

Mali: A country of emigration, immigration, transit and return

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Historically and geographically, Mali is an important crossroads for civilisations and migration. Mali is at the same time a country of emigration, immigration, transit and return.

It is estimated that around one-third of the Malian population, that is four million people, live outside the country, of which more than half reside in other West African countries. A large number of undocumented Malian migrants in Europe are being confronted with the current strengthening of European immigration policies. The Malian authorities pay significant attention to migrants' financial contributions to the country in the form of remittances and to their support of development in their locality of origin. Created in 2004, the Ministry for Malians Abroad and African Integration (MMEIA) was designed to address the needs of Malians abroad and to make them more aware of their potential role in the country's development.

In recent years, Mali has also become an important country of transit for Sub-Saharan migrants on their way to the West African coast (Mauritania, Senegal, Guinea, Gambia and Guinea Bissau), to Maghreb, and across the Mediterranean to Europe.

Mali is also a country of return, frequently receiving Malian and other Sub-Saharan immigrants expelled from Europe, Maghreb countries of transit, or from war-stricken African countries. Migrants blocked in transit are either escorted to the Malian border (with Mauritania, Algeria or Lybia) and abandoned in the middle of the desert, or sent back by plane tied down and muzzled.

Malians subject to involuntary return describe massive raids, degrading treatment and long periods of detention with the prospect of a forced return to their home country, often with no money.

Situation of migrant returnees

Public concern about the issue of migrant expulsion is very acute in Malian society. Migrants' countries of return often lack appropriate structures for receiving migrants who have been forced to return. They also lack mechanisms for protecting the rights of returned migrants. Organisations supporting migrants have documented a large number of human rights violations on which they base advocacy efforts and judicial complaints. Explorative missions are carried out by Malian civil society organisation, often in collaboration with international solidarity organisations, in order to record the reality of forced returns at borders (1). Their reports reveal the criminalisation of migrants in transit, flagrant violations of the integrity and dignity of migrants expelled on mass, arbitrary imprisonment, inhumane conditions during transportation and abandonment in the desert.

It is worth noting that the EU policy for controlling migration flows does not foresee centres of assistance for expelled migrants at the borders, nor are any international NGOs active in these border zones. The voluntary associations trying to assist returned migrants lack both the capacity and resources to fulfil the task. At the same time, the EU has financed the establishment of detention centres in countries such as Lybia and Mauritania for detaining illegal immigrants prior to their forced return. These centres are part the EU's strategy of 'outsourcing' immigration control outside of EU borders.

The General Delegation of Malians Abroad (DGME), whose mission includes the assistance,

protection and promotion of Malians abroad, has an office at the airport of Bamako for the administrative and technical assistance of voluntary and involuntary returned migrants. The arrival of airplanes containing returned immigrants is supervised by civil protection, in collaboration with the Malian Red Cross. However, this is only the case during so-called 'urgent procedures', i.e., when the authorities are informed in advance, which is rarely the case. Involuntary returned migrants often arrive home after several years of absence utterly destitute.

Most of them come from rural areas and have no family in Bamako. A number of Malian civil society associations, with limited resources, are active in providing accommodation, medical care, legal assistance and financial help to return migrants to their home region. No official aid is given to these vulnerable people.

Current challenges in Mali

In view of the risks of illegal immigration (including expulsion), the Malian authorities try to stem migratory flows by promoting education and employment opportunities in Mali, and by negotiating agreements on the concerted management of migratory flows. In 2008, the Ministry for Malians Abroad and African Integration, in partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and various associations supporting returned migrants, carried out a national awareness campaign on the dangers of illegal immigration.

Financed by the EU, a Migration Information and Management Centre (CIGEM) was inaugurated in Bamako in October 2009. The creation of CIGEM is part of the EU's 'Global Approach to Migration' launched in 2005; CIGEM works to promote the linking of migration with the development needs of migrants' countries of origin and encourages collaboration with migrants' countries of origin and transit in the management of migration flows. CIGEM's activities include the definition of a national migration governance policy, the promotion of a codevelopment approach (2), the promotion of legal migration schemes, and the fight against illegal immigration through awareness campaigns and the orientation of candidates for migration towards work and education opportunities at home.

The above initiatives in favour of legal immigration clearly reflect the EU and its partner countries' political will to put an end to illegal immigration. The incentives offered to potential migrants to remain in Mali and the mass expulsion of illegal migrants from transit countries and countries of destination are both sides of the same coin. They are part of the EU's self-interested strategy of 'chosen immigration'.

For example, the incentives offered by European countries for 'voluntary return' are poor and underfinanced. Migrants blocked in transit are not assured of being taken care of upon their return, while expelled migrants are not eligible for any 'reintegration' programme financed by the EU. Migrant associations also plead for the return of property and contributions to the social security system from the former country of residence. Some people reclaim up to 22 years of social contributions.

It is in this context that the cautious position of the Malian authorities in the negotiation of the agreement with France on the concerted management of migratory flows must be situated. On the one hand, they appreciate the contribution of Malian emigrants to Mali's national development, but on the other hand, they depend on EU development aid, which is increasingly becoming conditional on the adoption of agreements on the concerted management of migratory flows. How long the wrangle will last is unknown. The global economic crisis and its consequences have reaffirmed Mali's concerns. The crisis has been accompanied by cuts in EU development aid. The labour market contraction is also spurring tougher restrictions on

migration, which affects the capacity of migrants to send remittances. Tougher immigration restrictions often imply human rights violations, but are ineffective in stopping illegal immigration: people still put their lives at risk to reach Europe, at any cost.

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(1) AME carried out an exploratory mission at Mali's border with Algeria together with the Afrique Magazine in 2007 and with Apdha (Spain) at the border with Mauritania in 2008.

2) Codevelopment is a trend of thought and development strategy in development studies that considers migrants to be a developing factor for their countries of origin.