

“The situation in northern Mali is still as dreadful” Interview with Moctar Mariko, President of the Malian Association for Human Rights (AMDH)

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How has the situation evolved in the North of Mali these past few months?

Moctar Mariko - The situation in the North of Mali remains practically unchanged for us. From a humanitarian perspective, I've just been informed that since the establishment of the corridor many families in the North of Mali haven't received a single grain of rice.

Also, the right to education is non-existent as schools have closed. The right to health is also violated; there are no more specialists in the hospitals. The elderly and patients with diabetes or hypertension lack proper care and their health is deteriorating.

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The Sharia continues to be enforced in Gao and in Timbuktu. There is no more freedom of movement. People cannot go about their business. Men and women walking together are systematically asked whether they are married.

For all these reasons, we believe that the situation in northern Mali has not really changed.

What is the balance of power between the different factions in the north at this time?

In northern Mali, the Unicity Movement and Jihad in West Africa (Mujao) and 'Ansar Dine' (Defender of Islam) are currently the main movements. Mujao is composed of some Arab militia fighters and some Songhai combatants. They are currently occupying Gao and Timbuktu.

Ansar Dine is only based in Kidal.

Near Gao, in particular in the Menaka circle, elements of the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA) are also present. They are also located on the Algerian and Burkinabé borders.

Of these three forces, we can say that the most dominant today is Mujao.

How do these different factions affect people's lives? Earlier you spoke of obstacles to the freedom of movement, etc ... Do you have other examples?

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Summary executions are still perpetrated. The AMDH Gao section has just reported to me that in Menaka, a young man was shot dead by members of the MNLA for refusing to give them his mobile phone. Many examples of this kind have been reported in the Gao region.

The MNLA was defeated (by Mujao) in the city of Gao. Their men have withdrawn to the outskirts of the city and are now attacking peaceful fishermen and farmers in order to survive.

Regardless of this, the Sharia remains in force in the Gao and Timbuktu regions. And although amputations have ceased, severe curtailments on liberty amount to overwhelming deprivation of freedom.

Do you know why amputations aren't taking place anymore?

Because the population rose up against them; the youth in Gao and Timbuktu began to protest against these amputations and against restrictions on their liberties a few months ago. They stopped the amputations, but people still can't watch television or smoke cigarettes. They are prisoners. Nevertheless, the population is organising itself, and discussing ways to counter these impostors.

Also, we are seeing a very worrisome phenomenon: the Mujao is recovering ground. It is trying to bribe imams with money in order to get them to explain to young people that Sharia is compatible with the culture of the North and the deprivation of civil liberties.

Do you have any information about how these young people and women are gathering or organising themselves to denounce violations and ensure that they diminish or cease?

We are talking about spontaneous uprisings. People truly have had enough. But it seems that these uprisings were driven by members of the Songhai ethnic group. They are the ones who told people they had to prevent the executions and the deprivation of liberty.

Do these uprisings persist to this day?

“Mujao is trying to undermine the youth by bribing them, sometimes using imams as intermediaries.”

These movements are relatively new. But, as I said, the Mujao is trying to undermine the youth by bribing them, sometimes using imams as intermediaries. This is causing division, destroying relationships between young people and weakening their movement.

If a young person is able to mobilize their entire neighborhood against the present forces, then the Mujao just have to go and see this person's parents and give them a lot of money to keep them quiet. The money used is money obtained by Mujao through liberating the Spanish hostages.

The recent FIDH and AMDH report “War crimes in northern Mali” emphasized the presence of vigilante groups and armed militias created or reactivated during the crisis. These groups defend their populations or ethnic groups and have in some cases been responsible for violations against the civilian Tuareg population in the regions of Timbuktu and Gao. Do you have any information about these events?

These groups have almost all disbanded and are now located near Mopti and Douentza, the buffer zone between the occupied areas and southern Mali. The militias currently present in the north are almost all Arab militias, who are very close to the Mujao. They are the ones supplying men to the Mujao.

The vigilante groups referred to, which initially automatically defended black people and often attacked small Tuareg camps, have disappeared from the north of Mali and are now in the south.

One of our sections in the north has begun an investigation concerning these vigilante groups because we had actually heard that they had committed atrocities in the course of protecting their ethnic groups . If abuses were indeed committed, our section has unfortunately not yet been able to accurately document them due to the deterioration of the situation in this area.

As you can see in the report, we approached the leaders of the Songhai vigilante groups and they told us that the camps they had attacked were military camps and that they had considered the people there to be combatants and not civilians. We have not really been able to deepen this inquiry, but our sections are on site and trying to clarify the position further. This is not easy whilst the Mujao occupy the land.

On 18 July, the Malian government seized the Office of the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to open an investigation. Has there been any advancement in this case?

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refugee camps.”

Everyone in Mali is worried about this; they think that the matter won't be followed up. After the referral, the prosecutor sent a team of analysts to interview almost all of Mali's civil society sector. They were also able to reach some victims of rape and abuse. The ICC delegation did not make it to the North but rather went to the south, to the refugee camps.

However, since the departure of this delegation the status quo has persisted. It is now time for this procedure to be reactivated if hearts are to be emptied of resentment. Everyone in Mali, especially those in the north, want justice to be done.

It is important that the ICC gets to grips with the fight against impunity in Mali before the people of the North decide to take justice into their own hands.

Has the government of unity taken concrete steps to fight impunity outwith its referral to the ICC?

In the south of the country, the justice system is trying to do its job. Indeed, whenever we learn of cases of torture, we inform the Ministry of Justice. Attacks on journalists and citizens are systematically subject to investigation in Bamako. However, most of the time these cases are not followed up. Is this due to a lack of political will? Are judges afraid? It is hard to say, but every time we, as human rights defenders, question them on progress in these cases, they say they are doing what they can.

The Ministry of Justice has set up a commission to document human rights violations, of which AMDH is a member. This commission is currently investigating in the south and every month a meeting is held at the office of the Minister to review the information collected.

What conditions are your sections in the North working in?

From a security point of view, the situation is very complicated. For instance, when MNLA was still in Gao, they went to collect our representative after he made a declaration on RFI (French International Radio) condemning atrocities committed in the city.

Our desk in Bamako continues to send mission orders to our sections in the North to check and obtain information from the ground. We are regularly in contact with them, which allows us to check facts and to rule out rumours.

The UN Security Council should come to a decision concerning an international intervention in the coming days. What is your opinion on this issue?

I think that such an intervention is exceedingly welcomed, even if collateral damage is inevitable. And it must be carried out soon, because as I was saying, Mujao is taking over and corrupting the population. Indeed, weddings are being organised between Mujao members and civilians.

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This intervention should not start in Gao or Timbuktu, but in Kidal or Tessalit, because that is where Ansar Dine has concentrated its forces. It has also been joined by some MNLA fighters who have switched sides.

If the intervention starts in Kidal, there will be less damage because fighter positions are much more visible. In Gao and Timbuktu, however, fighter positions are right in the middle of the population.

It is definitely time to act. In Timbuktu, Mujao has created jails for women where they are raped every night. Women are sent to these prisons because they were not wearing the veil or because they were wearing trousers. Intervention is necessary to end such acts of barbarity.

Also, food and medical aid does not really get to Gao and Timbuktu and only a small part of the population has access to it. If this lasts, populations will be forced to ally with Mujao simply to survive because the Mujao are the one who control all the aid. And this is highly worrying.

“Ansar Dine and Mujao have also been recruiting children.”

Ansar Dine and Mujao have also been recruiting children. This is how they proceed: they come to see you at home and offer you money to teach the Koran to your children. If you don't accept, then they cut off your allowance.

We are talking of 10 to 12 year old boys, who, once enrolled, can't even hold their gun. In Gao and Timbuktu, you can see them among armed groups. They also offer money to marry young girls. This is a well-tried strategy which establishes ties between the locals and the armed groups. This could compromise the success of any military intervention, if it comes too late.

Interview conducted on 16 November 2012

P.S.

* <http://www.fidh.org/The-situation-in-northern-Mali-is-12562>