



**Mali: MINUSMA's  
withdrawal implications  
on the safety of  
journalists in conflict  
zones**

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## **Introduction:**

For over a decade now, Mali has been facing an unprecedented security crisis. As key players, journalists are often on the frontline covering events and reporting on the situation on the ground. However, with the gradual withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the question of the safety of journalists in particular has arisen, alongside the safety of the population in general.

This article looks at the impact of the withdrawal of the UN mission in Mali on the safety of journalists in conflict zones, and even in Bamako.

## **1. Background to the security crisis in Mali**

The rebellion of armed groups in the north, in this case the CMA (Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad), which started in Kidal, was the trigger for the security crisis in Mali. Other armed groups under the Islamic banner, such as the MUJAO, ANSAR DINE and Al-Qaeda, later joined the fighting. They took advantage of the instability in Libya and transported a whole arsenal of weapons, looted from abandoned barracks, into Mali. Weakened by popular protests and the setbacks suffered by soldiers on the battlefield, the central government in Bamako was ousted by soldiers led at the time by Captain Amadou Aya Sanogo, currently a General appointed by acting President Dioncounda Traoré, who led Mali's transition at the time.

The MINUSMA mission was dispatched in a context of security crisis in Mali. Its role was to support the political process and carry out a number of peacekeeping activities relating to security and the protection of civilians, as well as ensuring respect for human rights, while paying particular attention to the main metropolitan areas and communication routes.

## **2. The pivotal role of journalists in covering the crisis**

Journalists in Mali continue to play a key role in informing public opinion about the crisis in the country. In order to ensure the proper and impartial processing of information on the ground, freedom of the press must be guaranteed. This enables journalists to avoid engaging

in manipulation, propaganda or disinformation. But freedom of the press goes hand in hand with journalists' safety in the current context. In the course of their work, journalists sometimes face pressure, intimidation and physical violence from certain armed groups or even the military intelligence service. Despite these challenges, journalists in Mali continue to work to provide the public with reliable information.

### **3. The impact of the withdrawal of MINUSMA on the safety of journalists**

MINUSMA's presence has made it possible to ensure security in certain areas of the country, while at the same time providing protection for journalists, to a certain extent, when they travel to high-risk areas. The withdrawal of peacekeepers from Mali was approved by the UN Security Council at the end of June, at the request of the transitional government. There is no doubt that the departure of soldiers and police officers from the UN mission in sensitive areas will create a security void. This will inevitably increase the vulnerability of journalists to armed groups and forces hostile to press freedom, making access to information more difficult.

In addition, the withdrawal of MINUSMA could lead to reduced international scrutiny of the situation of journalists in Mali. The presence of UN peacekeeping forces often draws the attention of international media to human rights violations and attacks on journalists. Without this presence, journalists may not receive the same media coverage and their safety may be neglected.

Although MINUSMA has not really played a significant role in protecting journalists by working with the Malian authorities to investigate attacks on the media and bring the perpetrators to justice, its presence has been a source of protection for journalists working in Mali. It has provided logistical support, as well as helping to ensure the general safety of the country. The withdrawal of MINUSMA could weaken this protection, making journalists more vulnerable to attacks and intimidation, especially in the conflict zones in the centre and north of the country. Without MINUSMA's presence and support, it could become more difficult for journalists to travel safely in conflict zones, access information and share it with the public. This could lead to a decrease in media coverage of the situation in Mali, compromising transparency and accountability of the actors involved in the conflict.

It is therefore essential that measures are taken to guarantee the safety of journalists, even in the absence of MINUSMA.

#### **4. Challenges that may arise for media professionals in Bamako and Mopti**

MINUSMA has extensively documented the issue of alleged human rights violations committed on the ground, either by the army or by radical groups or self-defence movements. These reports have served as a database for journalists in the country to enlighten public opinion. With this departure, journalists are expected to remain on the sidelines directly denouncing possible human rights violations on the ground, including those perpetrated by the army. However, the government in power, which has always condemned what it describes as the "weaponisation of human rights", is certainly not going to let this happen. The safety

of journalists who dare to defy public authority will also be at stake. It should be noted that MINUSMA's departure was partly triggered by the Mourrah issue. MINUSMA's human rights unit carried out investigations, the results of which were published at the UN, accusing the Malian army and its Russian auxiliaries, the Wagner Group. This was the last straw that broke the camel's back.

In collecting data on alleged human rights violations, MINUSMA is said to have often worked with field workers and even journalists. The latter could then be vulnerable with the withdrawal, in case their faces are revealed to the authorities. For example, journalist Malick Konaté was harassed and threatened following his alleged contribution to an investigative video broadcast by BFMTV headlined "Wagner, Putin's mercenaries". Today, for security reasons, the journalist had to leave the country.

## **5. The dilemma between self-censorship and the high risk of being targeted**

For those in the know, the situation as it is should not be taken lightly. The media, although not the focus of public opinion at the moment, could be one of the first victims in terms of security following the departure of MINUSMA. International news outlets such as *RFI* and *France 24*, which have commented on the country's security situation and condemned alleged human rights violations by the army, have been closed down. Some of the journalists involved have been sacked. Others were forced to flee the country, as the risks they faced were too daunting. According to our sources, some newsrooms have been intimidated by the government, which has allegedly accused them of reporting on developments on the security

front in such a way that they are "playing into the enemy's hands". This means that journalists who continue to document alleged human rights violations attributed to the Malian army and Wagner in the centre and north of the country, could be more exposed to harassment and kidnapping by the military intelligence service. Until now, MINUSMA's human rights unit had been a shield for journalists, who used the UN mission's quarterly reports as evidence to forcefully denounce the most serious alleged human rights violations perpetrated by the army and Wagner.

However, the government is not the only party threatening critical journalists. Armed groups are also fighting to win the hearts and minds of the population and the international community through propaganda. Journalists and media who report on their losses and setbacks at the hands of the army or on their abuses against civilians, risk being attacked or kidnapped.

The [kidnapping](#) on 8 April 2021 of Olivier Dubois, a freelance journalist, by the GSIM (Groupe de soutien à l'Islam et aux musulmans) in Gao is a vivid example of these threats to the safety of journalists. Dubois was abducted while trying to make contact with Iyad Ag Ghali, a Tuareg warlord turned Malian jihadist leader.

## **6. Double impact on access to information and training for conflict-sensitive journalists**



MINUSMA plays an essential role in protecting civilians, including journalists, by providing a deterrent presence and facilitating access to dangerous areas. Its withdrawal, in addition to having an impact on press freedom or the safety of journalists, could deal another blow to journalists, especially in conflict zones. Without the ability to travel safely in conflict zones, journalists could be forced to restrict their coverage or rely more heavily on information from potentially politically biased sources. MINUSMA also offers logistical support to journalists by providing training in conflict-sensitive journalism and the countering of misinformation.

This departure is bound to have an impact on the safety of journalists and the general public alike", said Abdoulaye Guindo, Director of Publication at the newspaper *Procès-Verbal*, and also a blogger and author at *Benbere*.

"MINUSMA's role was not only to protect civilians, it also had other missions, in particular providing transport for the population. For example, when journalists went on assignment in dangerous areas, whether on behalf of MINUSMA, on their own account or on behalf of the government, they were airlifted by MINUSMA. Being flown guaranteed the safety of journalists. Today, if journalists want to cover events in Timbuktu, Gao, Kidal or Ménaka, they may have to travel by road, which exposes them to danger. We know that these roads are often infested with robbers, landmines and terrorists, who often kidnap journalists. The work is sensitive; a journalist can be kidnapped because he is a journalist, he can lose his life in a robbery," Guindo lamented.

"I particularly remember a training course organised in collaboration with the young people of the G force in Gao. As we were the trainers, MINUSMA decided to ensure our safety

during the training, which was held on the outskirts of the town. Even our accommodation during the week of training was protected. If the terrorist groups, armed bandits or rebels had found out that there were journalists, they might have attacked. In other words, the departure of MINUSMA will have an impact on security," says another publisher who worked with MINUSMA.

In 2019, Issiaka Tamboura, director of publication for the weekly *Soft*, was kidnapped and then released after months of detention by armed jihadists, while travelling alone in his car to his village in Boni, in the centre of the country. The journalist had often reported on the "abuses" committed by the jihadists in central Mali.

## **7. Efforts to improve the safety of journalists**

Human rights organisations must undertake initiatives to strengthen the security of the media in Mali. This should be done in full collaboration with the Malian government. The international media and journalists' organisations must also play a role in this. It is therefore essential that measures be taken to ensure the safety of journalists in Mali, even in the absence of MINUSMA. This could include the exercise of restraint by the military intelligence service in their interface with journalists, increased awareness among the media and journalists of the safety measures to be taken in the face of insecurity, and international advocacy for the protection of journalists.