

21 January 2013

MALI

Nowhere to run: Fleeing Malians struggle to find safety and assistance

The plight of thousands of people internally displaced in Mali following the recent military intervention is getting worse

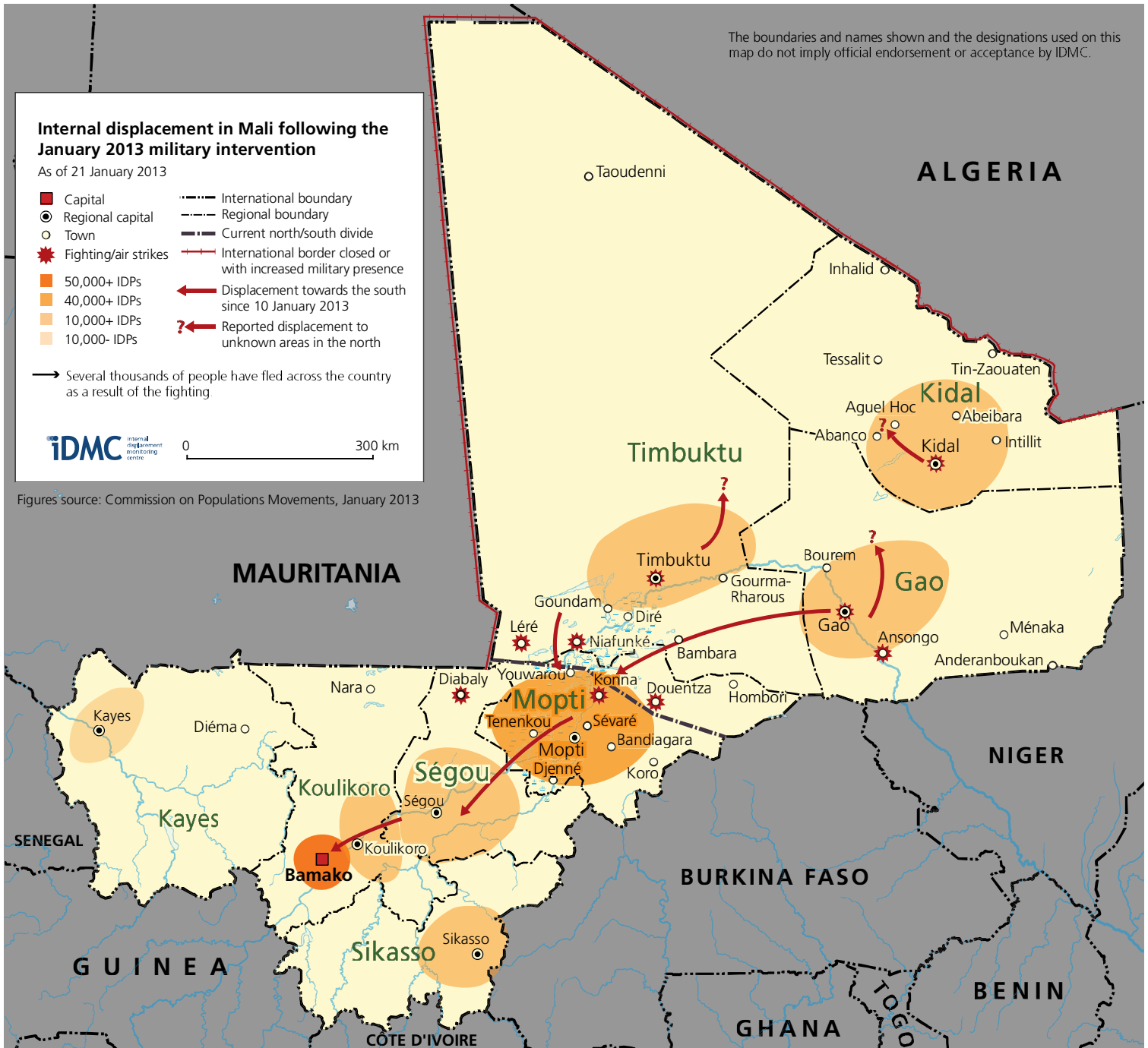
The armed intervention launched on 10 January 2012 by the Malian army and foreign troops against Islamist armed groups has caused thousands of people to flee their homes.

According to the latest estimates dating back to 14 January 2013, close to 230,000 people were internally displaced in Mali since January 2012. The overall number of people internally displaced since the beginning of the current military intervention is still unknown. Estimates of those internally displaced are hard to verify because of the conditions on the ground but assessments are currently taking place in accessible regions by humanitarian partners. The year-long turmoil affecting Mali has also forced an estimated 150,000 people to seek shelter and assistance in neighboring countries.



An internally displaced family from northern Mali in Bamako.
(Photo: IDMC/E. J. Rushing, October 2012)

More displacements are expected across the country as the fighting and violence are likely to intensify over the next few weeks as more French and African troops are deployed. Further counterattacks such as that launched by jihadists in the west of the country are also to be expected. The closure of Algeria's border with Mali will prevent Malians wanting to take refuge there from doing so, and Mauritania has also increased its military presence along its border.



Forced to flee in difficult conditions

Fighting and airstrikes near inhabited towns have forced people to flee their homes, sometimes for the second or third time since the beginning of the crisis just a year ago. They are forced to leave in extremely harsh conditions, sometimes on foot, and with only very few possessions. Many are unable to afford the prices demanded for places on boats or buses and some roads are blocked. Reports that armed groups have prevented people displaced in the north from seeking refuge in the south are of particular concern.

Over the last few days, internally displaced people (IDPs) in the north of the country have reportedly been fleeing into the desert and bush, with dire consequences for their security and access to shelter, food, water and health care. Humanitarian organisations have only limited resources to assist them, and insecurity in the northern regions prevents access to those in need.

Most of the new IDPs have been making their way to southern regions, in particular Mopti and Bamako, while some of those displaced in Mopti last year have moved further south. Mopti already

hosts around 40,000 IDPs from the 2012 crisis and some 50,000 people had taken refuge in Bamako as of early January. A major influx of IDPs in all southern regions will put further pressure on host communities already struggling after months of humanitarian, security, political and food crises.

Displacement escalating faster than response

Mali's current crisis began in January 2012 when Tuareg rebels from the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (known by its French acronym MNLA) launched a rebellion to take control of large parts of northern Mali. A military coup forced President Amadou Toumani Touré to step down in March.

A few days later, MNLA fighters backed by heavily armed Islamist groups took control of all three regions of northern Mali. Soon after, Islamist groups quickly imposed a hardline interpretation of *sharia* law. The local population has since been subjected to serious human rights abuses, including arbitrary killings, amputations, stonings, whippings, rapes and abductions. Armed groups have recruited many children and women and girls have suffered badly from sexual and gender-based violence.

A government of national unity under the leadership of an interim president, Dioncouda Traoré, was formed in April 2012, before being replaced by a second one in August. In December, a second coup allegedly perpetrated by members of the March junta forced Prime Minister Cheick Modibo Diarra to resign. A new government was formed, headed by Prime Minister Django Cissoko.

Since the beginning of the crisis, Mali's successive governments of national unity have taken some steps to respond to health, nutrition and education needs, but serious concerns remain for the vast majority of IDPs who still lack access to

basic services. Given the relatively sudden onset of the conflict, humanitarians have faced difficulties adapting their response to match the scale of IDPs' needs.

Vulnerable groups at particular risk

All parties involved in the conflict must take all possible measures to protect the lives of people trying to seek safety away from their home areas. IDMC is especially concerned about the situation of people who have been made particularly vulnerable as a result of their displacement, especially women, children, those with disabilities and older people. It has also been reported those injured are afraid to go to hospitals because of the bombings.

All parties to the conflict must refrain from recruiting and using child soldiers and must respect the safety and physical security of civilians. Reports of rapes and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence, abductions, mutilations and killings in northern and central Mali are of particular concern.

Arbitrary displacement and persecution on the basis of political opinion or ethnicity is also a major concern in the current Malian context. Many members of the Tuareg, Arab and Peul communities fear that the army will take revenge on them on the basis of their ethnicity and their perceived allegiance with armed groups. Allegations of exactions by the army against civilians have also been reported. Some IDPs fear retaliation by armed groups who see them as aligned with the army and foreign forces.

A call to implement the Kampala Convention

Mali ratified the Convention for the Protection and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons in

Africa (Kampala Convention) in December 2012, the same month the historic treaty entered into force. Both the Malian government and the armed groups present in the north of the country are bound by its provisions and those of international humanitarian law applicable to non-international armed conflicts.

The Kampala Convention states that all parties to the conflict must ensure that IDPs are protected from human rights violations and abuses, and that their freedom of movement and access to basic needs and assistance is guaranteed. The government must take all necessary steps to protect IDPs who have taken refuge in the south, and must work with international partners to begin organising the response for the protection of those in the north as soon as the situation permits.

About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC) was established by the Norwegian Refugee Council in 1998, upon the request of the United Nations, to set up a global database on internal displacement. A decade later, IDMC remains the leading source of information and analysis on internal displacement caused by conflict and violence worldwide.

IDMC aims to support better international and national responses to situations of internal displacement and respect for the rights of internally displaced people (IDPs), who are often among the world's most vulnerable people. It also aims to promote durable solutions for IDPs, through return, local integration or settlement elsewhere in the country.

IDMC's main activities include:

- Monitoring and reporting on internal displacement caused by conflict, generalised violence and violations of human rights;
- Researching, analysing and advocating for the rights of IDPs;
- Training and strengthening capacities on the protection of IDPs;
- Contributing to the development of standards and guidance on protecting and assisting IDPs.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org

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