

## BACKGROUND

Niger is situated in a geopolitically sensitive area linking the Sahara desert with the Sahel, and West with Central Africa. The country has developed into a major hub for mixed movements northwards to Libya, Algeria and the Mediterranean but also southwards with people fleeing Libya or being deported from Algeria.

Owing to the role of Niger as a transit country, the UNHCR Niger operation has become more high profile and a new office in Agadez has been opened in 2017. The aim of the expansion is to scale up UNHCR operational capacity to respond to the increasing number of persons identified as being in need of international protection within mixed movement flows in the region.

UNHCR, IOM and the Government of Niger have signed an MOU on the identification and referral of persons of concern (PoCs) for information and assistance.

## CONTEXT

Libya is not considered a safe country for persons in need of international protection. Many refugees and asylum-seekers are victims of human rights violations in the country and along the route to Europe. These violations include torture, extra-judicial executions, rape, forced prostitution, slavery/forced labour, illegal imprisonment, hostage-taking and extortion, as well as other inhumane, cruel and degrading treatment. In response to the extremely complex humanitarian and security situation in Libya, Niger is increasingly turning into an alternative space for protection and solutions, including for the asylum-seekers and refugees who failed to reach Europe.

In the framework of mixed movements, UNHCR's main objective is to ensure that people in need of international protection have access to asylum (through the structural strengthening of the Niger asylum system), and access to assistance and durable solutions, including legal pathways within and outside the ECOWAS region. Current UNHCR actions in Niger need to be considered as an investment in support of the Government of Niger for the future, in an unpredictable regional environment.

In Agadez, since 2017, UNHCR has continuously invested in strengthening the national RSD system through financial and human resource support, so to enhance its technical capacity to conduct RSD effectively and efficiently.

UNHCR is working closely with the regional authorities to strengthen the protection of refugees and asylum seekers, who have continued to increase in number since the end of 2017. **As of 30 June 2019, 1,587 people, mainly Sudanese nationals returning from Libya, have been identified as in need of international protection**, and registered by UNHCR in Agadez. Of these people, over 11% has been previously biometrically registered and disposes of UNHCR refugee cards issued by other UNHCR operations.

Among this population, of which around 8% are unaccompanied and separated children (UASCs), some have reportedly been the victim of exploitation, torture and human trafficking, after escaping war in Sudan (25% have specific needs). The most vulnerable are hosted in guest houses in Agadez by UNHCR, and have received immediate protection and assistance, while the majority are hosted in a Humanitarian Centre in the outskirts of Agadez, which is managed by UNHCR and partners. Here, those seeking asylum are provided with protection and assistance. With the dire human rights situation in Libya, it is possible that the number of persons of concern reaching Agadez may continue to increase.

At the beginning of May 2018, tensions increased as local authorities arrested and deported 132 Sudanese nationals. UNHCR intervened immediately to open a space of dialogue and negotiation. As a result of the consultations, on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2018, a Regional Forum on the Asylum Space in the context of Mixed Migration / Movements was co-organized in Agadez by the Government of Niger and UNHCR, to reaffirm the asylum space for those seeking international protection.

## LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN NIGER

- The asylum system is substantially strengthened, with a focus on timely registration and refugee status determination (RSD) in liaison with the competent authorities;
- PoCs in mixed movements are aware of protection services available in Niger and can access them;
- Effective protection and solutions are available for identified persons of concern who are part of mixed movements.

## ACHIEVEMENTS SO FAR

- Pro-active collaboration between UNHCR and the Regional Authorities;
- Increase in the presence of the competent authorities - General Directorate of Civil Status, Refugees and Migration (DGEC-RM) / Ministry of Interior);
- Wide partnership network established to identify refugees/asylum seekers in the mixed movements;
- Improvement of basic reception conditions, provision of food and medical assistance and counselling;
- A transit facility or 'Humanitarian Centre' is being built several km outside of Agadez on a 5ha site. More than 300 RHUs (Refugee Housing Unit) have been assembled on the site, and more than 1,300 asylum seekers have been relocated there, while 3 guesthouses remain available in the city of Agadez for the most vulnerable.
- Cross-border exchanges with Chad and Sudan to develop a comprehensive framework for readmission/voluntary repatriation. As a result, so far 10 Sudanese were successfully voluntarily readmitted to Chad, 1 to Benin, another 1 to Cameroon, all countries of their first asylum – while 9 cases are pending.
- An increase in the engagement by community leaders in all activities, including the management and security of the new humanitarian centre;
- The National Eligibility Commission (CNE) began Refugee Status Determination (RSD) interviews in Agadez for asylum seekers. 5 newly appointed RSD caseworkers received training and began interviews in September 2018. So far, 288 interviews have taken place, among these 87 for unaccompanied and separated children (UASCs). A first group of 6 UASCs were granted refugee status in December. More information is available [here](#).
- From May 18 to 24, the experts committee on RSD held a 7 day work session in Agadez. The commission, divided in 3 groups, reviewed an average of 25/30 cases per day. As a result, 200 cases were analyzed for a total of 200 households (including 19 families and 181 individuals).

## PLANNED RESPONSE

- Continue identification of persons of concern, including through a range of referral instruments;
- Promote community-based protection, in order to identify persons with specific needs (UASCs, SGBV cases included);
- Support the Government of Niger in conducting timely registration of asylum seekers, followed by RSD and issuance of individual documentation;
- Accommodate and care for most vulnerable asylum-seekers;
- Strengthen peaceful coexistence between the host population and the refugees/asylum seekers in Agadez;
- Promote access to solutions (asylum, readmission, repatriation, regularization of stay) for the different groups identified in the mixed movements.
- Develop an education/training support strategy for refugee and asylum seeker children in collaboration with UNICEF.

## CHALLENGES

- UNHCR remain in constant dialogue with the authorities to strengthen the peaceful coexistence of the asylum seekers and the host community;
- Over 35,000 persons have been expelled from Algeria to Niger since January 2018, of which more than 20,000 are Nigeriens. This increases pressure on the region and can have a negative effect on social cohesion. UNHCR provides assistance to those amongst the expelled who are in need of international protection;
- UNHCR continues to advocate for the right to asylum and to monitor non-refoulement.

### Contacts:

Mr. Benoit MORENO, *External Relations Officer*, [morenob@unhcr.org](mailto:morenob@unhcr.org)

Mrs. Marlies CARDOEN, *Associate External Relations Officer*, [cardoen@unhcr.org](mailto:cardoen@unhcr.org)

Mrs. Laurence BRON, *Associate Reporting Officer*, [bronl@unhcr.org](mailto:bronl@unhcr.org)