



UN Volunteer UNHCR Oussamata Iba (centre), with two fellow refugees from the camp of Goudebou, Dori, Burkina Faso.

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When refugees assist fellow refugees, an example from Burkina Faso

In 2019, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme launched a pilot project to mobilize refugees as UN Volunteers, in support of the refugee community in Burkina Faso, which includes more than 25,000 Malian refugees. Ahmed, Mohamed and Oussamata are refugees who were selected to support UNHCR operations as UN Volunteers in their own communities. One year on, we share their experiences.

Since March 2019, Mohamed Ould Zeni has served as a Community Mobilization Assistant with UNHCR in Djibo, in the north of the country. Every day he monitors households and ensures that cohabitation and relationships between local host populations and refugees are as peaceful as possible.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mohamed is responsible for monitoring and addressing concerns about the health and security situation in the Mentao refugee camp. He also works with implementing partners and coordinates the distribution of food and non-food items to 6,489 refugees.

Thanks to his volunteer assignment, Mohamed has gained significant experience in the protection of refugees, learned mediation approaches

through engagement with local populations and developed skills and awareness in gender-based violence. Ultimately, the experience has been personally enriching for Mohamed.

“ The work these UN Refugee Volunteers are doing with us is impressive! It is proof that refugees are not just a burden to their host country, but are actors whose contribution can bring added value to development efforts; hence our theme this year, "Everyone can make a difference. Every action counts". --Ioli Kimyaci, UNHCR Representative in Burkina Faso

Ahmed Ag Mohamed Aly serves alongside Mohamed as a UN Volunteer Community Services Assistant in the refugee camp of Goudebou.

Escaping security threats in Mali, Ahmed and Oussamata Iba arrived in Burkina Faso in 2012, just as Ahmed graduated from high school. In his community, 82 per cent of people were illiterate. As part of the mixed solution project for Malian refugees in Burkina Faso there are 4,000 refugees within the camp and a further 8,000 residing outside the camp. Today, Ahmed oversees community service activities on gender-based violence, child protection and care provisions for people with special needs.



Ahmed Ag Mohamed Aly playing soccer with children from his refugee community in the Goudebo refugee camps, Dori, Burkina Faso. ©UNHCR, 2020.

As a victim of persecution himself, Oussamata is passionate about humanitarian assistance work. His personal experience motivates him to provide protection and resilience assistance to other refugees.

Through their contributions, Oussamata and Ahmed act as the interface between refugees and UNHCR and provide understanding of the cultural and linguistic diversity among the refugee community. Lately, they have engaged refugees in an environmental campaign to collect and recycle the plastic waste generated within the camps to earn income. One kilogram of plastic waste is worth 100 CFA, and to date, five tonnes have been collected.

The volunteers also support other income-generating activities, such as the production of masks. Their objective is to produce 35,000 masks by the end of June 2020 to help protect people from COVID-19.

To promote sustainable livelihoods that reflect local realities, Oussamata and Ahmed have coordinated the training of 385 refugees in plastic waste collection and 17 in sewing (nine refugees and eight from the local population). They have also trained more than 400 people in agriculture and 151 in market gardening, of whom 81 are refugees and 70 host community members.

Due to these training opportunities, out of the 8,000 refugees who were living in Dori in March 2020, there are now less than 5,000 left in the camps today. Through their efforts, the volunteers have helped people from their communities learn new skills and diversify their activities in areas outside of cattle breeding, which was their main economic activity in Mali.

“ Given the fact that we are from refugee communities, we know the harsh realities and work in almost all fields: protection, health, education, livelihoods and food security. We engage refugees and local communities in our promotion of peaceful cohabitation, and include those refugees who have left the camps. --Mohamed Ould Zeni, Refugee UN Volunteer Community Mobilization Assistant with UNHCR, Burkina Faso



Mohamed Ould Zeni (right) providing assistance to the last breeders among the Malian refugee population from Mentao (6,500 refugees) in Djibo, Burkina Faso. ©UNHCR, 2020

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