Mali 2015 Crime and Safety Report

Travel Health and Safety; Transportation Security; Crime; Insurgencies; Improvised Explosive Device

Africa > Mali; Africa > Mali > Bamako

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Overall Crime and Safety Situation

The government continued to rebuild governance capacity in 2014 and is making efforts toward security sector reform with massive assistance from the international community. However, the challenges in achieving a peace agreement with northern militant groups, ongoing terrorist activity, and humanitarian calamities continue to undermine efforts toward national reconciliation. The arrival of thousands of military and civilian personnel associated with the French and African troops, the European Union Training Mission to Mali (EUTM), and MINUSMA has breathed new life into the struggling economy. The largest businesses in Bamako are once again earning a profit. Some government and financial services returned to the northern regions of Timbuktu and Gao, though mostly only in the capitals of those regions. Moreover, despite Mali’s 2014 rise out of the bottom ten countries in the world according to the Human Development Index, long-standing problems of unemployment, food insecurity, and long-term economic underdevelopment persist.

Mali remains engaged in the slow process of rebuilding after its democratic transition in 2013. The president has focused on a need to reform the security sector to be capable of addressing dangers posed by terrorist elements, organized crime, trafficking, and intra-national divisions.

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Crime Rating: Critical

Crime Threats

Although most crimes are of an opportunistic nature, criminals have been increasingly violent. Victims have been threatened with firearms. Numerous motorcycle thefts are reported regularly. Several expatriates have been victims of attempted carjacking. There are been multiple reports of suspects posing as police officers pulling vehicles over under the auspices of a traffic stop, during which they attempt to exhort money under threat of violence. There are periodic reports of nighttime robberies of commercial establishments (restaurants, convenience stores, small businesses) in Bamako. Residential break-ins are not common, although proper locks and solid doors are indeed warranted. The majority of reported attacks have targeted unaccompanied individuals and ranged from muggings at gun/knife point to physical assaults.

Areas of Concern

The train station in downtown Bamako is a gathering place for criminals and prostitutes and should be avoided by visitors. There have been reports of drug trafficking and prostitution in some restaurants and hotels in Bamako.
Although it is not against the law to take photographs in general, care should be exercised and permission should be requested in advance of taking pictures/video. Photographs and video, however, should not be taken of sensitive buildings (those belong to the police, military, or embassies, including the U.S. Embassy). MINUSMA headquarters in L'Amitie hotel also prohibits photography; offenders can be arrested.

All travelers are advised to avoid the northern parts of the country due to extremist activities, threats of kidnapping, ongoing military operations, and criminal activity. Northern Mali remains desolate, difficult to patrol, and continues to provide some sanctuary for extremists groups.

Transportation-Safety Situation

Road Safety and Road Conditions

Driving is a major safety concern. Enforcement of existing traffic laws is practically non-existent. However, traffic police have made visible efforts to help control traffic flows and respond to road accidents in 2014. Problems of low-level police corruption remains endemic, and drivers can expect police to request cash bribes on site. Automobiles share the road with mopeds, motorcycles, bicycles, donkey carts, and pedestrians, many of whom do not look before they venture into the street. Many drivers lack rudimentary driving skills, and many vehicles, including public transportation vans and taxis, are poorly maintained, overloaded, and break down frequently. Americans are advised to drive defensively and expect the unexpected from drivers. Driving at night in Bamako is very hazardous, as many vehicles lack headlights, and roads are poorly illuminated.
Mali continues to improve paved roads leading from Bamako to most major cities in the south; however, this has resulted in many accidents due to speeding. The rainy season (June-September) can make many of the roads outside the capital impassable. Deep sand and ditches are common on the major routes. Four-wheel drive vehicles with spare tires and emergency equipment and/or roadside assistance kits are recommended. Travel overland is best done in convoys and with long-range communications capability. Cellular phone coverage is limited in many areas, and satellite phones are advised, if practicable. Travelers are strongly urged to limit overland travel to daylight hours to avoid the risk of banditry, which typically occurs at night, and of poorly illuminated roadways.

Traffic police are routinely slow to respond to accidents, and drivers often resolve the accident by mutually agreeing on a sum of money to cover damages in order to settle the accident without the assistance of the police. Motorists involved in an accident resulting in injury are expected to pay for the immediate medical treatment of the injured regardless of who was at fault. Crowds commonly gather at the scene of an accident/altercation. Crowds have become involved in the situation in support of either party involved and have the potential to threaten the safety of the parties. Vigilantism does occur. Most common accidents occur between cars and motorcycles, often resulting in injury of the motorcyclist. Malian law dictates that able parties “assist someone in danger” (i.e., the injured party), despite who is at fault for causing the accident, and refusal to do so is not only contrary to local customs, but also a violation of law. Westerners are widely perceived as being the ‘able party’ in these circumstances.

Public Transportation Conditions

The Embassy strongly recommends against the use of local taxis; if taxis are used, extreme care should be taken. Taxis can be in poor mechanical condition, and the skills of the drivers...
vary. Passengers should negotiate a rate with the driver before getting into the vehicle. It is common for Americans to be charged a higher price than local passengers would pay. Street addresses are not normally used in Bamako, and passengers should be prepared to give detailed instructions of where they want to go if the driver is unfamiliar with the destination.

Aviation/Airport Conditions

Because there is no direct commercial air service to the U.S. by carriers registered in Mali, the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has not assessed Mali’s Civil Aviation Authority for compliance with International Civil Aviation Organization safety standards. Several major international carriers (Air France, Royal Air Maroc, TAP airlines) do fly directly into Bamako. Bamako-Senou International Airport is open, and flights operate on a daily basis. Malian forces installed a passenger screening system at the Bamako airport to enhance air transit security monitoring. Travelers are advised to allow a minimum of three hours for check-in and screening procedures.

There are no commercial in-country flights, although charter planes are available.

The UN Humanitarian Assistance Services (UNHAS) offers infrequent air service to humanitarian workers to Mopti, Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal regions. In 2014,

Political, Economic, Religious, and Ethnic Violence
Despite a string of positive developments -- successful presidential and legislative elections, a roadmap for peace negotiations, and a gradual return of government control to northern regions with the help of France’s Operation Serval and the MINUSMA peacekeeping mission -- efforts to resolve the intertwined political and security crises in Mali’s northern regions did not achieve their objectives by the end of 2014. International donors expressed concern about Mali’s financial management following a scandal involving defense contracts. The government addressed these concerns, cancelled erroneously approved contracts, and changed involved Ministers that prompted international donors to resume assistance.

Political Violence Rating: High

Local, Regional, and International Terrorism Threats/Concerns

The UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission (MINUSMA), established in July 2013, faced particular difficulties in 2014 as they came under direct assault by terrorist elements and engaged militarily against aggressive action by combatants in the north. There was a significant increase in rocket attacks and Improvised Explosive Device (IED) incidents in Gao, Timbuktu, and Kidal regions in the latter half of 2014. Armed conflict continues in the north, and at least one incident has occurred in central Mali. While southern Mali has improved with the restoration of democracy and advances in the peace process, the possibility for terrorist attacks and/or violent civil unrest continues to exist, resulting in a security situation in Mali in which vigilance and caution are warranted.
In northern Mali, renewed armed conflict broke out between Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) and northern armed groups in Kidal in May 2014, resulting in the military’s withdrawal from the city. A May 23 ceasefire agreement led to a roadmap for peace negotiations to be held in Algiers. That ceasefire was broken, and negotiations lag, leading to renewed fighting between the northern armed groups, ethnically-based militias, and security forces. In the absence of a peace agreement, undefeated, operational extremist elements have taken advantage of the situation to attack security forces. The frequency of improvised explosive device (IED) detonations in northern regions increased significantly in the latter half of 2014, targeting both MINUSMA and Malian military installations.

Despite the significant successes of French offensive and counterterrorist operations, extremist groups persist in targeting Malian and Western assets, and sporadic fighting continues between the military and northern armed groups. Although the security situation in Bamako remains relatively stable, there are continued concerns that Bamako remains a viable target for these groups. Violent extremist elements have demonstrated their persistent ability to carry out a variety of different operations in northern Mali, including vehicle-borne and person-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED and PBIED); convoy ambushes; targeted IED operations; and coordinated assaults on military installations. Training camps and weapons caches continue to be discovered.

Terrorism Rating: High

Anti-American/Anti-Western Sentiment

As Mali continues down the path of national reconciliation with armed groups in the north, public perception of the neutrality of MINUSMA and/or French forces plays an important role.
in the potential for civil unrest against Western interests. Local populations have demonstrated both for and against MINUSMA activities. American citizens should be sensitive to the latest public sentiments toward these forces.

Post-specific Concerns

Kidnapping Threat

Though no Westerners have been kidnapped since November 2012, there were multiple reports of kidnappings of Malian nationals in 2014, to include five humanitarian workers.

Police Response

Police are poorly trained, poorly paid, and lack resources to combat crime effectively. Police and emergency responders have been known to request money in return for providing what Americans view as routine police services. Legitimate police security checks are two or more police officers and are most often located at main intersections. Rogue police elements and bandits posing as police officers will often stop vehicles and demand money. These incidents should be reported to the nearest police station. Calls to police stations for urgent assistance have often generated responses that no officers are available or that there is no gasoline for response vehicles. If the police do respond, many lack investigative skills to solve the most basic crimes or to identify and arrest suspects.
The government maintains that the reform of Mali’s security sector is a key policy priority and has – with support from the international community – initiated significant efforts to reform and rebuild Mali’s security forces. Support from the international community is focused on improving Police, Gendarme, and National Guard performance, capability, and institutional capacity. This support ranges from equipment provisions to national security strategic planning and crisis response development. The European Union Training Mission to Mali is heavily involved in the efforts to reform and restructure Mali’s military.

Americans are strongly encouraged to carry with them copies of their passport data and visa pages in the event they are detained or stopped by police. Originals should not be handed over if at all possible.

Crime Victim Assistance

Americans who are the victim of a crime should contact the US Embassy to seek assistance at 223-2070-2300.

Police/Security Agencies

The organization of security forces starts with the Ministry of Internal Security and Civil Protection. This Ministry is composed of four main branches: the National Police, Civil Protection, National Gendarmerie, and the National Guard. The Gendarmerie and National
Guard are military organizations that also come under the Ministry of Defense but are affiliated with the Ministry of Security to reinforce police operations in major cities, particularly during riots/civil unrest. Law enforcement is the responsibility of the National Police. Police responsibilities are concentrated exclusively in urban areas, while the Gendarmerie is primarily responsible for rural areas.

Many Western businesses and expatriates employ full-time guards to protect residences and office facilities.

Medical Emergencies

Medical care generally does not meet U.S. standards. For those traveling outside of Bamako, medical facilities are scarce and may be austere. All travelers are encouraged to prepare a medical emergency kit including first aid supplies and malaria prophylactic/treatment medications.

Contact Information for Recommended Hospitals/Clinics

The Polyclinic Aly Guindo, located near the German Embassy in Badalabougou (+223 2022 2207) is a multispecialty clinic with a small hospital. For Americans experiencing the most common medical emergencies, the Polyclinic Guindo is the recommended clinic.
The Pasteur clinic is another multi-specialty clinic with emergency capabilities and a small hospital. As of January 2015, the Pasteur clinic remains closed after the Ebola crisis. If and when the Pasteur clinic re-opens, it will likely resume its place as the recommended source of medical care for Americans.

The Hospital of Mali opened on the east end of town in 2012 in the Missabougou area of Sotuba and offers limited medical services. The Hospital Gabriel Toure is the largest facility in Bamako (located at Avenue Al Quds, Medina Coure, city center, telephone (223) 2222-7122) and offers a full range of emergency and medical services. The hospitals are far from U.S. or European standards.

Recommended Air Ambulance Services

International SOS provides reliable air ambulance service, but requires approximately 24-48 hours response time.

Recommended Insurance Posture

The U.S. Embassy cannot emphasize strongly enough the importance of securing adequate medical evacuation insurance and bearing proof of that coverage at all times.
CDC Country-specific Vaccination and Health Guidance

Malaria is a common and potentially deadly infection for travelers. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends taking antimalarial medication before, during, and after travel to Mali. Other diseases that may affect travelers to region are dengue, schistosomiasis, polio, and lassa virus. In October 2014, Mali detected its first case of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD). As of January 2015, Mali was considered free of EVD but remains on high-alert for further cases. For additional information on vaccines and health guidance, please visit the CDC at: http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/destinations/traveler/none/mali.

Tips on How to Avoid Becoming a Victim

Situational Awareness Best Practices

Visitors to Bamako are advised to practice the same personal security precautions they would in any large city. Visitors should be vigilant and maintain awareness at all times in crowded areas such as markets. Be aware of anyone who jostles you even if it appears innocent. This is often a ploy used by pickpockets, including children, to distract you. Do not carry, let alone display, large sums of money. Do not carry anything in your wallet that cannot be easily replaced. Theft of unattended items is common.

Visitors should avoid wandering around in remote areas of the city by themselves, particularly at night. It is best to travel in groups and stay in illuminated areas as much as possible. Travel
at night on foot should be avoided since the roads are often poorly illuminated, increasing the chance of being struck by a vehicle or motorbike.

Thefts from hotel rooms may occur. Visitors are advised not to leave anything of value in their room and to ensure that hotel room doors are locked while sleeping in the room.

U.S. Embassy Location and Contact Information

Embassy Address and Hours of Operation

The Embassy is located in ACI 2000, Rue 243, Porte 297, Bamako, Mali

Business hours: Monday-Thursday, 07:30AM-5:00PM; Fridays, 07:30AM-11:30AM

Embassy Contact Numbers

Embassy Switchboard: +223-2070-2300

Regional Security Office: +223-2070-2552
Embassy Guidance

U.S. citizens in Mali should enroll in the State Department’s Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), which can be accessed at this link: https://step.state.gov/step/. By enrolling, you will receive security updates, and the Embassy can contact you more easily in case of emergency.

OSAC Country Council Information

There is no formal OSAC Country Council in Mali. The Regional Security Officer is available to meet with American private-sector representatives and provide information on the current security situation in country. To reach OSAC’s Africa team, please email OSACAF@state.gov.