



DISPLACED IN ALGERIA FACE HOUSING CRISIS AND LACK BASIC DAILY NEEDS

The Global IDP Project

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Since the electoral crisis in 1991, hundreds of thousands of Algerians have been forced to flee armed attacks, massacres and large-scale human rights abuses. The precise number of Algerians displaced by the political violence is impossible to assess given the "information void" that has pervaded the conflict in Algeria since its onset. This said, some estimates have been published. The U.S. Committee for Refugees stated that by the end of 2001, some 100,000 to 200,000 persons were believed to be internally displaced (USCR 2002, p. 52).

Due to the long-standing problems of access, precise information is often not available about the internally displaced. In 1998, there were indications that persons were being displaced from Médéa, Blida, Ouled Allel and other towns south of Algiers (Dammers 1998). During 2002, local media and statements by the authorities gave a scattered image of the extent of the problem. What is known is that some 30,000 IDPs live in Tiaret, that more than 5,000 displaced live in Chlef, that over 30,000 IDPs live on the periphery of Saïda, that over 650 families fled the threat of violence in the region north-east of Ténès, and that over the past 10 years, some 40,000 people have fled Médéa and Aïn Defla (El Watan 20 November 2002, 12 November 2002, 6 August 2002, le Quotidien d'Oran 9 November 2002, El Watan 31 December 2002).

It is reported that the most recent movements of displaced persons are from vulnerable rural areas to the relative safety of metropolitan centers, and that most displaced live with family and friends and not in camps or shelters (undisclosed source 5 December 2000).

Causes

During 2002, violence in the country was once again on the rise. It was reported in June 2002 that already some 730 persons had been killed since the start of that year (BBC News 28 June 2002). As an indication of the seriousness of the situation, the International Federation for Human Rights submitted a written report to the 58th session of the UN Commission for Human Rights, expressing its concern at the increase in displacement, as well as in other human rights violations.

In many cases, these armed attacks and massacres have led the local population to choose the safest option and leave their homes altogether. Another direct cause of displacement has been the destruction and theft of crops and agricultural property by the terrorist



groups. It was reported in July 2002, for example, that these incidents led to massive population displacements near Relizane (Le Quotidien d'Oran 31 July 2002).

The Islamic Armed Group (GIA), notorious for its brutality, was said to be responsible for the bulk of the violence (HRW 2000). However, government security forces were also to blame for direct abuses of human rights as well as the repeated failure to protect civilians from attack (HRW 1999; Cohen 6 December 1999). The absence of sufficient protection from security forces or the lack of street lighting have been cited by the local population as serious negligence by the authorities, facilitating terrorist attacks on the population. Moreover, the subsequent demands by civilians to be allowed to arm themselves against terrorist attacks are often left unanswered (El Watan 26 August 2002).

Subsistence needs

Displaced fleeing massacres and violence in their home regions have been facing serious social and economic difficulties in the areas of refuge. Chlef, for example, is one of the worst-hit regions in the country, with an unemployment rate of 35 per cent, poverty, social exclusion, malnutrition, inaction from the authorities, and bad or degrading overall living conditions. A massive influx of people fleeing from terrorism has added more pressure on the overall situation, and as a consequence living conditions have further deteriorated in the shantytowns.

What is very clear from reports out of Algeria is that the overall housing situation in the country is desperate. According to a report published by FIDH in November 2001, some 2.5 million Algerians live in 'hovels'. It is also reported that 30 percent of all households are overcrowded with as many as 15 to 20 persons per home. The government has launched a recovery plan, but it falls short of meeting demand by as many as 1.2 million homes (FIDH November 2001). A typical feature of the housing situation has been frequent relocations of people by the authorities. In most cases, these people have been provided with alternative housing. Internally displaced families, however, have often been expelled without having been provided with alternative shelter. The authorities often destroyed the shantytowns in order to make sure that the sites would not be re-occupied (Le Quotidien d'Oran 9 September 2002).

Even on the countryside, internally displaced people have been facing dire living conditions, such as the absence of drinkable water, a defective infrastructure, as well as the absence of health centers.

Return

In general, the security situation in Algeria does not allow for a mass-scale return of the displaced populations, since armed attacks and massacres are still occurring on a frequent basis. After massacres hit the village of Hjar Mefrouche, its inhabitants went to Aïn Kechra in November 2002 to protest against the authorities. There, they voiced threats to abandon their village if their safety would not be guaranteed. This example shows the seriousness of the security situation in Algeria and the obstacles to a possible return.

Despite this situation, the government does seem to be stimulating the return of displaced to their home villages. The authorities have tried, for example, to re-populate the village of Lekouassem in the infamous 'triangle of death' through the return of displaced populations. Since one and a half year, a return has begun through an improvement in security and the rebuilding of shelters. Despite these intentions, the actual facilities such as water and electricity remain basic or non-existent, hampering a real return. Another obstacle for return is the ignorance of the existence of agricultural support structures for returning farmers, the majority of whom never heard of anything of the kind.

Access

Throughout the whole of the conflict, the Algerian government has heavily restricted and often censured information about human rights conditions (HRW 2000). For years, all major international human rights organizations have been prohibited from visiting the country. Though some agencies were finally permitted entry in 2000, the visit of the International Federation of Human Rights, for one, was reportedly conducted under conditions of strict surveillance (FIDH July 2000). In fact, the FIDH made three requests to return to Algeria in 2001, but as of October 2001, no response was forthcoming from the government (FIDH November 2001). At the same time, Algeria continued to refuse visits by the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances, the UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, as well as the UN Special Rapporteur on the question of torture (El Watan 10 December 2002). A hopeful development was the visit of the UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief in September 2002.

At the same time, the few human rights NGOs working in Algeria itself face continual obstacles and restrictions in the conduct of their work (AI 8 November 2000). The US Department of State reported that the authorities occasionally harass the human rights groups through surveillance and obstruction of communications. Moreover, domestic NGO's must be licensed by the government and are prohibited from receiving funding from abroad (US DOS 4 March 2002, sect.4).

International response

Overall, international reaction to the situation in Algeria has been one of cautious observation. Certainly, UN and bilateral condemnations of violence came following the large-scale massacres of late 1997 and 1998 (Dammers 1998). However, external support since that time has been markedly absent. For the most part, Europe has kept its distance, avoiding involvement or the use of influence to direct events within Algeria (ICG 20 October 2000). The US has made intermittent public expressions of concern about the human rights situation, while at the same time, remaining steadfastly committed to doing business in Algeria (HRW 2000). An interesting, although not pacifying, development has been the decision of the US government in December 2002 to provide military aid packages to the Algerian authorities for its fight against Islamic militants (NYT 10 December 2002).



Background

The current violence in Algeria was triggered by an army-backed coup in 1991 that blocked the electoral victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) over the National Liberation Front (FLN), the then ruling party and political heir of the Algerian revolution. In response, the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), an armed group affiliated with the FIS, launched an armed campaign meant to bring down the new government (USCR 2000). Thousands of Algerians supported the opposition campaign against the new regime, and violence quickly spread throughout the country.

The violence reached the status of civil conflict between 1992 and 1998 as fighting intensified between the military-backed regime and an armed opposition composed of a number of growing, sometimes conflicting, clandestine groups (ICG 2000). During the height of the crisis, some 1,200 persons reportedly were killed per month in Algeria, victim to barbarous massacres, indiscriminate armed attacks and assassinations (ICG October 2000, Executive Summary). Another 4,000 persons are documented to have "disappeared" during this period (HRW 2000, Human Rights Developments). Women were often the most vulnerable targets of ruthless violence. During the course of attacks, women were reportedly abducted, enslaved, raped and later executed (HRW 2000). The region south of Algiers on the Blida plain was the site of some of the most heinous crimes against civilian populations and was, thus, termed the "triangle of death" (Dammers 1998). By April 2001, thousands of hamlets were said to have been deserted as a result of generalized violence in the Blida and Medea regions (Tlemceni 11 April 2001).

Since the darkest days of the conflict, the situation in Algeria has improved, albeit not to the level observers might have hoped. Although the AIS has generally respected a cease-fire since 1997 and security has returned to the larger metropolitan centers, killings and the violation of human rights continue unabated and unpunished in rural areas (HRW 2000). The election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika as president in 1999 raised hopes that the violence would diminish and that justice would be served for past violations. However, President Bouteflika's government has made little effort to bring justice to the thousands of victims of the Algerian conflict and its Civil Concord amnesty law has failed to encourage guerillas to lay down their arms (ICG 9 July 2001; HRW 2000; AI November 2000). Perpetrators of crimes, both members of government security forces and armed groups, continue to enjoy impunity in the face of the most criminal actions (AI 28 November 2000).

Since April 2001, the International Federation for Human Rights has noted that state-pressure has decreased, allowing Algerians some space to demonstrate their grievances against the government, as done in Kabylia in April 2001 and May 2002 (FIDH November 2001). However, the country is still rife with insecurity, and the atmosphere in Algeria remains one of violence and fear.



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Notes:

1. The Global IDP Project, based in Geneva, monitors internal displacement worldwide, as requested by the United Nations in 1998. It is part of the Norwegian Refugee Council, an organization that has assisted refugees worldwide since 1953. For more information about IDPs from conflict in 49 countries, visit our website www.idpproject.org.

2. See full Country Profile on displaced people in Algeria:
<http://www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/idpSurvey.nsf/wCountries/Algeria>)

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