



NEWS BULLETIN 298
TUESDAY JULY 25, 2017

Malian Rape Survivors Defy Terror and Invest for the Future

(Real names are not used in this bulletin)



Abi, 18, thought she had put the terror behind her. Like thousands of other women in northern Mali, she endured several hellish months in early 2012 after Tuareg rebels joined with jihadists and imposed a reign of terror across the north. Abi's parents were killed. She herself was raped. In desperation, she fled her home in the historic town of Timbuktoo for the capital Bamako.

Within a year the crisis seemed to pass. French troops intervened and scattered the jihadists. The Tuareg rebels began to talk peace with the government.

Democracy was restored. Abi returned to Timbuktoo to live with her aunt, hoping to start a new life.

It was not to be. Early this year fighting again broke out in Timbuktoo and Abi again fled south to seek safety with the family that had sheltered her in 2012. She then found her way to a [training center for survivors of sexual violence in Bamako run by Sini Sanuman](#), a partner of The Advocacy Project (AP). When Abi talked with an AP mission recently, she was still traumatized and seeking help from the center psychologist.

Abi's ordeal shows that conflict has returned to Mali and that women are once again under assault, in spite of the presence of a large UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA) and an active peace process between the government and Tuareg rebels.



HE Coulibaly, Mali's Minister of Defense, with Siaka Traore from Sini Sanuman

The jihadists have regrouped and are moving into central Mali, in an apparent effort to foment ethnic hatred between the Peul and Bambara tribes. In a meeting with AP and Sini Sanuman, the Malian Minister of Defense Tiena Coulibaly said that the Malian army is taking heavy losses and is ill-equipped to withstand the better-armed jihadists.

Mayors are being killed. Schools are closing and agriculture is threatened in one of the Mali's most fertile regions. According to the UN, 32,000 Malians like Abi had fled fighting in the north by May 31.

But if women are bearing the brunt of this new crisis, they are also rising to the challenge. Since 2014, Sini Sanuman ("Healthy Tomorrow") has trained 660 survivors of sexual violence to sell soap, clothes and embroidery. The program has opened two new centers this year and is on track to produce over 25,000 bars of soap and 1,200 school uniforms. Its colorful embroidery has been turned into wall hangings by quilters in Washington DC.

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Making soap at a Sini Sanuman center

Sini Sanuman is now taking its training out of centers and into the community. It has invested \$1,000 in one soap-making cooperative, *Moussou Kalanso*, after the group agreed to recruit former Sini Sanuman trainees.

AP met with several of the beneficiaries, who pooled half of their earnings (\$648 over four months) and then shared the rest. Fatimata used her share to do still more trading in water and rice. "It doesn't matter how small, this income is important," she said with satisfaction.

In another experiment on the other side of Bamako, at the Nieta tailoring shop, five former Sini Sanuman trainees are working for the owner, Aissata, who herself learned dress-making at a Sini Sanuman center in 2014. Business peaked in June when Malian women celebrated the Eid festival in a blaze of color. The young seamstresses earned 15,000 CFA (\$26) per week - a serious wage.



Training in the community: at the Nieta tailoring shop in Bamako

Encouraged by such results, Sini Sanuman has opened a new center in the northern town of Gao, which is a transit stop for traffickers and migrants en route for Libya and the Mediterranean. Gao also has the largest number of undeclared rape survivors from the 2012 crisis, according to the UN. "The need for this center is certainly great" says Siaka Traore from Sini Sanuman. "But it will not be easy."

Sini Sanuman is funded by the [Federal Foreign Office of Germany](#) through [Zivik](#) in Berlin and by the Foreign Ministry of Liechtenstein.

* To donate to Sini Sanuman's soap-making project [click here](#)

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Thanks to Humanity United for supporting our 2017 program and to the Peace and Collaborative Development Network for re-posting our bulletins.



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