

## Timbuktu's embattled citizens head home despite Mali's uncertain future

Their properties have been looted, the city is ruined and the economy stagnant but Malians who fled in the wake of a rebel onslaught are now going home

- [Charlie English](#) in Timbuktu
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Donkeys transport wood along a Timbuktu street. Photograph: Sean Smith/Guardian

Mina Alessane remembers the morning the [MNLA rebels](#) came to Timbuktu. She was standing by the gate of her house when a column of pickup trucks filled with armed men came past. It was 1 April 2012, and the Saharan city echoed to the sound of gunfire that day – smoke billowed out of the Malian army camp, government flags were burned and every building connected with the state was ransacked. The following morning, al-Qaida-allied jihadists arrived and announced they would rule Timbuktu in the name of Islam and under sharia law. Many people didn't hang around to find out precisely what that meant, and took the long desert track south.

Alessane, 52, from the Bela tribe, sits on a mattress in a room decorated with lacework peacocks and explains her exodus. She and the 13 members of her family who shared the house clung on in

Timbuktu for a terrifying month, but it was the economy that forced them to go in the end. Her husband had retired two months before the occupation began, and she earned a small income making traditional Tuareg indigo cloth. But when the rebels arrived, the markets stopped functioning. She sold as much of her work as she could, along with her goats, then packed a few bags and became one of more than half a million people from the north – including at least two-thirds of Timbuktu’s population – who fled south or to neighbouring countries.

From the government-held town of Sévaré and later Ségou, she followed events in the city closely, and was “so happy” on the day of liberation. “I was just overwhelmed,” she says. Every day she was away, “she felt bad in her heart”, because her home was in Timbuktu. In February 2013, 15 days after the town was liberated, she was back in her house; she and her family are among the 370,000 people to have returned. More are on their way. According to Alessane, not a single person she met from the north intends to stay in the south.



**Mina Alessene was forced out of Timbuktu when she could no longer sell her cloth at market. Photograph: Charlie English/Guardian**

Sally Haydock, director of the World Food Programme (WFP) in Mali, says that, with a few caveats, “it is a very, very positive phase that we are moving into. There’s a significant amount of people who have gone back. I think the fact that so many people have returned shows that the local population feel comfortable being back in the north. As a first stage they went back to the main towns, but I think now they are even going back to their rural areas.”

Early last year, when Haydock first came to Mali, there was nobody in Timbuktu's streets and the markets barely functioned. Now that the banks have reopened, there is liquidity – and the economy has begun to work. “I think the markets are strong again,” she says. “[People have started rebuilding their lives.](#)” She believes an inter-agency assessment in the first week of November will show that people's food security has also improved.

Across the city from Alessane's house, Mohamed Ag Hamalek and his father Hamalek Ag Alhassane, 64, sit on mats in the porch of the house they returned to just a week ago. Mohamed was a translator with the US military trainers who worked with the Malian army before the war. His father, who makes Tuareg jewellery, used to work the salt caravans that ran between Timbuktu and Taoudenni.



Mohamed Ag Hamalek lived as a refugee in Burkina Faso for seven months. Photograph: Charlie English/Guardian

Despite their ethnicity, the family felt no sympathy for the MNLA Tuareg separatist movement and left Timbuktu three days after the invasion. They felt the south of Mali would also be unsafe – there had been anti-Tuareg protests in the capital, Bamako – so they crossed into

Burkina Faso and lived in a refugee camp for seven months. Once the situation in Bamako had stabilised, they moved there to find work.

Mohamed and his brother got a job and a friend rented them his house, but the family found city life very hard. “We are a nomad family,” says Mohamed. “In Bamako my father was always at home, he didn’t go out, he couldn’t even go walking anywhere.”

Their homecoming has not been easy. While they were in the south, thieves broke into their property and looted it. “Our house was totally destroyed,” says Mohamed. “They stole everything: clothes, furniture, beds, chairs, everything.”

They are trying to save up to rebuild, but are hindered by the stagnant economy. Hamalek’s decorative Tuareg weapons and jewellery, made from scrap metal, are beautifully wrought, but there are no tourists to buy them. Western embassies have been advising their citizens not to travel north since long before the 2012 crisis.

Alessane, meanwhile, can’t earn a living as her workshop was looted and all her equipment taken, so the family lives on the support of the WFP and other NGOs. She says the government has done nothing to help. “All we do at the moment is eat and sleep. There are no jobs, so there is nothing to do.”

Unesco hopes to help fill this vacuum with a programme [to rebuild the city’s damaged monuments](#). The jihadists systematically knocked down the medieval mausoleums, smashed the door of the Sidi Yahya mosque, and knocked down the Al Farouk monument, the symbol of the city. Explosions also damaged the 14th-century mosques and several of the libraries that house [Timbuktu’s famous manuscripts](#).

“Our strategy is to work with the community,” says Lazare Eloundou Assomo, chief of Unesco’s Africa section, in Bamako. “We use local people – they have the knowledge, they are the custodians. We also want to try to improve their living conditions: through our activities we are able to create 140 jobs just in the reconstruction of the mausoleums, then you can add the mosques and the rest.” However, funds for the rebuilding are short. “We have a four-year plan in the



north, for which we need \$11m, and we have been able to fundraise only about \$3m so far,” he says.



A collector of rubbish with his donkey and cart. Unesco is helping to provide work for Malians with a cultural rebuilding programme. Photograph: Sean Smith/Guardian

The big question – for Eloundou Assomo, Haydock, and all the people of the north – is security. Without it, the economy will be held back. At the moment, violence is on the rise. This month, Mali’s foreign minister, Abdoulaye Diop, appealed to the UN security council to dispatch an international rapid-reaction force to the country to reinforce what has become the [deadliest peacekeeping mission in the world](#) – 20 Minusma soldiers having been killed in the past two months. Mali “again runs the risk of becoming the destination of hordes of terrorists who have been forced out of other parts of the world”, Diop said.

Haydock admits that security remains very difficult. “There are more and more IEDs [improvised explosive devices], [and] people on motorbikes starting to attack people,” he says. The fear in Timbuktu is palpable. When I visit, there is a bomb scare in the market, while NGO buildings are surrounded by sandbags topped with razor wire.

There is hope that talks in Algeria between the government and the northern factions will deliver a lasting peace, but also anger among many Malians that the MNLA is seen as a credible negotiating partner after fighting alongside al-Qaida against the Malian state. “The

MNLA are terrorists,” says one army colonel I meet, who blames northern unrest on the patchwork of [drug-running](#), people-trafficking “crazies” who operate in the no-man’s land of the central desert.

For now, the refugees are just pleased to be home. “I am so happy to be back in my own house,” says Alessane.

Despite his lack of funds, Mohamed is also “very, very happy to be back. I feel free. I don’t need money to see my friends. In Burkina Faso we always needed money to move around, whereas here it’s almost my last problem.”

Does he fear the return of the militants? “I’m sure they won’t come back this time,” he says. “I hope. But you never know.”