



Inequality in MINUSMA #3

SECURING THE DANGEROUS UN CONVOYS IN MALI

It has proven particularly challenging for the UN stabilization mission in Mali (MINUSMA) to transport fuel, food and water to military camps in Sector North on the frontline of the mission. Convoy escorts drain the UN mission of resources and is one of its most dangerous tasks, mainly carried out by African soldiers who lack adequate training, equipment and support.

Ever since the UN Security Council established MINUSMA in 2013, Sector North has been the most dangerous area for the mission to operate in. In this sector, MINUSMA is under permanent threat of attack from armed groups, including jihadist factions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- MINUSMA's leadership should increase the capacity and support for securing convoys in order to ensure the provision of supplies to all sectors of the mission.
- Joint operations between European and African soldiers need better coordination, and the disadvantaged TCCs, which are often some of the poorest countries in the world, should have better access to training and adequate equipment.
- Investment in infrastructure would improve convoy security and would serve a broader purpose of developing the north and facilitating transport of humanitarian aid to civilians.

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Combined with the general absence of infrastructure in Mali, the supply line of fuel, food and water between Gao in Sector East and Kidal in Sector North is severely challenged.

During 2016, the security situation in the country continued to deteriorate and severely hampered the mission’s ability to perform core functions, including protection of civilians. In this context, escorting convoys to the north illustrates how MINUSMA is challenged in maintaining its troops. The delays in the provisions put pressure on the soldiers’ physical strength, their morale and their ability to operate effectively in a harsh climate.

The stretch from Gao to Kidal is only around 350km, but it goes through some of the world’s most impassable desert terrain, where temperatures at times reach 55 degrees Celsius. Twice per month, a convoy of 50-80 heavily loaded trucks travel from Gao to Kidal. The operation is scheduled to take 10-14 days, but can, at times, take up to three weeks.

In addition to breakdowns and being stuck in the sand, the convoys are exposed to improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and ambushes from antagonistic groupings. Consequently, to escort convoys requires advanced counter-IED training and adequate equipment, which many of the African contingents in MINUSMA do not have.

‘The operation [i.e., convoy security] is difficult,’ one African commander in charge of convoys from Gao to Kidal noted, ‘because it takes place in an environment with many threats in a harsh and hot climate. There is dust; the material and the men feel how hard it is. It is also very challenging to execute the task, because we

meet dangers, mines and ambushes, all the time.’ African soldiers take on the biggest role when it comes to convoy security between Sector East and Sector North. While Asian troops also assist the convoy escort, particularly the African troops lack the adequate material and support both from their home countries and the UN. Furthermore, according to the commander in charge of the convoy security unit, joint planning of operations is inadequate, and there is insufficient backup from headquarters in Sector East.

Convoy routes

In total, four convoys leave Sector East every month. Two go to Menaka to the east; two to Kidal in Sector North, one of which continues to Tessalit in the far north (320 km) . The route to Kidal from Gao goes through Anefis (240km) and normally takes one day. However, if a vehicle breaks down, the trip takes two to three days. In Anefis, the convoy security unit from

Map I: Convoy routes in Sector East and North



Sector East meets a convoy security unit from Sector North, which then takes over provision of convoy security.

The escort team from Gao then waits in Anefis for four to six days for the empty trucks to return from the north. When breakdowns occur or if a truck is stuck in the sand, soldiers have to guard the vehicles under constant threat of attack. This put a lot of pressure on soldiers and their commanders. 'It's stressful', one African commander in charge of convoy security noted, 'my soldiers go on mission for 10 to 15 days, and you are not at ease until they are back, because anything can happen.'

Can private transport companies be trusted?

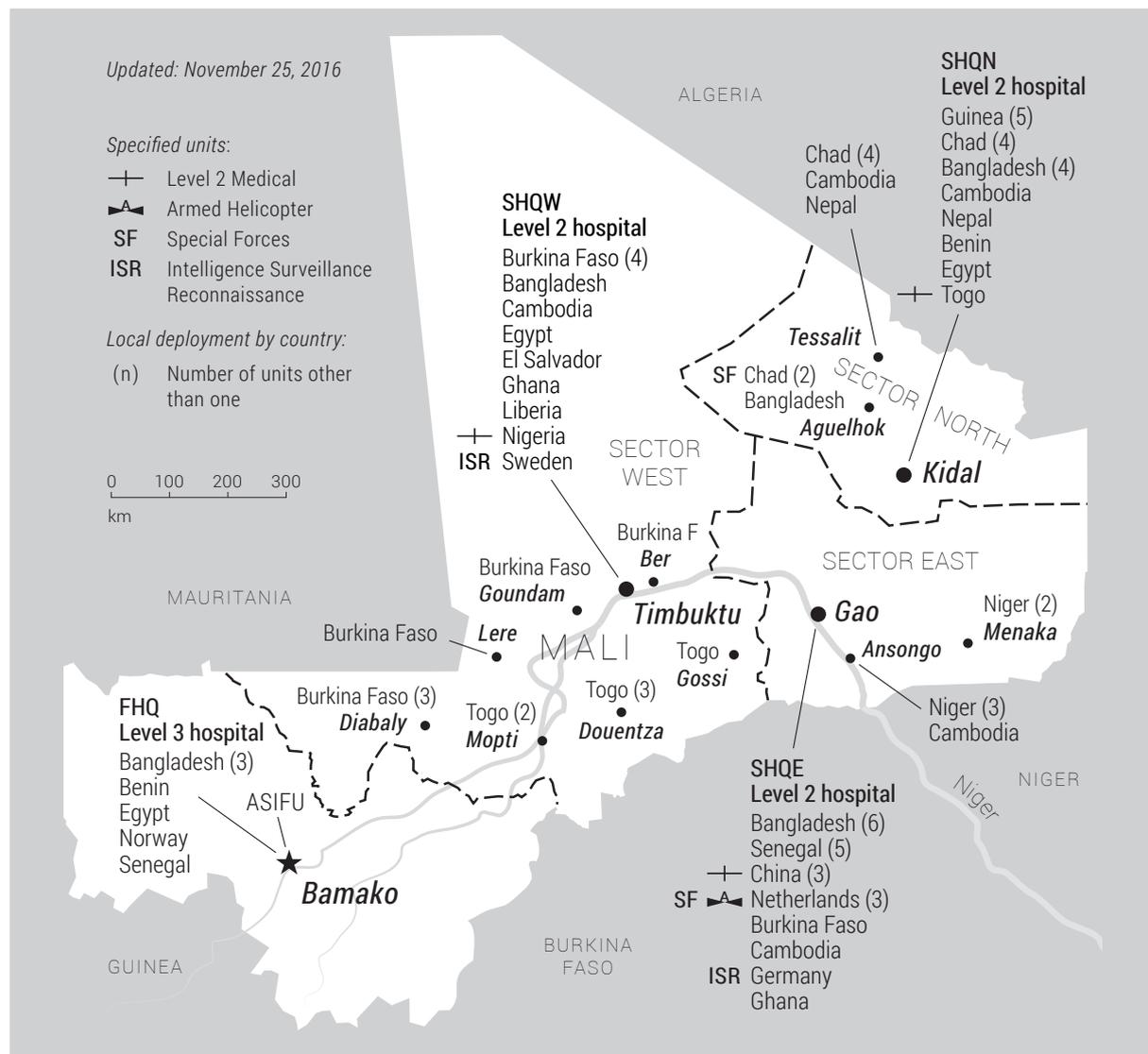
MINUSMA hires trucks from private transport companies. This adds an additional safety risk to the provision of convoy security. Combined with the fact

that convoys move slowly, and use the same route with a predictable frequency, makes them an easy target of armed groups.

Among MINUSMA officers, notably those in charge of the convoys, there were concerns that the civilian truck drivers would inform armed groups about the planning and positions of the trucks. 'For every truck we rent,' one officer noted, 'there are two civilians in the vehicle, and they can call whoever they want to. The terrorists know who drives the trucks, and if they want information, they will pay the civilians to provide them with what they need.'

Therefore, apart from the convoys being slow, and draining MINUSMA's resources, dependency on private transport companies further exposes the mission to security threats from antagonistic groups, including jihadists and criminal networks. MINUSMA

Map II: MINUSMA force deployment



has tried to reconstruct the Kidal airstrip in order to fly in military provisions and humanitarian aid. However, immediately after the airstrip was finalized, armed groups from the Kidal area demolished it.

To improve MINUSMA's ability to escort convoys, the Force Commander in 2016, Michael Lollesgaard, who was Danish and left his position in December 2016, looked into enhancing security of the convoys to the north. However, bureaucratic procedures of the UN and national interests of troop-contributing countries hindered a permanent solution. The Force Commander encouraged, among others, Denmark to provide a combat convoy battalion of armored trucks and 300 troops to assist the mission. However, the majority of Danish parliamentarians did not support the request because of other priorities in Eastern Europe and the Middle East.

On November 30, 2016 the Gao airport – a key transport hub – was attacked by one of the jihadist groups causing damage to prefabricated hangars and forcing the airport to close down temporarily. In early 2017, Egypt agreed to provide the much-needed combat convoy battalion. Nevertheless, securing the logistics supply between the sectors remains a considerable challenge to an already overstretched mission.

Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde, Postdoc, DIIS (smr@diis.dk); Peter Albrecht, Senior Researcher, DIIS (paa@diis.dk); & Rikke Haugegaard, Lecturer, Royal Danish Defence College (isk-mk04@fak.dk)

Cover photo: Chadian UN peacekeepers escort a convoy with Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Herve Ladsous, in Tessalit, northern Mali © UN Photo/Marco Dormino



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