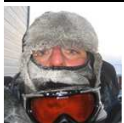


Mali's displaced fearful of returning home a year on from crisis

Country slowly getting back on its feet after March 2012 coup and conflict in the north but concerns about security remain



Charlie English in Bamako
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A girl whose family was displaced from Timbuktu in northern Mali plays at their refuge in Bamako. Photograph: Rebecca Blackwell/AP

With bright red lipstick and colourfully patterned dress, Bintu Dara retains an air of glamour even as she stands in line to collect food handouts in the Malian capital, Bamako. A singer from Timbuktu, she remembers well what the Malian rebels did when they took over her home town on 1 April last year.

"The jihadis had whips to beat the women inside the town. They even went into their houses.

"One of my cousins was given 100 lashes in front of me. My drummer was caught and put in jail. One of my relatives was the first person in Timbuktu to have a hand cut off."

Dara was particularly frightened of the rebels, a mixture of separatists from the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) and Ansar Dine jihadists, because of her profession.

"When they entered Timbuktu, people said that if you are an artist they will not cut off your hand, they will cut out your tongue because they hate music and want to ban it. I even heard they were looking for me because I am an artist."

She hid inside her house for a month before joining the ranks of Mali's displaced, fleeing south to Mopti and finally Bamako.

Others who fled from the north have similar stories. Halima Haidara, from Gao, becomes visibly upset as she relates the trauma of the MNLA's takeover of the town.

"I have three younger sisters and when the rebels arrived they violated them," she says.

"Then they caught four of my uncles and slaughtered them and their families, so I disappeared."

But the rebels caught her and she only escaped being forcibly married to an MNLA fighter by asking her elder brother to pretend to be her husband.

Aid agencies estimate that of northern Mali's population of 1.3 million, almost 500,000 have been displaced as a result of the crisis. Now, a year after France, the former colonial power, intervened and retook the north with the help of Chadian troops, many have still not returned.

There have been sporadic outbreaks of violence across the country for months, but Malians also know that things could be so much worse.

After the March 2012 coup led by the former army captain Amadou Sanogo<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/23/mali-coup-draws-condemnation-ecowas>led by the former army captain Amadou Sanogo, the subsequent collapse of the economy and the ceding of the north to a patchwork of armed groups including the MNLA and jihadists, there were genuine fears that Mali was about to become a failed state.

"Mali has come a very long way in the last year," said one western diplomat. "There was a crazy week in January when we were looking at the complete collapse of the country into a Somalia-style state. Amazing things have been achieved since then."

These include the defeat of the rebels, who have been pushed into the remote town of Kidal. There have been no fewer than four elections, including the

second round of parliamentary elections on 15 December.

Mali's new president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, who was inaugurated in September, appears to be both dynamic and genuinely interested in tackling corruption, according to diplomats. Sanogo, meanwhile, is in jail and awaiting trial on charges of kidnap that may be upgraded to murder.

Aid, which was cut after the coup, has been restored and the French soldiers are being replaced by a UN force.

Minusma is made up of regional forces from members of the Economic Community of West African States (Ecowas) bolstered by the Dutch, Chinese, Bangladeshis, Danes and Norwegians.

There is, however, a long way to go. The infrastructure in the north of the country remains fragile and food is in short supply.

"The administration completely collapsed in the north," says Ilaria Allegrozzi of Oxfam. "Now the administration is coming back, but they are not really able to ensure access to school for kids and people in [the northern regions of] Kidal and Timbuktu are still very much dependant on external assistance. It is not a very nice picture."

The biggest issue remains security and the peace process with the separatists, including the MNLA, who demand the establishment of Azawad, an independent Tuareg homeland in the north. There is tangible hatred of the group in the south, where stories of atrocities are legion.

Displaced people from Timbuktu say they were relieved when the jihadis kicked the MNLA out of the town, but the group is still, nevertheless, an effective fighting force.

"If the Malian army went head to head with the MNLA they would probably still lose," says the diplomat. "A sustainable peace agreement is therefore essential."

Peace is also essential for the displaced. Haidara says she is afraid to return to Gao. "I think the MNLA will come back very soon," she says.

Awa Cissé, from Kidal, has 12 children and wants to go back but feels unable to. "I can't live here [in Bamako] with all my children, but the trouble in Kidal is that there is no peace, no security. It is really hard for us to go without security."

Some say they will join the tens of thousands who have sought permanent sanctuary in Bamako, one of the world's fastest growing cities.

"If the north is still not stable then I don't think I will go back," says Moussa Yattara, a father of eight who fled south when the MNLA and Mujao came to his village in the Gao region.

"My children are going to school in Bamako now. My children want to stay here, so I think I will stay here. It is all Mali."

Dara's husband, who is also her guitarist, has already returned to Timbuktu and she intends to join him there, but not yet.

"Our house has collapsed and we don't have anything to eat there. And as an artist I live from music and they took all my instruments away with them. How can I live without my instruments?"



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