

Russia's Wagner group in Mali spurs refugee spike in Mauritania

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Maliens are fleeing to nearby Mauritania to escape from bandits, fighters, the army and now Russian operatives.

M'bera, Mauritania – Finally, the day came when Ag could not handle it any more.

He and his neighbours in the rural hinterlands of Timbuktu region in northern Mali had heard the stories from survivors passing through their town. They said white soldiers believed to be Russians had been coming into markets in nearby towns along with the Malian army – looting shops and attacking and killing people indiscriminately.

So Ag and his friends panicked, packed their belongings and fled, not stopping until they left the country.

When the Russians arrive in town with the Malian army, “they take everything they find in the market,” he told Al Jazeera at the M'bera refugee camp, in neighbouring Mauritania, where he and his family arrived about a month ago. “Often, they attack the people who try to escape. If you try to run, they'll kill you without knowing who you are.”

It is his second time in M'bera, after temporarily seeking shelter here at the beginning of the conflict in 2012.

Ag – not his real name, but a common prefix to last names among the Tuareg ethnic group, meaning “son of” – had put up with the insecurity dolled out by the Malian state and various armed groups fighting against them for years.

But with the reported indiscriminate attacks and arrests by the Russians, things had reached breaking point again.

Mali's military is in the 10th year of a war which started out as a separatist rebellion before morphing into a fight led by armed groups affiliated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. Russia-linked Wagner mercenaries reportedly arrived in Mali to support the military last December.

Since the end of 2021, M'bera has experienced a population boom, United Nations officials running the camp said, inching towards 78,622 people [and still counting](#) – a record.

Almost 7,000 new arrivals were recorded in March and April alone. UN officials said the true number is likely higher as many Malians are seeking refuge in neighbouring villages outside the camp.

The refugees Al Jazeera spoke to are from the northern Timbuktu region and the Segou region in central Mali. They had varying motivations for crossing to Mauritania. Some were fleeing violence

by the armed groups, the Malian army or fighters affiliated with it, and reported no connection to Wagner.

But multiple refugees either cited the Russians specifically as a threat or said the security situation in Mali's decade-long war has gotten worse since Wagner mercenaries arrived.

'A new element'

The refugees' testimony of being driven out of Mali by the threat of Wagner, or increased violence by the Malian military since the Russians' arrival "perfectly lines up with what we have seen and documented", said Ousmane Diallo, Dakar-based researcher for Amnesty International.

"Many, many reports and many people that we interviewed talked about the army being more brutal," he said, adding that the increased brutality has come "since Wagner's arrival".

"There is a new element," he adds. "The abuses and the violations by the Malian army are not new, but the scale and the brutality have heightened since January 2022 - and that is something that cannot just be dismissed."

According to Wassim Nasr, author of *Etat Islamique, le fait accompli* - a book on the Islamic State, and "jihadism expert" on France24, Malians from the centre of the country have been displaced by Wagner operations there.

Earlier this year, the Russians in Timbuktu were only there in supporting roles such as mechanics, he added. In May, however, The Guardian [reported](#) that Wagner forces had been seen in Timbuktu and near the Mauritanian border.

"People from the centre told me ... now when they see a white man, a white military, with the Malian military, they are scared because they know human rights abuses will follow," Nasr said.

"This is in line with so many massacres that have been conducted," he said, referencing the documented Moura massacre, in the Mopti region, which is [thought to have been](#) carried out by Malian troops and Wagner operators.

Large-scale attacks on civilian populations represent "the modus operandi" for Wagner, Nasr added. "They think that they will terrorise the terrorists, and this is the way to do it - but it shoots back, always. ... It only fuels recruitments."

A city of refugees

This corner of southeast Mauritania has hosted Malian refugee camps during previous crises. And now, the M'bera camp has become an autonomous community of sorts.

Cash grants from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) allow refugees to build their own housing, which now stretches across 44 blocks, over 9 square kilometres.

Women in the bustling M'bera market sell Malian mangos, dried fish, and fabric, and businesses offer solar panels, hair cuts, and spare parts for motorcycles.

While plenty have found work in the thriving micro-economy in the camp, others - especially long-term residents, some who even graduated high school there - were quick to complain about rice rations and money that are barely enough and a high rate of unemployment.

"We're suffering," said Mohamed Ould Noctari, who arrived in the camp in 2012 as a 17-year-old and has not found steady employment. "The conditions are not good."

Many new arrivals, however, are more focused on the immediate security guarantees that the camp provides compared with their life in Mali.

"The camp is the best place, above all for civilians – women, their children, all these people. There's not a place they can rest today if not in the M'bera camp," said Ag. "When you find peace, you sleep peacefully, there's nothing to fear. They receive aid as well – there's no other place."

For most of the conflict, former colonial power France was at the Malian military's side, and troops from both sides racked up their own list of allegations of rights abuses and civilian killings. With the French in Mali, M'bera camp reached a high of more than 75,000 refugees in 2013. It dropped to a low of 41,000 in 2016, but since 2018, numbers have been steadily rising.

Amid deteriorating relations with Mali's military government, which came to power in 2020, France is in the process of redeploying troops from Mali, refocusing its fight against terrorist groups in neighbouring Sahel countries. Meanwhile, Wagner forces have stepped in to fill the gap.

A series of war crimes accusations have followed – and mass displacement, too.

Malian authorities have repeatedly denied killing civilians and also Wagner's presence in the country – instead saying they invited Russian military trainers. Russian authorities have also denied Wagner's existence, though they have undercut the Malian government's public position by saying there are private contractors in Mali.

'We can't count [the dead] anymore'

Before the arrival of the Russians, the situation was already "catastrophic" in the Segou region, one new arrival, a man of Fulani ethnicity who had been in the camp for more than two months, told Al Jazeera on condition of anonymity.

The camp, though ensconced among Mauritanian military outposts, is a mere 40km or so from the Malian border, and most refugees still have family in Mali.

Previous attacks by the Malian military, the man said, which might have one or two dozen dead, now seem "small-scale" compared with the continued violence that finally forced him to flee. Survivors used to be able to count the dead after a raid. "After the arrival of Wagner, we can't count any more. There are bodies everywhere."

The raids on villages in recent months, he said, all came from the Malian military – he has not personally seen Russian forces accompanying them. But he cannot shake the idea that the increase in violence is related to Wagner's arrival.

"We were already persecuted, killed, over the years," he said. "But since their arrival, the attacks [by the military] have been stronger – it's the only explanation."

Some of the refugees have been in the camp for a decade – graduating high school, getting married and having children. Many hold out hope. Others consider Mauritania their new home.

For Ag, even imagining a return to Timbuktu now is impossible.

"There were armed bandits that took everything you had with you – all your week's work. We lived

with that," he said. But the insecurity has proved to be too much. "I don't have another destination ... I don't see anything in the near future that will allow me to return."

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