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Algeria: return continues amid improved security

Conflict between the government and insurgent groups displaced at least one million Algerians between 1992 and 2002. Fighting and attacks targeting the civil population forced large numbers to flee rural areas and find security in nearby urban centres. Today, government forces have largely regained control over rural areas and a large majority of the former insurgents have accepted an amnesty offered by President Bouteflika and approved by the Algerian people in a referendum during fall 2005.

The actual number of people displaced by the conflict is difficult to determine given the information void that has pervaded the conflict in Algeria since its onset. The European Union estimated in 2002 that violence had displaced one million people, while others put the number as high as 1.5 million. There is no information available about the current number of internally displaced persons (IDPs), but it is regularly documented that many still live in the shanty towns that mushroomed across Algeria during the conflict.

With security returning to the former conflict zones, the government has launched a rural rehabilitation programme to encourage the return of displaced people. Several newspapers write about return to the former conflict-areas, but there are also several reports about villages that remain empty due to administrative delays and lack of livelihood opportunities. The displaced in Algeria have not received any international assistance as Algerian authorities have denied access to the affected population; nor did the UN and other international actors try to address their situation during the conflict. The European Union has, however, launched a project supporting the rehabilitation programme of the government. The Algerian government needs to step up its response to the IDP situation, for example by involving international organisations with expertise in developing IDP strategies and conducting surveys. It is also time for the international community present in Algeria to finally address the issue of internal displacement and assist the government in building up its capacity to implement international standards such as the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement.

Map of Algeria



Source: University of Texas, 2001

More maps are available on <http://www.internal-displacement.org/>

Background

Violence in Algeria was triggered by an army-backed coup in January 1992 to block the electoral victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) over the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN), which had ruled without a break since driving out the French colonialists in 1962. An army-backed High State Committee was set up in January 1992. The FIS was dissolved the following month and thousands of activists arrested. In response, radical Islamists outside the FIS reactivated the Algerian Islamic Movement (Mouvement Islamique Algérien, MIA), an armed group which had mounted a limited insurgency in the 1980s, and launched a violent campaign against the army-backed government. Thousands of Algerians supported the rebellion and violence quickly spread throughout the country. Between 1993 and 1998 Algeria was in the grip of terrifying violence as fighting intensified between the government and the various armed Islamic organisations. The rebellion split into rival movements early on, with the Armed Islamic Group (Groupe Islamique Armé, GIA) emerging as the most extreme and brutal movement, responsible for numerous killings of foreigners from late 1993 onwards and perpetrating large-scale massacres of civilians in 1996-1998, a strategy which eventually precipitated splits within its ranks. In response, the MIA evolved into the Islamic Salvation Army (Armée Islamique du Salut, AIS) in 1994, publicly proclaimed its allegiance to the ex-FIS and moderated its ambitions before eventually abandoning its campaign by observing a cease-fire from late 1997 onwards and dissolving itself completely in 2000 (ICG, 2000, 30 July 2004; UN, January 2003). However, attacks against the ci-

vilian population were widespread for several years after peaking in 1997-1998 – with reports of indiscriminate killings and displacement taking place as late as 2002.

This brutal conflict has claimed the lives of an estimated 150,000–200,000 people. Furthermore, at least 7,000 people, the former Algerian Prime Minister Ouyahia has said 8,000, arrested by security forces and their allies have "disappeared" and remain unaccounted for (Al-Jazeera, 22 March 2006; Reuters, 24 February 2005; HRW, 2003; FIDH, 17 March 2003). The GIA, notorious for its brutality, was said to be responsible for the bulk of the violence (HRW, 2000). While an estimated 17,000 Islamist rebels were killed during the conflict, the civilian population became the prime victims, suffering indiscriminate armed attacks and assassinations. Massacres started in late 1996, targeting families suspected of being opposed to the extremist views of the GIA. Hundreds of civilians were killed in subsequent massacres during 1997 and 1998. At the height of the crisis, some 1,200 people were reported killed each month (ICG, October 2000, Executive Summary, ICG, July 2004, p.14). However, government security forces were also to blame for direct abuses of human rights, displacement and killings as well as the repeated failure to protect civilians from attacks (Martinez, March 2003; Comité Justice pour l'Algérie, May 2004, dossier no.2; Liberté, 14 August 2004). Women were often the targets of this ruthless violence and faced abduction, slavery, rape and executions (AI, December 2004; HRW, 2004). Self-defence groups, legalised by a 1997 law, were created to secure the local populations. In some cases insecurity worsened as

some of the leaders of these groups evolved into local warlords, terrorising the population themselves. Between 150,000 and 200,000 people joined these militia groups and another 80,000 were recruited as communal guards. They were all armed by the military (Sidhoum, December 2003).

As the government regained control over conflict areas, many members of armed groups surrendered to the authorities under the "Civil Concord", an amnesty for fighters who agreed to lay down their arms by mid-January 2000. However, dozens reportedly rejoined armed groups after having surrendered (AI, 2003).

The security situation in Algeria has improved considerably during recent years, but Algeria is still plagued by bouts of attacks that make certain rural and mountainous zones unsafe (Grant, 17 November 2005; El Watan, 23 January 2006; USDOS, March 2006). According to the government, the total number of people killed during 2005 was 488, compared to 429 in 2004 and 1,162 in 2003. Civilians are also victims of counter-insurgency operations. In May 2006, more than 30 women and children were killed in a raid against members of the extremist Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) in the province of Jijel (Souaïdia, 27 May 2006). A state of emergency in Algeria remains in place since 1992, despite international pressure to end it.

The Algerian government says that the GSPC is the only remaining extremist group in Algeria. The GSPC, formed in a breakaway from the GIA in 1998, has openly announced that it will continue to fight against the state, while the rump of the GIA has almost disappeared since its

leader was killed in late 2004. Official estimates say that between 800 and 1,000 insurgents are still active, down from a roughly estimated and disputed figure of 28,000 during the 1990s (Grant, 17 November 2005; Reuters, 24 February 2005). In general, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's government has made little effort to seek justice for the hundreds of thousands of victims of the conflict. Perpetrators of crimes, both members of government security forces and armed self-defense groups, continue to enjoy impunity (AI, 2003; US DOS, February 2004). However, a commission has been appointed to examine the case of the more than 7,000 people who disappeared during the 1990s and the government has agreed to accept responsibility for unauthorised actions by security forces and pay indemnities to families of the disappeared (US DOS, February 2005). In a referendum in September 2005, President Bouteflika won an overwhelming victory for a proposal to grant amnesty to former members of militant groups, excluding those involved in documented rape and massacres. However, the amnesty has been criticised by several human rights groups for offering impunity to those who committed large scale abuses that have not even been investigated (L'Expression, 28 February 2006; HRW, 3 September 2005, 16 April 2006).

Numbers and patterns of displacement

While families fled insecurity already during the first years of the Algerian crisis, massacres of the civilian population from late 1996 onwards led to the first massive exodus of people towards the cities. Thousands fled to the outskirts of

Algiers from where many were forced to flee for the second or third time when the conflict approached the capital during summer and autumn 1997. Towards 1998, when the military had gained control over the major urban centres, fighting again moved to the rural areas. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were forced to flee the continuing massacres, armed attacks and large-scale human rights violations. There are also reported cases where the Algerian police forcibly emptied villages they suspected of supporting rebel groups (Liberté, 14 August 2004; Le Matin, 16 May 2001; Comité Justice pour l'Algérie, dossier no. 2, May 2004, pp.20-21). Another direct cause of displacement was the destruction and theft of crops and agricultural property by extremist groups. It was reported, for example, that such incidents led to massive population displacements near Relizane in July 2002 (Le Quotidien d'Oran, 31 July 2002).

Most of the displaced fled to the relative safety of nearby cities, where they stayed with family and friends, or found refuge in shanty-towns. It is therefore very difficult to assess the actual number of displaced with any accuracy. There is no publicly available overview of the number of displaced. According to one newspaper, President Bouteflika said on one occasion that 1.5 million people had been displaced (Figaro, 6 April 2004). However, this information seems to contradict a statement given a few days later by the minister of interior, stating that only 500,000 people were internally displaced during the conflict (El Watan, 10 April 2004).

Furthermore, there are no available estimates from international organisations because the Algerian authorities have

denied access to the affected areas. UNDP acknowledges a clear link between the violence and the aggravated rural exodus during the 1990s but makes no estimates, while the European Union stated in 2002 that violence displaced one million people. Several newspapers have reported massive displacement from rural areas because of the security situation, with one estimating that 1.5 million people had fled as of the end of 2002 (L'Expression, 18 November 2002; Martinez, March 2003; EU, Strategy 2002-2006, p.38; UNDP, 2001 National Poverty Eradication Plan).

Most of the information found on this subject is fragmented. According to media articles, more than 300,000 people fled to the main urban centres in the province of Medea, 125,000 in Jijel, 90,000 (15,000 families) in Chlef, 80,000 in Tissemsilt, 66,000 (11,000 families) in Aïn Defla, 30,000 in Tiaret, and 30,000 in Saïda. Also, tens of thousands fled the violence and took shelter on the outskirts of Oran (Le Soir d'Algerie, 3 May 2005, 11 September 2003; El Watan, 4 August 2003, 20 November 2002, 12 November 2002, 6 August 2002). There is no information about the internally displaced in Algiers, although it is known that many also moved to the outskirts of the capital city. The military monitored the population movements to some extent. In some areas, houses belonging to families who had fled the violence were marked with a cross, and newly displaced families arriving in these areas were then installed there (Comité Justice pour l'Algérie, May 2004, dossier no. 2, pp.20-21).

Internal displacement from rural areas over the last decade should be seen in the context of a more general urbanisa-

tion process where unemployment and poverty have led to widespread economic migration into towns. Official statistics show that the urbanisation rate increased from 31.4 percent in 1966 to 58.3 per cent in 1998 and according to one newspaper close to five million people left the countryside for urban areas between 1977 and 1998 (ONS, 2001, p.11, *Le Matin*, 8 September 2002).

A pressing need for housing

Despite a booming economy and soaring oil and gas export revenues, Algeria is facing a range of more general economic and social problems, such as high unemployment rates, widespread poverty, social exclusion and malnutrition, which leave those internally displaced particularly vulnerable. The massive influx in urban areas of people fleeing armed attacks from extremist groups has added more pressure to the overall situation, and as a consequence living conditions have further deteriorated in the shantytowns of the major urban centres. Several newspapers have documented the decline in urban living conditions with the growth of shanty towns, breakdown of sanitation systems, overcrowded households and insufficient schooling facilities. Added to this already desperate situation, many of the displaced also face psychological trauma (*El Watan*, 10 May 2006, 21 February 2006; *L'Expression*, 3 January 2004, 8 January 2004).

The enormous population movements have led to an acute housing shortage in urban areas. According to UNDP, Algeria has one of the world's highest housing occupancy rates, and the government estimates that the country has an immediate shortfall of 1.5 million housing

units while more than 500,000 housing units need rehabilitation. However, many housing projects both in urban and rural areas are on hold due to administrative delays (USDOS, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, November 2003; AFD, May 2006; *El Watan*, 10 May 2006).

Return

Apart from a few episodes of displacement reported during 2004-2005, the security situation now would allow returns to previously conflict-affected areas. However, after years of abandon, a massive effort is needed in order to revitalise the agricultural sector in order to secure a livelihood for the returning population. The government has launched a rehabilitation programme in rural areas in order to encourage internally displaced people and migrants to return to their villages. The authorities have tried, for example, to re-populate villages by promising direct financial assistance to returnees as well as implementing programmes to rehabilitate houses, increase employment and revitalise the agricultural sector, which suffered during the 1990s. But the rehabilitation programme has seen a lot of delays, often due to administrative mismanagement. People have been discouraged from returning to their home villages because living conditions in the countryside can be even harder than in the towns, with no drinkable water, poor general infrastructure and a lack of health facilities (*El Watan*, 8 January 2006, 17 July 2005).

There is no collated information on the number of returns, apart from a reference in a speech given by President Bouteflika in April 2004, where he said that 700,000 people of 1.5 million internally

displaced had returned (Figaro, 6 April 2004). According to another source, between 50,000 and 170,000 internally displaced returned to their home areas between August and November 2002 (L'Expression, 19 August 2002).

Only anecdotal information has been found on recent return of internally displaced to previously conflict-affected areas. Some 60,000 families are reported to have returned over the last three years to the rural areas of the province of Khenchela and more than 2,400 families to the province of Relizane. Anecdotal reports have also been found on return to communes in the provinces of Aïn Defla, Annaba, Mascara, Médéa, Sétif and Skikda (Le Jeune Indépendant, 27 December 2005; Le Soir d'Algérie, 26 January 2006, 15 November 2005; El Watan, 4 February 2006, 1 October 2005; El Moudjahid, 13 September 2005, 13 August 2005; La Tribune d'Algerie, 29 September 2004). In the province of Algiers, most have returned to their former home areas, according to one media report, but are facing numerous problems in restarting their lives due to high unemployment rates and lack of basic infrastructure (Le Soir d'Algérie, 26 January 2006).

However, other newspaper reports from regions in the provinces of Aïn Defla, Chlef, Mascara, Médéa, Tissemsilt and Tizi Ouzou give the impression of only minor return as rehabilitation efforts have just started or are still in preparation. A persisting feeling of insecurity among the displaced is also quoted as a reason for staying in their place of refuge (Le Quotidien d'Oran, 26 July 2005; Algeria News, 18 June 2005; El Watan, 2 January 2006, 3 September, 17 July, 28

May, 1 February, 23 and 8 January 2005; Le Soir d'Algérie, 18 June 2005).

Humanitarian Access

Throughout the whole of the conflict, the Algerian government heavily restricted and often censored information about human rights conditions (HRW, 2000). For years, all major international human rights organisations have been prohibited from visiting the country. However, during 2005, visits from several NGOs such as Amnesty International, Freedom House and the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH) were accepted, although confined to the capital city (AI May 2005; FIDH, July 2005; US DOS, 8 March 2006).

At the same time, the few domestic human rights NGOs working in Algeria have faced obstacles and restrictions in the conduct of their work. The US State Department reported that the authorities occasionally harass human rights groups through surveillance and obstruction of communications (US DOS, 8 March 2006). In general, the state exercises considerable control over Algeria's mass media, and harassment of the press increased following President Bouteflika's re-election in April 2004. In February 2006, Algeria's parliament passed a law that provides up to five years in prison for any statement or activity concerning "the national tragedy" which "harms" state institutions, "the good reputation of its agents" or "the image of Algeria internationally" (HRW, 16 April 2006).

International response

Overall, international reaction to the situation in Algeria has been one of cautious observation. The UN and individual states condemned the large-scale massacres of late 1997 and 1998 (Dammers, 1998). For the most part, EU countries have kept their distance, avoiding involvement or attempts to use their influence to direct events within Algeria (ICG, 20 October 2000). The US has expressed concern about the human rights situation, while at the same time remaining steadfastly committed to doing business in Algeria and supporting the authorities with military aid (HRW, 2000; Arabic News.Com, 28 October 2003; NYT, 10 December 2002).

Although the local media have raised the problem of violence-induced internal displacement on several occasions, the plight of the internally displaced in Algeria has so far been largely ignored by international actors. Not a single document examined for this report concerns the particular needs and rights of internally displaced. UN information about the internal displacement situation in Algeria is strikingly absent. However, the UN agency International Fund for Agriculture and Development implements projects in rural areas that benefit returnees (e-mail IFAD, June 2006).

The European Union is the only organisation with a substantial project to support the return of the internally displaced. In its strategic document for cooperation with Algeria, the EU says that return of the displaced population is a prerequisite for the future development of rural areas (EU, 2002-2006, p.38). Until the end of 2004, Algerian authorities blocked the implementation of the

EU rehabilitation and development project which aimed at promoting the return of some 70,000 people displaced by violent conflict in Algeria (Libération, 14 April 2004). In December 2004, the parties came to an agreement and the European Union disbursed €17 out of a total pledge of €30 million for projects in around 60 communes in the provinces of Mascara, Relizane, Tiaret, Tissemsilt, Chlef and Aïn Defla. However, the implementation only started a year later and it is too early to assess the impact the project will have on the return of displaced populations (e-mails from EU Algiers).

While the Algerian government encourages return of internally displaced, a more comprehensive IDP strategy does not seem to exist. There is also a need for an IDP survey on the number and location of the displaced as well as their specific needs and intentions as regards return or resettlement. The government should involve international organisations with expertise in developing IDP strategies and conducting surveys in this process. The international community present in Algeria should finally address the issue of internal displacement, encourage the government to adhere to the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement and contribute to the monitoring of the situation of IDPs and returnees.

Displacement due to natural disasters

Algeria is also plagued by natural disasters which have displaced hundreds of thousands of people. In November 2001, devastating floods hit Algiers, killing more than 800 people, mostly in the

capital's Bab El-Oued area. In May 2003, a strong earthquake with a magnitude of 6.8 on the Richter scale struck the country and caused catastrophic damage in five provinces in the north-central section of Algeria. The province of Boumerdes and the eastern district of Algiers were most affected by the earthquake. Official figures put the number of casualties at 2,320 persons killed and 10,147 injured. Hundreds of thousands were left homeless (US DOS, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs November 2003).

Note: This is a summary of the IDMC's country profile of the situation of internal displacement in Algeria. The full country profile is available online [here](#).

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Note: All documents used in this profile summary are directly accessible on the [List of Sources](#) page of the Algeria country page.

About the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, established in 1998 by the Norwegian Refugee Council, is the leading international body monitoring conflict-induced internal displacement worldwide.

Through its work, the Centre contributes to improving national and international capacities to protect and assist the millions of people around the globe who have been displaced within their own country as a result of conflicts or human rights violations.

At the request of the United Nations, the Geneva-based Centre runs an online database providing comprehensive information and analysis on internal displacement in some 50 countries.

Based on its monitoring and data collection activities, the Centre advocates for durable solutions to the plight of the internally displaced in line with international standards.

The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre also carries out training activities to enhance the capacity of local actors to respond to the needs of internally displaced people. In its work, the Centre cooperates with and provides support to local and national civil society initiatives.

For more information, visit the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre website and the database at www.internal-displacement.org.

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