

Timbuktu faces humanitarian crisis after invasion by al-Qaeda

By **Duncan Gardham**

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Timbuktu has been dragged back to pre-colonial times by the invasion of al-Qaeda and Islamic extremists who have ransacked the ancient city, an aid worker working there has said.



A video grab shows fighters of the Islamist group Ansar in Timbuktu. Photo: AFP

The invasion of the 12th century city in Northern Mali is “without precedence” and “cannot be imagined by human minds” according to Elmehdi Ag Wakina, director of the local aid agency AMSS.

“We have seen the systematic destruction of all we hold dear,” Mr Wakina told an audience at the Telegraph Hay Festival during a visit to Britain backed by the Department for International Development. “The state of affairs has only widened the gap between the aspirations of the people and reality so that it is even worse than it was before colonisation,” he said, speaking through a translator.

He issued a “cry from the heart” following the systematic looting of schools, health clinics, banks and even solar panels used to drive machinery to draw water from wells in the city of 55,000.

Women have been forced to marry rebel leaders, music has been banned and the mobile phone networks destroyed, he said.

One statue has been decapitated, “spiritual” places of worship have been desecrated and other religions banned, Mr Wakina added.

The city was invaded by fundamentalist Salafi rebels from Ansar Deen and members of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) on [April 1](#) and is now surrounded by Tuareg rebels from the MNLA.

Giving one of the first reports from inside the city, Mr Wakina said the city was plagued by robberies, looting, violence and terrorism.

“The community has been touched to its soul,” he added, explaining that 26 per cent of the population has fled to neighbouring cities and to Mauritania and Niger, fearful of reprisals that followed previous Tuareg uprisings in 1991 and 1994. The city was already affected by a drought which has left the population struggling to pay for the food they need for their families.

“They need to re-find our dignity which has been ripped away from them,” Mr Wakina, who is Tuareg, added. “The people of Timbuktu opposed the rebels but in the face of weapons there was not much they could do.”

Mr Wakina said the “powder keg” had been lit for the uprising by Tuaregs and other tribes in the North by the return of Malian mercenaries who had been serving in Col Gaddafi’s army in Libya.

“They demanded to be integrated into the Malian army at the same rank that they had held in Libya. This was refused and that fuelled the rebellion,” he added.

But he said that even before the uprising, Arab militias had arrived in the city and began looting and pillaging, allowing al-Qaeda to take advantage of the situation to take over the city.

The uprising took hold in just 72 hours, he added but the situation could change again if a “magical solution” could be found.

“We should not abandon the people,” Mr Wakina, who works with a British aid agency called Living Earth, said.

He said he hoped that a “Malian solution” could be found which would allow them to “chase the rebels and the terrorists out of our borders.”

Both the Malian government, which faced a military coup earlier this year, and the Tuareg rebel groups are riven with divisions but a peace process has begun in Burkina Faso and the hope is that al-Qaeda can then be driven from the city.