



State of the World's Minorities and Indigenous Peoples 2016 - Mali

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Events of 2015

While 90 per cent of Mali's population is Muslim, with the remainder subscribing to Christianity (4 per cent) and traditional religions (6 per cent), it also includes considerable ethnic diversity. The two largest minority groups are Peuhl (also known as Fula or Fulani), amounting to 14 per cent of the population, and Tuareg and Maure who make up another 10 per cent. In recent years, these differences have been the source of violent conflict in the country. Some Tuaregs, spurred by political marginalization and poverty in the north, their home region, and aspiring to a separate Tuareg state, Azawad, had been in low-level conflict with the government since the 1990s. A Tuareg offensive in early 2012 was joined, and came to be dominated by, largely foreign Islamist extremist groups. It eventually gained two-thirds of Mali's territory, and all sides committed grave human rights abuses. Islamist groups at times imposed harsh law on the areas under their control and destroyed key cultural monuments in places such as Timbuktu.

In January 2013, Mali's interim President Dioncounda Traoré requested that France intervene, and the joint counter-offensive was broadly successful in dislodging the jihadist groups, reclaiming territory and imposing state control. However, Mali's Tuaregs and Arabs, perceived due to their ethnicity as having been likely supporters of the rebels, were at times targeted by both security forces and pro-government self-defence militias; members of the Tuareg separatist group National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) were also responsible for abuses as the violence further exacerbated existing divisions between ethnic groups. Some Islamist groups continued to operate and carry out attacks. The June 2013 Ouagadougou peace agreement and subsequently attempted accords were not fully implemented, particularly in contested areas of the north, and suicide attacks and ambushes against UN troops and civilians continued throughout the country. By the end of 2015 many civilians were still uprooted as a result of insecurity within Mali, with more than 139,000 Malian refugees in Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger and almost 62,000 others displaced internally.

In June 2015 the Coordination of Movements for Azawad (CMA), an alliance of Tuareg and Arab-led rebels, signed a peace deal with the Malian government. However, insecurity, including fighting between the CMA and pro-government militias, has continued in the north, culminating in August with a significant breakdown in the ceasefire as the two forces battled over the town of

Anéfis, Gao region. In October the two sides endorsed a joint road map including an agreement for cessation of hostilities and joint initiatives towards reconciliation.

However, violence, including attacks on humanitarian staff, state officials and UN personnel, has spread from the north into central Mali and further south. Some of it has been attributed to extremist groups present before the French-led intervention, as well as to a newly emerged Islamist armed group, Macina Liberation Movement. Following an extremist attack in November in which 20 people, many of them foreigners, were killed in a luxury hotel in the capital Bamako, Mali imposed a state of emergency that at the end of the year was extended to March 2016.

The deliberate destruction by Ansar Dine extremists, themselves followers of the Salafi school of Islam, of mosques, mausoleums, shrines, ancient manuscripts and other objects associated with Sufi Islam after they took control of World Heritage Site Timbuktu in 2012 has drawn global attention. Mali's intangible cultural heritage is immense and diverse, including, to date, eight elements listed by UNESCO and drawn from a cross-section of Mali's numerous ethnic groups, including the Tuareg, Peuhl and other minorities. Timbuktu-based efforts to revive and stimulate cultural life, including plans to return the Festival au Désert music and arts festival to Timbuktu, have involved a range of community actors and are helping to heal rifts and restore social cohesion. In 2015, Timbuktu's mud masons completed restoration of all 14 of the destroyed mausoleums, and work on the other damaged sites is continuing. Meanwhile, UNESCO is supporting efforts to preserve additional ancient manuscripts smuggled out of Timbuktu by the local population in 2012 to prevent their destruction. Former Ansar Dine leader Ahmad al Faqi Al Mahdi appeared before the International Criminal Court (ICC) in September on charges of 'war crimes of intentionally directing attacks against historic monuments and buildings dedicated to religion, including nine mausoleums and one mosque' – the first time in the ICC's history that war crimes against cultural heritage have been the primary focus of an international criminal proceeding.

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