
Volunteers

Story

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Restoring hope in Mauritania amidst a cross-border humanitarian crisis

Trapped in a conflict, part of the Malian population continues to flee the country to seek refuge in Mauritania. Last spring, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that in eight months, more than 5,400 Malians crossed the border to seek refuge in the Mbera camp in Mauritania, which already houses over 50,000 refugees and asylum seekers. This is the largest influx of refugees from northern Mali since 2013.



Helena Pes (Italy), international UN Volunteer serving with UNHCR in Mauritania, accompanied by Touareg singer Hamma of the Taflist group during the organization of activities on World Refugee Day (UNHCR, 2017)

Helena Pes (Italy) is an international UN Volunteer serving in the Mbera camp, Mauritania, with the [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](#) (UNHCR). "The situation in northern Mali remains unstable and in these conditions, influx of refugees is unpredictable," she explains. Since 2012, several populations fled from Northern Mali due to conflict and the fear of oppression. Most of the more than 51,000 refugees in the camp are Touareg, co-habiting with Arab, Fula, and Songhai refugees.

As a Public Information Officer for the UNHCR refugee camp, Helena is in charge of UNHCR publications and communications in Mauritania. Her role is of paramount importance for the camp and for raising awareness of UNHCR's work. Its main objective is to make known the existence of these refugees in Mauritania, collateral victims of the conflict who have found themselves in now trying living conditions. She produces reports, produces publications that raise awareness for the cause, and speaks in international media. After 5 years, the humanitarian situation remains worrisome. "The Malian situation is entering its sixth year. It is a protracted crisis, forgotten by the media and obscured by other humanitarian emergencies, although equally serious," she states. "Many individual stories of refugees have left their mark on me."

The conflict has had a considerable impact on the already very limited resources at the base of this semi-arid zone of the Hodh ech Cargui area, where the refugees are located. "The local people's pasturage also suffers from this situation," Helena comments. "Refugees who have lost their livestock due to conflict or drought are reduced to abject poverty and entire generations suffer from the lack of opportunities." Despite the efforts of humanitarian organizations in the camp, education, especially at the secondary level, remains a problem and most of the camp population is illiterate.

In getting involved, it was mainly the position that attracted me, the opportunity to explore new horizons and to be able to chronicle a new situation. By becoming a UN Volunteer for the UNHCR camp in Mbera, I was sure to find interesting stories, to be able to put my skills to use for a just cause, all for the benefit of a population in exile."

Despite the situation, thanks to her work, Helena has also produced reports that showcase a positive aspect of camp life, highlighting the culture that perseveres. "I had the opportunity, for example, to meet artists who are breathing new life by bringing culture to the camp. I made a [report](#), and since then, several initiatives with these artists have been put in place, one being the most important for UNHCR: World Refugee Day in [2016](#) and [2017](#), but also participation in a major music festival in Mauritania, the festival of [Ain Farba](#) which is a partner of the famous Mali Desert Festival, which unfortunately has not been able to take place since the conflict in 2012."

"I am proud of the results we have achieved (...) it is not always easy to spread positive messages in a difficult situation, (...) and the lack of understanding of the situation, especially for a country like Mauritania, which is perceived as a dangerous country or one not to be visited. On the contrary, I found there to be a lot of tolerance in this country," Helena concludes.

[Discover Helena's report in its entirety.](#)

[Listen to the explanations given by Helena during her speech on Radio France Internationale.](#)

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