

Central Sahel Situation

July - December 2019

The Central Sahel countries of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger continue to be confronted with multifaceted crises. Weak governance, violent extremism, severe climate change, food insecurity, rapid demographic growth and large-scale forced displacement intersect and transcend borders, deepening the region's vulnerability to shocks and creating spillovers into neighbouring countries. Despite the presence of thousands of troops from affected countries, supported by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (the MINUSMA), France and other international contingents, the security situation deteriorated further during the second half of 2019. Rising numbers of incidents and forced displacements have been observed, especially in the Liptako-Gourma area, where the three countries share common borders. As a result of the deteriorating security situation, UNHCR and its partners must contend with a shrinking humanitarian space in the face of declining access to populations at risk. Exploiting these underlying fragility factors, armed groups have sustained their attacks against civilian targets, such as schools and health centres, as well as state institutions and security forces. As insecurity continues to spread throughout Burkina Faso reaching its southern border, neighboring areas in Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Ghana and Benin run the risk of being destabilized.

KEY STATISTICS (AS OF 31 DECEMBER 2019)

1,007,258 REFUGEES & IDPS

164,952 refugees in Central Sahel

Including in **25,442** in Burkina Faso, **24,797** in Mali, **56,662** in Mauritania and **58,051** in western Niger (in Tillabery and Tahoua).

842,306 Internally Displaced Persons

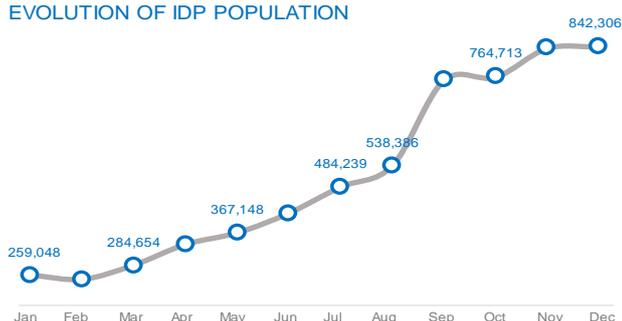
Including **560,033** in Burkina Faso and **201,429** in Mali and **80,844** in western Niger (in Tillabery and Tahoua).

sources: UNHCR and Governments

EVOLUTION OF REFUGEE POPULATION (from Burkina Faso, Mali & Niger)



EVOLUTION OF IDP POPULATION



Note: From June to December 2019, the number of POCs in Central Sahel has increased by 71%, including an increase of IDPs by 91%.

MAIN HIGHLIGHTS

- The continuous deterioration of the security situation** and scale-up of military operations in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger drastically **limits humanitarian access** and assistance in the most affected areas. With over 4,000 deaths reported, 2019 saw the highest annual death toll due to armed conflict in the region since the beginning of the conflict in Mali in 2012.
- Internal displacement has skyrocketed since July.** In Burkina Faso, the number of people internally displaced reached over 560,000 at the end of 2019, which represents a 1,200 per cent increase since January. In Mali, the number of internally displaced persons practically doubled in 2019, reaching over 200,000.
- The Regional Dialogue on Protection and Solutions** hosted by the Government of Mali and UNHCR in Bamako on 11-12 September was attended by Government officials and partners from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger to discuss forced-displacement in the Sahel region. The participants reconfirmed the need to **search for durable solutions** for persons forced to flee while ensuring that **protection of persons affected by the conflict** remains at the core of all interventions.

Funding 2019 (as of 31 December 2019) for the Central Sahel Situation

Funded 89%
USD 50.4 M



Gap: 11%
USD 6.2 M

OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

- **Deteriorating security situation.** The situation across the Sahel is continuously deteriorating with rising numbers of security incidents targeting state institutions, security services but also schools and health centres in a worrying trend of increasing attacks on civilian targets. The Liptako-Gourma, where Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger share common borders has borne the brunt of these attacks. Among the most notable incidents, an attack in Burkina Faso on 25 December killed 42 civilians, almost all of them women, in one of the deadliest assaults to hit the country in nearly five years of violence. In Inates, near the Mali border in western Niger, 71 soldiers were killed and 12 wounded on 10 December. In Mali, 49 soldiers and one civilian died in an attack on a Malian armed forces camp in Ménaka on 1 November and, on 25 November, 13 French soldiers lost their lives during combat operations near Gao in one of the French Forces' deadliest incidents in decades. In this challenging context, France's president Macron invited his counterparts from each of the G5 Sahel countries to meet on January 13 in Pau, southwestern France, to lay the groundwork for increased international support.
- **Shrinking humanitarian space.** The scale up of military operations in response to this deteriorating security situation significantly restricted UNHCR and its partners' movements, which must now contend with a shrinking humanitarian space.
- **Risk of spill over into coastal countries.** As insecurity spreads to east and south-east Burkina Faso, bordering areas in Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, Ghana and Benin run the risk of being gradually destabilized. Though still limited, Burkinabe refugees were reported fleeing towards Ghana and an attack was perpetrated on the night of 30 November to 1 December against the Yendéré police station on the border with Côte d'Ivoire. Other minor incidents are being reported throughout the areas bordering the south of Burkina Faso. The ongoing security and humanitarian situations in Nigeria may also escalate and spread beyond Nigeria to reach other West African coastal countries and worsens the humanitarian situation.
- **Increasing forced displacement.** The scale of forced displacement is immense and continues to grow especially in Burkina Faso where the number of IDPs went from 47,000 in January to over 560,000 at the end of December 2019 representing a staggering increase of 1,200 per cent. During the same period the number of IDPs in Mali increased by over 80,000 to reach over 200,000 by the end of November 2019. Of great concern to UNHCR, forcibly displaced populations often find themselves seeking refuge in areas that are also plagued by violence.
- **Major protection gaps.** The crisis continues to aggravate pre-existing vulnerabilities and critical needs in the region, such as poverty and chronic food insecurity, and exacerbates the competition to access already scarce resources. This harms the social cohesion and community-based traditional coping mechanisms, depriving persons with critical needs of services and assistance. The conflict disproportionately harms girls' access to education and worsens the overall situation of young women and girls who are more impacted by child marriage, child pregnancy, child-labour, and other types of violence, abuse, exploitation and GBV. As for the boys, they are more affected and exposed to IEDs and small arms, they are also the target of recruitment by armed groups and are exposed to violence, exploitation, including GBV and child labour. UNHCR's protection monitoring systems have also identified major gaps in terms of: food and water; shelter; firewood for domestic fuel; medical and legal assistance; cash assistance; absence of safe spaces for women and children; and lack of sufficient psycho-social support.
- **Threats to education.** Armed groups in the Central Sahel continue to disrupt education by targeting students, teachers, and education infrastructures. Threats to education personnel, attacks on education facilities and the use of schools for military purposes have severely disrupted education for more than 460,000 students and left more than 11,000 teachers unable to work or displaced by the violence between April 2017 and December 2019. In the same period, over 3,200 schools closed in the region, including more than 2,000 in Burkina Faso and more than 1,200 in the northern and central regions of Mali (OCHA, December 2019). In this challenging context, UNHCR continues to engage with government, humanitarian and development partners to invest in education, particularly in girls' education, and to facilitate the inclusion of refugees and internally displaced persons in education systems, which is a critical part of UNHCR's strategy.
- **Bamako Dialogue.** The Regional Dialogue on Protection and Solutions in the context of forced-displacement in the Sahel took place from 11-12 September in Bamako, Mali. The Dialogue, hosted by the Government of Mali and UNHCR, and including government officials and partners from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger, reconfirmed the need to search for durable solutions for persons forced to flee while ensuring that the protection of civilians remains at the core of all interventions. Drawing from this initiative, Ministers and Government representatives from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger reaffirmed their commitments to protect civilians in a context of counterterrorism operations in the Sahel at the margins of UNHCR's annual Executive Committee (ExCom) meeting in Geneva on 9 October. They also pledged to reduce intercommunity violence, guarantee access to asylum and ensure protection against forced returns.
- **Scale up of the response.** In an effort to address the growing humanitarian needs in the Sahel and to prevent spillover southward, UN agencies have individually scaled up their activities. In June 2019, UNHCR declared an internal L-2 emergency in Burkina Faso and extended it in December to respond to the IDP crisis in line with several other UN agencies. In an effort to raise awareness about the crisis, the UN Secretary General, at a special high-level meeting on the Sahel during the UN General Assembly in September, told world leaders that humanitarian and development responses for Mali and Africa's wider Sahel region "are falling short", and international support must be scaled up.

COUNTRY UPDATES

Burkina Faso

- **Insecurity spreading across the country.** Since July, the already volatile security situation in Burkina Faso, mainly in the Sahel, Centre-Nord, Nord and East regions, has continued to deteriorate and spread. Initially targeting defense and security forces, insurgent groups are now targeting civilians and humanitarian workers, especially in the area of Djibo. On 3 November, the Mayor of Djibo (Soum Province of the Sahel), who was a Member of Parliament, was ambushed and executed in front of several bystanders, including UNHCR staff. In Mentao Camp near Djibo, schools and health posts have been closed and basic services are no longer provided. As local populations in and around Djibo are fleeing to other areas, refugees in Mentao camp have also expressed the intention to be relocated elsewhere. Around 240 refugees have relocated from Mentao (Djibo) to Goudoubo camp (Dori) in 2019. The Goudoubo Refugee Camp near Dori has also been attacked twice by unidentified armed individuals in November and December, and partner vehicles were attacked on their way back from the camp towards Dori on 22 December.
- This growing insecurity drastically limits humanitarian access and assistance in the most affected areas and forced UNHCR to temporarily relocate its staff from Djibo, to work remotely from other offices. Assistance to those who are still living in Djibo is provided through partners. UNHCR continues to assist locals and refugees who have arrived in Dori, Bobo Dioulasso and Ouagadougou.
- **Protection and assistance.** In this highly challenging operational context, UNHCR sustained its effort to provide IDPs and refugees with protection and assistance, starting with civil documentation. In 2019, over 76,000 birth certificates, 15,000 nationality certificates and over 7,000 National Identity Cards were issued to displaced populations and their host communities across Burkina Faso. UNHCR is also carrying monitoring visits to IDP sites and settlements in the Centre-Nord region to map partners working on coordination and management of temporary IDP sites, assess the major needs in consultation with the affected communities, and identify and address the most pressing cases. Distribution of food, CRI and cash-based interventions (CBI) have also taken place in the camps and other affected areas visited. UNHCR has also provided members of the security forces (FDS) from Seno and Oudalan training on international protection and the Burkinabe national asylum framework. In order to strengthen prevention and response to protection issues and especially gender-based violence (GBV), trainings and workshops were conducted with partners and refugees in the Mentao and Goudoubo Camps.
- **Coordinated response.** In an effort to better address the situation, in June 2019, the Government asked its main multilateral partners, the UN, the World Bank, the African Development Bank and the European Union to jointly undertake a Prevention and Peacebuilding Assessment (PPBA) exercise to support conflict prevention and peacebuilding initiatives, particularly in areas most affected by instability and insecurity. To help enhance the UNCT's response capacity and presence in the country, including in field locations, the UN Secretary-General made Burkina Faso a pilot of the New Way of Working. Following up on this decision, UNHCR took the lead in the establishment of the UN common office in Kaya (Centre-Nord), where nine agencies (UNHCR, UNFPA, FAO, UNICEF, WFP, IOM, UNDP, OCHA and UNDSS) are sharing common premises.
- **Cluster activation.** On 11 December, seven clusters were activated including Protection and Shelter/NFI led by UNHCR, Nutrition, Education and WASH led by UNICEF, Food Security led by WFP and FAO and Health led by WHO. A Working Group on Humanitarian Access has also been created to address this growing issue.

Mali

- **Persistent violence and instability.** Since July 2019, persistent violence amongst armed groups and inter-communal clashes continue to affect northern Mali, and have now spread to other regions. The ongoing insecurity continues to weaken the authority of state institutions in some parts of the country, particularly in the northern and central regions. Civilians, politicians, civil servants and security forces are being targeted and killed. Mali's army has been struck more than 30 times by militant attacks since May and recorded two of its deadliest attacks in years in December 2019 when two outposts in the country's northeastern region were overrun killing almost 100 soldiers. The deterioration of the security situation despite the presence of UN peacekeeping forces and French troops have generated a growing hostility of parts of the Malian public opinion, some calling for their departure.
- **Growing internal displacement.** The crisis has had a devastating and disproportionate effect on children, girls being particularly exposed to GBV and boys risking forced recruitment into armed groups. Humanitarian access is increasingly restricted, creating significant difficulties in providing sufficient access to health, water and sanitation in a context where droughts and desertification have exacerbated the already scarce availability of food. As this trend continues, the number of Malians displaced by violence continues to climb with over 200,000 internally displaced as of December 2019 compared to 120,000 at the beginning of the year.
- **Voluntary repatriations.** In November, UNHCR facilitated the return of over 3,700 refugees to Mali, including through cash interventions. Although returns continue to take place, due to some security improvements in specific regions, such as Timbuktu, the overall situation in Mali remains extremely volatile and precarious with large areas around Gao and Mopti outside of Government control, despite significant international support. On 28-29 November, the 13th meeting of the Tripartite

Commission – Mali-Niger-UNHCR – took place in Bamako. Members of the Tripartite discussed the regional security context and the situation of over 57,000 Malian refugees in Niger.

Mauritania

- **Registration.** Mauritania hosts over 56,000 refugees registered at Mbera Camp in the south-eastern governorate of Hodh Ech-Chargui and the situation is bound to remain protracted due to the deteriorating situation in Mali. Since July, UNHCR has continued its registration efforts in Mbera Camp and surrounding areas. In August, UNHCR Mauritania deployed the Population Registration and Identity Management EcoSystem (PRIMES). This will provide refugees access to a legal and digital identity that can be recognized by authorities and businesses.
- **High-level visits.** Several high-level visits took place in the second half of 2019. In July, the Ambassador of Japan to Mauritania visited Mbera Camp and Bassikounou. During his mission, organized in collaboration with the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in Mauritania, the Ambassador had the opportunity to visit projects financed by the Government of Japan, such as the ILO/UNHCR vocational training centre construction site where he met with young refugees and Mauritanian trainees. In September, Mbera Refugee Camp and the moughata (department) of Bassikounou received a visit from Mr. Richard Albright, PRM Deputy Assistant Secretary (DAS). During his three-day visit, DAS Albright met with Mauritanian local authorities, UN agencies and NGOs operating in the Hodh Ech Chargui region and with Malian refugees and host community members. He praised the good collaboration between UNHCR and the Mauritanian Government in terms of refugee protection, as well as the generosity of the host community of the moughata towards Malian refugees. Furthermore, the Ambassadors of France and the European Union visited Mbera Camp and its surroundings in October and December respectively.
- **Inclusion.** In line with the Global Compact on Refugees, the Government of Mauritania is adopting an open and inclusive policy towards refugees, looking at ways to better include Mbera Camp in the national service delivery system. A technical committee was created in early November, including Ministry of Health officials, the World Bank and UNHCR, to discuss the modality of this approach. In December, during the opening session of the first Global Refugee Forum in Geneva, Mauritania pledged to: prepare a draft law on the right to asylum for adoption by 2020; register all refugees with civil registry offices to enable them to obtain a national identification number and the issuance of a secure national identification card as well as allow their inclusion in national systems, including statistics; ensure the inclusion of refugees in health services on an equal basis with nationals; ensure that refugees have the same conditions of access to the labour market as nationals. The Minister of Foreign Affairs represented Mauritania at the Global Forum.
- **Tripartite.** In November, the sixth meeting of the Mauritania - Mali -UNHCR Tripartite Commission took place in Nouakchott. The meeting confirmed the need for continued discussions on education, and agreement was reached on study visits by both ministries of education and close cooperation on certain issues, such as teacher qualifications and recognition, teacher training, manuals, etc.. On birth certificates and civil registration, the second outcome UNHCR Mauritania and Mali sought to achieve through this meeting, it was agreed to convene a workshop to discuss how to facilitate displaced (including refugee) children's access to Malian civil registration.

Western Niger

- **Deteriorating security situation.** Since July 2019, the security situation in western Niger has significantly deteriorated with an increasing number of attacks against both security forces and civilians along the extensive border with Mali and Burkina Faso. Hosting most of the 58,051 Malian refugees in the country and over 2,190 people of concern coming from Burkina Faso, the Tillaberi and Tahoua regions also count over 80,000 IDPs as a result of the precarious security situation. Car jackings have also become a trend in the region and have compromised humanitarian access. Since May 2019, 17 vehicles have been taken by armed groups, eight of which belong to humanitarian organizations (OCHA, November 2019). In this difficult context, a state of emergency remains in force since it was declared in 2017 in western Niger. The continuous deterioration of the security situation limits humanitarian access as well as leads to new forced displacement and secondary movements from the border areas with Burkina Faso to safer zones. This trend however concerns primarily women and children, while men tend to remain in the conflict zones. This increases the risk of enrolment into armed groups and may have a negative impact on peaceful coexistence between communities.
- **Alternative to camp and inclusive approach.** Despite the worrying trends, building on the long-established collaboration between UNHCR and the Government allows adoption of innovative approaches and alternatives to camps. In the Tahoua and Tillaberi regions, UNHCR has been tasked by the Government to accelerate its existing out of camp strategy in Tillabery, and close the camps. Malian refugees in the camps of Mangaize (7156 persons) and Tabareybarey (10648 persons) should be relocated respectively to the villages of Ouallam and Ayorou. In the context of prolonged forced displacement, the strategy for Malian refugees focuses on medium and long term solutions that will promote social cohesion, self-reliance, and integration into national service systems. To facilitate this inclusion, UNHCR is closely collaborating with the Government of Niger and supports capacity development within key public institutions, including among others, the Regional Directorates of Health, Education and Hydraulics. Furthermore, based on the current situation, protection monitoring and the coordination of a strong and robust emergency protection response, for Malian refugees, IDPs and arrivals from Burkina Faso is a priority.

KEY CHALLENGES

Sahel

- **Deterioration and risk of spill over.** With insecurity continuing to rise in Burkina Faso, northern Mali and western Niger, UNHCR fears more displacement, both internally and into the neighbouring countries (Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo and Benin), and increased humanitarian needs over the coming months.
- **Beyond the militarized response.** The militarized security approach to the Sahel crisis fails to yield the peace dividend that was expected, quite the opposite in some instances. The scale up in military operations and the extension of states of emergency in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso restrict movements and bring local economies to a near halt without much improvement in the security level. This has proven to have negative repercussions on livelihood opportunities and efforts to put forth solutions-oriented strategies to boost refugee and host community self-reliance.
- **Climate change and increased food insecurity.** Over the past years, the Sahel has been experiencing an overall decrease in rainfall, but also a depletion of soils due to agricultural overexploitation and progressive deforestation of the original savannahs as a result of cutting firewood, bush fires and stray animals. The crisis now makes it even more difficult and dangerous for pastoralists to reach grazing lands and for farmers to access their land at critical periods of the growing season, which could threaten food insecurity in the coming months.

Burkina Faso

- **Malian new arrivals in Burkina Faso.** Today, over 25,000 Malians have found refuge in Burkina Faso and are biometrically registered by UNHCR. The Sahel region, bordering Mali and Niger, hosts 98 per cent of Malian refugees and is affected by insecurity and violence. For over a year, thousands of asylum-seekers from Mali have continued to enter the Boucle du Mouhoun and Nord regions, fleeing an intensification of violence in Central Mali. According to authorities some 8,000 Malian asylum-seekers live in spontaneous sites or with the local population in the Nord and Boucle du Mouhoun regions. Due to rising insecurity in hosting areas, UNHCR has not been able to carry out its registration strategy jointly developed with the Government.
- **Risk of statelessness.** Burkina Faso hosts a large number of stateless people or people at risk of statelessness, especially in the Sahel region. According to a UNHCR study, 30 per cent of people living in the Sahel are without a nationality in a situation, which leaves them struggling to realize their fundamental human rights and to access to basic services most people take for granted.
- **Climate change and increased food insecurity.** According to WFP, an erratic rainy season in 2019 contributing to drier than normal conditions may cause a below average harvest in Burkina Faso, which could threaten food insecurity for the next lean season.

Mali

- **Ongoing security and governance challenges.** The issue of security throughout the territory continues to be a concern. The implementation of the peace agreement, the management of the social climate, including the school crisis, the improvement of living conditions of Malians and the conduct of institutional reforms remains a challenge for the newly constituted government. Administrative changes may slow down the activities of current humanitarian workers and those planned with certain ministries.

Mauritania

- **Healthcare:** Regardless of UNHCR's efforts, in coordination with the World Bank and the Ministry of Health, there is an imminent funding gap to ensure free health care in the camp from July 2020 until the Ministry of Health takes over responsibility with the support by World Bank in 2021. The Mauritania Operation is currently exploring alternatives.
- **National asylum law:** UNHCR is increasing its capacity to register asylum seekers, including Malians, in the urban centres in the view of the fact that Mauritania has not adopted national asylum registration yet. The draft asylum law approved by all ministries in January 2016 and adopted by the Minister for Interior and Decentralization in December 2016 needs to be adopted by the Council of Ministers.
- **Mixed movements:** There is an increasing need to support UNHCR's persons of concern in urban areas (Nouakchott and Nouadibou). A profiling survey on the migrant population residing in Nouadhibou was conducted at the end of 2018. In December 2019, a joint study with ILO regarding refugee livelihoods was launched to plan livelihoods intervention.
- **Humanitarian-Development Nexus:** Despite the return of 2,086 refugees to Mali since early 2019, UNHCR Mauritania registered 4,557 new Malian refugees in Mbera Camp between January and December 2019 due to the security situation in Mali. As such, the prolonged exile of Malian refugees calls for strengthening the humanitarian-development nexus. The

Mauritania office is working with development partners including the World Bank, the German Development Cooperation (GIZ), and the French Development Agency (AFD) .

Niger

- **Risk of spill over inside the country.** In Niger, the troubling increase in violent attacks suggests that conflict could be spreading further into the interior of the country. With fighters from Mali and Burkina Faso seeking strategic depth in northern Tillaberi bordering Mali, and more recently in southern Tillaberi bordering Burkina Faso, there are worrying signs that the dynamics between the Sahel's two most conflicted areas, the Liptako-Gourma and the Lake Chad Basin, could become more intertwined, with Niger a potential bridge between the two. Moreover, since May 2019, more than 35,000 Nigerians from the north-western Nigerian States of Sokoto, Zamfara and Katsina have fled into Niger due to ongoing violence and instability. Rooted in a dramatic increase in tensions between farmers and pastoralists, Haoussa and Fulani, this conflict has led to a new humanitarian emergency in Niger's Maradi region and is likely to spillover to the southern Tahoua region in the coming months.
- **Mixed movements.** Migrants and refugees on the move across the Sahel, less visible in constantly-evolving flows that are often irregular and passing through conflict zones, are also exposed to the same protection risks as the local populations, including sexual and gender-based violence, in addition to arbitrary detention, torture and human trafficking, as well as attacks of armed groups/extremists. To prevent refoulement, UNHCR continues to work with governments and partners to establish protection-sensitive entry systems and pursues its efforts to strengthen asylum systems in the Sahel region to provide meaningful alternatives to onward movements. On 31 December, a group of 124 refugees were evacuated out of Libya to the UNHCR Emergency Transit Mechanism (ETM) in Niger, where they are provided with humanitarian assistance while further options for them, such as resettlement, are pursued. In 2019, a total of 835 refugees were evacuated by UNHCR from Libya to the ETM in Niger.

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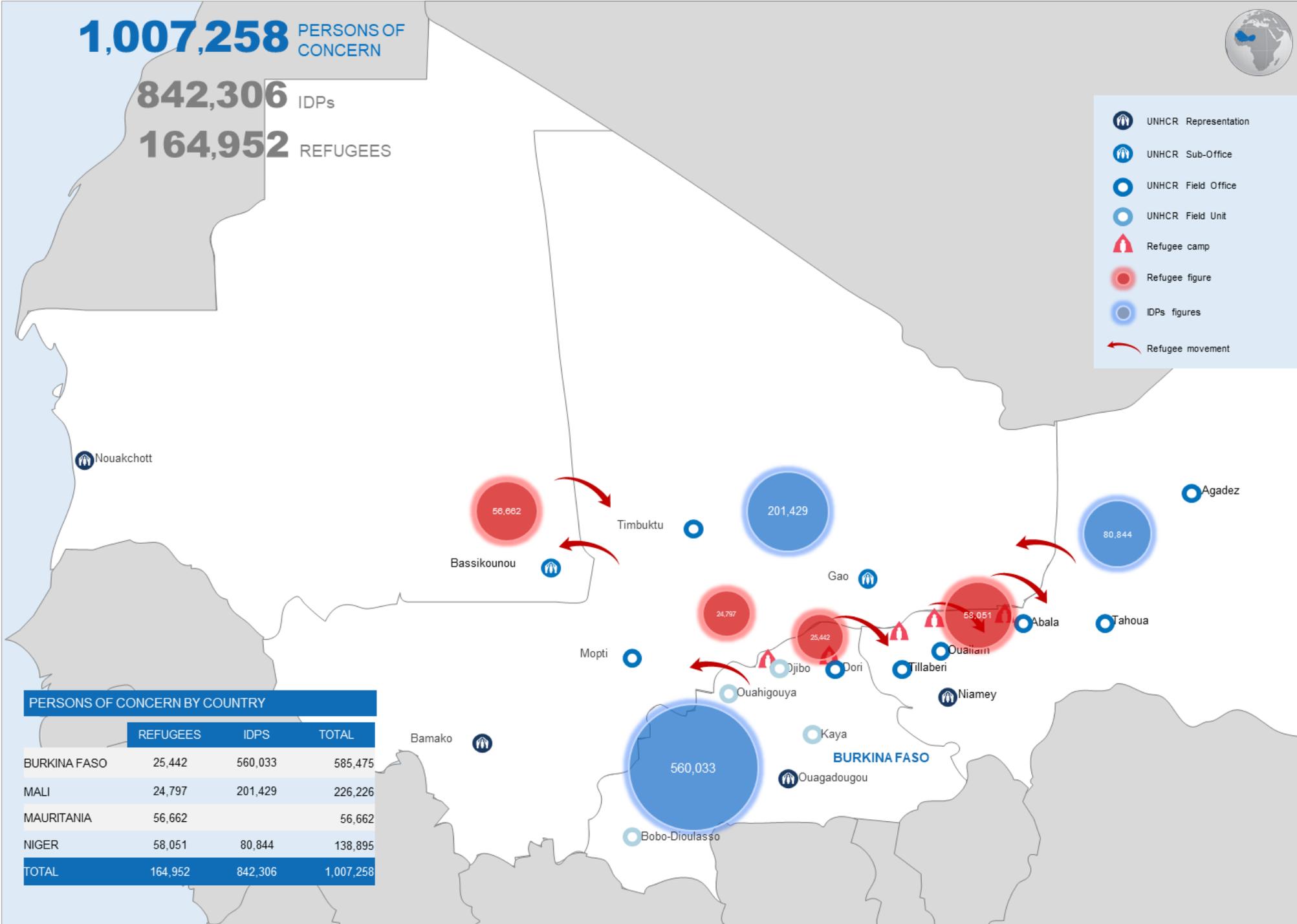


1,007,258 PERSONS OF CONCERN

842,306 IDPs

164,952 REFUGEES

-  UNHCR Representation
-  UNHCR Sub-Office
-  UNHCR Field Office
-  UNHCR Field Unit
-  Refugee camp
-  Refugee figure
-  IDPs figures
-  Refugee movement



PERSONS OF CONCERN BY COUNTRY

	REFUGEES	IDPS	TOTAL
BURKINA FASO	25,442	560,033	585,475
MALI	24,797	201,429	226,226
MAURITANIA	56,662		56,662
NIGER	58,051	80,844	138,895
TOTAL	164,952	842,306	1,007,258