

The displaced people of Timbuktu

Outreach to the Tuareg

by Mark Gibson



The Tuareg (also known as Tamajaq) are one of many Muslim people groups found in the north of Burkina Faso. Most, if not all, of the Tuareg in our area originate from the legendary town of Timbuktu in the north of Mali. With their fiery temperaments and nomadic lifestyle, they have gained the reputation of being the warriors of the desert. They are not difficult to identify, with their dark blue robes and turbaned heads.

During the mid 1980s, following the independence of Mali, the Tuareg rebelled in order to gain independence. As a result, many Tuareg people became refugees as they fled for their lives. A number settled around Djibo, one of the major northern towns in Burkina, where SIM has been working among the Fulani people since 1982.

Once the uprising passed and stability was restored to the region surrounding Timbuktu, many Tuareg returned home, leaving just a scattering of families to make a go of life here. Fifteen years later, the troubles started again between Tuareg rebels and Malian government soldiers, and in mid 2008 more Tuareg refugees flooded over the border in search of a safe haven.

Uncertain future

Since our arrival in Djibo in 2003, my wife and I have come to know a number of the Tuareg quite well, even though our purpose for being here is working among the Fulani. One Tuareg friend of ours owns a number of camels, and we often take visitors to his camp for the ride of a lifetime. But today his visitors are his own people, as a fresh wave of refugees descends.

Overwhelmed with the situation, our friend invited me to visit. Even as we entered the camp, crude shelters were being erected as the tired travellers sought shade from the intense heat of the Sahelian sun. Many had only a couple of mats and the clothes they stood up in. The owner of the camp informed me that, even though he had been given the responsibility for these refugees, no aid had yet appeared, and all he could do



was feed them with his own dwindling supplies. He asked if I could help in any way.

As I met the people and listened to their stories, my heart went out to them. Many had travelled for over a month on foot, and all had fled due to the fear of what might have happened to them had they had stayed. A large percentage of those who had arrived were women and children—two of the women gave birth within days of their arrival.

It's difficult to convey the details of their dreadful predicament, and even harder to assign blame. But one thing was clear: these Tuareg refugees are image bearers of the Creator and, because we are Christians, we have responsibilities. So, with the aid of a friend, a local church and an NGO, I was able to help alleviate their suffering.

Most of these nomads had never met Christians before. Some were surprised that we were willing to help them. One old man exclaimed, 'I am confused. Why are you willing to help us? You are Christians, we are Muslims.'

We were just pleased we were able to communicate something of Christ's love. As we distributed food and plastic coverings (for when the rains started), my friend asked if it would be possible for me to show the Jesus film to them. I was astonished, as he is a respected Muslim leader, not only in the town but also among the Tuareg community in the capital. He explained to me that whenever they have faced problems like this, it is always the Christians who help.

Because I didn't speak any Tamajaq, I was pleased when I managed to track down a copy of the Jesus film in their dialect. I showed it a few weeks later. It was a thrill to be able to present to these Tuareg people, in their own language, the story of the one who offers true hope in an unpredictable world. After fleeing in fear from Mali, they found themselves in a land that was not their own. Now they faced a very uncertain future—on so many levels.

Most of these displaced Tuareg are still in the area and will be for the foreseeable future. I continue to make contact with them when I can, sharing the gospel through cassettes in their language and communicating through my Fulani language. The door is open; the opportunities are there. We are praying that the Lord will send people willing to commit themselves to learning the language and culture, and ministering to the Tuareg people in the north of Burkina Faso.

(Editor's note: Since this article was written, a number of Tuareg refugees have left Burkina Faso and returned to their homes. Please continue to pray for this people group.)

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