

International

Kindness of strangers tips the scales in strife-wracked Mali

Thousands flee as violence spread to the centre of the country

SEGOU: The courtyard of Issa Haidara's home in the central Malian town of Segou fills up rapidly at nightfall - testimony to the kindness of strangers. In quieter times, Haidara lived in the house with his wife, their five children and an aunt. But this night, 29 more people have filed in through a small metal door. "They're displaced, by the grace of God, this is how it is in Mali," said the householder, a tailor of 51 with a ready smile, clad in a flowing black African robe, or boubou.

Despite his meager income (8 euros on good days), Haidara has never hesitated to take people in when destitute villagers fleeing a bloody conflict flooded Segou in their thousands. "This is Mali, this is the custom, it is God who wills it," Haidara repeats firmly. A jihadist uprising began in northern Mali in 2012 on the back of a Tuareg rebellion in the Sahara. In January 2013, elite French troops helped to rid key desert towns, such as Timbuktu, of the fighters, but the conflict changed shape.

Armed Islamists initially fell back into the arid north-eastern badlands, but since 2015 violence has spread to the centre of the country, forcing tens of thousands to abandon their homes. Among the first to be taken in by Haidara six months ago were Amadou Semasekkou, 58, his wife and their five children, who fled an ethnic Fulani village in the region of Mopti, a central garrison town. Semasekkou's family had felt threatened by the warriors of radical Islamist preacher Amadou Koufa on the one hand and by communal conflict involving the Bambara and Dogon peoples on the other.

Kidnapped by 'terrorists'

A specialized commission has counted more than

300,000 Malians far from home. Almost 140,000 have become refugees in neighboring Mauritania, Niger and Burkina Faso, while more than 170,000 are displaced in their homeland. Some 20,000 people have come to Segou, a town that has so far been relatively free of violence.

Sleeping mats have been laid in the courtyard of Haidara's house and the living room rearranged to house those sheltering there. Semasekkou was a farmer cultivating millet at Mamba village near Mopti until 2017 when "terrorists" came and kidnapped him. "I spent a year and a half with them in the forest. I went out to the fields to grow food for them," he said, wearing a loose purple robe and glasses that had seen better days.

Semasekkou says he has no idea why the jihadists decided one day to let him go, but he managed to return to Mamba, be reunited with his family and take the road into exile. Their trek took several months and stops in several towns before they set foot in Segou and soon found a place to rest at Haidara's house. Semasekkou does odd jobs such as "building work, work in the fields," wandering around the town and offering his services for 1,500 CFA francs (2.3 euros) a day.

Sharing the costs

Looking for work from street to street is also the daily lot of Awa Pamata, a woman of 27 caring for two children. She offers to wash residents' clothes in the broad Niger river and she charges 1,000 CFA francs (1.5 euros) for a day's labor. Though not much, "there's always this to add to the communal fund," Hamata says, for all the 37 people who benefit from the Haidara family land contribute to the joint effort. With cleaning work for the women, building



SEGOU: An aerial view shows the ancient mosque of Segoukoro (the old Segou) in central Mali. — AFP

site labor for men and market jobs like fetching and carrying for the youngsters, the members of this group earn money to feed everyone.

"Before they arrived, I bought 50 kilos of rice and it lasted a month. Today, we've gone up to 150 kilos a month and sometimes it isn't enough," Issa Haidara says, but there are food distributions by the government and some NGOs

that help. Every franc counts and all hands are useful, Haidara says, but he doesn't include children. Child labor is widespread in Mali and contributes to a low rate of school attendance. Still, almost none of the 15 children living in the compound goes to school. Instead they play and run around, proving quite a handful. "At least they're having fun," says Awa Pamata. — AFP

Europol: Ransomware attacks getting bolder

THE HAGUE: Global ransomware attacks are on the decline, but such cyber strikes are getting bolder and homing in on more profitable companies, with data encryption a key target, Europe's police agency said yesterday. Europol said it was also worried about the rise of so-called "self-generated explicit material" by underaged children who share sexual images and videos with peers through smartphones, making themselves vulnerable to sexual offenders.

Police and the private sector "confirm a diminishing number of ransomware attacks targeting individual citizens" but that they were "becoming more bold", the agency said as it released its latest annual report on internet organized crime. One of the most visible ransomware



attacks happened in March last year when SamSam malware paralyzed the southeastern US city of Atlanta for several days. Although the attackers asked for a ransom of roughly \$50,000 (45.5 million euros) it cost the City of Atlanta more than \$2.6 million to respond to the attack, according to science and technology publication Wired Magazine.

"This only proved to be the tip of the iceberg," Europol said. "There are cases where a company's encrypted files have been ransomed for over one million euros," the agency said. Company data remained a key target, Europol said, not only for conventional ransomware attacks, but also sabotage. These attacks which permanently erase or irreversibly damage company data doubled during the first six months of 2019 with half focusing on the manufacturing sector, Europol said.

This included a new strain of malware called GermanWiper "which rather than encrypting the victim's files, rewrites the content resulting in the permanent destruction of the victim's data." The agency's Internet Organized Crime Threat Assessment report also highlighted online child sexual exploitation as an ongoing major concern with children themselves contributing to the problem, helped by greater access to smartphones. "Self-generated explicit material has been a growing concern for several years, as more-and-more young children share explicit material online," Europol said. — AFP

The Kurdish struggle for rights and land

ANKARA: Turkish forces are poised to advance into northeast Syria after US troops began vacating the area, in an abrupt policy shift by President Donald Trump widely criticized in Washington as a betrayal of America's Kurdish militia allies. Ankara says it plans to create a "safe zone" to resettle the millions of refugees currently living on Turkish soil. This would then serve as a buffer against what Turkey sees as its main security threat in Syria - Kurdish YPG fighters who Ankara says are linked to militants waging an insurgency inside Turkey. Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran all have large Kurdish minorities seeking varying degrees of autonomy from central governments after decades of repression. This is an overview of their status.

History

The Kurdish ethnic minority, mainly Sunni Muslims, speaks a language related to Farsi and lives mostly in a mountainous region straddling the borders of Armenia, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. Kurdish nationalism stirred in the 1890s when the Ottoman Empire was on its last legs. The 1920 Treaty of Sevres, which imposed a settlement and colonial carve-up of Turkey after World War One, promised them independence. Three years later, Turkish leader Kemal Ataturk tore up that accord. The Treaty of Lausanne, ratified in 1924, divided the Kurds among the new nations of the Middle East.

Syria

Before Syria's popular uprising erupted in 2011, Kurds formed 8-10 percent of the population. The Baathist state, championing Arab nationalism, had deprived thousands of Kurds of citizenship rights, banned their language and clamped down on Kurdish political activity. During the war, President Bashar Al-Assad focused on crushing mainly Sunni Arab rebels with the help of Russia and Iran, turning a blind eye as Kurdish fighters carved out self-rule across the north and east.

Kurdish forces have emerged among the biggest winners, controlling about a quarter of the country - territory rich in oil, water and farmland. It is the biggest chunk of Syria not in state hands, now with its own forces and bureaucracy. Assad has said he will recover the northeast, but the two sides have kept some channels open.

The Kurdish YPG militia's power grew after joining forces with US troops to seize territory from Islamic State. While the US deployment has provided a security umbrella that helped Kurdish influence expand, Washington opposes the autonomy plans. Syrian Kurdish leaders say they do not seek partition but rather regional autonomy as part of Syria. Faced with the threat of a Turkish attack, the Kurdish-led authority in northern Syria has declared a state of "general mobilization" across north and east Syria.

Turkey

Kurds form about 20 percent of the population. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) took up arms against the state in 1984, waging an insurgency for autonomy in Turkey's largely Kurdish southeast. Since then, more than 40,000 people have been killed in the conflict. PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan was captured in 1999, tried and sentenced to death. That was later reduced to life in prison after Turkey abolished the death penalty.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan has removed restrictions on using the Kurdish language. The government held talks with Ocalan, who is in jail on an island near Istanbul, in 2012, but they broke down and the conflict has revived. The United States, the European Union and Turkey classify the PKK as a terrorist organization. Turkey's military has often struck targets in Iraq's Kurdish region near the PKK's stronghold in the Qandil mountains. Erdogan has said he will crush Syria's YPG, which Ankara sees as a branch of the PKK, and has sent troops into northern Syria to mount offensives rolling back the Kurdish fighters.

Iraq

Kurds form 15-20 percent of the population, mainly inhabiting the three northern provinces of Iraqi Kurdistan. Late President Saddam Hussein's rule targeted Iraqi Kurds in the late 1980s when chemical gas was used, villages were razed and thousands of Kurds were forced into camps. Their region has been semi-autonomous since 1991, has its own regional government and armed forces, but still relies on the Baghdad central government for its budget.

When Islamic State militants swept through much of northern Iraq in 2014, Kurdish fighters exploited the collapse of central authority to take control of Kirkuk, the oil city they regard as their ancient regional capital, as well as other territory disputed by Baghdad and the Kurdish north. Iraqi government forces and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, with US backing, defeated Islamic State which had captured swathes of northern Iraq.

Iraq's Kurds held a referendum on independence in September 2017, which backfired and triggered a regional crisis in the face of opposition from Baghdad and regional powers. The vote prompted military and economic retaliation from Baghdad, which retook the territory seized by Kurdish forces since 2014. Ties have since improved, but tensions remain over oil exports and revenue-sharing.

Iran

Kurds form about 10 percent of the population. In 2011, Iran pledged to step up military action against the Party of Free Life of Kurdistan, a PKK offshoot that has sought greater autonomy for Kurds in Iran. Rights groups say Kurds, along with other religious and ethnic minorities, face discrimination under the ruling clerical establishment. The elite Revolutionary Guards have put down unrest in the Kurdish community for decades, and the country's judiciary has sentenced many activists to long jail terms or death. Iran's military has demanded Iraqi authorities hand over separatist Kurdish dissidents stationed there and close their bases. — Reuters

US serial killer confesses to 93 murders

LOS ANGELES: The FBI is asking for the public's help in identifying dozens of victims of a convicted murderer who has confessed to strangling 93 people, claims the agency says are credible and make him the most prolific serial killer in US history. Investigators who have interviewed Samuel Little at a Los Angeles-area prison say they have confirmed 50 of the homicides he admitted to carrying out between 1970 and 2005 and have released videotapes of his jailhouse confessions as they investigate the remaining slayings.

"Even though he is already in prison, the FBI believes it is important to seek justice for each victim - to close every case possible," the FBI said in a statement posted to its website, which also includes drawings made by Little, 79, of many of the women he strangled. Little, who is serving life behind bars for his conviction on three murders committed in the 1980s, began confessing additional killings some 18 months ago to a Texas Ranger who interviewed him in his cell at the state prison in Lancaster, California, according to the FBI. He appears to have targeted mostly vulnerable young black women, many of them prostitutes or drug addicts, whose deaths were not well-publicized at the time and in some cases not recorded as homicides. — AFP



BAGHDAD: Iraqi police are seen deployed in Baghdad's predominantly Shiite Sadr City. — AFP

Iraqi social networks still offline despite return to calm

BAGHDAD: Access to social media sites remained restricted in Iraq yesterday, despite calm returning to the streets after a week of anti-government protests that left dozens dead. For a week internet access in Iraq has been progressively limited. First access to certain social media sites disappeared, followed by internet connections for telephones, computers and even virtual private network (VPN) applications. Cyber-security NGO NetBlocks noted that "the state imposed a near-total telecommunication shutdown in most regions, severely limiting press coverage and transparency around the ongoing crisis." Since Tuesday, connection has intermittently returned to Baghdad and the south of the country. During these short reconnections, social media sites were accessible via a VPN connection, and

images of protesters killed during marches began to be shared.

Yesterday, the connection remained unreliable. Providers told customers they were unable to provide a timetable for a return to uninterrupted service, information on restrictions, or any other details. Iraqi authorities have not commented on the restrictions, which according to NetBlocks affected three quarters of the country. In the north, the autonomous Kurdish region is unaffected.

Iraqi authorities cut off internet access last year in response to mass protests in southern Iraq. Those outages followed a similar pattern: social media was unavailable at first before a wider internet blackout across the entire country. Since October 1, according to official figures, more than 100 people have been killed, mostly protesters, and more than 6,000 others wounded.

The protests were unprecedented because of their apparent spontaneity and independence in a deeply politicized society. They began with demands for an end to rampant corruption and chronic unemployment but then escalated with calls for a complete overhaul of the political system. The protests and accompanying violence have created a political crisis, prompting President Barham Saleh to call for a "national, all-encompassing and frank dialogue... without foreign interference." — AFP

Part-time hunters boost income with bushmeat in Congo

MBANDAKA: Once a month, Mohamed Esimbo Matongu leaves his home in the western Congolese city of Mbandaka and hunts for wild animals. Though he works for a government agency, he says he needs the income from selling most of what he kills to provide for his family. But bushmeat hunters like him are emptying Central Africa's forests at a high rate, researchers say. "When I was a teenager, I had to travel no more than 10 km upriver to find animals. But now I have to go as far as 40 km to come across a decent hunting ground," said 61-year-old Matongu.

When he goes hunting, he rents a dugout canoe and a couple of paddles, and packs a homemade rifle, a dozen cartridges and enough kwanga, a traditional bread made from cassava, to last a few days. He stays in a cabin on a tributary of the Congo river and roams the forest day and night in search of whatever quarry he can find, including monkeys, forest antelopes, crocodiles, pythons and river hogs. Until the 1990s, hunters like Matongu killed for personal consumption, but growing appetite for wild meat in cities has ramped up the scale of hunting.

The impact on wildlife numbers is clear, according to locals and researchers. Research shows around 6 million tons of bushmeat are sourced annually from the Congo Basin, whose forest spans across six countries and is second in size only to the Amazon. "Our surveys show that animals from many species are disappearing around villages," said Michel Bakanza, who works on community forests for the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in Mbandaka.

Many animals, including bonobo apes and pangolins, are protected by international law, but a lack of government oversight means these endangered species are regularly killed. Matongu says his monthly salary of about \$75 is not enough to cover the needs of his wife, four daughters, two brothers and nephew who live under his roof. — Reuters