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**NIGER: New Touareg rebel group speaks out**

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Photo: [IRIN/G. Cranston](http://www.irinnews.org/)

This man is a Touareg in northern Niger. A Touareg-led group has declared a rebellion against the government, accusing it of "neglect"

DAKAR/NIAMEY, 17 May 2007 (IRIN) - A string of armed attacks in the north of Niger this year were provoked by feelings of neglect among people in the region and throughout Niger, the spokesperson for a new Touareg-led rebel group that claims responsibility for the violence told IRIN on Wednesday.   
  
“The movement was created because nothing has been done by the government,” Moktar Roman, spokesperson for the Mouvement des Nigeriens pour la Justice (MNJ) said. “There is no work, no schools, not even drinking water in all Niger. It’s terrible, it’s a genocide, and the government is corrupt, taking money from people and leaving them to live in poverty,” he said.   
  
The group is fighting for development in what the United Nations considers the poorest, least developed country in the world, Roman said. “It is not just a Touareg movement,” he said.   
  
However, the government of Niger has refused to even call the fighters rebels, accusing them instead of being bandits trafficking drugs, guns and people in a vast region that is difficult to police.   
  
To reinforce its claim, government officials cite a seizure of drugs and weapons the army made in the north in April. They also cite data from the UN Development Programme which shows that five times more cannabis was seized in Niger in 2006 than in 2004.   
  
Roman denies that his group is involved in drug or arms trafficking. “There are traffickers and they work with the government and the presidency. The Sahara is being turned into a transit route by them, we don’t have the means to do it,” he said.   
  
He and other members of the group also strongly deny that their movement has connections to Islamic terrorist organizations which some analysts believe are establishing strongholds in the Sahara’s isolated corners.

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**The fighting**   
  
The only attacks the rebel group takes responsibility for are those that have targeted the Nigerien army, which have been amongst the worst since the government signed a peace deal in 1998 with former rebels in northern Niger.  
  
The first known attack occurred in February when the MNJ claimed responsibility for an attack on an army base in the northern oasis town of Iferouane.   
  
In March, the MNJ attacked a bus which provoked an all night gun battle with the army that left five of its fighters dead. The army accused the group of planting mines that killed two soldiers.   
  
In April the group claimed responsibility for an attack on a uranium exploration team operating near the Algerian border.   
  
**What do they want?**   
  
The group is made up of Touareg fighters, including a former officer called Mohamed Al Cherif, who participated in previous uprisings and were subsequently integrated into the Nigerian army, but then defected. The movement is also supported by intellectuals and Nigerians living abroad, Roman said.   
  
He alleged that the government has not met the terms of peace deals signed between Touareg rebels and the Nigerien government some nine years ago, which included promises of decentralisation of political power and a focus on economic development for the northern region, Roman said.   
  
The new group is reminiscent of earlier Touareg armed groups, according to Baz Lecocq, a fellow at the Zentrum Moderner Orient research institute in Berlin who has been studying rebellions in Niger and neighbouring Mali.

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| **History of Touareg uprisings**  Touaregs are a pastoral, nomadic ethnic group scattered across several West and North African states. They make up just 10 percent of the total population of Niger, but in the northern desert region of the country they constitute a majority.  In the mid-1970s severe droughts in Mali and Niger forced thousands of young Touareg men to emigrate to neighbouring Libya and Algeria. There, many received military training.  In the 1980s many returned with their governments promising them resettlement assistance, but in Niger the assistance never materialised. This and other grievances led to increased tensions between returning Touaregs and the Nigerien government.  On 19 October 1991, the Front de Liberation de l'Air de Asaouad was formed which demanded a federal system of government with greater self-determination for Touaregs and economic improvements.  Supported by France, China and Libya, the Nigerien government fought the various Touareg rebel factions until 1998, when a peace accord was signed, promising administrative decentralisation, improved development in the north, and disarmament and the integration of former fighters into the army.  Source: [Uppsala University Conflict Database](http://www.pcr.uu.se/database/) |

“These complaints are the same old ones they have been arguing about, discussing and blaming the government for since the start of the rebellion in 1991,” he said. “The claims made by the MNJ spokesperson are not meaningless, but they are old hat.”   
  
Lecocq said the government has also had the same old reaction to the threat. “Every attack, whatever the reason, is called banditry” Lecocq said.   
  
**More fire power**   
  
The group has asked for talks with the government but the Nigerien Prime Minister Hama Amadou and senior defence officials have repeatedly ruled that out.   
  
“Rebellion?... We cannot speak of political demands. For us the attacks signify ‘leave us to prosper from our illicit trafficking of drugs and arms,’” Mohamed Ben Omar, minister of communication said last month on Nigerien national television.   
  
However the Nigerien government this week authorised 30 billion CFA (US$ 60 million) for ramped-up army operations in the north. The investment is 9 billion CFA ($ 18 million) more than what the government and donors spent on food security for Nigeriens in 2006.   
  
“Security today is one of our main priorities,” Salifou Madou Kelzou, minister for institutional relations, told Niger’s parliament on Wednesday.   
  
**Other theories**   
  
The MNJ says it wants wealth from Niger’s burgeoning uranium mining industry to benefit the national economy, and specifically the northern region in which the mining is taking place, said Roman.   
  
A Niger analyst, the independent French researcher Nadia Belamat, said she thinks the government is going to face more and more resistance from the MNJ and other groups if it ignores these demands.   
  
“Since around 2003 there has been a growing realisation that not only is uranium mining in northern Niger not helping the region economically, it is also causing serious ecological and health problems,” she said.   
  
“There are many discontents there now. The country is very poor, and there is still no transparency or good economic or political leadership. People in the north of Niger have been waiting for a decade for decentralisation of politics and inclusion but they do not see it happening and that has created powerful resentment,” she said.   
  
Roger Boulanger, Niger Editor at the Economist Intelligence Unit in London, said he wouldn’t dismiss the group as bandits. “There is definitely a political element. There are a lot of disgruntled and unemployed former fighters around,” he said. “There’s a widespread feeling that they’re being ripped off,” Boulanger added.   
  
However, Lecocq suggested a completely different theory for the recent upswing in violence, saying it may be a result of inter-tribal politics which could fade away.   
  
“Often tribes attack government posts and state facilities, economic sites, not to hurt the government but to show force internally to other factions and tribes. Or they could have serious claims against the government while also playing local politics.”   
  
MNJ spokesperson Roman denied such claims and refused to be drawn on what the group would do if the government refused to negotiate.   
  
“Don’t underestimate us,” he warned. “Now is the time for negotiation.”   
  
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