



FOCUS

Closing borders, Unlocking Solidarity: Assisting Stranded Migrants Despite The COVID-19 Crisis Across West and Central Africa

CONTEXT

West and Central Africa presents dynamic migratory patterns and has a long history of intraregional mobility. West Africa provides a compelling example of intraregional migration flows in sub-Saharan Africa, with an estimated 80-90 per cent of migratory movements mainly linked to employment taking place within the sub-

region alone. In addition, populations living along borders within the region, including the Sahel, often originate from the same historical and social groups and share similar socio-economic and cultural interests. Hence, borders across the region remain symbolic for a majority of the populations. At least, until the COVID-19 broke



out. Travel restrictions put in place by governments across the region have had an impact at different levels. From January to March 2020, the flow monitoring points (FMP) located in 35 key transit areas show a 28% decrease of travels. Most border crossings are halted, except for a few border posts across which goods are

still transiting to be sold at skyrocketing prices. Border communities see their economy plummeting and herders are stranded at borders. Preventive measures have also reduced the populations' access to health services, and aid delivery has experienced delays.

STRANDED MIGRANTS – HUMANITARIAN NEEDS

In this current slump, while governments are fighting the spread of the disease to protect their populations, migrants and mobile populations across the region are not always considered in national responses. Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis in West and Central Africa, significant spontaneous movements, both forced and voluntary, have been observed throughout the region. **Over 24,000 persons** including stranded migrants, migrants hosted in transit centers and herders stranded at borders are currently waiting for their fate to be settled. And for the borders to reopen.

expose them to a higher risk of contracting the disease.

To mitigate the disruption on its activities including the provision of assistance to stranded migrants, IOM is mainstreaming COVID-19 related activities into existing projects and when possible, IOM continues its operations such as humanitarian search and rescue operations or internal movements.

“I understand that borders have to be closed to protect us from this virus, but I have been on the road for months. I'm exhausted. I just want to see my parents again,” says Ehoumou, a young Ivorian stranded in Mali.

After universities were closed in Cameroon and fearing that they would be unable to return, over 2,000 **Chadian** students returned from Cameroon. Upon their entry into Chad, they were quarantined for two weeks. IOM is currently supporting the students with transportation, chartering special buses headed back to their communities of origin after negotiating special authorization for transportation across administrative regions.

Almost **3,000** migrants have asked IOM to assist them with their **voluntary return** prior to the closure of borders, mid-March. Frustrations for not being able to depart and lengthy stays in transit centres -which have already reached their full capacity - lead to dissatisfaction, tensions and psychological stress among migrants and may

Almost **1,400 Nigerien gold miners** were stranded outside Ouagadougou with no means to reach Niamey. IOM supported them with cash assistance for food, registration and rapid vulnerability screening. The Government of **Niger**



agreed to open the border to facilitate this assisted voluntary return movement and requested IOM to host their nationals on a humanitarian site where they will complete their mandatory 14-day quarantine. In 10 days, IOM set up 550 shelters, built 40 latrines and showers, and installed 30 handwashing stations and five

solar lighting units. Several partners on the ground contributed to address critical gaps, including UNICEF, WHO, UNHCR, Luxembourg/Niger Red Cross and ICRC.

Over **1,000 migrants including Malian or Senegalese traders** are waiting in **Mauritania** to cross the border. IOM is providing training and donations of medical and protective equipment to Mauritanian authorities to allow for a swift

CONCERNS

IOM supports measures to prevent the spread of the virus and is committed to fully comply with decisions taken by governments. At the same time, some measures may **unintentionally impede humanitarian operations** at a time when they are needed most. Therefore, ensuring the continuation of humanitarian operations must remain our priority across the region.

In addition to logistic and operational challenges due to the governmental measures, **unforeseen costs** -notably those generated by the **quarantine** such as the rental of facilities, food for two-week period, etc.- are jeopardizing the sustainable provision of assistance.

Given the impossibility to put in place adequate social distancing and recommended sanitary measures, IOM's health response in the transit

reopening of border posts. Over **5,200 Talibé children** (Koranic school students) who were residing in the Kano and Katsina states of **Nigeria**

returned to the departement of Kantche in Niger, their region of origin, following the decision by Nigerian authorities to close schools and mosques and ban public gatherings. The children, accompanied by tutors, are back in their communities of origin. IOM is organizing support including NFI kits and food assistance. In **Cameroon, close to 9,000 Internally Displaced Persons** (IDPs) who were displaced by hostilities in North West and South West regions returned to their towns of origin out of the fear to contract the coronavirus.

centres and IDP camps is limited to prevent a **potential outbreak**. In Niger, IOM has rented additional facilities to implement physical distancing. However, funds are almost depleted. While some governments including Niger have already confirmed their approval for the opening of a **humanitarian corridor** to organize the voluntary return of migrants waiting in transit, urgent approval from countries of origin is needed to ensure that the return of migrants currently stranded -and who express their wish to return - can occur in a safe way, in line with sanitary rules and measures in place.

IOM is actively involved with national authorities to **secure the necessary authorizations** and review operational modalities required for corridors to be opened for returning migrants under IOM's care.



AID DELIVERY AND TRANSPORT OF GOODS

To scale up the response to COVID-19 and to continue critical life-saving humanitarian support, IOM advocates with other agencies in the region (WFP, OCHA, etc.) for **humanitarian supplies, health and aid workers to be considered as**

essential and be allowed to safely and rapidly move across borders and within countries provided preventive measures such as testing are in place.