

Once a stopover, Mali town becomes frontline destination for displaced people
By Derek Henry Flood, The Christian Science Monitor
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SÉVARÉ, MALI

This crossroads town once at Mali's center has become the country's de facto northern border since Tuareg separatists and Islamist rebels staged an uprising in late March, partitioning off the northern two-thirds of the republic and renaming it Azawad.

Traditionally a stopover for long-distance truck and bus traffic bound for Timbuktu and Gao to the north, Sévaré and the nearby tourist destination of Mopti are becoming a frontline destination, particularly for internally displaced peoples (IDPs) from the rebel-controlled regions of Kidal, Gao, and Timbuktu. Men who made a living by interacting with European adventurers are now queuing up for food staples donated by Western aid agencies. They sit astride a critical new geopolitical fault line where, so far, the international community has failed to take any substantial action.

Some are able to stay with members of their extended family in Mopti Region, while others head south to Bamako in search of more opportunities. Those who can't do either make their homes in canvas tents in a former truck drivers' hostel. Next door is a municipal complex where local functionaries of this rump administration file paperwork under humming fluorescent lights.

The local authorities said they had no knowledge of the state-of-play in Mopti Region, of which they have lost partial control to the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA).

Both ECOWAS, the West African economic bloc, and the African Union have warned about the global security implications of letting the Azawad issue fester, to no avail. The United Nations Security Council rebuffed the pan-African initiative to get approval for a military intervention, led by Burkina Faso and Niger.

According to a June 15 report from Agence France-Presse, the UN claimed it lacked sufficient details on the crisis and the possible logistics for a military intervention, even as its own High Commissioner for Refugees is in the midst of an appeal to stem the unceasing refugee outflow from the area that more than 300,000 Malians have already fled, with more en route.

Permission was hesitantly granted to this reporter to visit the IDP camp with a minder from the Ministry of Internal Defense and Civil Protection. The Christian Science Monitor was given very limited access to speak to IDPs under the assigned minder's watchful gaze. The sole figure in any authority was a doctor from Médecins Sans Frontières-Belgium (MSF), who treated patients in a makeshift clinic. When asked about common maladies afflicting those fleeing northern Mali, the doctor nervously said that he was not in a position to speak officially, suggesting contacting MSF's offices instead.

A male elder named Doumbe from the southeastern quarter of Timbuktu region was appointed as the camp's semi-official spokesman. Seated on a deep red carpet with a fan fluttering overhead, Doumbe explained that he left his village near the frontier with Gao region in part because he had the means to. He painted a scene of misery for those left behind, destitute and with little or no food left in the village stores. The minder would not let Doumbe speak to this reporter without supervision, and when this reporter attempted an unapproved interview with another male IDP, the very limited tour of the wind-blown facility was brought to an end.

In a red dirt courtyard, the Monitor met with a group of Songhai-speaking men who say they left Timbuktu in fear of their lives.

Idrissa had been a proprietor of a modest neighborhood shop in Timbuktu until he finally heeded his family's pleas in early May to join them further south and made off for Sévaré. Now an IDP bereft of income, he receives ration cards from USAID and Catholic Relief Services.

Retelling the story of his journey south, Idrissa said that as he crossed through a checkpoint run by the Salafi-Islamist group Ansar Eddine, one of the men questioned Idrissa's reasons for leaving the territory the group "liberated" from the Malian government along with the MNLA. A turbaned fighter told him: "[Azawad] is your country. There is no need to leave."

Clearly Idrissa disagreed. He described the tug of war in the early weeks of the rebellion between the ethno-nationalist Tuareg MNLA and Ansar Eddine, which claims its goal is to enforce Islamic stricture. "The MNLA was looting vehicles coming in and out of the city until they were intimidated by Ansar Eddine to stop," he said. Ansar Eddine eventually gained the upper hand and took control of the main towns in Azawad, leaving the MNLA to control the peripheries of the self-declared state.

Ansar Eddine tried to market itself as a "protective force" that would, in theory, defend Timbuktu from a possible reconquest by the Malian government forces, competing rebels, and bandits.

Another man, Moussa, had been a tour guide in Timbuktu before tourism evaporated in the wake of a brazen kidnapping of a group of Western travelers from a popular cafe in November. One of the tourists, a German, was killed after resisting. Moussa lived off his savings for another month before heading south. Now he, like Idrissa, is in Sévaré, reliant on ration cards and unsure of what the next day will bring.

Although he was pushed out of his home by bearded men claiming to be the new stewards of orthodox Sunni Islam in Azawad, Moussa is a devout Muslim. For him, the Tuaregs' ethnic and nationalist agenda was the bigger issue. As a Songhai, who actually far outnumber the Tuareg in the three northern regions, he doesn't speak Tamasheq, the indigenous tongue of Mali's Tuareg warrior-nomads.

"Really, language is the biggest difficulty. I don't feel safe to go back there [Timbuktu] as a Songhai [speaker]," Moussa said, slouching in his chair as the sun dipped below the communal compound's chestnut-colored walls. At the conclusion of the interview, Moussa cleaned the red soil off his feet and prostrated on a blue straw mat as the evening call to prayer resounded through the squat, mud brick city.

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