**Mali: Lessons from the Reinsertion of Ex-Combatants Project**

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***Abstract:*** The insurgency in northern Mali represents notable geopolitical similarities to Nigeria. However, DDR is yet to happen. This section provides an overview of the Mali conflict and DDR strategies outlined in the 2015 peace agreement between the Mali government and rebel groups. Strategies for overcoming challenges to DDR in Mali and Nigeria are also provided.

***Model Name***

Mali Reinsertion of Ex-Combatants Project, short for Mali Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration and Security Sector Reform.

***Time Period***

Armed conflict began in March 2012. Although a peace agreement was brokered in May/June 2015, no timelines for a successful DDR were established. Currently, disarmament is yet to happen and conflict remains sporadic. Progress is expected to be slow but steady until stability is attained.[[1]](#footnote-0)

***Background***

Mali, a landlocked West African country, is a product of European colonialism. Like most African territories, it fell under French colonization in the late 1800s together with the area now called Senegal. Its current form, boundaries, institutions, systems and structures reflect a colonial heritage distinct from its pre-colonial nature characterized by trade and nomadic movements. It gained independence the same year as Nigeria in 1960. Its population is estimated at 17.5million. About 90% of Malians are Muslim, with traditionalists and Christians in the minority.

The Republic of Mali has experienced some rebellions, coups and 23 years of military dictatorship until democratic elections in 1992. Although Mali is self-sufficient in food and one of Africa’s major cotton producers, its chronic foreign trade deficit makes it heavily dependent on foreign aid and remittances from Malians abroad.[[2]](#footnote-1) About 30% of its population is unemployed. Although agriculture is a major backbone of its economy, Mali faces recurring droughts, dust-laden harmattan haze especially during the dry seasons, occasional Niger River flooding, deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, and inadequate supplies of potable water. There are issues of physical insecurity, high population growth, corruption in government and public service, weak infrastructure and low levels of human capital which hinder sustained economic growth.[[3]](#footnote-2)

The following sections looks at the nature, scope and causes of Mali’s northern insurgency and how the DDR process in Mali is progressing after a peace agreement was reached. The aim is to identify similarities and differences with the Boko Haram case in Nigeria in order to determine the applicability of the Mali DDR model to Nigeria. The last section proffers some policy recommendations for the reintegration of Boko Haram into the Nigerian society based on the challenges and lessons learnt from Mali.

***The Northern Insurgency***

Mali’s northern insurgency dates back to the Tuareg insurgencies of 1963, 1990-91 and 2006 in which demands were made on Mali for northern secession amidst the declaration of an independent Azawad. Peace settlements reached were not adhered to leading to built-up distrust, suspicion, anger and frustration on the part of the northerners. In particular, provisions on the grant of some autonomy to the north were violated several times until January 2012 when another northern rebellion erupted.[[4]](#footnote-3)

The 2012 insurgency was sparked by widespread built-up dissatisfaction and frustration over the deprivation and marginalization of the North, and unfulfilled promises made by the Government of Mali to resolve earlier rebellions. Unlike the past, this insurgency has taken a more radicalized form. A Tuareg rebel group called the Mouvement Nationale pour la Liberation de l’Azawad (MNLA) started attacks in the northern towns of Menaka, Tessalit, and Aguel’hoc in January 2012. The rebellion also spread to Gao, Kidal, and Timbuktu, all in the north. Most of the rebels were returnees from Libya, after serving in Muammar Gaddafi’s army before the civil war which led to the collapse of the Gaddafi regime. A military coup which ensued in March 2012 after a military encounter with the rebels gave room for a take-over by a loose coalition of jihadist groups linked with the Al-Qaeda and the Tuareg rebels. The major among them were the Ansar Dine and the Mouvement pour l’unicite et le Jihad en Afrique de l’Ouest (MUJAO). The insurgency differed from earlier ones in the way it was radicalized with religious (Islamic) undercurrents and involved well-armed cohorts of rebels. The rebels considered their insurgency as a jihadist mission.[[5]](#footnote-4)

***International Involvement and Peace Settlement***

An apparent jihadist move by the Ansar Dine and MUJAO to the capital, Bamako, triggered a French-led intervention. French and Chadian troops drove them away from major towns in the North and restored the territorial integrity of Mali. Subsequently, a ceasefire agreement was reached in Ouagadougou in 2013 with the rebel groups paving the way for the democratic elections which brought the new president, Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, and a new legislature to office.[[6]](#footnote-5)

Later, an African Union (AU) mission established there was rehatted as the United Nations Multinational Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). There was also a European Union (EU) training mission and security assistance from the United States (US) and France in the form of a counter-terrorism campaign (Barkane) which targeted cross-border jihadist movements in Mali and four other Sahel countries.[[7]](#footnote-6)

Mali’s peace talks experienced several deadlocks due to disagreements between the government and key rebel groups over the creation of a Malian federation and ambiguities and rivalry among the various diplomatic initiatives led by MINUSMA, ECOWAS, AU, Algeria (as the key facilitator of peace negotiations and the choice of Mali’s government), Burkina Faso (the MNLA’s preferred choice as mediator), and Morocco. In the course of the peace talks, fighting erupted occasionally between the MNLA and the Malian Army, particularly in Kidal, the headquarters of the main rebel group. Both sides had successes and failures and several lives were lost. A peace agreement was finally reached in Algiers in June 2015, two years after the ceasefire agreement.[[8]](#footnote-7)

The Algiers agreement was signed between two coalitions of several Tuareg rebel groups; the Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) and the Platform of armed groups (the Platform). Thus, the major jihadist groups were left out of the peace talks and the signing of the agreement. The Accords provided for direct elections of local representatives to enhance local participatory governance, disarmament, demobilization and reinsertion (DDR), security sector reform (SSR), and establishment of conditions for restoring stability and economic recovery in Northern Mali.[[9]](#footnote-8) Areas which have seen new administrations – prefects and sub-prefects – are in the regions of Gao, Kidal, Menaka, Taoudenni, and Timbuktu.[[10]](#footnote-9)

***Civilian Agency Involvement***

Although yet to be put into practice, the “Accord pour la paix” outlines several roles for civilian agencies (albeit no specific organizations are mentioned). These functions include organizations being involved in human rights advocacy. Attention is accorded to justice officials who are well trained in violence against women and girls, the aim being to respect of the rights of women, children and other victims of conflict.[[11]](#footnote-10) Leaders of Malian society, especially women and youth, are to help influence dialogue between communities and help to reconcile Malians. Civil society and law professionals are to be enlisted to help reduce corruption and impunity in the justice system.[[12]](#footnote-11)

***Criteria for Reintegration***

Although exactly how many combatants will be integrated into the security forces and at what time is unclear, a World Bank grant will finance 10,000 cases of ex-combattants.[[13]](#footnote-12), [[14]](#footnote-13) Additional funds are allocated to reintegrate 7,500 of these ex-combattants.[[15]](#footnote-14). There seems to be substantial pressure both from within Mali and the international community for disarmament to happen, as against voluntary disarmament.

***Prosecution/Punitive Component***

A Truth, Justice and Reconciliation Commission (CVJR) was established in January 2014 to replace the former Dialogue and Reconciliation Commission (CDR). The CVJR is responsible for investigating crimes committed between 1960 and 2013 (since independence) and make recommendations to the government for prosecution. Its mission is to contribute to peace consolidation and national unity.[[16]](#footnote-15)Transitional justice processes have intermittently been marred by violence from sections of the rebel groups.[[17]](#footnote-16) Perpetrators of the most heinous crimes are to be taken to the International Criminal Court (ICC).[[18]](#footnote-17) There would be no amnesty for those suspected to have committed some named crimes, as per the Algiers Accords. However, to be able to get some rebel groups to sign the peace agreement, arrest warrants against fifteen suspected criminals who were to face charges of sedition and terrorism were lifted. Some others were also released from detention in Bamako.[[19]](#footnote-18) One top rebel named Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi was held in trial from August 22 to 24, 2016. He was charged with the war crime of destroying religious and historical artefacts in Timbuktu, Mali in June/July 2012. He pleaded guilty, and asked that his people in Timbuktu and Northern Nigeria forgive him for the harm caused. On September 27, 2016, the ICC sentenced him to a nine-year imprisonment.[[20]](#footnote-19)

***NGO and Community Involvement***

The Accord invites the involvement of humanitarian agencies and organizations to aid in in returning, repatriating, and reintegration all persons displaced by the conflict.[[21]](#footnote-20) No specific organizations are mentioned nor is a timeline for their involvement given. Outlined in the 2015 peace accord are provisions for a semi-autonomous Northern Mali and direct elections.[[22]](#footnote-21) However, no guidelines for community involvement in reintegration of ex-combattants is given.

***Financing and Cost Estimate***

The DDR is funded by the Government of Mali and international donors, including the World Bank. In April 2016, the World Bank voted a $15 million grant for the DDR project in Mali.[xvi] Technical, logistical, training and supervisory support have also come from the United Nations, European Union, ECOWAS, African Union, France and Chad.

***Challenges to DDR***

Although Mali’s reinsertion programme is progressing, it faces a number of daunting challenges which could mar the entire process if not addressed. The following are some of the hindrances to a steady and faster DDR in Mali:

* Implementation of the Peace Agreement is behind schedule.[xvii]
* Getting the rebels to lay down arms.
* Leaders of the rebel groups have insisted on having a say in who is qualified to join the Cantonment and who is included in the DDR Commission.
* There have been occasional hostilities and human rights violations by armed groups by the Mali armed forces.[[23]](#footnote-22)
* There are no statistics on the number of people to be cantoned and reintegrated and there is no clear eligibility criteria to prevent clientelism in choosing beneficiaries.
* There are also uncertainties about who among the various groups is to be mobilised and reintegrated into civilian economy and who has to be integrated into the Malian security forces.
* It is not clear which procedures are in place to identify leaders of armed groups who are not eligible for reinsertion due to human rights violations.

***Applicability of the Mali Model to Boko Haram***

The Mali case has some similarities and differences with Nigeria’s Boko Haram case. Both Mali and Nigeria are in the West African sub-region. Both are products of colonialism and share the challenge of having to keep their constituent parts together within their states. The two share most of the conditions under which conflict and violent extremism thrive in their northern parts: poverty, poor education, unemployment, ungoverned spaces, exclusionary politics, marginalization and neglect by government. The two also share the problem of unfavourable climatic conditions which make nomadic and farming activities difficult, if not impossible. Both cases have jihadist (Islamic) undercurrents, although at different levels. Again, Nigeria’s Boko Haram is said to be working in collaboration with the Ansar Dine and MUJAO in Mali.[[24]](#footnote-23) Mali’s DDR is ongoing and could be a contemporary of Nigeria if the latter is ready to go the way of the former, and to speed up processes for a peace settlement. In that case, the challenges faced by the former could serve as lessons for the latter to learn from.

It appears that the extent to which religion plays out significantly in the Nigeria case is minimized in Mali. While Nigeria’s population seems to be evenly divided between Islam and Christianity, Mali has over 90% for Islam. Although in the latter, there are jihadist fighters alongside Tuareg rebel groups, the Boko Haram and its splinter groups in northern Nigeria are mainly jihadists. Also, Mali’s DDR seems to be focused on the Tuareg rebels who went into the negotiations and signed the peace agreement. It appears the jihadists groups are yet to be captured in the entire process. However, if Nigeria is to undergo peace negotiations and a DDR process, it would have to do so with jihadists.

Again, in Mali, both the government and rebel groups agreed to the peace settlement, however reluctantly. It is not clear in the Nigerian case whether the government is ready for a political settlement. Also, although the military is not neutral in the conflict, it seems to be playing a role in initial efforts to disarm and demobilize ex-combatants who have voluntarily surrendered to the Operation Safe Corridor. If Nigeria is to go the Mali way, it would first have to be ready to negotiate with the Boko Haram, make compromises, and agree to have the pressing issues driving the insurgency addressed.

***Summary, Conclusions and Recommendations for Nigeria***

Mali, like most African states, suffers from most of the postcolonial challenges of nation-building. Like Nigeria, it has been through some years of civil wars and insurgencies, particularly in the northern parts. The inability of successive governments to adhere to the provisions of peace agreements, coupled with marginalization and neglect of the north have been a major cause of instability in the north. Northern Mali battles with unfavourable socio-economic conditions, political exclusion, and poor climatic conditions. The result has been built-up dissatisfaction, distrust, and suspicion leading to a series of rebellions. Mali’s northern insurgency has ethnic, and like northern Nigeria’s, religious undercurrents. For the fourth time, Mali is on the road to peace, after the signing of a peace agreement between the government and rebel groups. Jihadist fighters were not included in the negotiations, although they were also visible actors in the northern insurgency. If the Accord is strictly adhered to and the DDR process goes well, with its many challenges addressed, Mali could be on a steady road to lasting peace.

Nigeria has some similarities with Mali. Therefore, it can learn from the latter’s experiences. Although the DDR in Mali is on-going, a study of the successes, failures and challenges so far can inform a better reintegration process in Nigeria. If the latter is to go the Mali way, there would have to be an agreement between the Government of Mali and the Boko Haram for a peace settlement. Some compromises would have to be made both ways and issues driving the insurgency would have to be addressed. It would be a sure way to put reintegration efforts in Nigeria within the right framework.

From the Mali example, the following recommendations are worth considering for Nigeria:

* Establish a policy for Boko Haram fighters to disarm before going into peace talks;
* Set hard deadlines for the entire peace process and follow them judiciously;
* Facilitator(s) should be acceptable to all parties;
* For the DDR, establish clear criteria for eligibility and estimates of people to be reintegrated;
* Set up a known fund for the DDR process and proper financial monitoring for the entire project;
* Establish working follow-up mechanisms for tracking the progress of reintegrated ex-fighters;
* Constitute a DDR Commission whose members are acceptable to all parties to oversee the project;
* Add a security sector reform component to the DDR;
* Involve civil organizations in human rights advocacy and justice officials trained in the rights of women, children and victims of conflict. There should also be civil society organizations and law professionals who will check corruption and impunity in the justice system. Leaders of Nigerian society, especially women and the youth, should be made to help in reconciliation by influencing dialogue within the communities.
* Although some amnesty could be given some groups, especially child soldiers, perpetrators of some serious crimes, both in the Nigerian security services and the Boko Haram should be brought to justice.

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