undisciplined” and “the real enemies of peace.” He explained that, in the country’s northern regions, the activists have documented many cases of volunteer fighters stealing cattle, looting villages, raping women and girls, and kidnapping youth from displacement camps for ransom.
Other participants noted that the local population reports feeling more secure and less divided along ethnic or religious lines in areas where customary chiefs have refused the creation of self-defense groups. It has been apparent for some time that the Burkinabé forces are struggling to contain the spread of insurgent groups. However, arming poorly trained fighters with little to no oversight of their actions or accountability for their human rights abuses is unacceptable. The government of Burkina Faso must reconsider this approach. Many civil society actors in Burkina Faso believe the government should either increase accountability for volunteer forces or cease all funding, training, and arming of these groups and consider a process of disarmament.

Participants recognized that insurgent groups must also be held accountable for the atrocities they commit. However, Burkinabé activists observed that the government’s ability to do so is hampered not only by its lack of capacities but also by its own abuses. Moreover, participants noted that while these insurgent groups are inherently spoilers of peace, the government cannot not be. They believe that although counterinsurgency operations must continue, efforts to stop and prevent atrocities in Burkina Faso should begin with the state.

**Targeting Fulani Communities**

The participants highlighted that the Burkinabé police and military, as well as the volunteer fighters, disproportionately attack Fulani communities.

This Muslim ethnic group spans across Africa and is known for cattle herding and livestock rearing. In Burkina Faso, they predominantly live along the country’s northern borders with Mali and Niger—the stronghold of the Sahel’s various extremist armed groups.

These groups often target young Fulani men for recruitment, capitalizing on the lack of employment prospects and government services in their communities to generate support for armed insurgency. The disproportionately large number of Fulani found in the ranks of the region’s Islamist groups has led to the stigmatization of the entire Fulani community.

As a result, state security forces and allied militia appear to attack Fulani civilians and villages on the assumption that they support Islamist armed groups. It was widely reported that the massacre of 180 people in Djibo, in the northern part of the country, included civilians who were likely to have been killed purely for being Fulani. At the same time, repeated attacks on Fulani people are further marginalizing members of the community and facilitating their recruitment by militant Islamist groups.
Human rights activists in the discussion called for the government forces and militias to adopt a more nuanced understanding of the Fulani communities. They insisted that the government publicly acknowledge that not all Fulani are violent or extreme in their religious ideologies and denounce targeted attacks against them. In addition, the government should actively seek to destigmatize the Fulani people and address the socioeconomic grievances that are driving so many members of their communities to join the ranks of violent insurgents.

**Climate of Impunity**

Human rights groups are increasingly criticizing the government for failing to address human rights abuses by the Burkinabé forces and the government-supported volunteer fighters. According to local civil society leaders, many cases are officially opened to investigate abuses committed by members of Burkina Faso’s security forces, but little action is ever taken. Very few, if any, cases are fully investigated and closed. Human rights organizations claim to have offered the government a great deal of evidence for countless cases of abuse, but none of it is being used by officials.

Participants called for the government of Burkina Faso to transparently investigate abuses of human rights law and violations of international humanitarian law by members of its armed forces and the volunteer fighters. If the state lacks the capacity to investigate these alleged crimes, the government should request financial and technical assistance from international partners and donors to strengthen its capacity to uphold the rule of law.

**Censorship**

From the onset of the crisis, the government of Burkina Faso has struggled to protect and provide for its population. In many instances, it has denied the extent of the crisis. In mid-2019, the government amended the country's penal code to prohibit the “demoralization” of national security forces and to criminalize the dissemination of negative or critical information about Burkinabé forces. Violators could be sentenced to 10 years in prison. This broad law has silenced the press and stopped many civil society actors from reporting on the frequent abuses committed by armed forces and pro-government volunteer fighters.

Out of fear of government reprisal, many civil society organizations are no longer comprehensively documenting abuses being committed by all parties to the conflict. Indeed, the risks to civil society are very real. In the discussion, activists noted that
small local newspapers have published stories accusing human rights groups and aid organizations of supporting terrorists because they criticize the tactics of the government, military, and police force.

This law complicates efforts to collect data and effectively portray the full nature and scope of the violence against civilians. However, the information that is available (see chart above) still paints a grim picture of abuses committed by Burkinabé forces, the armed self-defense groups they support, and the insurgent armed groups. Participants recommended that the government amend the penal code again to have this dangerous censorship law repealed.

Failure of the International Community

Discussants lamented that international actors, including the United Nations, France, the European Union, and the United States, readily denounce violence by armed Islamist groups but appear reluctant to denounce abuses by government forces. They told Refugees International that critiques of Burkinabé forces are more often about their conduct in Mali than in their own territory. The international community should call for an independent investigation into the actions of the Burkinabé forces.

Civil society participants insisted that the government be pressed to crack down on widespread impunity within its military, police force, and the armed self-defense groups they support. International stakeholders must make bilateral support, such as governance and security assistance, to the government of Burkina Faso conditional on the cessation of atrocities committed by the country’s armed forces and the government’s good faith efforts to fully investigate alleged crimes and human rights abuses.

Conclusion

All parties to the conflict are committing atrocities that are forcing people to flee their homes in hopes of finding safe refuge from the widespread violence. Although the government of Burkina Faso is trying to stop deadly insurgent groups from attacking civilians, its national security forces and the self-defense groups they support are fanning the flames of conflict. This vicious cycle of atrocities is worsening the security and humanitarian crisis.

To prevent further atrocities in the country, the government of Burkina Faso must:

- Repeal the censorship law that criminalizes the dissemination of information about the Burkinabé forces.
Increase accountability for volunteer forces through investigations and prosecutions of human rights abuses, or cease all support for these groups, and consider disarming them.

Transparency investigation alleged cases of abuses of human rights law and violations of international humanitarian law by members of its military and police force and the state-assisted volunteer fighters.

Cease targeted attacks on the country’s Fulani community by armed groups and national security forces.

The international community and donor governments must:

- Compel the government to usher in these necessary changes. International stakeholders must publicly denounce atrocities committed by the Burkinabé forces and the armed groups they support.
- Strongly consider making bilateral assistance conditional on the Burkinabé government’s cessation of and full investigations into accusations of human rights abuses.

While quelling violence and violations of human rights by non-state actors is vital for Burkina Faso to re-establish peace, it cannot be at the cost of protecting civilians. Only by ceasing the violence will Burkina Faso be able to identify an effective pathway to peace.

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