

Note on the identification of hard-to-reach Malian refugees in Mauritania

Since the deterioration of the situation in Mali in 2012, Mauritania has generally maintained an open-door policy to the influx of refugees, though impacted by security and, more recently, health considerations. In support to the Mauritanian government and in the absence of a national asylum system, UNHCR continues to conduct registration of asylum seekers and determination of refugee status and supports the search for durable solutions. UNHCR and its partners are based in Nouakchott, Nouadhibou, Bassikounou, and Nema.

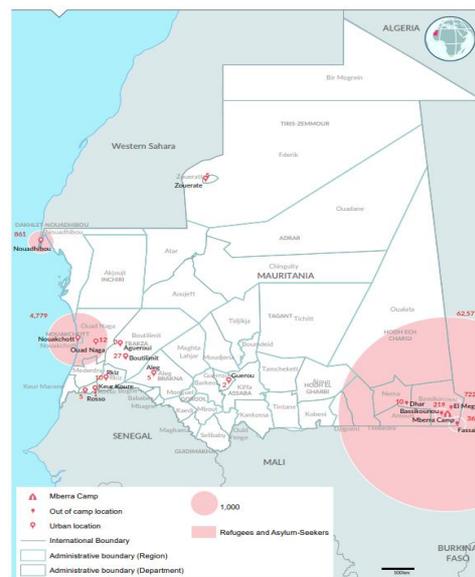
In 2019, the Mauritanian government authorized the registration of Malian¹ asylum seekers and refugees outside of Mbera camp. This registration started in villages around the camp in February 2019, and a merged registration and refugee status determination (RSD) procedure for Malians was launched in Nouakchott in June 2019, and in Nouadhibou in July 2020.

KEY FACTS AND FIGURES ON MALIAN ASYLUM-SEEKERS AND REFUGEES IN MAURITANIA (30 JUNE 2021)

67,810 registered refugees in and around Mbera camp	1,289 Registered asylum seekers in urban areas
3,541 registered Malian refugees in urban areas	6,999 Pre-registered asylum seekers (not documented yet by UNHCR)

The registration of Malian refugees beyond the camp has opened up significant avenues for providing international protection, including through providing them with documents. As of mid-2021, Malian refugees registered with UNHCR mainly live in Mbera camp and in the Bassikounou district (or *moughataa*), and in urban areas in the towns of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. Only a limited number of Malian refugees residing in the inland regions of Trarza, Brakna and Assaba, have come to Nouakchott and Nouadhibou to be registered and documented.

Based on information received from authorities, partners, and refugees that different groups of refugees had not been identified nor registered to date, UNHCR conducted during the first semester of 2021 field missions and a participatory evaluation to have a better understanding of these groups.



¹ Registration of other nationalities had been permitted beforehand. Asylum-seekers and refugees nationals of more than 40 countries are currently registered with UNHCR Mauritania.

These consultations confirmed that a significant number of refugees who have lived in in Mauritania for a long time are not registered.

Key Findings

- + Presence of **thousands of unregistered Malian refugees, some for several years**, throughout the country in villages and rural areas.
- + **Heightened protection risks** for undocumented refugees (arrests, restriction of movement, etc.) including those pre-registered but not yet fully registered by UNHCR.
- + **Different levels of integration and inclusion** into national services (e.g., small number enrolled with civil registration service): in some areas, difficult living conditions and limited access to/availability of basic services.

- + Presence of **thousands of unregistered Malian refugees** throughout the country living in secondary towns, villages and rural areas (gross estimate).

UNHCR has been informed by local authorities and refugee communities of the presence of:

- Between 5,000 to 10,000 individuals in the Hodh Chargui, dispersed in villages across a vast area bordering with Mali.
- A few thousand persons in and around secondary towns and villages along the main route from Ayoun to Nouakchott, and in rural areas in Trarza, Brakna and Assaba.
- A few hundred working in mines in Chami and Zouerat areas.

Some of these refugee groups have been living in Mauritania for years and had not been identified nor registered to date. However, with the evolution of the conflict and expansion to central areas Mali, recent arrivals (since 2018-19) have also taken place.

- + **Long-term nature of refugee presence** in Mauritania.
 - Most registered Malian refugees surveyed expressed their **primary intent to return to Mali** once the security and socio-economic conditions will have improved.
 - A very **small portion** of Malian refugees shared their **intent to move onwards** to go to Europe, often through quick/direct crossing, or following a short stay in Mauritania to gather money. All these individuals were young men.
 - Pending the realization of conditions for a potential return to their country of origin, **most Malian refugees have lived for a long time** in Mauritania. Some of them have moved from one area of the country to another, in most cases to find jobs. Living conditions vary greatly between recent arrivals and those who settled in Mauritania years ago, and depending on the community support they can benefit from.

- + Heightened **protection risks for undocumented** refugees and **differentiated levels of integration and inclusion** into national services.

- Unpredictable access to territory (due to Covid-19 measures, security concerns, efforts to limit irregular migration, including in response to demands from European countries, etc.).
- Limited access to registration and documentation and subsequent risk of arrest and expulsion:
 - Lack of knowledge of the refugee status determination procedures and refugee rights and duties, both on the part of some authorities and the refugees themselves.
 - Lack of means to reach UNHCR registration centers.
 - Many undocumented births (often occurring outside of health structures).
 - Limited freedom of movement for the undocumented refugees.
 - Approximately 7,000 Malians who have approached UNHCR for registration and documentation and are waiting for over a year to be called for an interview, as UNHCR does not have sufficient resources to expedite the processing of the applications; meanwhile, they are not documented and cannot benefit from UNHCR and partner support on health, education, and assistance.
- Access to services limited for refugees holding neither national nor UNHCR documentation.
- Many families visited in the Hodh Chargui were living in dire conditions (no shelter, malnutrition, children out of school).

Key recommended actions

- ✓ **Improve access to the territory and to the registration and refugee status determination procedures** by increasing the resources available to UNHCR Mauritania.
- ✓ Engage with authorities, development actors and donors to **facilitate the inclusion and access to basic services** at various locations where refugees have settled (urban and rural areas, and the camp).

- Expand contingency planning for large numbers of refugee arrivals for the entire Hodh Chargui as well as the Hodh Gharbi regions.
- Develop a plan for UNHCR registration of Malian refugees in prioritized areas where their identification and documentation are more needed: in the Hodh Chargui (moughataas of Amourj, Djiguenni, Timbedra and Nema), and in other rural areas (such as Kiffa and Aleg).
- Use of differentiated registration procedures to adjust to the caseload profiles for purposes of efficiency.²
- Support the enrolment of hard-to-reach Malian refugees by the national civil registration agency, ANRPTS, and their subsequent documentation.
- Ensure appropriate information and communication on refugee status determination procedures targeting both relevant authorities and people in need of international protection.

² In the Hodh Chargui where most Malians are in need of international protection, UNHCR will use the “enhanced registration process”. In the rest of the country, where profiles are more diverse, with Malians originating from northern and central Mali living closely together with migrant Malians who have no risk in case of return to Mali. To identify refugees in those mixed groups, UNHCR will use its merged registration-RSD procedure currently employed in Nouakchott and Nouadhibou.

- ✔ Engage with authorities, development actors and donors to **facilitate the inclusion and access to basic services** at various locations of settlement (urban and rural areas, and the camp).
- Engage development partners (World Bank, the EU and GIZ for instance) and other UN agencies (such as WFP and UNICEF) to support authorities to facilitate refugee inclusion and ensure refugee access to livelihoods opportunities and basic services such as civil registration, education and health in areas where they are currently settled.
- Offer the option of relocation to Mbera camp for the most vulnerable refugees in the Hodh Chargui.
- Reinforce community mechanisms.

FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS FOR ADDITIONAL STAFFING FOR OUTREACH, REGISTRATION AND DOCUMENTATION

Registration of Malian refugees in the Hodh Chargui:	USD 547,000
Registration of Malian refugees outside the Hodh Chargui, including acceleration of the treatment of the backlog of Malian refugees in urban areas:	USD 300,000