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Algeria:

National reconciliation fails to address needs of IDPs

Although Algeria was affected by large-scale displacement caused by conflict between 1992 and 2002, internally displaced people (IDPs) were not a priority for the government during or after the conflict. As a result, even the most basic information about their number and situation has consistently been unavailable. The European Union estimated at the end of the conflict that violence had displaced one million people, while other sources put the number as high as 1.5 million. The government has not contested these figures.

Furthermore, there is no indication about whether these IDPs have achieved durable solutions. The government has stated that no-one remains displaced, but has not provided information about returns or living conditions in areas of origin. It is likely that most IDPs have remained in the cities they fled to, and mixed with other poor populations there, as access to livelihoods in rural areas has remained very limited. Lack of support, justice, and reparations for IDPs has been the norm.

While security has steadily improved since 2002, attacks in Algerian towns and cities by the rebel organisation called “al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb” increased in 2007 and 2008. The President began a third presidential term in 2009 after modifying the Constitution to allow for re-election, and these attacks seem to reflect a growing discontent at single-party dominance.

If the situation of IDPs and others affected by the conflict and more recent attacks is not to fall into oblivion, international condemnation for these attacks must be paired with demands about the situation of human rights, including the rights of the large numbers of people that were victims of forced displacement.

Map of Algeria



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Background and causes of displacement

Violence in Algeria was triggered by an army-backed coup in January 1992 which aimed to pre-empt an electoral victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut* or FIS) over the ruling National Liberation Front (*Front de Libération Nationale* or FLN), which had been in power since Algeria gained independence from France in 1962. In the context of a stagnating economy, the opening of the political arena after years of political restrictions gave the FIS an opportunity to gain wide popularity, and it was poised for victory. Following the coup, a state of emergency was introduced and the FIS was banned.

Between 1993 and 1998, fighting between the army and various armed Islamist organisations intensified, as did attacks against civilians. Due in part to the army's counter-insurgency strategy, the rebel movement split into a plethora of armed movements, which proved difficult to eradicate (University of Bradford, November 2004). The Armed Islamic Group (*Groupe Islamique Armé* or GIA) emerged as the most brutal, and was responsible for numerous killings of foreigners from late 1993 and large-scale massacres of civilians from 1996 to 1998, a strategy which eventually led to splits within its ranks (HRW, 2000). However, attacks against the civilian population remained widespread for several years, with indiscriminate killings and displacement reported as late as 2002 (AI, 2003).

The conflict is estimated to have claimed the lives of between 150,000 and 200,000 people. While an estimated 17,000 rebel combatants were killed during the con-

flict, the civilian population became the prime victims of armed attacks and targeted assassinations. At the height of the crisis, some 1,200 people were reportedly killed each month (ICG, October 2000, Executive Summary; ICG, July 2004, p.14). Nevertheless, as with figures for internally displaced people (IDPs), estimates of the number of people killed are imprecise and have been contested (Comité Justice pour l'Algérie, May 2004). Many women were executed, raped, abducted and enslaved (AI, December 2004; HRW, 2004).

Government security forces were also directly responsible for killings and other violations of human rights, as well as causing displacement and failing to protect civilians from attacks (Martinez, April 2003; Comité Justice pour l'Algérie, May 2004, dossier no.2; Liberté, 14 August 2004).

The establishment of local self-defence groups to ensure the security of civilians, which became legal in 1997, in some cases increased insecurity as their leaders evolved into local warlords. Between 150,000 and 200,000 people joined these militia groups and another 80,000 were recruited as local guards. The militias often participated in operations with the security forces and effectively replaced them in certain areas (AI, 18 November 1997; Sidhoum, December 2003).

After his election in 1999, President Abdulaziz Bouteflika focused on restoring stability by introducing initiatives such as the 1999 Civil Concord Law and the 2005 Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. The Charter, which was passed in a national referendum, sought political reconciliation at the expense of

justice for those affected by the conflict: it granted a blanket amnesty for human rights violations committed during the conflict by state armed forces, and a decree for its implementation criminalised speech about violations committed by the security forces (AI, 2006, USDOS 2008). Furthermore, both the Charter and the 1999 Law left many problems unsolved; for instance, dozens of members of armed groups reportedly re-enlisted after having surrendered (AI, 2003).

The conflict ended in 2002, but while security has since improved considerably, violence has continued. Firstly, clashes continued between the government and remaining armed groups. Secondly, an organisation known as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) emerged from the union of al Qaeda and a splinter group of the GIA, and re-intensified attacks against Western targets and the Algerian security forces throughout 2007 and 2008, including the 2007 Algiers bombing that killed 17 United Nations (UN) staff, and the abduction of a UN special envoy (BBC, 2009; BBC, 11 December 2007; UK Home Office, 2 November 2007; Tomás, 14 June 2007; Center for Contemporary Conflict, November 2006).

The government's measures to counter these new attacks have sometimes had an adverse impact on affected groups including those displaced by the conflict. They have sometimes targeted human rights defenders or those providing legal counsel to people accused of terrorism (AI, 2009). The state of emergency has continued since 1992 despite the concerns then expressed by the UN Human Rights Committee (HRC, 2007), and in violation of the country's constitution (Mustapha

Bouchachi, El Khabar, 2009). Among other limitations of rights, freedom of movement may be restricted by the interior minister and even provincial governors, who have power to deny residency in certain districts to people regarded as threats to public order (USDoS, 2009).

Constitutional reforms which have allowed the President to stay in power for a third term have further reduced the space for institutional political opposition, creating a breeding ground for radicalism (Maître Ali Yahia Abdenour, 2009). Following the President's re-election in April 2009, the same ministers have remained in place. This has happened in a context of increasing control of the media and limitations to freedom of speech and of association (LADDH, 2009; USDoS, 2009).

Numbers of IDPs and patterns of displacement

There are no available estimates on the number of people displaced by the conflict in Algeria and the information on the subject is fragmented. During and after the conflict, because of difficulties in accessing the affected areas (USDoS, 2008), international organisations were unable to issue informed estimates of the number of IDPs. Furthermore, existing reports do not always differentiate between IDPs and those who moved primarily for economic reasons, as high degrees of poverty-driven urban migration have also been observed.

One of the few international sources of IDP numbers is the European Union (EU), which in its development strategy for Algeria for the period from 2002 to 2006 cited that violence displaced one million people (EU, Strategy 2002-2006,

p.38). Several newspapers reported massive displacement from rural areas, of up to an estimated 1.5 million people as of late 2002, because of the security situation (L'Expression, 18 November 2002). According to a newspaper, the President said on one occasion that 1.5 million people had been displaced (Figaro, 6 April 2004). However, this report was quickly refuted by the Minister of the Interior, who stated that only 500,000 people were internally displaced during the conflict (El Watan, 10 April 2004).

Most IDPs fled to the relative safety of cities, including Oran, Blida, Médéa, Chlef and Tiaret, where they stayed with family and friends and possibly eventually settled. Some were displaced by a combination of insecurity and poverty in areas affected by the conflict. While families were already fleeing insecurity during the first years of the crisis, the first massacres of civilians in late 1996 initiated massive movements towards the cities. Thousands fled to the outskirts of Algiers, of whom many were forced to flee for a second or third time when the conflict approached the capital during the summer and autumn of 1997.

Towards 1998, when the army had gained control over the major urban centres, fighting moved back to rural areas. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were subsequently forced to flee continuing massacres, armed attacks and large-scale human rights violations. Media reports also documented cases where the police forcibly cleared villages suspected of supporting rebel groups (Liberté, 14 August 2004; Le Matin, 16 May 2001; Comité Justice pour l'Algérie dossier no.2, May 2004, pp.20-21). The destruction and theft of crops and agricultural

property by rebel groups also reportedly led to massive displacements near Relizane in July 2002 (Le Quotidien d'Oran, 31 July 2002).

There is no more recent information on IDP numbers, although the Ministry of the Interior reported to the UN Human Rights Committee in October 2007 that there were no IDPs remaining in the country because they had all returned home (HRC, 24 October 2007). Government figures on urban growth rates show that the expansion of cities has slowed over time, and so appear to corroborate the above statement; however they do not take into account the many people living in slums around cities without legal residence there (Mesli, Alkarama for Human Rights, 2009), and the data is incomplete because the government does not systematically release full indicators (USDoS, 2008). Simple observation reveals that slums around cities have grown significantly in Algiers, Blida, Médéa, Chlef, Tiaret, Sidi Bel Abbes, Relizane, and Oran (Mesli, Alkarama for Human Rights, 2009).

Durable solutions

Given the magnitude of the displacement situation, it is likely that a significant number of IDPs have not been able to attain durable solutions by 2009. Information on return movements is mainly drawn from newspaper articles or fragmented data presented in project implementation reports. Generally, access to government information is restricted (USDoS, 2008), and the government has not published figures on return, although the President stated in an April 2004 speech that 700,000 people of 1.5 million IDPs had returned (Figaro, 6 April 2004). Similarly,

no data is available on people who have integrated in their area of displacement or resettled elsewhere in the country.

According to anecdotal reports, some 60,000 families returned between 2002 and 2005 to the rural areas of Khenchela and more than 2,400 families to Relizane Province (Le Jeune Indépendant, 27 December 2005). There are also newspaper reports of returns in the Provinces of Aïn Defla, Annaba, Bouira, Chlef, Mascara, Médéa, Sétif, Skikda Tiaret and Tissemlit (La Dépêche de Kabylie, 3 October 2007; Le Soir d'Algérie, 9 January 2007, 26 January 2006, 15 November 2005; El Watan, 4 February 2006, 1 October 2005; El Moudjahid, 13 September 2006, 13 August 2005; La Tribune d'Algérie, 29 September 2004). According to one 2006 report, returnees in Algiers Province were facing numerous problems in rebuilding their lives due to high unemployment rates and a lack of basic infrastructure (Le Soir d'Algérie, 26 January 2006).

Security in areas of return has improved consistently over the past few years, thanks also to the gradual redeployment since 2006 of security forces to the Kabylia region, where AQIM had carried out numerous attacks (BBC, 2009; L'Expression, 10 July 2006). The security forces had been withdrawn from Kabylia following the Kabyle Berber protests of the "Black Spring" of late April 2001 (ICG, 10 June 2003; Afriqu'Echos, 12 December 2006). However, AQIM has since been reportedly active, in particular in the Provinces of Boumerdés, Tizi-Ouzou, Bejaïa, Batna, Khenchela and in the regions of Aurés and Jijel (CRI, August 2007; BBC, 6 July 2007).

Since the conflict, the north of the country, where most of the population lives and most of the violence took place, has remained contaminated by an unknown number of home-made explosives laid by insurgents and by some 15,000 anti-personnel mines laid by the army (ICBL, October 2007). Mined areas are generally well marked and fenced (although in some cases, marking and fencing have reportedly been removed or have deteriorated), but the presence of unexploded ordnance has still obstructed the development of livelihoods and a sustainable economy in affected areas (email from UNDP Mine Action Programme in Algeria, 3 December 2007).

National and international response

Overall, both the national and the international responses have focused in the past few years on national reconciliation and on the development and regeneration of rural areas; no specific attention has been paid to those that were displaced by conflict (Présidence de la République d'Algérie, 27 December 2006; EU Commission, 7 March 2007; UNDP, September 2007). In 2001, the government, profiting from increased oil revenues, launched a comprehensive programme of investment focusing on housing, infrastructure, public services and agricultural production (ICARRD, March 2006; Government of Algeria, July 2005). However, while the government has encouraged the return of IDPs, there is no targeted strategy to assist them, and no reports or assessments of the particular needs and rights of IDPs, which could have helped shape these programmes, are available.

Some efforts have been made to revitalise agriculture in rural areas and secure the livelihoods of returning populations. The government launched the National Agricultural and Rural Development plan (*Plan National de Développement Agricole et Rural* or PNDAR) in 2000, to encourage IDPs and migrants to return to their villages. The government has offered direct financial assistance to returnees and programmes to repair houses, increase employment and revitalise the agricultural sector (WB, 27 March 2003, 20 December 2005, 27 June 2007). In particular, in rural areas, the government has committed to build some 475,000 new homes between 2005 and 2009 (La Tribune, 15 October 2006). However, the rebuilding programme has been repeatedly delayed, often due to administrative constraints such as lack of capacity from local administrators, and people have been discouraged from returning to their home villages by the lack of safe drinking water, general infrastructure and health facilities there (El Watan, 8 January 2006, 17 July 2005).

National mechanisms for the protection of human rights do not provide adequate redress for citizens including IDPs. The ombudsman's office is perceived as pro-government and its annual report is not released publicly (USDoS, 2009), while limits to judicial independence hinder the enforcement of court rulings. In 2008, the government denied requests for visits from various UN human rights experts (USDoS, 2008).

The international reaction to the conflict in Algeria was generally one of cautious observation. The UN and individual states condemned the large-scale massacres of late 1997 and 1998 (Dammers,

1998). For the most part, EU members avoided direct involvement and ignored calls to use their influence to direct events within Algeria (ICG, 20 October 2000). The USA expressed concern about the human rights situation, while at the same time remaining committed to doing business in Algeria and supporting the government with military aid (HRW, 2000; Arabic News.Com, 28 October 2003; NYT, 10 December 2002). In the context of the "war on terror", international attention has since focused on the risks associated with terrorist groups in the country.

Note: This is a summary of IDMC's new internal displacement profile on Algeria. The full profile is available online [here](#).

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About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org.

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