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Mali conflict inflames ethnic tensions

GAO, 23 October 2013 (IRIN) - Mali's recent conflict has degraded social relations, leading to fears of reprisals among some of the displaced and posing major hurdles to reconciliation, observers say.

Mali plunged into chaos with the March 2012 ouster of President Amadou Toumani Touré, which eased the capture of the country's north by Tuareg separatist rebels, who were later dislodged by heavily armed Islamist militants.

Across Mali, many blamed the Tuareg and Arabs for helping the Islamist take-over of the much of the north. When French forces intervened in January to expel the militants, many Tuareg and Arabs were targeted by civilians, and a climate of suspicion engulfed many northern and central towns. Many people said they feared reprisal violence.

Ethnic tensions have long existed in Mali, and inter-communal violence has erupted in the past, but an October study by Oxfam revealed that the 2012-2013 conflict frayed social relations more profoundly than previous violence.

"There is this overall feeling that there has been a major degradation of social relationships," said Steve Cockburn, Oxfam's West Africa campaigns and policy manager. "There is quite a strong fear

to return home.”

He told IRIN that some of the displaced and the refugees “feared that there would be tensions and conflicts within the community, that there wouldn’t be a lasting peace, and that they would have to leave again in the near future.”

Beyond the recent conflict, longstanding poverty, corruption, and anger over underdevelopment, marginalization and injustice in northern Mali are seen as factors undermining social relations, Oxfam said.

“In a broader reconciliation process, how does the Malian state devise a process that brings those dissenting voices in?” asked Cockburn. He said many of the study’s respondents expressed a lack of faith in state institutions and showed more confidence in traditional mechanisms of governance.

“Reconciliation programmes will have to be at the community level. It’s less about political agreements at the high level and more about being able to share tea with your neighbour. Will your friend pick up your call? Will you be able to take your cattle to a trader?”

Mistrust

The collapse of social cohesion is visible in the tendency to generalize blame. Sixty percent of respondents who believe that social relations have worsened blamed whole ethnic groups rather than individuals, said Oxfam’s report, which also noted that threats, violence and stigmatization have contributed to the strained relations.

“Houses belonging to Arabs and Tuareg suspected to have colluded with the MNLA [the Tuareg National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad] and the MUJAO [Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa] were looted. At times, there was no distinguishing whether they collaborated with the rebels or not. As long as you have light skin, you were targeted,” said Youssouf Traoré, who works for the Gao-based Association of Sahel Agricultural Advisors (ACAS), a partner organization of International Organization for Migration (IOM) that supports the tracking of returnees.

Mistrust is highest among the displaced, who have undergone the hardships of fleeing and living in refuge. For some, it is not the first time they have been forced from their homes, said Oxfam’s Cockburn.

Going home?

Some of the refugees surveyed in the Oxfam study, mainly ethnic Tuareg, said they were unwilling to go back home, Cockburn explained. “That is clearly a challenge in terms of finding solutions for those who have been displaced.”

“The occupiers made us... systematically associate light-skinned people with the Islamists. Social relations are not like they were in the past.”

“Cohabiting is difficult. The problem is between those who supported the rebels and those who didn’t,” said Hachimy Maïga, who also works for ACAS.

“The occupiers made us... systematically associate light-skinned people with the Islamists,” Maïga said, referring to Arabs and light-skinned Tuareg. “Social relations are not like they were in the past.” He said a man suspected of having collaborated with the Islamists was recently beaten to death at a market in Gao.

Nonetheless, since the Islamists were driven away from the main northern cities of Timbuktu, Gao and Kidal, thousands of displaced people have returned home. Some of this was encouraged by the Malian government, which set up a scheme to pay the relocation and resettlement fees of civil servants resuming duty in the north.

Between January and September, some 65,000 people returned to the Mopti, Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu areas, according to the IOM. But another 40,000 have moved to southern towns from the north, likely due to the lack of economic opportunities and difficult access to basic services.

Violence, livelihoods

Insecurity remains a threat to those returning to the north. In late September, suspected militants carried out attacks in Timbuktu and Gao cities, while MNLA fighters briefly clashed with Malian forces in Kidal.

“The government must make sure that there is security because we will not accept to be sent to slaughterhouses,” said Oumarou Sangaré, a government veterinarian, referring to the September suicide attack in Timbuktu. “We are not going to sacrifice our lives because of the relocation and resettlement fee. The city must first be secured.”

Still, many of those returning say they feel that security has improved. But financial difficulties are also complicating relocation, said Stephanie Daviot, manager of IOM’s Displacement Tracking Matrix project.

“What we’ve seen also is many went up north, and when they saw that the conditions there [were poor], especially the condition of their houses and farms... they decided to go back south simply because they did not have any means of survival,” said Daviot.

Others have returned north after facing economic hardships in the south. Some 4,500 people returned to Gao city from the capital Bamako and other southern regions between August and September, said ACAS’ Traoré.

“The first reason they say made them come back is the return of stability. The other is economic difficulty in areas they had gone to seek safety,” he said, citing problems accessing proper housing, education, health and food as well as difficulties adapting to life in refuge.

Fatalmoudou Maïga, a mother of five, told IRIN that when she returned to Gao, she found that part of her house had been damaged by bombing and another was occupied by people she did not know.

“I lost my husband during the Islamist occupation in Gao,” she said. “But I decided to return because I’ve always lived in Gao. It’s like starting all over again. I feel like a stranger in my own house. I don’t recognize my town, my house. Some of my neighbours joined the rebels... They are the ones who stole my animals.”

Economic life has also been disrupted, with the departure of many Tuareg and Arabs who were the main traders in the north. ACAS' Maïga explained that the prices of basic goods - such as tea, dates, sugar, oil and flour - have risen.

"The trust between the different groups diminished so people trade less with each other," said Cockburn.

Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, Mali's new president, has promised to tackle the causes that led to the overthrow of his predecessor and the capture of the country's northern half.

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