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## Tillabéri: Western Niger's Protection of Civilians Crisis

*In November 2021, the Global Protection Cluster (GPC) conducted a mission to support the National Protection Cluster (NPC) in Niger and to raise awareness of the ongoing protection crisis. The mission met with people affected by the crisis, authorities, local organisations, INGOs, UN Agencies, Protection Cluster and Areas of Responsibility (AoR) and their Lead Agencies, OCHA, and other clusters.*

*Together with colleagues from the national and sub-national Protection Cluster in Niger, the Global Protection Cluster travelled to Tillabéri – a region facing a huge humanitarian crisis since 2018 and which has recently been experiencing rising risks of intercommunal tensions, mass killings and increased violence leading to both internal and transborder displacements, towards Mali and Burkina Faso.*

*As the dramatic surge in atrocities in Western Niger could mark a change in a conflict previously characterised mainly by fighting between armed groups and security forces, this article describes the challenges that one million people in need of protection face on a daily basis and shares some insights into six concrete actions that we can collectively take to avoid the situation quickly escalating.*



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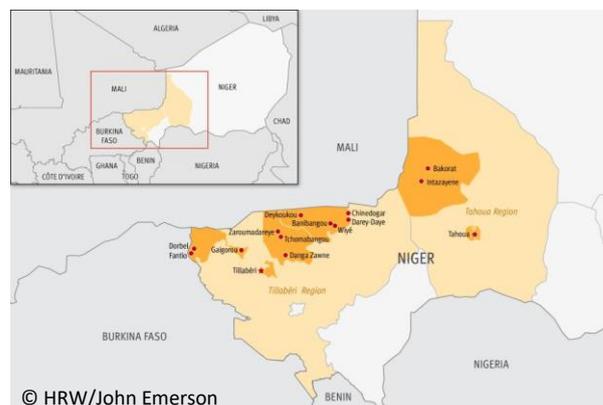
## What is happening in Niger?

An announced growth of 7% in 2021, a sharp increase in investments and notable social advances, make Niger's economy the most dynamic in West Africa according to the IMF. Nonetheless, with a Human Development Index of 0.394, Niger remains ranked 189<sup>th</sup> in the world out of 189 countries. 42.5% of the population live below the poverty line, half of the population is under 15 years old and 41% of school-aged children are not going to school. In addition to a big social backwardness, Niger faces several threats simultaneously, including armed conflict, climate change and endemic diseases, which only contributes to the complexity of the context.

More recently, the country has been facing a **dramatic surge in atrocities**, with the expansion of armed groups affiliated to the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGC) and Al-Qaeda to western Niger. In 2021, violence at a scale never experienced before has been recorded with nine horrendous attacks taking place in villages in Tillabéri and Tahoua regions, within 40km of the border with Mali and Burkina Faso (*see map*)<sup>1</sup>. In March, 170 Tuareg villagers were killed in Niger's worst attack in recent history, while another 69 civilians, including local leaders, were killed in the attack of Banibangou on November 4.

The armed conflict is characterized by **systematic killings and kidnapping of civilians accompanied by looting of cattle and goods**. The modus operandi is consistent across the Central Sahel region, where armed groups enter villages on motorcycles, killing men and boys, and burning houses and granaries. Threats against civilians, repressive policies imposed on the population, closure of schools, recruitment and illegal taxation, in the form of livestock, money or grain, are also widespread in the 'three borders area'. In southeastern Niger, armed criminal groups, operating since 2019 on both sides of the border

with Nigeria and Tchad, have made kidnappings for ransoms an income-generating activity – targeting mainly farmers and herders; but also, women and young girls, kidnapped for the purposes of forced marriage or to perform domestic tasks. From January to November 2021, 129 kidnapping incidents affecting 499 people were reported by protection actors in the communes of Bosso, Diffa, Gueskerou, Kablewa, N'Guigmi and Toumour<sup>2</sup>.



Attacks on villages in Tillabéri and Tahoua in 2021

**Early and forced marriage** is one example of a deeply harmful prevalent practice that needs to be addressed more urgently. In Niger, 76% of girls are married before the age of 18<sup>3</sup>. Child marriage occurs at the intersection of sexism, poverty and weak legal redress<sup>4</sup>, now exacerbated by insecurity and activism of radical armed groups. The phenomenon is growing and worsening with these marriages being perceived as a mean of personal and economic security for the girl as well as a source of income for the poorest families. Information collected by the GBV Sub-Cluster demonstrates clearly the link between the lack of livelihoods and the exposure to GBV, with the situation of economic precariousness leading to harmful coping strategies, including the use of sex for survival and early marriage being reported as the most common category of GBV in Niger<sup>5</sup>. In areas of N'Guigmi and Goudoumaria (Diffa) or Torodi (Tillabéri), the most affected by the conflict, it is not less than 100% of households surveyed that report having at least one child married<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> [HRW, Surge Atrocities by Armed Islamist Groups, August 2021.](#)

<sup>2</sup> Niger Protection Cluster, Advocacy Note on the Situation of Kidnappings in the Region of Diffa, November 2021.

<sup>3</sup> Niger Humanitarian Needs Overview, 2021.

<sup>4</sup> The Nigerien Civil Code (art.44) does not follow the standards of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child and discriminates

on the basis of gender. Thus, the minimum age of marriage for the girl is set at 15 years, while boys cannot be married before 18 years.

<sup>5</sup> Early marriage represents 28% of GBV incidents collected by the GBVIMS in Niger.

<sup>6</sup> Niger Multi-Sectorial Needs Assessment (MSNA), 2021.

## Why is it important?

**First, because the situation is worsening, and the protection of civilians should be on top of our collective agenda.**

The Protection Cluster estimates that 1.1 million people will be in need of protection next year (HRP 2022)<sup>7</sup> – with a sharp increase of people in need of psychosocial care. People are under high risk of facing systematic violations of their most fundamental rights, starting with their safety and well-being. Some of the most common violations are internal displacement, unlawful killings, looting, kidnapping, forced recruitment, early and forced marriage, and sexual violence. The use of mines and other explosive ordnances, as a new strategy from armed groups, and the rising intercommunal tensions over access to land and water also require our full attention and strengthened coordination and response capacity. Unaddressed, there is a well-founded fear that the growing communal violence could lead to the formation of ethnic self-defence groups, with even more deadly results – similarly to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Mali.

**Second, because the violence triggers multiple and secondary displacement with no end in sight.**

With a rise of 35% in the number of IDPs and significant secondary movements recorded in 2021, displacement has had a particular impact on the well-being of populations and in particular their mental health, which almost systematically require a full multisectoral response. Civilians live in fear and psychosis of non-state armed groups and despair of never returning to their areas of origin. While Nigerien authorities have facilitated some returns in the region of Diffa<sup>8</sup>, these remain relatively limited and sometimes perceived as premature, given the growing insecurity in Diffa, Maradi, Tahoua and Tillabéri.

**Third, because humanitarian access is shrinking leaving thousands of forcibly displaced persons stranded in inaccessible areas near the border with Mali and Burkina Faso.**

Administrative restrictions imposing escorts on humanitarian workers have limited their response capacity and increased the vulnerability of populations, particularly in Tillabéri and in Diffa, respectively towards the borders of Mali/Burkina Faso and Nigeria/Chad. Incursions by armed groups into Nigerien territory have also caused internal displacement, with forcibly displaced people stranded in inaccessible areas – far from humanitarian support and access to basic services. In this type of highly complex environment, international actors' footprint and State presence is drastically reduced – leaving local and national NGOs and community-based mechanisms as the sole providers of assistance and protection.



Exchanges with women community leaders in Tillabéri

## What can we do about it?

Here are six things that we believe can be done to respond to conflict dynamics and humanitarian needs in Niger and ensure proper attention is given to the protection crisis.

### 1- Make community mechanisms and L/NGOs as a framework for protection central in the humanitarian response

With the operational space shrinking for humanitarian actors, it is worrying that basic social services and protection provided by humanitarian actors as well as civil society are too far away from communities and fewer in number. In some areas, for fear of reprisal, the legitimate increase in the reluctance of community focal points to collaborate with humanitarian actors and the

<sup>7</sup> Niger Humanitarian Response Plan, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> As of August 31, 7,376 households of 40,138 people have returned to 24 villages of origin in the region of Diffa

authorities makes the response even more complex. We need to acknowledge and preserve national and local leadership, as well as recognize the role played by affected communities. Community-based programming with robust risk management is key to enable communities and NGOs to continue leading much needed frontline negotiations, protection monitoring and tailored response. The approach to protection in the Sahel needs to come from the ground to address root causes of violence and conflict – as community-driven initiatives offer greater potential of being sustainable and solution-oriented, and sometime the only framework for protection.

## **2- Sustain strong and regular protection analysis**

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The Protection Cluster needs to unify and lead the protection analysis of the crisis as part of the cluster's core functions. Sustaining a strong protection narrative is key for the visibility and understanding of the situation and will lead to more advocacy, programming and resources mobilisation for the Sahel region. The process of producing regular Protection Analysis Updates following the PAF methodology<sup>9</sup> should be consolidated in 2022 and continued after the first round of products<sup>10</sup> – exploring area-based approaches to analysis.

## **3- Lead local to global advocacy on protection of civilians, human rights and durable solutions**

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Addressing the protection needs in areas affected by the conflict – which are becoming more and more inaccessible to international actors – require a well-defined advocacy strategy originating from community-based mechanisms and feeding into globally-led opportunities. Taking the Protection Analysis products as a baseline, the GPC Advocacy Task Team can support the national Protection Cluster in this task, bringing the situation in Niger to the forefront of media attention, engaging with human rights mechanisms and mobilizing donors to support the scale of protection response.

## **4- Scale up protection programming, in quantity and quality**

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With 90 actors active, the Protection Cluster in Niger has the capacity to scale up its response but is lacking adequate and flexible funding – with only 33% of protection requirements funded in HRP 2021 – to operate in a volatile and ever-changing environment. We must fulfil our mission to stand by those affected by the conflict and take the responsibility of leading the protection response. Access to mental health and psychosocial support, as well as dedicated child protection and gender-based violence services – which are the basics of protection programming – remain an utmost priority and need to be scaled up, in quantity and quality.

## **5- Adopt a more robust approach to Centrality of Protection**

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Two critical protection issues require a system-wide response and a collective engagement through a robust Humanitarian Country Team (HCT) Protection Strategy. Its upcoming revision in February 2022 is an opportunity to adopt collective protection outcomes on i) the prevention of child marriage, particularly cases induced by the armed conflict, ii) the scale up of psychosocial and mental health as a cross-sectoral objective between the Protection Cluster, Child Protection and GBV AoRs, and Education and Health Clusters.

## **6- Support alternatives to returns and explore durable solutions**

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In 2018, Niger became the first to adopt a national law domesticating the Kampala Convention after its adoption, accompanied by a National Committee for Data Collection and Information Management, which oversees the displacement trends and registration processes. In June this year, the Nigerien authorities pledged to facilitate the return of IDPs to their villages of origin. We need to support safe, fully informed and voluntary returns while exploring the full gamut of alternatives and durables solutions – including local integration and relocation.

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<sup>9</sup> [Global Protection Cluster, Protection Analytical Framework](#)

<sup>10</sup> [Protection Analysis Update Niger, June 2021](#)