

DAKAR, 15 March 2011 (IRIN) - For aid agencies and local authorities in the village of Dirkou (population about 4,000), northern Niger, the priority is to have migrants fleeing Libya move through as quickly as possible.

The UN estimates that some 60,000 people could come into Niger from Libya in the coming weeks. As of 10 March, 2,205 had arrived - 1,865 of them Nigeriens and the rest from other West African countries - according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The number in Dirkou varies day to day, with new arrivals and truckloads of people moving on to the regional capital Agadez, 650km to the south - many to return to their hometowns or home countries.

Dirkou, some 550km south of the border with Libya, is used to hosting migrants. It is a main stop for [West Africans moving north](#) for work, and since 2009 has housed a transit centre for migrants expelled from north Africa. But with the Libya unrest the centre is overflowing and local resources are strained.

"We've never had this many here at once," said Mahaman Nour, prefect of Bilma Department, where Dirkou is located. "There is a strain on food resources and prices are rising." Much of Dirkou's food supply historically came from Libya but trade has been cut, aid workers and local authorities said. Now food must come from Agadez or the capital Niamey, 1,600km away.

IOM, which is helping the migrants get medical care and food, used to get food from the Dirkou market for the transit centre but can no longer do so, aid workers said.

The World Food Programme (WFP) has moved about 50 tons of food to the area, enough to cover 2,500 migrants for one month, WFP spokesperson in Niger Vigno Hounkanli told IRIN.

Weak infrastructure

Water supply and sanitation are also limited.

"The infrastructure is weak," IOM's Vijaya Souri told IRIN from Dirkou. "There is no running water, only wells." Bilma department prefect Nour said he worries about eventual illness in the case of a large influx. "There is no hygiene infrastructure," he said.

Souri said IOM is moving people on to Agadez and beyond as quickly as it can. She said it is a region where military escorts are required for each convoy.

A 5 March [UN multi-agency flash appeal](#) for US\$160 million to assist migrants in and outside Libya says: "The bordering area between Libya and Niger is not only very insecure but suffers also from an acute lack of transport means and logistic capacity."

Prefect Nour said the people in Dirkou are “showing great solidarity” and doing what they can to accommodate the migrants, who are from several English- and French-speaking countries.

“Just last night [9 March] nearly 2,000 people boarded trucks for Agadez,” he told IRIN. “There were people from Ghana, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Togo - from all over.”

Most of the migrants are men. A local journalist who visited Dirkou this week said he saw one group with about 800 men and just seven women.

Poverty

More than a quarter of a million people have fled Libya for Niger, Algeria, Egypt and [Tunisia](#) since late February, according to IOM. “The numbers are increasing by the hour,” the UN says in its appeal.

Niger is by far the poorest country facing an influx of the migrants fleeing Libya. The situation is expected to have a detrimental effect on Niger’s economy, the document says, “notably impeding camel exports and remittances, particularly important for the northeastern Nigerien regions of Diffa and Zinder”.

Gross national income per capita in Niger is US\$675, compared to \$7,979 in Tunisia and \$5,889 in Egypt, according to the document. Over 65 percent of Nigeriens live on less than \$1.25 per day - 2.6 percent in Tunisia, and less than 2 percent in Egypt. In Tunisia there are 13 doctors for every 10,000 people, in Egypt 24, in Niger 0.5.

Source: [IRIN](#)