

Briefing Note: Impact of COVID-19 on mixed migration in the Agadez region, Niger

Niger, April 2020

SUMMARY

Niger is traditionally a major transit point for people in mixed migration flows¹. West African refugees and migrants² travel northwards in search for opportunities, while others are pushed southwards, deported by Algerian authorities or entering Niger from Libya, looking for safety across the border. The first case of COVID-19 was detected in Niamey on 19 March 2020. A total number of 3,245 tests have been administered to potentially infected persons, mostly in Niamey, with positive results for 832 people as of 10 May 2020. Among those tested positive, 46 people lost their life as a result of the disease³. Eighteen positive cases have been identified in the Agadez region early May. To limit a further spread of COVID-19 into the country, Nigerien authorities closed its borders and schools, reduced public transportation, limited movement in and out of Niamey to a minimum and prohibited gatherings of more than 50 people, as well as meetings and workshops⁴.

Border closures have had the following immediate impact on refugees and migrants (returning or transiting):

- Refugees and migrants entering the country are required to quarantine for two weeks. As the locations where they are being quarantined are often not intended as places of prolonged isolation, **these areas are often ill-equipped to respond to the basic needs of the refugees and migrants isolating there**⁵.
- Foreign refugees and migrants that intend to repatriate are **blocked in increasingly crowded transit centres with no clear perspective on when their repatriation could take place**⁵.

While there seems to be a general interest among the humanitarian community to intervene in support of the authorities managing the crisis, there seems to be a lack of clarity on the size of needs and gaps in the current response. This briefing note, written in the framework of the Migration Working Group, presents the findings from a rapid assessment on the humanitarian situation of mixed migration flows affected by COVID-19 in the Agadez region. The assessment was conducted by REACH Initiative from 17-22 April 2020 and is based on secondary data and 10 key informants (KIs)⁶ interviews conducted remotely via phone. The findings should be considered as indicative rather than representative, providing a general overview of the humanitarian situation and needs. This briefing note explores the priorities identified by KIs in terms of urgent humanitarian needs for refugees and migrants currently quarantined in isolation sites or living in transit centers in the Agadez region.

KEY PRIORITIES



Health

Health infrastructure, personnel and supplies are generally reported as insufficient to respond both to the increased number of refugees and migrants stranded in Niger and a potential outbreak of COVID-19 in the Agadez region. Calls to finance the regional response plan largely remain without response, according to regional authorities interviewed.



Humanitarian assistance

There is widespread agreement among KIs interviewed that although humanitarian assistance is available in isolation and transit sites, the quantity seems to be generally insufficient to respond to the needs of the increasing migrant population in these sites, with main needs in food assistance, shelter and non-food items (NFIs).

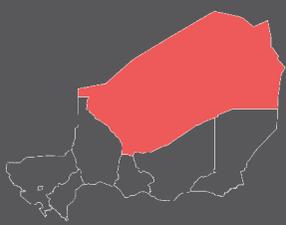


Protection

KIs reported that many refugees and migrants, who have often been exposed to high security risks and stigmatization, are currently stranded in Niger and in need of protection and psycho-social support.

HUMANITARIAN CONSTRAINTS

KIs emphasized the absence of sufficient financial resources and the restriction on movements to respond to the needs of vulnerable refugees and migrants, as well as to properly implement the regional COVID-19 prevention plan. Humanitarian interventions are reportedly further constrained by difficulties of coordination, and lack of clarity of urgent needs. The inability to organize in-person meetings reportedly poses further obstacles to coordination.



Briefing Note: Migrants affected by the COVID-19 situation in the Agadez region Niger, April 2020

CONTEXT

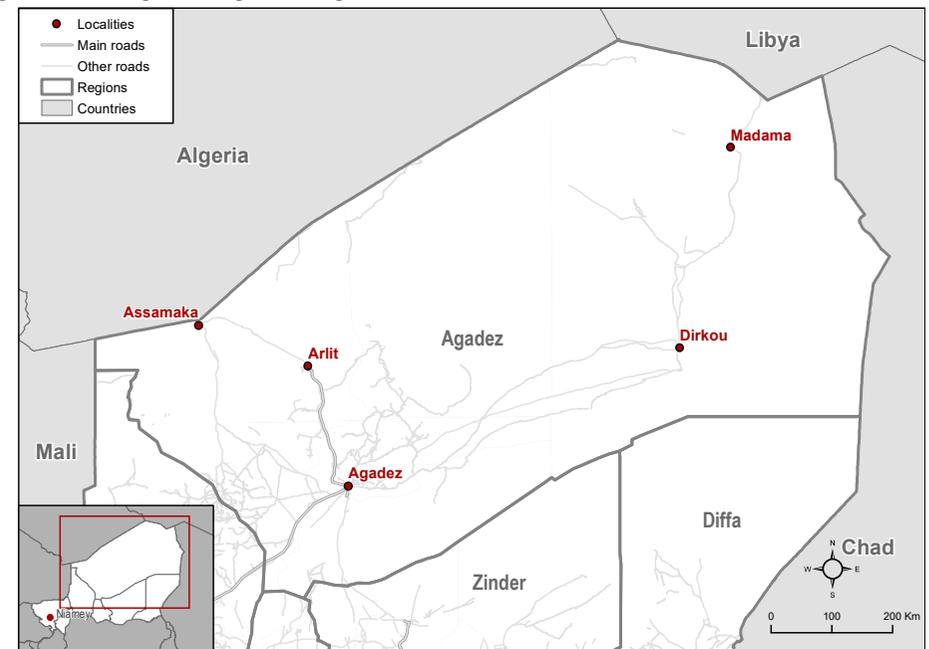
COVID-19 and its related restrictions affect vulnerable refugees and migrants on the move and stranded in Niger. Border closures have reduced mixed migration flows by 28% in West Africa between January and March 2020, according to IOM's Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM). In the Agadez region, DTM observes a 23% decrease in Arlit (near the border with Algeria) and a 5% decrease in Madama (near the Libyan border)⁷. As of 17 April 2020, IOM estimates that about 2 300 migrants are currently blocked in Niger⁸.

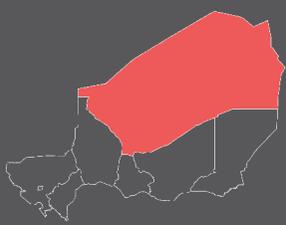
Border crossings at Assamaka (Niger-Algeria border) and Madama (Niger-Libya border)⁴ have officially closed on 19 March 2020. **Refugees and migrants on their way north** are therefore presented with the choice of either being stranded in Niger or continuing their journey by taking clandestine routes through the desert, a potentially fatal journey as they are exposed to harsh weather conditions and limited supplies⁹. According to KIs, refugees and migrants are still making their way towards Libya and Algeria, even though borders have been closed. That said, according to a KI the number of departures of migrants towards Agadez might decrease due to the lack of public transport between Niamey and Agadez as a result of the COVID-19 prevention measures.

Refugees and migrants on their way south reportedly continue to arrive in Niger. Algeria has been deporting West African migrants at a rate of about 500 migrants a week since 2018, transporting them to the border point 15km before the settlement of Assamaka, from which migrants walk through the desert towards this town^{4,9}. Despite the official border closure, 1,046 people were deported from Algeria between 19 March and 18 April 2020⁴. As explained by KIs, these are often young Nigerien men working in mines in the border zone between Algeria and Niger. Violence, insecurity and protection concerns are driving refugees and migrants out of Libya and into Niger. Travelling southwards by their own means, they are at risk of getting lost in the desert. In April, 256 people who returned from Libya were rescued in the desert close to Madama⁴.

Finally, 1,490 migrants¹⁰ and a growing number of refugees are **stranded in Niger**, waiting for their repatriation or resettlement. As the number of refugees and migrants entering Niger increases while repatriation and resettlement possibilities are on hold as a result of border closures, the facilities hosting them are becoming increasingly saturated. Those who are wishing not to repatriate and who are not eligible for resettlement often end up in the suburban areas in Agadez city or attempt to renew their journey northwards. According to the Regional Council of Agadez, which surveys migrants entering and leaving the region, 81% of the 3 818 migrants they interviewed in March indicated that they do not want to return to their home countries or home towns⁵.

Figure 1. The Agadez region in Niger





Briefing Note: Migrants affected by the COVID-19 situation in the Agadez region

Niger, April 2020

RESPONSE CAPACITY

The current response is providing a limited level of assistance in all sectors, yet KIs have highlighted that aid is generally insufficient to adequately cover the needs of all refugees and migrants. There is a particular concern of rising unmet needs in case of a continuation of people arriving in Niger⁵.



Humanitarian assistance

Nigerien authorities are leading the response, both taking measures in the face of a potential spread of COVID-19 in the region – such as the set-up of the isolation site in the stadium, and in the assistance of migrants affected by these measures. The authorities are supported by IOM, which generally provides logistical support and distribute kits with food and non-food items. IOM also managed the transit sites for international migrants, while UNHCR is overseeing the humanitarian centre for stranded refugees and asylum seekers. In addition to these UN agencies, a number of NGOs are involved in the assistance, including MDM, MSF and IRC.



COVID-19 prevention measures

In the Agadez region as a whole, the Regional Direction of Public Health (DRSP) has established a Preparation and Response Plan for COVID-19, costing about 2 million USD. The plan includes the creation of a dedicated care facility for COVID-19 patients, as well as the strengthening of health surveillance measures at the border points and the region's gold mines¹¹.

A regional committee comprised of state and non-state actors has been established to implement these prevention measures, raise awareness and mobilise resources⁵. Yet, despite calls for resources being raised by regional authorities, the response by the humanitarian community remains limited, according to state representatives interviewed.

Whereas the regional plan is designed to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the Agadez region as a whole, specific migration-related prevention measures have also been taken. Besides the opening of isolation sites and the imposition of a 14-day quarantine to refugees and migrants entering Niger, officials are systematically taking the temperature at Niger's border points. However, the Agadez region's testing capacities remain low despite the implementation of the COVID-19 response regional plan.

Repatriation

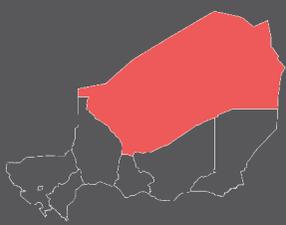
In order to provide a solution to West-African migrants wanting to repatriate in a situation where borders are closed, the government of Niger, IOM and diplomatic missions are working together to open a potential corridor to return migrants to their countries of origin⁸.

ISOLATION SITES AND WELCOME CENTRES

Isolation sites

According to KIs, people on the move risk transporting the virus to new places, especially in the Agadez region, which is a crossroads of migration routes. This explains why Nigerien authorities have adopted measures to prevent potentially infected refugees and migrants from spreading the disease, additionally to border closures. All refugees and migrants entering Niger are subjected to a 14-day quarantine period and at the border points of Assamaka and Madama, the temperature of refugees and migrants is being measured. Two main new isolation sites have been set up affecting refugees and migrants entering the Agadez region:

- **ASSAMAKA ISOLATION SITE:** At the border settlement of Assamaka, where a transit centre was already present before the border closure and imposition of quarantine measures, an isolation site has been created where migrants entering from Algeria pass their quarantine period. The site is managed by the DRSP, supported by IOM and MSF, which provide, among other things, water, sanitation and sleeping facilities, as well as food distributions. However according to KIs, it has been challenging to transform the response from welcoming refugees and migrants for 24 hours in the centre to hosting hundreds of people for 14 days. Nevertheless, as there is a continuous flow of refugees and migrants arriving in small and large groups in the settlement, it has proven to be increasingly difficult to put them in quarantine, as new arrivals need to be separated from existing groups, according to KIs. The 356 migrants currently present at the site⁸ are sheltered underneath hangars in communal spaces⁸. Upon completion of their quarantine period, these people are generally moved to Agadez where Nigeriens are handed over to the Nigerien state, whereas international migrants and asylum seekers are respectively hosted and assisted by IOM and UNHCR as explained by KIs⁵.



Briefing Note: Migrants affected by the COVID-19 situation in the Agadez region Niger, April 2020

- **AGADEV STADIUM:** The refugees and migrants arriving from Libya were transported by IOM and Nigerien authorities from Madama to Agadez via Dirkou⁸. In Agadez, these 235 refugees and migrants passed their quarantine period in the regional stadium, managed by the DRSP as isolation site, assisted by IOM. These refugees and migrants have been sheltered in big tents and share non-food items. On 10 April, 43 migrants escaped the stadium by climbing its walls¹².

Transit centres

After the 14-day isolation period, international refugees and migrants are moved to sites where they are staying until their repatriation or resettlement. Nigerien migrants that entered the country through Algeria or Libya go through the repatriation site, after which they are asked to return to their hometowns. In these IOM's centers, prevention measures as handwashing and temperature checks are currently being adopted

- **AGADEV TRANSIT CENTRE:** Approximately 775 refugees and migrants⁸ are staying at the transit centre for international migrants, where they sleep in dormitories and hangars. Whereas this site was created to host refugees and migrants for 1-2 weeks during which their repatriation is being arranged, it has had to adapt to the current situation in which hundreds of refugees and migrants are sheltering for multiple months in the absence of immediate possibilities to repatriate, according to KIs.
- **ARLIT TRANSIT CENTRE:** After having completed their 14-day quarantine in Assamaka, 405 refugees and migrants are staying at the IOM transit centre in Arlit⁸. After a 2-weeks quarantine, tensions seems to be starting in the centre, related to communication difficulties and lack of information regarding a potential return to migrants' native country¹³.
- **AGADEV REPATRIATION SITE:** The repatriation site is located in Agadez and is managed by Nigerien authorities and supported by IOM. The site hosts about 227 Nigerien migrants⁸ deported from Algeria, who usually spend 48 hours in this site before returning to their home villages. The site contains emergency shelters, and while sanitary facilities are present, they are considered to be insufficient for the number of people at the site, according to KIs.

- **HUMANITARIAN CENTRE:** Just outside of Agadez city, UNHCR manages a humanitarian centre for asylum seekers. The site was created in 2018 and mainly hosts Sudanese asylum seekers.

Finally, largely outside of the reach of the humanitarian community, there are migrants working at mining sites in the Agadez region, who are particularly exposed to a potential outbreak of the disease due to the lack of prevention measures taken on these sites and the high concentration of people at these sites⁵. However, almost no information is available regarding inhabitants' status and their living conditions on the site.

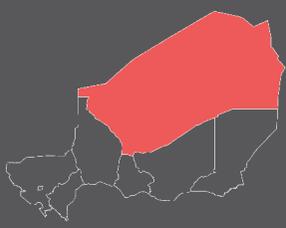
MAIN HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

Protection, security and psychosocial support

According to KIs interviewed, vulnerable refugees and migrants are in need of protection, security and psychosocial support. They expose themselves to high security risks throughout their journey, and many of them have had to face risks to their safety in Libya, Algeria and the Nigerien desert. In addition, they are often concerned about their future and health, and face social stigma by local populations⁵. Among the refugees and migrants, there are unaccompanied and separated children, as well as elderly men and women, pregnant women, and handicapped persons⁵. The particular need for protection of refugees and migrants that are not willing to repatriate has also been highlighted by KIs.

Health and hygiene

Healthcare needs were mentioned by KIs both in relation to ensure refugees and migrants' access to basic healthcare and to help limit the risk of spreading COVID-19. Current transit sites – built to host migrants and refugees for a couple of days - are not sufficiently equipped to care for refugees and migrants' health needs over a period of multiple months. While a lack of health infrastructure, personnel, services and supplies was already identified in Assamaka and Madama before the crisis¹⁴, the current pandemic has further increased the need for health personnel and supplies, including COVID-19 tests, which are still absent in the region at the time of this assessment, according to KIs^{5,15}.



Briefing Note: Migrants affected by the COVID-19 situation in the Agadez region

Niger, April 2020

Food and nutrition

While the humanitarian community seems to be able to cover the immediate needs of the refugees and migrants in the isolation and transit sites, KIs identified concerns related to both the supply of food – which has allegedly been affected by border closures – as well as its quality, as current food assistance may be unable to cover all nutritional needs, especially as the number of beneficiaries increases.

Shelter

In many of the locations where the refugees and migrants are isolating or transiting, they lack individual space and are sheltered in hangars or big tents. Not only is there an absence of privacy in these spaces, communal spaces and shared non-food items also increase the risk of facilitating a potential contamination of COVID-19 or other diseases. In addition, tents, hangars and shelters are often ill-adapted to the climate in the region, which is marked by strong winds and very high temperatures, particularly in the months of April and May⁵. Finally, several sites seem to be close to their saturation threshold, and the lack of in-depth quantitative data hinders particularly the implementation of viable alternative solutions by humanitarian actors.

KIs furthermore highlighted the importance of supporting the refugees and migrants in ghettos as well as the local community in Agadez city. These populations receive relatively limited assistance, while they are being affected by a potential socio-economic crisis resulting from COVID-19 measures, including changes in market prices and supply, as well as informal trading and other employment opportunities⁵. In addition, the local population of Assamaka might be particularly vulnerable as they are exposed to migrants entering Niger before their 14-day quarantine, yet there is no infrastructure for the inhabitants of Assamaka to arrange for their own isolation⁵. However, the information gaps around these communities are very important, and according to KIs, the information currently available does not allow an appropriate response.

Humanitarian constraints

Resources

Although KIs suggest that there is a certain “mediatisation” of the topic in Niger and despite the willingness of humanitarian actors to intervene, there seems to be a lack of financial resources,

leading to a lack of adequate assistance. Calls for financing of the regional COVID-19 prevention plan largely remain unanswered, according to the regional authorities interviewed as part of this assessment.

Coordination and communication

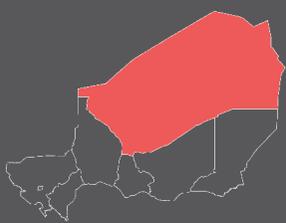
KIs highlighted a need for improved coordination between all actors involved. While coordination mechanisms exist at national level, the importance of strengthened coordination at the regional level was emphasized, as well as the need to place interventions within the regional framework to prevent the spread of COVID-19 set up by authorities. Coordination in times of prevention measures also limits the ability to organise physical meetings, which means that many of the usual coordination channels have been suspended. In addition, some KIs argued that there is an urgent need to take humanitarian needs arising from mixed migration flows more seriously within the humanitarian community.

Information

Due to the porosity of the borders and the vastness of the territory, it is nearly impossible to monitor the ways in which refugees and migrants are moving. In addition, assessments about the humanitarian needs of vulnerable refugees and migrants are outdated, according to KIs, while further research is also needed about the effects of the COVID-19 prevention measures on the local population of Agadez, in order to obtain disaggregated quantitative data to provide accurate information and contribute to informed humanitarian response.

Outlook

As refugees and migrants continue to cross borders, KIs have raised concern about a potential deterioration of the humanitarian situation, given the limited capacity of isolation and transit centres to provide them with basic assistance. As long as refugees and migrants continue to return from Algeria and Libya, and as long as transit centres are unable to repatriate these refugees and migrants, humanitarian sites and transit centres risk becoming overpopulated. An assessment to obtain quantitative data disaggregated by sex and age in the different isolation sites and transit centres in the Agadez region regarding their sheltering capacity and needs could help inform humanitarian actors and clarify the priorities identified to date by KIs.



Briefing Note: Migrants affected by the COVID-19 situation in the Agadez region

Niger, April 2020

NOTES

1. For the purposes of this assessment, 'mixed migration' is defined as 'cross-border movements of people including refugees fleeing persecution and conflict, victims of trafficking and people seeking better lives and opportunities. Motivated to move by a multiplicity of factors, people in mixed flows have different legal statuses as well as a variety of vulnerabilities. Although entitled to protection under international human rights law, they are exposed to multiple rights violations along their journey. Those in mixed migration flows travel along similar routes, using similar means of travel – often travelling irregularly and wholly or partially assisted by migrant smugglers.' Source: [Mixed Migration Centre](#).
2. For the purposes of this assessment, all people in mixed migration flows are referred to as "refugees and migrants", unless otherwise specified.
3. [Johns Hopkins University, COVID-19 Dashboard, 28 Avril 2020](#)
4. [IOM, Suivi des urgences – COVID 19 : Niger, région d'Agadez, 19 Avril 2020.](#)
5. Key informant interviews, carried out from 17-22 April.
6. The key informants represented 9 different organisations and entities: Catholic Relief Service (CRS), Direction Régionale de l'Etat Civil, des Migrations et des Réfugiés (DREC M-R), International Rescue Committee (IRC), International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Médecins du Monde (MDM), Regional Council of Agadez, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations International Children's Emergency Funds (UNICEF) and the Nigerien Red Cross.
7. The International Organization for Migration (April, 2020), Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM).
8. IOM. Réponse COVID-19 : Niger – Rapport de situation N. 2 : 27 mars – 16 avril
9. [Médecins Sans Frontières \(MSF\), Niger: at the crossroads of migration, 17 December 2019](#)
10. IOM. Réponse COVID-19 : Niger - Rapport de situation : 17 avril - 8 mai
11. Direction Regionale de la Santé Publique. Plan de Préparation et Réponse au nouveau coronavirus (COVID-19) de la Région d'Agadez. Mars 2020
12. Air info. Agadez : une quarantaine de migrants confinés au Stade régional prennent la fuite, 13 Avril 2020.
13. [France24, Niger : A Arlit, des migrants subsahariens se révoltent contre une quarantaine sans fin, 24 avril 2020](#)
14. IOM Niger. Enjeux et défis de la santé aux frontières de la région d'Agadez. 2018.
15. Echos des régions du bulletin journalier de la réponse à la pandémie au COVID-19, Niger : Agadez, 16 April 2020.

METHODOLOGY

- This situation brief presents findings from a rapid assessment on the effects of the COVID-19 prevention measures on migrants in transit centres in the Agadez region. It was conducted from 17-22 April 2020 in the framework of the Migration Working Group.
- The rapid assessment is based on a review of secondary data, 10 structured key informant (KI) interviews, and informal consultations with members of the humanitarian community. Organisations and coordination structures that have been interviewed or consulted include CRS, DREC M-R, IRC, IOM, MDM, Regional Council of Agadez, UNHCR and UNICEF .
- The KIs have been selected on the basis of their expertise on the current situation in Agadez and the coordination of its response. Interviews were conducted via phone or by Internet with pre-developed and semi-structured questionnaires.
- Several organisations and coordination structures have been consulted to triangulate information and obtain specific information on their sectors or issues of expertise.
- The secondary data review included publicly available information sources (publications, news articles) and information sources that have been distributed bilaterally.
- Due to the methodology used for the assessment, findings are indicative only, providing a general overview of the current situation and needs of the migrants assessed in this assessment.
- Considering time constraints and a lack of available, public data, the humanitarian activities mentioned in this briefing note are likely not exhaustive.

ABOUT REACH

As an initiative deployed in many vulnerable and crisis-affected countries, REACH is deeply concerned by the devastating impact the COVID-19 pandemic may have on the millions of affected people we seek to serve. REACH is currently working to scale up its programming in response to this pandemic, with the goal of identifying practical ways to inform humanitarian responses in the countries where we operate. Updates regarding REACH's response to COVID-19 can be found in a devoted thread on the [REACH website](#). Contact geneva@impact-initiatives.org for further information.