

Mali coup: Tuaregs tell of ethnic attacks



Up to 60,000, mostly Tuareg, people now live in the makeshift Mbera camp

Since rebels seized control of much of Mali's vast northern desert region, tens of thousands of people, mainly from Tuareg communities, have fled to neighbouring countries. BBC Afrique's Maud Jullien visited the refugee camp of Mbera in Mauritania.

"My own parents' house was burnt down in January, right after the beginning of the Tuareg rebellion in the north of Mali," Oumar Ag Abdul Kader says.

"All of my things - my motorcycle, my computer, my mattress were burned. They did not kill anyone. The police came before anyone got hurt, but it was too late to stop the fire."

Mr Kader does not know exactly who attacked his house in Mali's capital Bamako - just that they were black Malians, and none of them were wearing uniforms.

The pale-skinned Tuaregs, who inhabit northern Mali, have long complained of neglect and discrimination by the government dominated by southerners in far-off Bamako.

In February, Mr Kader says attacks increased against Tuareg in Bamako and the nearby garrison town of Kati.

"People started attacking anything Tuareg: They burnt houses, cars and attacked anyone with white skin - even Arabs," he says.

'Tuareg's fault'

Mr Kader's new home is a canvas tent in the desert, emblazoned with the blue of the UN's refugee agency, UNHCR.

Mbera refugee camp in Mauritania is 50km (30 miles) from the border with Mali - and hosts 60,000 people, mainly from Mali's Tuareg community.



Schoolteacher Mr Assala fled after he overheard threats from his colleagues

Some of the refugees fled the south of Mali - out of fear of the sort of reprisal attack Mr Kader suffered.

Abdul Ag Mohamed Assala moved to Bamako from the northern city of Kidal when the rebellion broke out - only to find tension in the capital quickly escalated, forcing him to flee across the border.

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“Start Quote

I left all my money in my bank account, I didn't take any of my things, I just ran”

End Quote Mr Hamel, who lived in Mbera when he was a child

"There were riots and I was afraid that they would take me for a member of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb or the MNLA [rebel National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad]," says Abdul Ag Mohamed Assala, the headmaster of a school set up in Mbera.

"I was not threatened directly, but colleagues at my office were talking, saying all of the Malian crisis, including the coup, was the fault of the Tuareg people," Mr Assala says.

"Some of them were saying the Tuareg people killed their relatives - and that now they must do the same to the Tuareg who are among them."

Mr Assala says he was especially shocked when he saw a Tuareg policeman being beaten by his colleagues because he introduced himself as a Malian, rather than by the name of his tribe.

When news of January's Tuareg rebellion reached Bamako, panic spread through the Tuareg community and people fled - often leaving all their belongings behind.

'Child of the camp'

"I left all my money in my bank account, I didn't take any of my things, I just ran," says Mr Hamel, who works for an international aid agency in Bamako.

One of the reasons people say they fled so quickly is that the events of the early 1990s were still fresh in their minds.

During that period - the last time Tuareg rebels took up arms - hundreds of civilians were killed by the Malian army.

It is not Mr Hamel's first time in Mbera - he calls himself a "child of the camp".

He went to school there for several years - having fled Mali with his family in the early 1990s.

Many Tuareg families have also fled the north because of rising insecurity since the rebels took over.

In January, after a couple of years of relative peace, several rebel groups, including the MNLA and the Islamist Ansar Dine, launched a rebellion - the fourth Tuareg uprising since Mali's independence in 1960.



Mr Mohamed, who is an MNLA fighter, says the rebels are not looting and killing

The MNLA's aim was to set up their own autonomous Azawad region, which they have declared although no country has recognised it.

Ansar Dine fought to establish Sharia or strict Islamic law, which they have started to do in Timbuktu, where they largely control.

Their task was made easy by March's military coup in Bamako - and the rebels swept into the main northern towns of Gao, Kidal and Timbuktu without meeting much resistance from the Malian army.

Abdul Aziz Ag Mohamed is a MNLA fighter. He is in Mbera visiting his wife and family who fled from Lere because, they say, there was no food.

Mr Mohamed was also a child during the Tuareg rebellion of the 1990s.

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“Start Quote

We need an authority in Bamako so there can be someone to negotiate with, because we cannot stay in this situation”

End Quote Meini Ould Chebani Former civil servant from Timbuktu

His grandfather, a religious leader, and his uncle, a doctor, were killed by the Malian army - it is that memory that influenced his decision to become a rebel.

He insists he would never harm civilians - and blames reports of atrocities, including rapes and killings, committed in the north on rogue criminal elements and armed militia, which, he says, are taking advantage of the instability.

Mr Mohamed says 400 MNLA members are working to restore law and social order in Lere, the town close to the border of Mauritania where he was based until 4 May.

"Now that we control the area, we have no other objective than to stabilise it, and to show the world that we are in our own state and that we deserve a free, democratic and independent state. "

He says in the area around Lere, unknown groups are transporting weapons and waving MNLA flags - but, he insists, they do not belong to the rebel movement.

Conditions in the rebel-held north are very difficult - and many people are fleeing because they are faced with rising prices, food and fuel shortages as trade via Mauritania dries up.

"I was very far away from the fighting but we couldn't stay because we couldn't find food, we couldn't find cars, we couldn't find anything," says Mohamed el-Moktar Ag Mohamed, a refugee from the region of Timbuktu.

Life in Mbera camp is not easy: The medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) says residents share one latrine between 220 people and, due to insufficient aid, do not receive enough food rations to meet the nutritional needs of the children in the camp, some of whom are suffering from malnutrition.



Respiratory infections and diarrhoea are also common, according to MSF.

Despite the difficulties in the camp, continuing instability in Mali means many people prefer to be there - and the chance of their returning home anytime soon are very slim.

"We don't know who controls what," says Meini Ould Chebani, an Arab former civil servant also from the Timbuktu region.

"Where I am from, only women and children are left, those who were too weak and too poor to leave," he says.

"There are no local authorities to protect them, no mayors, no police, no judges. There is no-one. Most of them were from the south of Mali so they fled back. "

"We need an authority in Bamako so there can be someone to negotiate with, because we cannot stay in this situation."