

U.S. Embassy Dakar

Consular Warden Message

December 10, 2009

Travel Warnings for Mali and Mauritania

The U.S. Embassy in Dakar calls to the attention of all U.S. citizens in its consular district, especially those living or travelling in areas near the Mauritanian and Malian borders, the recent travel warnings issued for Mauritania and Mali. The text of the travel warnings for Mauritania and Mali follows.

Mauritania: December 02, 2009

The U.S. Department of State warns U.S. citizens of the risks of traveling to Mauritania, and urges extreme caution when traveling there due to increased activities by the terrorist group Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). AQIM continues to demonstrate its intent and ability to conduct attacks against U.S. citizens or other foreign nationals. Most recently in a presumed terrorist action, three Spanish NGO workers were kidnapped from their vehicle while driving from Nouadhibou to Nouakchott on November 29, 2009. The U.S. Department of State also recommends against all non-essential travel to the Hodh El Charghi region, the eastern half of the Tagant region, as well as the Zemmour region of Mauritania, and strongly discourages travel to unpopulated areas of eastern Mauritania. Faith-based organizations operating in Mauritania, regardless of location, may also be particularly targeted. This Travel Warning replaces the Travel Alert for Mauritania, which was issued on September 1, 2009, to remind travelers of security concerns.

As noted in the Department of State's Worldwide Caution dated July 29, 2009, AQIM has been designated as a terrorist organization by both the United States and the European Union. AQIM has declared its intention to attack Western targets.

On August 8, 2009, a suicide bombing near the French Embassy in Nouakchott injured two French guards and one Mauritanian citizen. The bomber is believed to have acted on orders from AQIM. On June 23, 2009, a private U.S. citizen was shot and killed in Nouakchott in an apparent kidnapping attempt by individuals associated with AQIM. Terrorists also killed 11 Mauritanian soldiers out on patrol approximately 40 miles from the northern town of Zouerate in September 2008. The Israeli Embassy and an adjoining nightclub frequented by Westerners were attacked in Nouakchott in February 2008. In December 2007, terrorists shot and killed four French tourists and wounded a fifth near the town of Aleg in southeastern Mauritania. Two days later, terrorists killed four soldiers near the town of El Ghallaouiya in northern Mauritania. The perpetrators of these attacks are all believed to be linked to AQIM.

As a result of these safety and security concerns, Peace Corps has temporarily suspended its volunteer program in Mauritania. The State Department, Peace Corps, and Embassy Nouakchott are continually evaluating the security situation in preparation for a return of the Peace Corps' volunteer program at the first possible opportunity.

Travelers should avoid all non-essential travel to the Hodh El Charghi region of southeastern Mauritania, the eastern half of the Tagant region of central Mauritania (east of Tidjika) and the Zemmour region of northern Mauritania due to increased AQIM activities in these areas. Travel in the unpopulated areas of eastern Mauritania (areas east of Zouerate and Chinguetti and north of Nema) is strongly discouraged due to the threats of terrorism and banditry. U.S. Embassy staff members are authorized to travel to these regions only with Mauritanian government escorts.

U.S. citizens should not venture outside of urban areas unless in a convoy and accompanied by an experienced guide, and even then only if equipped with sturdy vehicles and ample provisions. Driving after dark outside of urban areas is also strongly discouraged. There have been reports of banditry and smuggling in the more remote parts of Mauritania. Landmines also remain a danger along the border with the Western Sahara. Travelers should cross borders only at designated border posts.

Given AQIM's threats to attack western targets in Mauritania and the region, and due to indications of a desire to kidnap Westerners for ransom, U.S. citizens should remain aware of their surroundings at all times and maintain good personal security practices, including always locking their homes and cars, varying routes and time of travel, and avoiding drawing attention to themselves. When going out, they should avoid being part of large, highly visible groups of Westerners, and avoid sitting in areas that are easily visible from the street when in restaurants or cafes. U.S. citizens should be particularly alert when frequenting locales associated with Westerners, including cultural centers, social and recreation clubs, beach areas, and restaurants.

All U.S. citizens residing in or traveling to Mauritania are urged to register with the U.S. Embassy through the State Department's travel registration website, <https://travelregistration.state.gov>. By registering, U.S. citizens make it easier for the Embassy to contact them in case of emergency. The U.S. Embassy is located between the Presidency building and the Spanish Embassy on Rue Abdallaye. The postal address is B.P. 222, Nouakchott, telephone (222) 525-2660/2663, 525-1141/45, or 525-3038 (ext. 5441), and fax (222) 525-1592. For after-hours emergencies, please call (222) 525-3288. The Embassy webpage is <http://mauritania.usembassy.gov>.

Updated information on travel and security in Mauritania may be obtained from the Department of State by calling 1-888-407-4747 toll-free within the United States and Canada or, for callers outside of the United States and Canada, on a regular toll line at 1-202-501-4444. For further information, please consult the Country Specific Information for Mauritania and the Worldwide Caution, which are available on the Bureau of Consular Affairs Internet website at <http://travel.state.gov>.

Mali: November 19, 2009

The Department of State warns U.S. citizens of the risks of travel to Mali and continues to recommend against all travel to the north of the country due to kidnapping threats against Westerners. This replaces the Travel Warning for Mali dated August 31, 2009, to update security and threat information.

As noted in the Department of State's Worldwide Caution, dated July 29, 2009, the Islamic extremist group Al-Qaeda in the Land of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has been designated as a terrorist organization by both the United States and the European Union. AQIM has declared its intention to attack Western targets throughout the Sahel (including Mali, Mauritania, and Niger), and has claimed responsibility for the kidnapping of two Canadian United Nations officials in Niger in December 2008, the kidnapping of four European tourists in January 2009 on the Mali-Niger border, the murder of a British hostage in Mali in June 2009, the murder of a U.S. citizen in Mauritania in June 2009, and the suicide-bombing of the French Embassy in Mauritania on August 8, 2009. On November 14, 2009, heavily armed individuals attempted to kidnap U.S. Embassy employees in Tahoua, Niger.

In addition to threats posed by AQIM and potential hostage takers, confrontations between the Malian military and Tuareg rebel groups occurred in Nampala (along Mali's border with Mauritania) in December 2008 and in the region of Kidal in January 2009. The threat posed by AQIM, continued Tuareg unrest, sporadic banditry, and the porous nature of Mali's northern borders with Algeria, Niger, and Mauritania all reinforce longstanding security concerns affecting travel to northern Mali.

The Department of State notes that the U.S. Embassy in Bamako has designated the northern regions of Mali as "restricted without prior authorization" for purposes of travel by U.S. government employees, contractors, grantees and their dependents. Prior to traveling to these areas U.S. government employees are required to have the written approval of the U.S. Ambassador to Mali. This designation is based on the presence of AQIM, as well as Tuareg rebel activity and banditry. Though this restriction does not apply to private U.S. citizens, it should be taken into account by all Americans contemplating travel to Mali. The restriction is in effect for the following areas:

- The region of Kidal;
- The region of Gao including the road to Ansongo and the border with Niger;
- The region of Timbuktu.

U.S. citizens are specifically reminded that the restricted areas include Essakane, site of the popular "Festival au Desert" musical event, as well as many other musical and cultural festivals in the regions of Kidal and Gao that are traditionally held between December and February. It should be noted that in addition to the potential terrorist and criminal threats, these celebrations are located in some of the most remote destinations on earth and the Embassy would have extreme difficulty rendering assistance should an emergency occur there.

All U.S. citizens residing or traveling in Mali are urged to register with the Department of State or the U.S. Embassy in Bamako through the State Department's travel registration website, <https://travelregistration.state.gov>. By registering, U.S. citizens make it easier for the Embassy to contact them in case of emergency. The U.S. Embassy is located at ACI 2000 at Rue 243, Porte 297. The Embassy's mailing address is B.P. 34, Bamako, Mali. The telephone number is (223) 2070-2300. The consular fax number is (223) 2070-2340. The Embassy webpage is <http://mali.usembassy.gov>.

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