

# Refugees and asylum seekers in Agadez

## Background

Niger is situated in a **geopolitically sensitive area linking the Sahara Desert with the Sahel, and West with Central Africa**. The country has become a major hub for mixed movements northwards to Libya, **Algeria** and the Mediterranean while at the same time witnessing an increasing number of people fleeing Libya or being deported from Algeria on Nigerien territory. In response to the complex humanitarian and security situation in Libya, Niger is increasingly turning into an **alternative space for protection**, including for the asylum-seekers and refugees who fail to reach Europe. UNHCR works with the Government in order to **find solutions** that enable refugees to live their lives in dignity and peace. They can include voluntary repatriation, resettlement and local integration.

Owing to the role of Niger as a transit country, the UNHCR Niger operation has opened a new office in Agadez in 2017, scaling up its operational capacity to give a response to those in need of international protection within mixed migratory flows.

## Role

UNHCR's main objective is to ensure that people in need of international protection have access to asylum. Therefore, UNHCR invests in the structural strengthening of the Nigerien asylum system. Moreover, UNHCR gives assistance to people under its mandate and aims to find durable solutions, such as resettlement, local integration or voluntary return to the country of origin if the security conditions allow. Complementary legal pathways, such as family reunification, study visa or humanitarian evacuations are also examined.

In Agadez, UNHCR has continuously invested in strengthening the national Refugee Status Determination (RSD) system through financial and human 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 2020, 1,064 people, mainly Sudanese nationals, 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 by UNHCR in another country or disposes of refugee cards issued in other countries, mainly Chad.

2% are unaccompanied and separated children (UASCs), some have reportedly been the victim of exploitation, torture and human trafficking, after escaping war in Sudan (22% have specific needs). The most vulnerable are hosted in 3 guesthouses in Agadez by UNHCR where they receive immediate protection and assistance, while the majority are hosted in a Humanitarian Centre built in the outskirts of Agadez on a 5ha site managed by UNHCR and partners. With the dire human rights situation in Libya, it is possible that the number of persons of concern reaching Agadez may continue to increase.

## Philosophy of Care

Given the severe trauma that most of the asylum seekers in Agadez have suffered, psychosocial and psychological support is of paramount importance. Many of those asylum seekers have suffered torture, sexual violence and slavery whilst in their country of origin and/or in Libya. In order to respond adequately, UNHCR works mainly with partners APBE, COOPI, INTERSOS and MEDU to provide specialized services (primary health care, psychosocial support, SGBV and Child Protection services, including education....).



*Psychosocial activities provided to the children living in the guesthouses and in the humanitarian center.*

## COVID-19

On March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020 the General Directorate of Civil Status suspended interviews of asylum seekers in Agadez except for new and emergency cases for which only registration continued in strict compliance with the COVID-19 preventive measures. Schools were closed, resettlement departures and relocation to Niamey were suspended, as well as ICRC family tracing. RSD interviews conducted by UNHCR personal continued with strong preventive measures put in place (use of masks, handwashing, disinfections of the facilities etc...). The Government of Niger lifted restrictions of activities on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

To prevent the spread of the virus, sensibilization of the refugees were conducted on a regular basis by the health partner APBE with the support of UNHCR.

In May 2020, through partner Forge Arts, UNHCR launched trainings in soap, hydroalcoholic gel and masks to refugees and local populations. In total, 184 beneficiaries including 34 members of the host community in Agadez were trained and produced 2,719 litres of liquid soap, 3,574 litres of bleach, 2,705 pieces of moringa-based antiseptic soap, 10,788 pieces of laundry soap that have been distributed within the guesthouses, the humanitarian centre and to host populations. Thanks to a generous contribution by important Italian private donors, the project will be extended for other 3 months, giving the opportunity to PoCs to produce their own hygienic products and be part of the active response to the pandemic

## 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;
- People of Concern in mixed movements are aware of protection services available in Niger and can access them;
- Effective protection is available for identified persons of concern who are part of mixed movements;
- Niger has ratified the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Additional Protocol. It is also a State Party to the 1969 OAU Convention as well as the 1954 Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons;
- Niger has adopted a Law on Asylum (law n°97-106 on the Status of Refugees, June 20, 1997). The country has also implemented a National Action Plan on Statelessness for Niger (2018-2020).

## Achievements so far

- UNHCR has established a proactive cooperation with the regional authorities in Agadez and has managed to increase the presence of the competent authorities, notably the General Directorate of Civil Status, Refugees and Migration (DGEC-RM) / Ministry of Interior) responsible for refugee status determination;
- UNHCR, IOM and the Government of Niger have signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2017 on the identification and referral of persons of concern of information and assistance;
- Thanks to the Regional Development and Protection Programme for North Africa (RDPP NA), between 2016 and 2019 key actions which aimed at strengthening the asylum system in Niger, were implemented namely: capacity-building of Government officials on refugee status determination (RSD) standards and procedures,

recruitment of 10 eligibility agents trained by UNHCR and embedded in GoN structures, improved capacity to process RSD and finally providing assistance and protection services to PoCs in Agadez. Over this period, 1,041 cases have been adjudicated in first instance by the CNE.

- As of June 2020, with the support of the RDPP-NA III, a one-week comprehensive training session on RSD standards and procedures has been dedicated to 33 members of the first instance eligibility body in Dosso (22-26 June). After this training session, the CNE held its first 2020 session in Dosso (27-29 June) and adjudicated 104 cases including 79 from the Agadez caseload.
- UNHCR has constructed a humanitarian center built several kilometers outside of Agadez. This facility is equipped with over 330 refugee housing units, community kitchens and offices for staff working on the site. It has a reception capacity of over 1,300 persons. 3 guesthouses remain available in the city of Agadez for the most vulnerable cases.
- UNHCR is engaged in cross-border exchange with Chad and Sudan to develop a comprehensive framework for readmission and voluntary repatriation;

## Planned response

- Continue identification of persons of concern among mixed migratory movements, including through a range of referral instruments;
- Promote community-based protection, in order to identify persons with specific needs (unaccompanied minors, victims of sexual or gender-based violence, pregnant women, etc);
- Support the Government of Niger in conducting timely registration of asylum seekers, followed by refugee status determination 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;
- People continue to be expelled from Algeria to Niger. This increases pressure on the region and can have a negative effect on social cohesion. UNHCR helps those amongst the expelled who are in need of international protection;

## Partners



## Donors

### Special thanks to:

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