



Last week the [UNHCR](#) Coordinator for the [Mali](#) Situation visited Europe to draw attention to a crisis same size as the Syrian one, but receiving far less media coverage.

"We see the Syrian crisis in the news every day, but the Malian is hardly anywhere", the UNHCR Mali coordinator, Mr Valentin Tapsoba, said during his press conference at UNRIC.

The crisis started during a military coup d'état in March 2012, which came as a surprise to many as president Amadou Toumani Touré, whose handling of the Tuareg rebellion the militaries were displeased with, had already agreed to step down. The coup has been described by Reuters as "a spectacular own-goal", as it quickly resulted in Northern Mali being lost to Tuareg forces.

Even with a transitional government in place in April, chaos and military rule has forced 250,000 people to flee the poor West-African country, seeking refuge in neighboring countries already under strain in a region hit hard by drought and hunger.

"The neighboring countries have opened their doors and hearts, but we must remember that the Sahel region was undergoing a crisis already before the escalation in Mali", Mr. Tapsoba stressed, and illustrated how tough the climate conditions can be by describing how the standard UN refugee camp tents have proven not to do the job here:

"They gather heat during the day, when it can get extremely warm, and then fail to keep the freezing cold outside during nighttime. We have negotiated with the Tuareg refugees regarding which type of tent would be more suitable, but UNHCR lacks the funds to follow up on it."

The f-word was a recurring one during the press conference, with about as bad connotations as the f-word used for swearing; today the UNHCR needs 153.7 million USD to meet the needs in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Mauritania, and are funded for under half of it - 40,6 per cent, to be exact.

"Right now, the UNHCR can only perform lifesaving activities in the region", Mr Tapsoba said.

Services like education are therefore left to the respective countries.

"The support that the countries receive from UNICEF to provide schooling depends on the amount of child citizens, and as refugee children are not citizens of the countries they've fled to, no recourses are allocated to them."

"Malian children have already missed out on last school year, and if funds are not raised quickly they will also miss the one just started. Children left out of school are easily picked up by Islamist groups, who lack scruples about recruiting children, but unfortunately do not lack money. Families, or youth, sometimes have no other choice but join their ranks for money. Kidnapping foreigners brings in huge sums of cash."

According to Tapsoba, a military intervention, which ECOWAS and the CDEAO have been in favor for, would be difficult to accomplish without the participation of Algeria. Algeria, however, has been reluctant since it has managed to eradicate extremist groups from their own territory, and are therefore not too keen to drive such groups out of Mali and possibly back across the borders to Algeria. Another risk is awakening dormant cells of AQMI (Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb).

"We must not forget that on top of the refugees, Mali's neighbors already had their local population suffering from the Sahel crisis. They, too, have needs that should be fulfilled", stressed Tapsoba. He calls for the European countries to open their eyes as well as their pockets.

Malian refugees suffering in already strained Sahel region

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