
Niger, after the Jihadists' attacks. Morelli (UNHCR), "they aim at destabilising the area"

Jihadists attacked villages in western Niger, near its border with Mali. They are burning houses and mercilessly slaughtering hundreds of innocent women, men and children. The latest attack by jihadist groups on Sunday March 21 was executed with ruthless dynamics, planned in great detail: hundreds of men on motorbikes surrounded the villages of Intazayene, Bakorate and Wistane in the Tillia department of the Nigeria's Tahoua region, caught in the grips of mounting instability. They opened fire at point-blank range on Tuareg nomads as they pursued their peaceful daily routine: the men with their camels, the women and children collecting water from a spring. A total of 137 people are confirmed dead, including 22 children between the ages of 5 and 17. "They were slaughtered with heinous brutality: the attackers opened fire on people working in the fields or near the water sources, while tending their animals drinking water from the springs." **Alessandra Morelli**, representative of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), spoke to SIR from Niamey, the capital of Niger, coordinator of a 400-person staff since 2017, helping displaced people and refugees in a complex and strategic territory. Their efforts span from Niger to Burkina Faso and Mali, from the central Mediterranean and Libya to the Lake Chad basin, home to inflows of Nigerians from the north fleeing Boko Haram attacks for the past 6 years.



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[Alessandra Morelli, with over 30 years' experience in conflict zones, survived a life-threatening car bomb attack in Mogadishu in February 2014, of which she still suffers the after-effects. She continues nonetheless to dedicate herself to helping displaced people and refugees in the most serious humanitarian crises. Militiamen of the Islamic State in West Africa Province \(ISWAP\), a cross-border terrorist group based in Mali, have reportedly settled in these territories in the last two years. The strategy in the Central Sahel, which includes Niger, is "to create new operating zones by torching villages and displacing the local inhabitants to consolidate their presence", Alessandra Morelli explained. What is their aim?](#)

["To destabilise the area and demonstrate that the Niger government has no control over the territory".](#)

[The latest attack took place a month after the election of President Mohamed Bazoum, candidate of the ruling party and successor of outgoing President Mahamadou Issoufou. According to UNHCR's head of mission, it is probably "a message to the government."](#)



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UN agencies are monitoring the situation and movements of people fleeing the Tahoua region. A convoy with UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP and government representatives has just departed to conduct a preliminary assessment of humanitarian needs. "We are taking every possible step to avoid being ambushed," Morelli said. The Tahoua region is very vast, there are very few roads and it's very difficult for the military to identify people on motorbikes. Moreover, "only limited information is available from the area due to its remoteness and isolation, with poor telecommunication links." However, the UNHCR has been informed that more than 600 people are crossing the border to seek shelter in Mali. The Niger regions of Tahoua and Tillaberi, bordering Burkina Faso and Mali, are currently home to 204,000 refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). **Recurring dynamics.** Similar attacks were reported in January 2021 in the western region of Tillaberi, in Tchombangou and Zaroumdareye. A Niger military patrol drove by two days earlier, the attack took place the following day. "The dynamics are the same", noted Morelli. "They monitor the troops' movements and attack once they leave." This is the second carnage of civilians in just one week. On March 15, armed groups killed over 58 people, including six children, on their way back from the market in Banibangou department, in the Tillaberi region, near the border with Mali. **One of the most tragic humanitarian crises.** Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali are now the epicentre of one of the most fast-escalating humanitarian crises. The region is already home to nearly three million refugees and internally displaced people as a result of armed conflict. "Fifty per cent are refugees and the remaining 50 per cent are internally displaced persons," Morelli pointed out. "This means there is a major security problem. Nevertheless, the Niger government continues acting with great generosity and openness towards those fleeing the violence in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions, as testified by the presence of the most important UN agencies and international NGOs. **The Pope's appeal and the presence of the Italian Bishops' Conference.** On March 24, Pope Francis made an appeal for Niger. He said he is praying "for the victims, for their families and for the entire population", and "that the violence they have suffered will not cause them to lose faith in the path of democracy, justice and peace." For those all those involved

"the Pope's words have an immense value of hope",

commented the UNHCR mission coordinator, who collaborates with Caritas Italy in the programming of humanitarian corridors. Last January, she met with the bishop of Acireale, Monsignor Nino Raspanti, Vice-President of the Italian Bishops' Conference, in Niamey to examine the initiatives implemented in recent years, including a scholarship project for undergraduates developed together with Intersos.



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