

REVIEW OF THE MALI/NIGER REPATRIATION AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMME

Inspection and Evaluation Service
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Scope of Review

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The evaluation covers UNHCR's involvement in the Mali/Niger repatriation, both in the countries of asylum and the countries of origin of the refugees, from its beginnings in 1995 to its final stages in 1998, with an expected overlap into 1999. Interviews were conducted with staff members who had served in the operation,

and in July 1998 a regional evaluation seminar was convened in Bamako which provided much valuable information. This complemented the data gathered during a field trip to some 25 returnee sites in the Timbuktu and Kidal regions of Northern Mali. In each of these sites, gatherings were held to interview returnees on their experiences in the countries of asylum, the circumstances of their repatriation and their living conditions after their return. Meetings were also held with representatives of donors, the government, implementing partners and other UN Agencies, and numerous files and documents were examined, many of them from prior years.

As regards both returnee numbers and resource requirements, the programme in Mali is by far the most important component of the operation. The evaluation therefore covers the different phases of the Mali programme in depth, highlighting the main problems and achievements. The focus then widens to the region as a whole, with a discussion of key management issues which affected the operation in the five countries involved. Relief and rehabilitation assistance for the returnees is also reviewed, with particular emphasis on the crucial water and food aid sectors. The concluding chapters provide information gained from interviews with the returnees themselves and a discussion of the efforts undertaken to secure a successful transition from relief to longer-term development aid in Mali and Niger.

The evaluation was carried out by Stefan Sperl a former UNHCR staff member who is currently a professor of Arab and Islamic studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, in London. Mr Sperl's previous work includes designing the UNHCR Voluntary Repatriation Training Module and Trainers Guide and participating in several repatriation operations. Mr Sperl has also led a recent evaluation of UNHCR's emergency response in the Great Lakes Region.

I. BACKGROUND

1. The Touareg rebellion which began in 1989, first in Mali and then in Niger, caused the flight of close to 170,000 refugees to neighbouring countries. Some 150,000 persons moved from Mali to Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger between 1990 and 1994; at the same time, some 15-20,000 persons fled from Niger to Algeria and Burkina Faso. Political settlements negotiated over a period of several years, followed by tripartite agreements involving UNHCR, made it possible for the majority of the refugees to return home to Mali and Niger over a four-year period.

The Touareg Rebellion and the Peace Process

2. Northern Mali and Niger are to-day among the poorest regions in Africa. Traditionally, the population depended on nomadism, livestock raising and the trans-Saharan trade, all of which have been seriously curtailed in recent times by a combination of political, economic and environmental factors. The new nation-states established artificial boundaries which interrupted trade routes and subjected the population to rule from distant capitals, while its livelihood was undermined by the big Sahelian droughts of 1973 and 1984, which led to major losses of livestock and large-scale desertification.

3. The resulting combination of political marginalisation and impoverishment is at the root of the Touareg rebellion which began in Niger in 1989 and quickly spread to Mali. In both countries attempts were made early on to secure a peaceful resolution of the conflict. After protracted negotiations and numerous setbacks, these efforts resulted in political settlements that paved the way for the return of

the refugees.

The peace process in Mali

4. The cornerstone of the peace in Mali is the *Pacte National* (National Pact) signed in 1991 between the Government of Mali and the MFUA (*Mouvement des Fronts Unifiés pour l'Azawad* - Movement of the Unified Fronts for the Azawad) which represented the various Touareg and Arab factions that had taken up arms. The agreement provides for a cessation of hostilities, the return of displaced persons and refugees, and the integration of the ex-combatants into the army of Mali, while promising more development aid and better political representation for the northern regions.

5. Implementation of the various provisions of the Pact proved contentious however, and negotiations between the parties continued for two more years. In 1993, the Government demonstrated its commitment to the peace process by establishing a committee of donors and development agencies for the North known as the *Commission paritaire* (Joint Commission), an important forum which is still in existence. It also declared its readiness to allow the refugees to return by signing tripartite agreements with UNHCR and the respective Governments of Algeria, Burkina Faso and Mauritania in the period between April and July 1994. At the same time, however, the conflict flared up again with renewed intensity, threatening to turn into outright civil war between two ethnic groups, the Touareg and the Songhai, and causing a renewed exodus of refugees.

6. Remarkably, it is the very scale of the violence which appears to have strengthened the desire for peace among the civilian population. Elders and notables of the different ethnic communities took the initiative to meet in so-called *rencontres intercommunautaires* (inter-communal meetings) that proved to be instrumental in renewing the dialogue between the warring parties and restoring a climate of mutual trust. The Government welcomed these initiatives and complemented them with a determined public relations campaign aimed at fostering reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. At the same time, officials and army personnel who were known to have participated in reprisals were removed from their posts and replaced.

7. As a result, the peace process was revived, and by mid-1995 security conditions in the North had significantly improved. In July, the Government convened the Round Table Conference of Timbuktu, at which donors and development agencies were presented with a comprehensive rehabilitation programme for Northern Mali. A year later, in April 1996, the arms surrendered by the warring militias were burned at a ceremony in Timbuktu which marked the official end of the armed conflict in the North.

8. The consolidation of the peace process endorsed at the Timbuktu Round Table involved participation by UNDP and UNHCR. UNDP was to create a Trust Fund to assist in the demobilisation and reintegration of ex-combatants while UNHCR would take charge of the repatriation and reintegration of the refugees. Both initiatives had the full support of the authorities in Bamako, not least President Konaré, who has been personally instrumental in the search for a peaceful solution to the conflict. The constructive attitude of the authorities is borne out by the virtual absence of protection problems among the returnees.

The peace process in Niger

9. The pacification of the conflict in Niger took rather longer than in Mali. An agreement between the Government and the rebel coalition known as ORA

(*Organisation de la Résistance Armée* - Armed Resistance Organisation) was signed in April 1995. This was followed in October 1995 by a Round Table Conference at Tahoua, with similar objectives to the Timbuktu Round Table of a few months earlier. The Conference brought together the Government, the ORA, traditional chiefs and the donor community. The aim was to mobilise resources for the rehabilitation of the pastoral zones in Northern Niger and develop a strategy for further development, without which a durable reconciliation of the warring parties could not be envisaged.

10. In January 1996, a military coup led by General Ibrahim Maïnassara did not slow the momentum gained so far. The new regime took a number of constructive measures aimed at further consolidation of the peace process, including giving more autonomy to lower echelon authorities as part of a decentralisation programme. Mixed security patrols were introduced and, in March 1996, tripartite agreements were signed concerning the return of the refugees (Burkina Faso/Niger/UNHCR and Algeria/Niger/UNHCR). The conclusion in December 1996 of a Protocol Agreement covering the integration of ex-combatants into the regular army was a further step on the way to peace; it took until the end of 1997, however, for the cantonment of the ex-combatants to be completed.

The repatriations to Mali and Niger: basic facts

11. **Mali:** The repatriation began with spontaneous movements in early 1995 and ended between December 1997 and June 1998 with movements that were almost entirely UNHCR-assisted. The latter were of two kinds: facilitated movements, in which returnees received pre-departure assistance but organised their own transportation; and organised movements, which took place with UNHCR-supplied transport. Many facilitated returns involved nomadic herdsmen with their flocks, while organised returns principally concerned vulnerable groups and urban refugees. Pre-departure assistance consisted of a three-month food ration as well as tarpaulins and domestic items.

12. The official returnee statistics for the period April 1995 to June 1998 give an overall impression of the type and number of refugee movements per country of asylum :

Country	Organised	Facilitated	Spontaneous	Total
Mauritania	18,656	20,804	4,015	43,475
Burkina Faso	4,710	14,711	2,877	22,298
Algeria	7,468	0	42,748	50,216
Niger	1,091	2,620	8,704	12,415
Senegal	679	0	0	679
TOTAL	32,604	38,135	58,344	129,083

13. **Niger:** UNHCR-assisted repatriation did not begin until 1997, as the Government wanted site-rehabilitation works to be entirely completed before the return of the refugees, largely on account of a failed repatriation in 1989 which had marked the beginning of the armed conflict. Movements began with the repatriation of some 500 refugees from Burkina Faso and continued with the organised return of 2,830 refugees from Algeria, concluded between March and June 1998.

II. OVERVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

14. The repatriation operations to Northern Mali and Niger demonstrated the

soundness of many of the policies UNHCR has developed over the years to promote and facilitate the voluntary return of refugees. The tripartite process organised with the help of UNHCR was instrumental in bringing the Governments concerned together on a regular basis and provided an effective framework to deal with practical issues. Similarly, the refugee sensitisation campaigns and the cross border visits set up with help of the Office contributed to creating a climate of confidence among the refugees. Finally, the assistance programme which was developed in the countries of origin helped decisively in the reintegration of the returnees.

15. Altogether, the social impact of the UNHCR programme in this poor and sparsely populated region is far larger than the small number of beneficiaries and the relatively modest financial input might suggest. In the UNHCR-sponsored camps in Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Algeria, the refugees were introduced to health and education programmes which many, particularly the nomads among them, had not previously known. Partly as a result of this, the reconstruction of civilian life after repatriation was not a return to the past but involved the creation of new, more settled communities with a different outlook and new ambitions. In Mali, this process was facilitated by the provisions of the tripartite agreements which allowed the returnees considerable leeway in selecting sites for rehabilitation. While this caused brought about certain problems, including a proliferation of sites, it contributed to the creation of a new social equilibrium in the region.

16. If there were difficulties and shortcomings in the operation, particularly in its early phases, these cannot be attributed to policy weaknesses, but rather concern implementation problems of a kind UNHCR has often had to face in the past. This was particularly the case during 1995-96 in Mali, where the operation was hampered by staffing limitations, planning problems, lack of effective cross-border co-operation and the greatly delayed arrival of essential equipment.

No substitute for an effective UNHCR presence

17. The lack of sufficient experienced staff was perhaps the most serious problem encountered and at various moments adversely affected UNHCR programmes in all the five countries involved: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger. While it was possible to take remedial action in Mali and Mauritania, in the other three countries UNHCR was never able to field sufficient human resources to provide effective monitoring and control of its programmes, which were located in far-flung, remote and sometimes inaccessible regions.

18. Among the consequences of UNHCR's insufficient presence in the field were:

- a. delays in monitoring food sufficiency and ensuring adequate supplies for the refugees, sometimes even resulting in malnutrition (Algeria, Niger)
- b. inadequate protection of refugees and/or difficulties in following up on protection issues (Algeria)
- c. inflated or inaccurate refugee statistics (Niger, Burkina Faso, also Mauritania until 1995)
- d. inadequate cross-border co-ordination of logistics during organised repatriations (Algeria, Burkina Faso)
- e. insufficient control over the handling and distribution of relief supplies (all countries, including Mauritania until 1995 and Mali until 1996)
- f. significant delays (up to 18 months) in running and concluding the repatriation operation as a whole.

19. While financial constraints are the main reason behind these staffing limitations, it could be argued that the costs of a significant increase in UNHCR's field presence would have been amply offset by increased efficiency and time gained in programme implementation. As it stands, UNHCR had to underwrite continuing care, maintenance and operational costs in countries of asylum to assist refugees who might have been repatriated up to a year earlier. Clearly there is no substitute for an adequate and qualified UNHCR staffing presence in the field. In addition, it is vital to secure governmental approval for the establishment of such a presence in close proximity to the refugees.

Mauritania : the ingredients of success

20. The UNHCR operation in Mauritania in its later stages illustrates effective use of all the relevant resources. The operation was characterised by an excellent team spirit, an effective UNHCR presence in close proximity of the refugees, good relations with the Government and WFP, and detailed advance planning in keeping with agreed deadlines.

21. Well-managed and well-supported by Headquarters, the programme in Mauritania came to be the driving force behind the operation as a whole and dictated the pace of events. Normally, of course, repatriations should be "country-of-origin-driven", not the opposite. In view of UNHCR's difficult start in Mali, however, the dominant role of the operation in Mauritania was inevitable, not least because the refugees themselves were impatient to return.

22. Teamwork of the type observed in Mauritania is always important, particularly when staff are faced with extremely difficult working conditions, as was the case in this operation: an exceedingly hostile climate, remote and isolated duty stations and a lack of basic amenities. By maintaining close contact with field staff at Bassikounou, a remote desert outpost some 1,200 km from the capital, and providing them with the resources required, staff morale in the field remained high and the workload could be kept under control. By contrast, overworked UNHCR staff in the field offices of northern Mali in the early days of the operation faced extreme isolation and discomfort.

23. The UNHCR presence in close proximity to the refugee camps in Mauritania made it possible to monitor programme delivery effectively and develop a constructive dialogue with the refugees, which proved invaluable in planning the repatriation. Close co-operation with the Government both at capital and provincial levels was another major factor, and included full official support for a refugee census conducted jointly with WFP. The census cut the estimated number of beneficiaries by more than half, resulting in considerable savings and enhanced credibility for the operation.

24. Finally, the momentum of the repatriation was kept up by a gradual and well-publicised phase-out of assistance activities in the camps. This was justified in the light of the complete lack of protection problems in the country of origin. Refugees and implementing partners were kept fully informed of UNHCR's aims, which had the support of the authorities. As a result, it was possible to fully meet the operational deadlines. set for the conduct of the operation could be fully observed.

Algeria : successful dialogue but many constraints

25. In Algeria, which hosted refugees from both Mali and Niger, UNHCR had to operate under more constraints. On account of security problems and governmental restrictions, staffing levels were very limited and there was no permanent UNHCR office in proximity to the refugee camps, located in remote

regions in the South of the country. WFP had difficulties supporting the operation and there were periods when the refugees received inadequate food supplies.

26. Despite these difficulties UNHCR was able to play a significant role in the repatriation process by facilitating the dialogue between all parties concerned. This involved frequent intergovernmental contacts through the tripartite process and sensitisation visits to the refugees by senior officials of the countries of origin. In addition, fact-finding visits by refugee representatives to returnee sites were organised, including meetings with the authorities and the local population. These meetings, many of which were organised and financed with the help of UNHCR, proved vital to rebuild trust between antagonistic factions and to persuade the refugees that it was safe to return.

27. These efforts could have had more rapid results had there not been a number of implementation problems in the repatriation operation. The delayed rehabilitation of returnee sites in Mali created frustration among the refugees and exposed to considerable difficulties those who had returned during the early phase of the operation. This was particularly evident in the Kidal region of northern Mali, which borders on Algeria. In this region, an IFAD-funded development project, intended to facilitate returnee rehabilitation under a quadripartite agreement between Algeria, Mali, IFAD and UNHCR, could not be started when originally planned. Thus the repatriation from Algeria to Mali continued well beyond the originally agreed deadline, and this led to a sense of grievance among some of the returnees.

Burkina Faso : problems with census and phase out

28. The Malian refugees in Burkina Faso were widely dispersed, and UNHCR had to assist them in 12 sites scattered in different provinces. The Office lacked the staffing and resources to work effectively in an area of that size, especially as many refugees were nomadic herdsmen who were frequently on the move. While this did not prevent the organisation of sensitisation campaigns and cross-border visits to promote repatriation, it was detrimental in other ways, particularly regarding unreliable beneficiary figures.

29. A refugee census conducted in 1995 led to the distribution of an excessive number of ration cards, and subsequent attempts to rectify the figures through a count of heads of household were only partially successful. This undoubtedly is reflected in the repatriation planning figure of 30,000, which was also used for the purpose of WFP food distribution, and which was probably considerably inflated. The difficulties experienced by UNHCR in securing reliable registration data for refugees, not only in Burkina Faso but also in other countries covered by this report, underscore the importance of the new registration guidelines which were being drafted at Headquarters at the time of writing.

30. Another feature of the operation in Burkina Faso concerns the phasing out of assistance prior to repatriation. Refugees only signed up for repatriation in large numbers once the more than adequate food aid in Burkina Faso was effectively discontinued. As a result, a long period of sluggish return movements was followed by a sudden tenfold increase in the number of people willing to depart. This which caused difficulties with transportation arrangements and the absorption capacity in the country of origin. Ideally, a timely and gradual phase-out of assistance measures in the country of asylum could have maintained repatriation at a sustainable momentum. This, of course, would necessarily be pre-conditioned on the absence of protection problems in the country of origin, as was the case in Mali.

Niger : a mixed record

31. Many of the Malian refugees in Niger found themselves in precarious living conditions. Despite the fact that they had settled in one of the poorest regions of the country where food shortages were endemic, they did not benefit from any kind of regular food aid, unlike the Malians in the other countries of asylum. The national feeding programmes for which they were theoretically qualified appear to have had only a minimal impact. As a consequence, nearly a third of the refugees were found to be suffering from severe malnutrition. It seems probable that a UNHCR presence in the field, charged with developing an adequate assistance programme and providing much-needed guidance to implementing partners, could have contributed to improving this situation.

32. Illustrating UNHCR's difficulties in Niger is the fact that it was only possible to initiate a census in the autumn of 1997 of refugees who had entered the country as early as 1994. As in Burkina Faso and Mauritania, numerous double registrations were discovered and the repatriation planning figure was reduced by half; further checks conducted in 1998 indicated that the true figure may have been even lower. The Malian refugees in Niger were among the last to return home, largely as a result of delays in negotiations between the two countries and the refugee leaders. Nevertheless it is likely that the repatriation could have been concluded sooner had UNHCR been able to play a more pro-active role from the beginning.

33. Programme implementation in Niger began to improve in 1997 when an experienced UNHCR Chargé de Mission was appointed to supervise the organised repatriation of some 3,000 refugees from Niger in the camps in Algeria and Burkina Faso. Previously UNHCR had covered Niger from the Regional Office in Dakar. Once repatriation began it proceeded rapidly and smoothly, largely because, in line with the policy of the Government of Niger, all reception-site preparation works were completed before the movement phase was initiated.

Mali 1995-96 : lengthy delays

34. It is in Mali that the implementation problems were the most intractable. While refugees started to return to the country as early as the beginning of 1995, it was more than a year before the resources to run an effective programme in the country were fully in place. It was only possible to issue a donor appeal in June 1996 and an agreement with WFP on food distribution for the returnees was not secured until later that year, when many refugees had already repatriated.

35. As a consequence, the returnees encountered considerable difficulties, particularly in the north east. In the Timbuktu area, these were less severe because a bilateral aid programme included a food component, but in other areas returnees faced serious problems, including food shortages, and felt let down because the support they had been promised failed to materialise.

36. As documented in this report, the responsibility for the shortcomings of the Mali operation in its initial stages cannot be attributed to a single factor or individual. Lack of resources and experience at field level were compounded by the slow response of Headquarters where attention had been diverted to other no less pressing issues. An additional obstruction was the involvement in the repatriation operation of five countries covered by two different Regional Bureaux, which presented obstacles to communication and coordination that were not remedied early enough.

The shortcomings of the Mali operation in its initial stages cannot be attributed to any single factor. Lack of resources and experience at field level were

compounded by the fact that UNHCR was grappling with other no less pressing issues elsewhere. An additional complication was the fact that the five countries involved in the repatriation operation are covered by two different Regional Bureaux. This initially and for some time raised obstacles to communication and co-ordination.

37. It is likely that difficulties of this kind could be attenuated if repatriation operations were handled as an emergency from the very outset, with rapid mobilisation of experienced staff and adequate resources to strengthen UNHCR's field presence, particularly in the country of origin. Creation of a task force at Headquarters, comprising designated focal points from all concerned units, would facilitate decision-making and response to field requirements; if necessary, the Emergency Preparedness and Response Section (EPRS) could be called upon to open and run field offices until permanent staffing has been secured.

Mali 1996-98 : a new start

38. The UNHCR programme in Mali was given new vigour as the result of a Regional Consultation meeting convened in Bamako in September 1996. The meeting took stock of progress to date and established a regional strategy to manage all aspects of the repatriation. The crucial question of food aid for the returnees was partially resolved through an agreement with WFP. The latter was not, however, in a position to provide assistance retroactively to the many refugees who had already returned; only those arriving after October 1996 were to benefit from a three-month ration.

39. This agreement affected the design of the rehabilitation programme in Mali because it obliged UNHCR staff in the country to take special measures to counteract discontent among the many returnees who were ineligible for free food distribution. Food distribution was therefore complemented by a broad range of other assistance measures designed to strengthen the absorptive capacity of all communities having received returnees and displaced persons. The revamped programme successfully put into practice three important principles: community participation, community-focused returnee aid, and delegation of authority to the field.

40. Despite certain implementation problems, the programme had a positive impact both materially and psychologically. Because whole communities were involved, the programme directly or indirectly reached a large number of beneficiaries. It helped to restore confidence among people who had felt let down by earlier delays and, in some areas, even contributed to reconciliation. By giving the programme a name – "Project Tetahelt" – in the Touareg language UNHCR ensured that it would become a household word in northern Mali.

41. Energetic public information and external relations initiatives were developed by the Office in Bamako in parallel with the reorientation of the country programme. UNHCR's role and objectives were explained to donor representatives, government counterparts, fellow agencies and the media, and a number of field trips were organised for their benefit. This effort undoubtedly was a major factor behind a significant increase in the level of donor support for the programme.

42. A no less important objective was the boosting of staff morale, which had suffered much in the early phases. Among other major difficulties, field staff had had to face persistent security threats, including the theft of 19 UNHCR vehicles in the course of the operation. Measures were taken to reduce the isolation of field staff and improve security while the renewed impetus of the programme as a whole engendered a new sense of direction. Many of the recommendations

contained in the recent IES report on Staff Stress and Security are particularly pertinent in this respect.

The water sector : achievements and setbacks

43. Water was the single most important sectoral input provided by UNHCR in both Mali and Niger. The results are impressive: hydrological works such as wells, bore-holes, pumps and water-course management were successfully undertaken in some 200 sites in Mali and ten sites in Niger, many located in extremely remote areas. Without these, returnee rehabilitation could not even have begun.

44. Numerous technical difficulties were encountered because of the nature of the terrain, the lack of infrastructure and the limited capacity of implementing partners. In the circumstances, it was fortunate that UNHCR Mali was able to obtain Headquarters' clearance to station a locally-recruited hydrologist in each of the four field offices. The presence of these staff members was essential; without them the Office would have been incapable of running and monitoring a technical programme of such size and complexity. In similar circumstances in the future, UNHCR should not hesitate to recruit its own technical staff.

45. Considering the size of UNHCR's input in the water sector in Mali, there are certain issues that would seem to require a more detailed evaluation by competent technical experts. These include: a) an assessment of the environmental impact of the UNHCR hydrological programme; b) an evaluation of the sustainability of the programme, including community participation in water management; and c) an assessment of the water quality provided through local water extraction techniques. The latter has been undertaken for the hydrological programme in Niger but not for the much larger one in Mali. It is recommended that these assessments be completed before the phase-out of the UNHCR programme in Mali as the results could significantly further the longer-term interests of the local population.

From relief to development

46. Northern Mali remains, like northern Niger, a fragile environment where economic deprivation continues to be a threat to peace and security. The promotion of development activities in both regions was an integral part of the agreements which ended the rebellion but results have so far been uneven, not least because both Governments have experienced delays in re-establishing services in the area. In some outlying districts of Mali, there is as yet no government presence at all.

47. In this context, the four-year development programme in the returnee area of northern Niger, initiated by UNHCR and funded by an international donor, could, if all goes well, become a good example of the transition from relief to development aid. The steps taken include the preparation of a project proposal by UNHCR, which could be emulated in other operations such as in Mali, characterised by major regional differences.

48. While the Timbuktu/Léré area of Mali is benefiting from aid and development programmes supported by a variety of agencies, other regions have not so far received similar attention on the part of the donor community and the Government. UNHCR Headquarters has therefore approved a request by BO Bamako for a six-month extension of the UNHCR presence in these areas until 30 June 1999. The following key objectives are suggested:

- . Consolidation of sectoral activities at vulnerable returnee sites, requiring a financial input of up to US\$ 2 million;

- b. Assessment of longer-term needs at vulnerable sites: this could include a sector-by-sector survey of essential activities still pending following the withdrawal of UNHCR; this should be the subject of a report to be shared with donors, development agencies and the government;
- c. Formulation of multi-year development projects: following the example of Niger, UNHCR should invite consultants to design projects covering the longer-term needs of vulnerable communities for presentation to specific donors and funding agencies.
- d. Advocacy with the government, donors and fellow agencies: the UNHCR Office in Bamako should continue the substantial efforts already undertaken to stimulate concern for the neglected regions of the North by organising site visits and ensuring wide dissemination of the data collected under points b) and c) above.

49. While these recommendations relate specifically to the programme in Mali, they could have wider relevance for repatriation operations in least-developed countries, where UNHCR is often under pressure to extend its presence due to the poor prospects faced by many returnees. In such circumstances, UNHCR should seek to ease the transition and attract the involvement of other concerned parties before it withdraws.

50. One way in which this could be done would be by preparing, at the phase-out stage of large returnee programmes in LDC countries, a report containing a detailed inventory of works undertaken, identifying anticipated outstanding needs at vulnerable sites after UNHCR's withdrawal, and outlining longer-term development projects in key target areas. Representatives of potential partner agencies could be invited to participate in the preparatory fact-finding missions and the final drafting of the document, which could also be effectively used as a final report to donors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1 : Management and Coordination

1.1 In large and/or complex voluntary repatriation operations a special task force should be created at Headquarters to monitor the situation on a regional basis, speed up decision-making and respond adequately to field requirements.

Recommendation 2 : Staffing

2.1 The rapid deployment of experienced staff at the beginning of repatriation operations is vital to seize the initiative and establish parameters of action.

2.2 The beginning of a repatriation operation should be treated as an emergency-like situation; if necessary, Emergency Response Teams should be despatched to open and run field offices until the appointment of regular staff.

2.3 It may be necessary to rapidly redeploy key staff previously assigned to the area if their qualifications or experience do not fit the changed circumstances engendered by the operation.

2.4 Recruitment of local staff should take into account the sensitivities of the returnee communities.

2.5 The establishment of a UNHCR presence in close proximity to the refugees is indispensable to prepare adequately for repatriation operations.

2.6 If vacant posts cannot be filled rapidly and staff have to be sent on mission status, their terms of reference should be clarified in writing and they should be assigned for at least three to six months.

2.7 Regional operations plans should be drawn up by staff in charge of their implementation and include a detailed inventory of staffing and administrative resources required.

2.8 The establishment of an integrated regional communications network must be a matter of first priority to ensure operational effectiveness and protect the welfare and security of staff.

2.9 Every effort should be made to support staff working in isolated field stations by rapidly supplying essential equipment; senior staff, including Chiefs of Mission, should make a point of contacting and visiting such duty stations on a regular basis.

2.10 Newly-recruited staff should be provided with induction training rather than mere briefings; to this effect a training course should be introduced which should also include negotiating and interpersonal communication skills.

2.11 The scheduling of team-building and training seminars should be an integral part of all regional operations plans; in large operations, one person should be designated to assess regional training needs, design a training strategy and arrange for its implementation.

2.12 Field offices on either side of the border should be given the authority to communicate with each other directly, issue PT8s for the purpose of cross border missions and decide on operational issues concerning their region.

Recommendation 3 : Registration

3.1 UNHCR should be prepared to make all necessary resources available for the conduct of registration exercises and the ongoing monitoring of refugee numbers.

3.2 Governments should be informed from the beginning of a refugee situation that an accurate census is a precondition for a credible donor appeal and that it is in their interest that UNHCR and WFP should be closely involved in any such exercise.

3.3 UNHCR should increase its investment into registration techniques, including electronically based personal identification systems.

3.4 UNHCR staff should be trained in the combined use of a variety of techniques which may provide accurate registration figures and/or reliable estimates of refugee numbers, both for use in camp situations and where refugees are self-settled or dispersed.

3.5 A case study of the successful refugee census conducted in Mauritania in 1995 should be prepared for reference and inclusion in a future registration training module.

Recommendation 4 : Cut-off dates

4.1 Provided repatriation in conditions of safety and dignity is assured, assistance measures in countries of asylum should be progressively phased out during a twelve-month period prior to repatriation deadlines.

4.2 Residual caseloads should remain eligible to benefit from rehabilitation

assistance in the country of origin if they return after the repatriation deadline and should be provided with an agreed means of identification to facilitate this.

Recommendation 5 : Water

5.1 A technical evaluation of the UNHCR hydrological programme in Mali should be conducted with a view to assessing its sustainability and environmental impact, and advise on community-oriented measures to improve the water quality provided.

5.2 Future UNHCR well-drilling operations should take account of the experience gained in Mali as recorded in PTSS Report 98/37; in particular, detailed feasibility studies should be conducted before engaging in any such operation.

5.3 In large technical programmes, it is imperative for UNHCR to recruit technical staff of its own to monitor their design and implementation.

5.4 Technical consultants seconded to UNHCR by other agencies should remain for the period during which they are needed, to maximise their effectiveness and ensure they become part of the team.

Recommendation 6 : Co-operation with WFP

6.1 In accordance with the recommendations of the Tripartite Study for the Great Lakes Emergency Operation, WFP and UNHCR should, as a matter of routine and from the outset of a refugee situation :

- . field joint assessment/monitoring missions
- b. develop joint operations and work-plans within a regional framework
- c. agree on levels and types of assistance.

6.2 UNHCR and WFP should jointly engage in planning and implementing rehabilitation assistance for returnees and ensure that it is :

- . designed as a single, integrated package
- b. targeted at whole communities rather than just returnees
- c. subject to a decentralised decision-making structure which can effectively take account of local needs.

Recommendation 7 : Facilitating Reintegration

7.1 In refugee camps, priority should be given to vocational and skills training programmes likely to enhance the refugees' rehabilitation and reintegration prospects after repatriation.

7.2 In returnee sensitisation campaigns, extra care should be taken not to arouse unrealistic expectations of assistance measures available after repatriation.

7.3 UNHCR and its partners should, from the beginning, aim to support initiatives taken by civil society to bring factions together and work for peace and reconciliation in the country of origin .

7.4 Returnees have the right to choose their sites of return; where extensive-site rehabilitation works are involved, however, criteria need to be established and strictly enforced concerning the type of site, the cut off dates for site-selection and the circumstances in which decisions may be changed.

Recommendation 8 : From relief to development

8.1 Prior to its phase-out from Mali, UNHCR should prepare a report comprising an inventory of works undertaken, a concise identification of outstanding needs and proposals for development projects in key areas, for presentation to the Government, donors and development agencies.

III. THE RETURNEE PROGRAMME IN MALI

51. The UNHCR returnee programme in Mali went through two distinct phases. The first lasted from the beginning of spontaneous repatriations in early 1995 until September 1996 and is characterised by delays and severe implementation difficulties. The second phase began with the Bamako Consultation meeting of September 1996 which provided for an improved response and laid the basis for the successful completion of the operation.

The first phase : 1995-96

52. Considering that UNHCR's operation in Mali was severely delayed, it is worth examining in some detail the events in the first nine months of 1995, a crucial period when security was beginning to return to the North and an increasing momentum of spontaneous repatriation developed. Indeed, between January and August 1995, some 30,000 refugees returned from Algeria , Burkina Faso and Mauritania.

53. The UNHCR Office in Bamako had been kept informed by its field stations in Léré, Gao and Kidal of the ever larger numbers of returnee arrivals which took place in the early months of 1995. These offices were opened already in 1994 but, on account of the poor security situation prevailing at the time, they were only staffed by locally recruited field officers without radios or vehicles at their disposal. The reports they sent to the capital during this period indicated that there was an urgent need to strengthen UNHCR's field presence and for upgrading its programmes to assist the returnees.

54. The Office in Bamako forwarded a revised country operations plan to Headquarters in April 1995, requesting an immediate increase of staffing levels in the field offices as well as communications equipment, office equipment and relief supplies for a planning figure of 35-40,000 returnees for 1995. In May 1995 UNHCR Bamako reiterated the urgency of the situation and requested missions from Headquarters to take stock of the situation before the onset of the rainy season. Apparently on account of conflicting pressures, however, it was not possible to organise these missions immediately. Indeed, the Programme and Technical Support Service (PTSS) was unable to field a mission to Mali until early the following year.

55. Increasing levels of departure to the country of origin had also been noted by the UNHCR Office in Mauritania and the authorities of both countries. On 16 May 1995, an urgently convened meeting of the tripartite commission between Mali, Mauritania and UNHCR decided that the time had come to commence a full-scale returnee programme in the Léré region. A joint UNHCR/Government mission comprising staff from both countries which subsequently visited the prospective returnee sites found that the infrastructure of the area had been largely destroyed and would require very extensive rehabilitation.

56. In forwarding the report of this mission to Geneva, the Office in Bamako noted that the site rehabilitation works required in the Léré region greatly exceeded its capacity and stressed the urgent need to put at its disposal the necessary resources to reinforce its presence in the North of Mali. Messages to the same

effect reached Headquarters from the UNHCR Office in Nouakchott, Mauritania, which pointed to the need for UNHCR to prepare itself for a massive repatriation of Malian refugees which would require a regional planning exercise, a donor appeal and "... putting in place very rapidly projects, equipment and personnel, principally in Mali".

Familiar problems are at the root

57. In response to the situation that had developed in Mali, a Regional Planning Seminar was convened in September 1995. A plan of action was adopted, and it was decided to organise repatriation pilot projects before the end of the year. In addition, the Seminar confirmed the urgent need to increase the UNHCR presence in Mali. The follow-up to the seminar's proposals led to some improvements in UNHCR's capacity, but these were still limited. Indeed, a new Regional Consultation Meeting on the Mali operation in September 1996 noted there were still major difficulties with programme implementation.

58. The situation at the time in Mali is characteristic of problems that have often beset voluntary repatriation operations¹, problems that are largely due to the sometimes inevitable delays in strengthening UNHCR's presence in the countries of origin. The main factors involved were as follows:

- a. Headquarters was unable to respond adequately to staffing requests from the field: key posts were not filled for long periods² and a Regional Co-ordinator was not appointed until June 1996. Inexperienced personnel were sent to remote field duty stations without sufficient training and there was a rapid turn over of international staff sent on mission.
- b. The regional planning process was not effective, as the Office in Bamako did not have the staffing capacity to engage in a major planning exercise. A plan drawn up by a staff member on mission did not cover staffing and administrative resources required for its implementation. The PTSS mission in February 1996 was not in a position to address regional issues. The donor appeal for the programme could only be issued in June 1996 and a comprehensive regional operations plan covering both UNHCR and WFP could only be put in place later that year.
- c. Delivery of essential equipment, in particular vehicles and radios, was very severely delayed. In the difficult circumstances prevailing in Northern Mali, with long distances, a lack of roads, a hostile climate and security threats, the lack of this equipment endangered staff and prevented them from carrying out their duties effectively.

59. Overwhelmed by these difficulties, the Branch Office in Bamako was hard pressed to adequately control relief supplies. Staff morale and relations with key implementing partners, fellow UN agencies and government departments were negatively affected as a result.

The second phase : 1996-98

60. The Consultation Meeting of September 1996 was the turning point of the Mali operation. A regional plan with targets and deadlines was adopted and the food aid agreement with WFP was concluded. A new management team was installed in Bamako and a greatly increased support was provided from Headquarters. This applies in particular to the crucial water sector where a considerable degree of technical input was required.

61. The resulting change in programme implementation can be illustrated by comparing returnee statistics before and after September 1996 :

	April 95 - Sept 96	Oct 96 - June 98	Total
	(Phase A)	(Phase B)	
Organised	9,064	23,540	32,604
Facilitated	12,460	25,675	38,135
Spontaneous	55,395	2,949	58,344
TOTAL	76,919	52,164	129,083

62. Phase A shows a high proportion of spontaneous returns, the majority (76%) of whom came from Algeria and were for the most part refugees who refused to enter the camps set up by the Algerian authorities. The Kidal area to which many of them returned lacked an effective rehabilitation programme, with returnees facing shortages of food and water. The majority (66 per cent) of UNHCR-assisted returns in Phase A came from Mauritania and settled in an area of Mali where they could benefit from a bilateral aid and development programme run by GTZ, a major NGO.

63. During Phase B, the number of spontaneous returns dwindled considerably while the improved level of programme implementation led to a significant increase in UNHCR- assisted returns. Of these, 50% came from Mauritania, 30% from Burkina Faso, 11% from Algeria and 7% from Niger.

64. The main achievements of the reoriented programme can be summarised as follows:

- a. repatriations from Mauritania and Burkina Faso were completed within the deadline of 31 December 1997 agreed at the Consultation Meeting, while those from Algeria and Niger were completed some six months thereafter;
- b. on the initiative of UNHCR, in March 1997, the Malian Government promulgated an Amnesty Law which helped significantly in persuading refugees that it was safe for them to return;
- c. all UNHCR-assisted returnees who arrived during Phase B received a free three-months' food ration from WFP. A rehabilitation programme comprising non-food items, micro-projects and food-for-work programmes was established for the benefit of communities receiving returnees from both Phase A and Phase B. Work in the water sector was greatly expanded, resulting in an accelerated rate of programme implementation.
- d. a public information and external relations drive was initiated in Bamako to elicit understanding of and support for the UNHCR programme. In addition, special efforts were made to secure the involvement of development agencies so as to provide for the longer term rehabilitation needs of returnee communities.

IV. REGIONAL MANAGEMENT ISSUES

*La crédibilité du HCR n'a pas de prix.*³

65. From a regional perspective, the Mali/Niger operation demonstrates the soundness of UNHCR's policies relating to voluntary repatriation operations. The tripartite process, the information and sensitisation campaigns, the cross-border visits, as well as the concepts used to design pre-departure assistance and post-arrival rehabilitation, all proved their worth. The problems that surfaced concerned, almost without exception, the process of implementation.

66. Participants at the Bamako Evaluation Seminar of July 1998 agreed that the prevention of such problems requires rapid action at the Headquarters level.

Particularly when several countries and different Regional Bureaux are involved, the creation of a special Headquarters task force is indispensable to speed up decision-making and response to field requirements. Such an arrangement would undoubtedly have reduced the long delays experienced in the case of Mali.

Recommendation 1

1.1 In large and/or complex repatriation operations, the creation of a special task force at Headquarters involving all concerned sections is indispensable to monitor the situation, speed up decision-making and respond adequately to field requirements.

67. Three management issues that proved crucial in the operation as a whole merit detailed discussion: staffing and staff support, refugee registration, and the management of operational deadlines.

Staffing and staff support

68. **Algeria:** Inadequate staffing adversely affected the operation not only in Mali but also in other countries. The Sub Office in Tamanrasset, staffed only by a national officer and a driver, was responsible for covering the Malian refugee camps in the far south west and the Nigerian camps in the far south east. A round trip between the sites entailed driving across some 1,500 km of largely trackless desert. Despite regular missions from Algiers, the lack of a permanent UNHCR presence close to the refugees slowed the repatriation process and may have prevented effective monitoring of distribution of relief supplies and follow-up on protection issues. Recurrent difficulties with trucking arrangements and convoys would certainly have warranted the assignment of a Logistics Officer to southern Algeria.

69. **Burkina Faso:** UNHCR's limited presence at the time of the refugee influx may have resulted in inadequate control over the 1995 refugee census, which yielded figures that later proved to be grossly exaggerated. Moreover, costs incurred during the early stages of the operation might have been reduced through a more judicious choice of implementing partners. In its final report on the repatriation, BO Ouagadougou concluded that "the lack of sufficient qualified UNHCR personnel at the beginning of the operation led to numerous difficulties in implementation strategies".

70. **Niger:** The staffing situation in this country, covered by the Regional Office in Dakar, was the most acute. A PTSS mission in April 1997 observed that "the lack of a UNHCR presence in the field and the understaffed UNHCR presence in Niamey have resulted in a situation where insufficient guidance to implementing agencies was provided and monitoring of the refugee situation and the assistance programme have been inadequate. This has resulted in very precarious living conditions among the refugees".

71. RO Dakar had requested a significant upgrading of UNHCR's activities in Niger in May 1996 but the situation only began to change in mid-1997 with the appointment of a Chargé de Mission and the opening of field offices. The main assignment of the Chargé de Mission was preparation for the repatriation of refugees from Niger in Algeria, while the Malian refugees in Niger, who were among the last to return home, were given lower priority.

72. **Mauritania:** Endowed with an effective team of local and international staff, the UNHCR Branch Office had established a field presence in close proximity to the refugees and enjoyed the full support of the Government. This resulted in a dynamic and tightly-controlled programme, and is an example of what can be

done when the necessary resources are available.

73. These and other staff-related issues, discussed in some depth at the Evaluation Seminar, as well as in individual interviews, lead to the following observations:

Staff deployment

74. Repatriation operations should be treated as quasi-emergencies, which may require an extremely rapid deployment of resources to the field. Recognising this, the role of the Emergency Preparedness and Response Section (EPRS) was extended in 1996 to include provision of support to repatriation operations.⁴ While an EPRS mission went to Mali in 1995-96, however, its presence only led to a limited and temporary improvement of the staffing problems. A more effective response in the critical period of May 1995 would have been to field two well resourced Emergency Response Teams to upgrade and run the field offices in Northern Mali until the arrival of permanent staff.

75. It may also be necessary to consider rapidly redeploying field staff who have been in place from before the beginning of such an operation, and whose qualifications and experience may not equip them to cope effectively with the changed circumstances and demands of a major repatriation programme. Likewise, when it comes to criteria for recruiting local staff, the need to establish a relationship of trust and confidence with the returnees must be taken into account.

Recommendation 2

2.1 The rapid deployment of experienced staff at the beginning of repatriation operations is of paramount importance to seize the initiative and establish parameters of action.

2.2 The beginning of the operation should be treated as an emergency-like situation; if necessary, Emergency Response Teams should be despatched to the area to open and run field offices until the appointment of regular staff.

2.3 It may be necessary to rapidly redeploy key staff previously assigned to the area if their qualifications or experience do not fit the changed circumstances engendered by the operation.

2.4 Recruitment of local staff should take into account the sensitivities of the returnee communities.

2.5 The establishment of a UNHCR presence in close proximity to the refugees is indispensable to prepare adequately for repatriation operations.

2.6 If vacant posts cannot be filled rapidly and staff have to be sent on mission status, their terms of reference should be clarified in writing and they should be assigned for at least three to six months.

2.7 Regional operations plans should be drawn up by staff in charge of their implementation and include a detailed inventory of staffing and administrative resources required.

Staff stress and security

76. In all the countries concerned, working conditions in field stations exposed

staff to a high degree of stress on account of the hostile climate, distances, isolation, lack of basic amenities and security threats. Vehicles, radios and air conditioners were essential not only for comfort but for survival and protection.⁵ The availability of a leased aircraft, stationed first in Mauritania and, in the final phase of the operation, in Mali, was crucial both for operational needs and staff welfare. Considering that overland field trips could take up to three days and involved considerable stress, the aircraft proved cost-effective, provided it was fully occupied.

77. Security incidents due to banditism and lawlessness were a common occurrence in northern Mali. In all, 19 vehicles were stolen and there were cases of abduction, injury and, in one instance, murder. With the arrival of a Security Officer in 1997, new security procedures were introduced which appear to have had an impact by reducing the number of incidents. Great emphasis was placed on the need to maintain communication links at all times and on discipline in the observance of procedures on the part of staff and implementing partners. There would have been a need for such security training from the start of the operation.

78. The recent Evaluation Report on Staff Stress and Security (EVAL/02/97) contains numerous observations and recommendations that also apply to this operation, in particular as far as northern Mali is concerned. The two recommendations below highlight the elements that were, at certain periods, most conspicuously lacking.

Recommendation

2.8 The establishment of an integrated regional communications network must be a matter of first priority to ensure operational effectiveness and protect the welfare and security of staff.

2.9 Every effort should be made to support staff working in isolated field stations by rapidly supplying essential equipment. Senior staff, including Chiefs of Mission, should make a point of contacting and visiting such duty stations on a regular basis.⁶

Staff Training

79. Three issues relating to staff training are of concern: staff members were assigned to the operation without adequate briefing; no regional team-building or voluntary repatriation training workshops were organised; and newly-recruited staff who had not been properly trained were expected to assume positions of responsibility in remote field stations without supervision. In certain instances this resulted in misunderstandings about UNHCR's role which adversely affected relations with implementing partners.

80. These points underscore the importance of implementing the UNHCR Training Strategy proposed by the Training Advisory Board on 30 June 1997, which calls for better induction briefings, reassignment training and "the transfer of institutional memory and of lessons learned at all levels of the organisation."

81. The experience in Mali demonstrates the urgent need for improved induction training, as opposed to a simple briefing. Newly-recruited staff would greatly benefit from intensive one-month training courses upon beginning their assignment to familiarise them with the work of the organisation; such a course should also cover negotiating and interpersonal communication skills which are of vital importance for staff at all levels.

82. The deployment of special training officers proposed in the UNHCR Training

Strategy would have been highly beneficial in the Mali/Niger repatriation. The inadequate briefings and lack of relevant training and team-building workshops would certainly have been avoided.

Recommendations

2.10 Newly recruited staff should be provided with induction training rather than mere briefings; to this effect a training course should be introduced which includes negotiating and interpersonal communication skills.

2.11 The scheduling of team-building and training seminars should be an integral part of all regional operations plans; in large operations, one person should be designated to brief newly-assigned staff, assess regional training needs, design a training strategy and arrange for its implementation.

Delegation of authority

83. In the early stages of the operation, field offices in the country of origin lacked the authority to establish direct contact with UNHCR counterparts on the other side of the border. Meetings were rare and all messages had to be relayed via the Branch Offices in the capitals, which inevitably caused delays and complications. In the later stages, a more flexible policy was adopted allowing regular direct contacts and cross-border visits. This not only facilitated the running of the operation but acted as a confidence-building measure among the refugees.

Recommendation

2.12 Field offices on either side of the border should be given the authority to communicate with each other directly, issue PT8s for the purpose of cross border missions and decide on operational issues concerning their region.

Census Management

84. Repatriation planning figures depend on the reliability of refugee registration exercises undertaken in the countries of asylum. In the repatriation to Mali, only one of four countries, Mauritania, produced an accurate planning figure.

85. The accuracy of the Mauritanian forecast was the result of a concerted UNHCR effort to come up with reliable figures, once it had become apparent that there were flaws in a census carried out by a former government. Close observation of a number of indicators including aerial surveys, attendance at clinics and schools, and the number of inhabited dwellings, led the Office to believe that the true figures were lower. After months of preparation and the mobilisation of considerable resources by the Government, UNHCR, WFP and implementing partners, a census was organised in the camps in April 1995 which resulted in the number of beneficiaries being reduced from 85,000 to less than half.

86. Aware that an unspecified number of Mauritanian citizens were nonetheless included, the Office undertook further efforts to control the camp population with the help of the authorities. There are strong indications that a considerable number of local citizens chose to de-register rather than risk being found out during a check-up.

87. The unreliable planning figures for Algeria, Burkina Faso and Niger must be

attributed primarily to the lack of a strong UNHCR presence in the field, coupled with varying government policies. The dispersal of the many refugees over a very wide area would not in itself have been an insurmountable obstacle had the governments and UNHCR been prepared to make the necessary resources available.

88. In Algeria, registration was left entirely up to the Algerian authorities and the Red Crescent which only registered the residents of the reception centres; estimates of the number of self-settled refugees varied greatly and were never reliable.

89. Successive registration exercises in Burkina Faso saw refugee numbers drop from 40,000 in 1995 to 17,000 in 1997, with voluntary repatriation only a minor factor in the reduction. The first census was conducted largely without UNHCR supervision, and the situation was never really brought under control thereafter. Thus the number of returnees arriving in Mali was consistently lower than the number of "departures" from Burkina Faso throughout the operation. The uncertainty about figures in Burkina Faso may have negatively affected UNHCR's relations with WFP and donors, some of whom appear to have reduced their support for the operation as a result.⁷

90. In Niger, no serious attempt at registration took place until 1997 even though the refugees had arrived three years earlier. The task was entrusted to the Nigerian Red Crescent and resulted in the planning figure being cut by half, from 22,000 to 11,400. Further verifications conducted during a UNHCR field mission in June 1998 showed that the real figure was probably even lower, as indicated by the fact that only some 4,000 refugees returned from Niger to Mali in 1997-8.

91. New registration guidelines were being drafted at Headquarters at the time of this evaluation, in the knowledge that registration is "vital to planning and credibility" and must therefore be given "the highest priority". In the light of the lessons learned and the positive experience in Mauritania, the revised registration guidelines could well include the following points:

Recommendation 3

3.1 UNHCR should be prepared to make all necessary resources available for the conduct of registration exercises and the ongoing monitoring of refugee numbers; the investment is likely to be repaid through enhanced credibility and financial savings .

3.2 Governments should be informed from the beginning of a refugee situation that an accurate census is a precondition for a credible donor appeal and that it is in their interest that UNHCR and WFP should be closely involved in any such exercise.

3.3 UNHCR should increase its investment into registration techniques, including electronically-based personal identification systems.

3.4 UNHCR staff should be trained in the combined use of a variety of techniques which may provide accurate registration figures and/or reliable estimates of refugee numbers, both for use in camp situations and where refugees are self-settled or dispersed.

3.5 A case study of the successful refugee census conducted in Mauritania in 1995 should be prepared for reference and inclusion in a future registration training module.

The management of deadlines

92. At the September 1996 programming meeting, deadlines were agreed for the conclusion of the repatriation programme. Assistance in Mauritania was to end in June 1997, in other countries of asylum on 31 December 1997 and in Mali and Niger on 31 December 1998. The strict adherence to repatriation deadlines was justified by the complete absence of protection problems in the country of origin.

93. The Mauritania operation was concluded within its deadline despite that fact that it had by far the largest number of UNHCR-assisted returns. This was possible because of a strong field presence by UNHCR, good relations with the Government and a highly focused planning effort which provided for camp consolidation and assistance phase-out over a twelve months' period.

94. The situation in the other countries was more problematic. The Algerian Government was reluctant to support UNHCR's policy of introducing cut-off dates for assistance because it felt that this would put unjustified pressure on the refugees. This may have contributed to delaying returns from that country, in addition to the other factors mentioned above.

95. In Burkina Faso, registration for voluntary repatriation was at a virtual standstill for long periods, but increased drastically once food aid was phased out in July 1997. Average returns jumped from 200 to 2,400 in one month and it was possible to close the programme within the deadline of 31 December 1997. The sudden surge in repatriations did, however, lead to problems with logistics and delays in the provision of rehabilitation assistance in the country of origin.

96. Timing of the return home from Algeria of refugees from Niger was determined by the policy of the Government of Niger, which wished to ensure the prior rehabilitation of the returnee settlement sites. The delayed start of these works meant that repatriation was only completed in May 1998, several months after the agreed deadline.

97. Residual caseloads also posed a problem in both Algeria and Mauritania, where certain groups of refugees remained behind after the discontinuation of UNHCR assistance. Some may have been genuinely reluctant to return because of fears related to the circumstances of their flight. Others, however, had clearly decided to last it out, assuming that UNHCR would extend its deadline for the termination of assistance, or that some other agency would come to their help. It was decided to discontinue the distribution of aid in the country of asylum as planned and to include them in the rehabilitation programme in the country of origin in case they returned at a later stage. Some 3,200 who remained in Mauritania were allowed to keep half their ration cards as tokens of identification to be used in Mali upon their return, while additional repatriation convoys were arranged for some of the residual cases from Algeria.

Recommendation 4

4.1 Provided repatriation in conditions of safety and dignity is assured, assistance measures in countries of asylum should be progressively phased out during a twelve-month period prior to repatriation deadlines.

4.2 Residual caseloads should remain eligible to benefit from rehabilitation assistance in the country of origin if they return after the repatriation deadline and should be provided with an agreed means of identification to facilitate this.

V. REHABILITATION ASSISTANCE

98. The rehabilitation of the returnees in the poor and arid pastoral zones of northern Mali and Niger posed very considerable problems. Many nomads had lost their herds and hence their livelihood, all-important water sources such as wells and pumps had been largely destroyed and food shortages were endemic in many areas.

99. In Niger, the relatively small number of returnees and the limited number of sites to be rehabilitated (ten altogether) made the problems more manageable, especially as UNHCR could rely on competent implementing partners. In Mali, on the other hand, the returnee programme covered some 200 sites dispersed throughout the north of this large country. UNHCR was the only UN agency with a sizeable programme in the region, government services were virtually absent in many districts and competent NGO implementing partners were few in number.

100. Three important sectors of rehabilitation assistance were examined in detail by the evaluation: water, food aid and the micro-project programme in Mali known as "Project Tehatelt".

The water sector : achievements and setbacks

101. Water was the most significant sectoral input provided by UNHCR in both Mali and Niger. Hydrological works such as well-digging, drilling, pump installation and water-course management were successfully undertaken in some 200 sites in Mali and ten sites in Niger, many located in extremely remote areas. Without these, returnee rehabilitation could not even have begun.

UNHCR technical staff were essential

102. There were numerous technical difficulties related to the nature of the terrain, the lack of infrastructure and the limited capacity of implementing partners. Fortunately, UNHCR Mali had stationed a locally-recruited hydrologist in each of the four field offices. The creation of these posts had met with initial reluctance at Headquarters, but it is clear that without them it would not have been possible to run and monitor a technical programme of such size and complexity. This is an example which could well be followed in similar operations, particularly as there are many technical difficulties and implementing partners are weak. In such situations, UNHCR should not hesitate to recruit technical staff of its own.

UNHCR drilling rig not suitable for local conditions

103. Another problem in the hydrological programme relates to a UNHCR-owned drilling rig which was shipped from Mozambique to Mali. The equipment, which was managed by a variety of experts seconded from two different organisations, incurred mobilisation costs totalling some US\$500,000 and suffered numerous breakdowns which led to major delays. To finally complete the drilling works, an alternative rig had to be found locally.

104. The UNHCR rig proved to be unsuitable for the sand and the hard rock formations of northern Mali. A feasibility study undertaken before despatch of the equipment might have anticipated this problem. As it stands, while the UNHCR rig was only able to produce nine bore-holes in one year, the other rig, which had been supplied to Mali as part of a bilateral development project, dug 19 bore-holes in only two months. As recommended by BO Bamako, any further utilisation of UNHCR's equipment should be subject to a detailed technical assessment.

Effectiveness of community participation needs further study

105. In order to ensure sustainability, the Mali programme stressed the importance of community participation in water management. A seminar on the subject was organised and special guidelines issued. The measures envisaged included the setting up of local management committees responsible for the maintenance of hydrological equipment. The equipment was to be funded through a levy of water charges. In addition, local personnel were to be trained, and special arrangements made with implementing partners to secure maintenance of more complex equipment, especially solar pumps.

106. Given the number of sites involved it was not possible to make a full assessment of the success of these measures. Judging by the available evidence, the outcome is variable and depends greatly on the capacity, commitment and abiding presence of the implementing partner. Community initiatives functioning without outside support appear to be rare. Local culture and traditions may not have been sufficiently taken into account. In many cases there seems to be resistance to the idea of paying for water, and local management committees thus lack the resources to secure adequate maintenance. Considering the size of UNHCR's input in the sector, an independent sustainability assessment by a technical expert familiar with local conditions would be warranted.

Environmental implications needed more attention

107. The environmental impact of the works undertaken must also be taken into account. The UNHCR programme resulted in tapping considerable underground water reserves in a region suffering from perennial water shortage, with the choice of sites left entirely to the returnees. In certain areas, ground water extraction is certainly higher now than it ever was in the past. In the light of this, BO Bamako requested an environmental impact assessment of its hydrological programme. Such a study would be in line with UNHCR's policy on the environment. If it is undertaken before the phase-out of UNHCR's activities in Mali, it may yield results of some importance for the future well-being of the population concerned.

Uneven attention to water quality issues

108. A recent study of UNHCR's hydrological input to assist returnee communities in Niger by a PTSS Water consultant has noted that traditional water-lifting operations with the use of animals and ropes have "a high potential of contaminating the water supplies with animal and other diseases". The report suggests a number of measures that may be used to ensure that water quality for human consumption remains in accordance with the standards approved by UNHCR and WHO. Chief among these are community awareness-raising programmes combined with simple techniques to prevent the contamination of wells.

109. The far larger hydrological programme in Mali does not seem to have benefited from a comparable assessment of the water quality provided by the wells and bore-holes dug by UNHCR's implementing partners. The problem of insalubrious water extraction techniques is undoubtedly the same in both countries and a technical evaluation of the work undertaken in Mali would be more than justified.

Recommendation 5

5.1 A technical evaluation of the UNHCR hydrological programme in

Mali should be conducted with a view to assessing its sustainability and environmental impact, and advising on community-oriented measures to improve the water quality.

5.2 Future UNHCR water drilling operations should take account of the experience gained in Mali as recorded in PTSS Report 98/37; in particular, detailed feasibility studies should be conducted before engaging in any such operation.

5.3 In large technical programmes it is imperative for UNHCR to recruit technical staff of its own to monitor their design and implementation.

5.4 Technical consultants seconded to UNHCR by other agencies should remain for the period they are needed, to maximise their effectiveness and ensure they become part of the team.

Food Aid

110. Difficulties regarding food aid, first for the refugees and subsequently for the returnees, underline the need for intensified efforts by UNHCR and WFP to harmonise operational policies and procedures. In the first instance, WFP's response was linked to its country-specific programmes in the various countries of asylum, rather than being part of a regional strategy. Regarding the returnees to Mali, the two agencies encountered problems in arriving at a common approach to defining caseloads and entitlements. In both cases the problems were linked with the issue of correctly identifying the number of beneficiaries. Altogether, the experience bears out the recommendations of the recent Tripartite (UNHCR-WFP-UNICEF) Study of the Great Lakes Emergency Operation.

Regional differences

111. While WFP was in a position to be highly supportive of the relief operation in Mauritania, it was not able to provide similar support in Algeria, where food shortages among the Malian refugees reached crisis level in 1995-6. UNHCR was therefore obliged to mount its own emergency food aid operation in this situation. WFP food aid was resumed in 1997, but the assistance provided remained below the total requirements. Nor was WFP able to provide assistance to the refugees from Niger in Algeria, as their number was inferior to 5,000 (the "floor" figure below which WFP cannot assume responsibility for food aid).

112. In Niger, the Malian refugees did not receive special WFP food distributions as they were considered "integrated into existing feeding programmes".⁸ These programmes do not appear to have had the expected impact, however, considering the high levels of malnutrition among the refugees and the local population (31 and 29 per cent respectively)⁹. As in Algeria, UNHCR mounted emergency food distributions for this caseload (December 96 to January 97), but their situation has remained precarious.

113. The situation in Burkina Faso was different. On account of over-registration, the target figure of 33,000 beneficiaries for WFP food distributions was in excess of actual requirements. Coincidentally, this appears to have lessened the impact of serious interruptions in the WFP food pipeline which occurred in the course of 1995.

114. Such differences might have had less impact had WFP had been in a position to take a regional approach to food aid requirements of all Malian refugees, irrespective of the countries of asylum. As it was, WFP was only able to

adopt a regional project in the context of the repatriation operation. This did not, however, include the refugees from Niger. Based on this experience, UNHCR and WFP could well give further consideration to the need to adopt joint regional strategies from the beginning of a refugee situation.

Difficulties in adopting a common strategy on returnees in Mali

115. The tripartite commission between Mali, Mauritania and UNHCR noted in a meeting in May 1995 that the returnees were in need of food aid and called for a distribution programme to be established. The Government of Mali submitted an official request to WFP later that year, but further lengthy negotiations were required before an agreement could be reached on the type and duration of food aid to which the returnees would be entitled.

116. This caused considerable anxiety in the field, and various options had to be examined by the two agencies and the Government, in order not to privilege returnees over internally displaced persons and the local population. It was finally agreed in September 1996 to combine a three-month ration with food-for-work programmes; this did not, however, cover retroactive food aid distributions for the refugees who had already returned, as WFP believed that the beneficiaries could not be reliably identified. For this reason, only refugees returning after October 1996 were to be eligible for food distribution in Mali.

117. The difficulties in arriving at a joint approach on food aid in the early stages of the Mali operation may have been an obstacle to the repatriation process, in that returnees feared food shortages in the country of origin. The experience demonstrates once more the need for the two agencies to engage in joint planning, programming and monitoring on a continual basis, as also noted in the Tripartite Study of the Great Lakes Emergency Operation. Clearly, the conclusions and recommendations of this study should not only apply to emergencies but to all ongoing assistance programmes involving more than one of the three agencies.

Recommendation 6

6.1 In accordance with the recommendations of the Tripartite Study for the Great Lakes Emergency Operation, WFP and UNHCR should, as a matter of routine and from the outset of a refugee situation,

- . field joint assessment/monitoring missions;
- b. develop joint operations and work-plans within a regional framework; and
- c. agree on levels and types of assistance and the identification of beneficiaries.

Project Tehatelt : an integrated approach to rehabilitation

118. Project 'Tehatelt', which means 'support' in the Tamasheq (Touareg) language, was created as a means of preventing eventual friction caused by the limitation of free food distribution to persons who returned to Mali after October 1996. This integrated project sought to offset imbalances in sites where returnees who had arrived since late 1994 were living without UNHCR or WFP assistance. In addition, it was aimed at improving the lot of many settled and internally displaced persons who were also in a precarious economic situation.

119. Thus UNHCR Bamako sought to combine the food distribution component

with a range of other tangible measures targeted at communities as a whole. The measures envisaged included complementary food rations for vulnerable groups, the distribution of non-food items (soap, blankets, tarpaulins etc.), food-for-work programmes and micro-projects in a variety of sectors.

120. In order to give the project an identity and emphasise its integrated nature, the name Tehatelt¹⁰ was used widely in information campaigns to promote understanding for the aims of all the various different aspects of the UNHCR programme.

Decentralised implementing arrangements

121. The project was characterised by a close working relationship between UNHCR and WFP, combining WFP regional food assistance with the other components of the programme and providing for the establishment of joint co-ordination committees for micro-projects and food-for-work projects in some 20 concerned districts of northern Mali.

122. The committees, which included representatives of NGO implementing partners and the local authorities, were given responsibility in each district to commit funds for a range of purposes set out in the project guidelines. This decentralised decision-making structure enabled the local committees to establish their own priorities, and proved to be an effective means of overcoming the great distances and poor communications in northern Mali.

Weaknesses outweighed by strengths

123. On account of the widespread nature of the project it was not possible to gain a comprehensive picture of the results achieved. A certain number of weaknesses were noted, however, probably reflecting the varying capacity of the implementing agencies. The region had been divided among 11 NGO partners, some of which proved to be more effective than others. Some areas such as Kidal and Gourma-Rharous were also rather more difficult to work in than others. WFP's limited implementing capacity in the field may also have been a factor in a slow start to several food-for-work projects.

124. In some districts, income-generation projects were based upon loans whereas others preferred to use grants. When this inconsistency was discussed at the evaluation workshop, it was pointed out that while loans and revolving funds were preferable in principle, they often proved difficult to implement in practice. Because of the lack of effective measures to tackle defaulters and the short term nature of UNHCR's involvement, many loans in the end had to be considered as grants.

125. On the whole, it is clear that the assistance package provided by UNHCR and WFP at relatively moderate cost has had a significant impact even in some of the remotest parts of northern Mali. By targeting communities as a whole, promoting new income-generation initiatives, and fostering the emancipation of women, the project has facilitated the settling process and helped create a new social equilibrium. It also has offset the frustrations experienced at the beginning of the operation, and contributed to building confidence in the international community among the local population.

Recommendation

6.2 UNHCR and WFP should jointly engage in planning and implementing rehabilitation assistance for returnees and ensure that it is:

- . designed as a single, integrated package;
- b. targeted at whole communities rather than just returnees;
- c. subject to a decentralised decision-making structure which can effectively take account of local needs.

VI. RETURNEE PERCEPTIONS IN MALI

126. Returnees in some 25 sites in northern Mali were interviewed about the circumstances of their repatriation and their assessment of the assistance provided to them by UNHCR. The interviews cover the experience of the refugee camps, the dynamics of return and the new lifestyle adopted by many after their homecoming.

The camp experience

127. For many refugees who had previously only known the struggle for survival in the Sahel, the refugee camps were a new world. Food security, clean drinking water, health services and education were amenities which especially the nomads among them had not previously known.

128. Returnees from Mauritania were especially grateful for the aid they had received in the camps. They in particular singled out the training and education programmes that had been organised for them by NGOs such as MSF, MDM and World Vision. Many said that these programmes had helped them significantly in setting themselves up after their return. Among these, the market gardening projects were perhaps the most immediately useful.

129. The training programmes also had a major impact in accelerating the emancipation of women, particularly among the nomadic population, as was noted in the following extract from a report on conditions in the camps at Bassikounou: "The women, who became nurses aides or midwives, knowing how to read and write and work with their hands (dyeing, sewing, market gardening, etc.) feel more independent and more emancipated. They work in organised groups in the different sectors and sell their products in the market."

130. In many instances it was observed that income-generating activities begun by women in the camps also continued after repatriation. Often such women's groups became beneficiaries of micro-projects under the UNHCR rehabilitation programme, which aimed to support women's activities as a matter of policy.

131. Camp life also had a negative side, as was frequently remarked, particularly by community leaders and younger, more educated returnees. They felt that the availability of free food aid in the camps had created a mentality of dependency and weakened people's resolve to become self-sufficient again. Some returnees even argued that, after the emergency period, UNHCR and WFP should have phased out free food distribution for all but vulnerable groups and organised food-for-work programmes instead.

132. While returnees from Mauritania were generally impressed by the assistance they had received, returnees from Algeria were less favourable. Some claimed that the services provided were often inadequate and only functioned properly when a UNHCR mission came to the camps. The camps in Algeria also lacked adult education or training programmes which might have helped the refugees after repatriation.

Recommendation 7

7.1 In refugee camps, priority should be given to vocational and

skills training programmes likely to enhance the refugees' rehabilitation and reintegration prospects after repatriation.

The dynamics of return

133. In deciding upon repatriation, the refugees had two principle concerns: security and the rehabilitation of their sites. In ethnically mixed areas such as the Niger valley and north western Mali, security depended very much upon the reconciliation of communities. The trauma and mistrust caused by the conflict had to be overcome so that Touaregs, Moors and Bellas could once more live side by side with Songhays and Peulhs. In recognition of this, the Government adopted a policy of national reconciliation aimed at fostering dialogue with all concerned, both inside the country and abroad.

Dialogue abroad

134. As part of its reconciliation policy, Government of Mali representatives participated in numerous visits to refugee camps to explain the circumstances at home and persuade the refugees that it was safe to return. The Government's efforts were complemented by an intense information and sensitisation campaign conducted jointly by UNHCR staff in Mali and in the countries of asylum. This was judged to have been very effective by the returnees.

135. The campaigns appear to have sometimes given rise to unrealistic expectations concerning the assistance the refugees were going to receive upon return, however. Some may have erroneously believed UNHCR would replicate at home the assistance they had received in the camps. There may have been a certain degree of misinformation, however, particularly regarding food aid: some refugees were initially led to believe that everyone would receive a six months' ration upon return .[11](#)

136. These misunderstandings, combined with the delay in site-rehabilitation and food aid distribution, led to disappointment, and feelings of bitterness are still palpable, particularly among the early returnees to Kidal, who probably faced the greatest hardship.

Recommendation

7.2 In returnee sensitisation campaigns, extra care should be taken not to arouse unrealistic expectations of assistance measures available after repatriation.

Dialogue at home

137. The resumption of an inter-communal dialogue owes a great deal to the courage of certain notables and traditional leaders who were willing to cross the divide. Among them were what may be called the "repatriation pioneers", refugees who took the risk to cross the border when security was still poor and were the first to establish contact with the other side. The point was made that these early returnees, who did so much to pave the way for the others, benefited least from UNHCR assistance, since it became available only at a later stage.

138. The fruit of these early contacts was a series of inter-community meetings, large public gatherings in which representatives of all factions were able to meet. A major such gathering was organised in September 1995 at M'Bouna, a district West of Timbuktu, with the support of GTZ, a major NGO partner of UNHCR. It included among the 2,000 participants, some 85 refugee representatives from the Mauritanian camps. The gathering proved instrumental in promoting reconciliation

and repatriation in the entire area. It concluded with a resolution which expresses the hopes of all war-affected regions of northern Mali: a return to peace and security, a re-establishment of the local government administration and "a firm engagement on the part of the partners in development".¹²

139. Since then both UNHCR and WFP have supported numerous similar gatherings in different parts of the North by providing items such as shelter materials, basic food and tea. The gatherings represent a triumph of civil society over political factionalism and their role in the pacification of the North cannot be overestimated; in supporting them, UNHCR helped in the consolidation of peace.

Recommendation

7.3 UNHCR and its partners should, from the beginning, aim to support initiatives taken by civil society to bring factions together and work for peace and reconciliation in the country of origin .

Reintegration

140. One of the most striking features of the repatriation process in Mali is the formation of entirely new communities.¹³ A mission visiting returnees from Burkina Faso, for instance, found that in only one site out of nine were there returnees who had lived there before the exodus. Numerous reasons are given for the proliferation of new sites, but certain trends prevail. Returnees of urban origin often did not want go back to their former places of residence because of the reprisals they had suffered there. Many returnees of nomadic background were forced by the loss of their livestock to select sites that allowed for a more settled lifestyle.

141. In all sites visited by the evaluation mission, returnees were asked how they judged their present living conditions compared to the situation before their exodus. Responses followed a consistent regional pattern. In the large Goundam Circle West of Timbuktu, virtually all communities stated that their lives had improved because they had found new sources of revenue and received a greater degree of help, particularly in the agricultural sector.

142. Responses in the Kidal region were far less positive. While the respondents noted that their political situation had improved due to the end of military rule, they felt that materially their situation was, if anything, worse than before and expressed a great deal of anxiety about the future. Clearly, many former nomads could not reconcile themselves to the loss of their herds and had difficulty in adapting to a new lifestyle;¹⁴ often, there were requests for training in market gardening and small scale irrigation management.

143. This proliferation of new communities can be directly linked to the tripartite commission's policy to engage in site preparation works wherever the returnees chose, provided certain basic criteria were met. The policy had drawbacks, however: returnees frequently changed their minds (partly because of implementation delays) and the sheer number of sites involved grew beyond all expectations. Criteria and cut-off dates for the choice of sites could have been more rigorously enforced and the returnees themselves could have been more involved in site preparation works. On the other hand, the policy definitely encouraged repatriation and greatly helped in the socio-economic integration of the returnees.

Recommendation

7.4 Returnees should retain the right to choose their sites of return;

however, where extensive site rehabilitation works are involved, criteria need to be established and strictly enforced concerning the type of site, the cut-off dates for site selection and the circumstances in which decisions may be changed.

VII. FROM RELIEF TO DEVELOPMENT

144. The following statement from the evaluation of UNDP's PAREM project which ended on 31 December 1997 also applies to UNHCR's returnee programmes in both Mali and Niger: "The PAREM has only begun the process of rehabilitation, and it is absolutely necessary to continue this action and consolidate the positive but fragile accomplishments; the transition must be smooth, in order to avoid any brutal interruption."¹⁵ Securing a smooth transition to longer-term action is far from straightforward, however, on account of the difficult terrain, the lack of government resources and the limited number of suitable implementing partners.

145. While UNHCR has initiated a promising attempt to consolidate the rehabilitation of returnee communities in Niger, the far larger and more complex problems in Mali have not as yet been tackled to the same extent, as illustrated by the examples provided below. Recommendations are made for further action to be taken by UNHCR prior to the termination of the returnee programme in Mali which has been extended until 30 June 1999.

Niger : continuity hopefully assured

146. Reintegration is a matter of priority for all parties in Niger on account of the experience of 1989 when a failed repatriation was the spark that unleashed the civil war in the North. In recognition of this, UNHCR secured the services of a consultant to draft a project proposal for submission to the German Ministry of Economic Co-operation, which has an annual fund of DM 5 million for refugee-related development and reintegration projects.

147. The proposal was designed to fit the Government of Niger's planning priorities, contained in the National Reconciliation Plan. It pursues three closely related objectives: to assist in the reintegration of the returnees; to promote lasting peace by helping to stabilise the socio-political situation in the project area; and to contribute to the socio-economic development of returnee receiving communities. The sectors chosen include livestock rehabilitation, micro-credits and community development activities. Financial inputs foreseen are some US\$ 1 million for a four-year period, and the effectiveness of the project will depend on the careful selection of beneficiaries. Since UNHCR does not maintain a permanent presence in Niger, an NGO has been selected to monitor project implementation on its behalf and report back to the donor.

148. Project activities have begun, but it is too early to predict their likely impact. Clearly, however, the fact that UNHCR through this proposal has attracted development funds for returnee communities, whose longer-term needs might otherwise have been neglected, is an example which could be followed in other operations.

Development input in northern Mali needs to be intensified

149. Like the Government of Niger, the Government of Mali has undertaken major efforts to promote development activities in the northern regions as part of its implementation of the agreements which ended the armed conflict. Progress has so far been limited, however. Of a total of US\$ 450 million pledged by the donor community, only half has so far been disbursed and both sectoral and

geographical coverage have been uneven.

150. No doubt this can in part be attributed to the Government's difficulty in re-establishing an administrative presence in the North. Candidates are few because of the difficult working conditions and as a result, government services remain minimal in many areas. This, in turn, inhibits the introduction of development projects which can only be managed and sustained through an effective government counterpart.

151. Persistent security problems, especially in the Gao-Kidal region, have been a further inhibiting factor. The problems are mostly due to bandits engaging in armed robberies and vehicle thefts. They seem to have worsened as a result of the slow pace of economic rehabilitation.¹⁶ There is a risk that if the lack of security continues to deter the expansion of development efforts, this vicious circle could have dangerous implications for the region.

The sustainability of UNHCR's input is not assured

152. The sustainability of UNHCR's input depends on the existence of operational partners with the capacity to continue the work undertaken. While the promotional efforts undertaken by the UNHCR Office in Bamako have had some notable results, including commitments by USAID and the European Union, many issues remain to be addressed. Coverage of the area by bilateral agencies is uneven and largely uncoordinated while the development agencies of the UN system, including UNDP, UNICEF and FAO will remain virtually absent in the North for as long as the technical ministries of the government are not operational.

153. As a result, the situation of returnee communities in northern Mali is characterised by major regional differences. At one extreme is the area west of Timbuktu, which is benefiting from a number of aid and development programmes, supported by a variety of agencies. The returnees, most of whom arrived over a year ago from the camps in Mauritania, have successfully reintegrated and UNHCR's presence in the area has been phased out.

154. The areas of Kidal and Gourma-Rharous, on the other hand, have seen far less input from the government and development agencies, and UNHCR-funded NGOs remain as yet the only significant source of support. Most of the returnees in Kidal come from the camps in Algeria, where living conditions were less favourable than in Mauritania, and their reintegration prospects have been affected by the slow start of the UNHCR operation and the difficulties in start-up of an IFAD funded multi-year development project.

GTZ in the Timbuktu region: a possible model for returnee assistance

155. The GTZ-funded North Mali Programme is a bilateral development programme which also acted as UNHCR's implementing partner in a major returnee region of the North. It illustrates the conditions an aid project needs to fulfil if it is to provide a positive framework for returnee rehabilitation in a developing country. These may be summarised as follows:

- a. integrated coverage: the project was focused on a coherent, well-defined geographical zone and targeted all needy people in the area, whether they were returnees, displaced persons or local people;
- b. multi-year approach: the project was operational from the beginning of the repatriation when needs were greatest; in the early stages it provided emergency relief and assisted in community reconciliation efforts; multi-year development initiatives were introduced in the later consolidation stages; UNHCR-funded reintegration assistance was

included in these activities;

- c. multi-sector input: the main thrust of the project was economic rehabilitation and employment creation through multi-sectoral support measures; equal attention was paid to the re-establishment of educational and health facilities;
- d. community participation: the ten project offices were staffed by local personnel representative of the ethnic composition of the area and familiar with its needs; decision-making on project implementation was decentralised and subject to input by locally constituted development committees;
- e. administrative autonomy: the project has a government counterpart at central level (the Ministry of the Environment), but project implementation and the release of funds are not subject to governmental administrative procedures, ensuring flexibility and speed.
- f. 156. The GTZ programme not only provided returnee relief at a time when UNHCR was not yet present on the scene but, on account of its multi-year presence, also proved to be a suitable operational partner at the phase-out stage: the project assumes the maintenance of all UNHCR-funded hydrological works including the co-ordination of local water-management committees, and provides an element of continuity for the beneficiaries of UNHCR-funded micro-projects. As a result, the "continuum from relief to development" has not been a problem in the GTZ area.

IFAD in Kidal : careful advance planning has yet to bear much fruit

157. The experience with IFAD in northern Mali has not yet fully lived up to expectations, despite careful advance preparation. IFAD's support for the returnees of the Kidal region of northern Mali had been envisaged from the beginning of the exodus, since an IFAD loan of US\$ 14.8 million had been made available in 1989 under the project known as PSARK (*Projet de Sécurité Alimentaire et des Revenus de la Zone de Kidal-Kidal Zone Food Security and Revenue Project*). Accordingly, IFAD's participation in returnee assistance was endorsed by the quadripartite agreement signed between Algeria, Mali, IFAD and UNHCR on 28 August 1994.

158. By 1996, however, it became apparent that there was a need to redirect the focus of the programme. Following UNHCR's contacts with IFAD's Headquarters in Rome, an interagency evaluation mission was sent to the Kidal region. It was subsequently agreed that IFAD would rehabilitate the water supply at returnee sites designated by UNHCR and provide funding and continuity for the micro-project sector implemented under project Tetahelt. Since that time some 30% of project funds have been disbursed.

159. Like the GTZ project, the PSARK was envisaged as a multi-year, multi-sector programme providing integrated coverage of all needy groups in a given area. The key difference between them resides in PSARK's lack of administrative autonomy and complex disbursement procedures, including the need to secure authorisation for all expenditures from the West African Development Bank in Lomé. Since the project is *de facto* implemented by the government, it is subject to official tendering procedures which can be lengthy.

Remaining UNHCR priorities in northern Mali

160. Considering the uneven coverage of northern Mali by development projects able to take over from UNHCR there is a need for the Office to consolidate its work further in the most vulnerable regions. It has therefore been decided to

extend UNHCR's presence in north eastern Mali until 30 June 1999, six months beyond the originally agreed deadline for the end of the operation. The following are suggested objectives to be achieved during this extended period:

a) Consolidation of current sectoral activities.

Living conditions in many returnee sites in north eastern Mali remain precarious and returnee communities, in particular those who have for the first time adopted a settled lifestyle, are in need of further UNHCR support in a number of sectors. A budget of some US \$ 2 million would be required for these activities during 1999.

b) Assessment of achievements and remaining needs in returnee sites.

The UNHCR Office in Bamako is currently engaged in a detailed inventory of assistance measures undertaken in the various returnee sites in Mali (some 200 in all). For the most vulnerable sites this inventory should be coupled with a sector-by-sector survey of essential activities that will remain to be accomplished after the withdrawal of UNHCR support in June 1999. This information should be the subject of a report to be shared with donors, development agencies and the Government.

c) Formulation of multi-year development projects.

Following the example of Niger, UNHCR should invite a consultant to formulate proposals for multi-year development projects covering the longer-term needs of vulnerable communities in selected areas, for presentation to specific donors and funding agencies. As in Niger, this should include the rehabilitation of livestock, a vital sector for the economy of the region which the UNHCR programme deliberately avoided because of its longer-term commitments.

d) Advocacy with donors and fellow agencies

The UNHCR Office in Bamako will continue the substantial efforts already undertaken in order to stimulate greater concern for the northern regions on the part of development agencies and donors. These should include the organisation of field visits by partner agencies as well as a wide dissemination of the data gathered under b) and c) above.

161. While these recommendations concern Mali in particular, the same approach could be adopted in all situations where returnee communities are in need of longer-term support. A document giving concise details of outstanding needs in combination with concrete proposals for development projects would be a specially useful tool. UNHCR could invite experts from partner-agencies to contribute to the drafting of the document; this would give it greater authority and promote heightened awareness of the needs. Such a document could also be used effectively as a final donor report on voluntary repatriation programmes.

Recommendation 8

8.1 Prior to its phase out in Mali, UNHCR should prepare a report comprising an inventory of works undertaken, a concise identification of outstanding needs at vulnerable sites and proposals for development projects in key target areas, for presentation to the Government, donors and development agencies.

NOTES

1. The UNHCR Voluntary Repatriation Training module which was issued in 1993 identifies the most frequent (problem) as lack of a regional approach to coordination and planning, inadequate staff resources (late assignment, lack of briefing, inadequate skills and rapid turnover) and late arrival of essential equipment, in particular telecommunications and vehicles (see p. 67-68)

2. There was no Programme Officer in Bamako from July 1995 to March 1996; the Admin Officer's posts, too, was left vacant for many months and a Repatriation Officer did not arrive until January 1997.

3. Comment at Bamako Evaluation Seminar, July 1998.

4. See IOM-FOM 86/96-98/96.

5. Two staff members died of heat exposure in Bassikounou. The risk of getting lost in the desert was also very real.

6. See also recommendation 6.1 of the Evaluation Report on Staff Stress and Security.

7. See final report of BO Ouagadougou.

8. Report on joint UNHCR/WFP meeting, 13/9/96.

9. PTSS Report 97/08 p.3.

10. From March 97, "Tehatelt" (or, in another Tamacheq dialect "Tetahelt") replaced the earlier, less appropriate name "parapluie".

11. This had in fact been recommended at the UNHCR Programming Meeting of September 1995.

12. Report on the Rencontre intercommunautaire de M'Bouna issued by the Region de Tombouctou, p.6

13. Notable examples are Nebkit Ilik, a new settlement of Moorish traders from Timbuktu who did not want to return there because of the attacks they had experienced; Koygma which harbours an assembly of former nomads who followed a religious leader to a denuded hill in the wilderness; and Hambuba, a new suburb of the oasis of Tessalit comprising groups of returnees from Algeria who, for some reason, stayed behind in the local transit centre instead of moving further inland.

14. The following comment by the leader of the returnee women's association in the new Hambuba settlement near Tessalit is symptomatic: "la seule chose qui nous manque vraiment c'est les animaux. Avant nous étions seuls dans la brousse, l'Algérie et le Mali ne nous connaissaient pas. Maintenant nous sommes devenus un ballon entre les états et nous mourons à petit feu".

15. Projet d'Appui à la Réinsertion des Ex-Combattants (PAREM), Rapport d'Evaluation, p.xi.

16. Some informants stated that the delayed start of the UNDP's PAREM programme and UNHCR's returnee programme may have contributed to the frustrations behind the incidents of banditism.