

Sahel Social Media Monitoring



To support the humanitarian response in the Sahel region, [Insecurity Insight](#) is conducting ongoing social media monitoring to understand perceptions and key concerns around the aid response in Burkina Faso, with the aim of contributing to the development of aid agencies' communication strategies in response to community sentiment.

February 2024

Viral Allegations that an Aid Organisation Had Prior Knowledge of the Djibo Jihadist Attack in November 2023 Underline Aid Agencies' Vulnerability to Disinformation in Burkina Faso

Summary

In the aftermath of the deadly Djibo jihadist attacks on 26 November 2023, the Burkinabè Red Cross was targeted via an audio recording or clip alleging that the aid organisation was aware of the impending attack and that it withdrew its staff from the area prior to the assault.

Aims: This social media monitoring brief examines the public reaction to these claims made in the audio clip.

Findings: The analysis shows that most social media users who reacted to the public discussion about the content of the audio clip appear to believe that the allegations were true, suggesting an underlying lack of trust in INGOs. This finding highlights aid agencies' vulnerability to disinformation in Burkina Faso.

Systematic social media monitoring could not identify any rumours or allegations on public social media accounts prior to the publication of the audio clip alleging inappropriate contact between the Red Cross and a non-state actor. This suggests that the claims made in the clip were deliberate disinformation targeting the Red Cross.

Edited press articles about the subject that were also available via social media accounts reported the facts, including the Red Cross version that disputed the allegations.

Context

In the afternoon of 26 November 2023, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) militants launched simultaneous attacks on an IDP camp, an army base, and Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland positions located around Djibo town, Soum province, Burkina Faso.

The Agence d'Information du Burkina [claimed](#) that "more than 400 terrorists were decimated on Sunday during a counter-offensive ... against nearly 3000 criminals". In turn, JNIM [published](#) a video of the attack on social media showing a pillaged army camp. Independent figures published by the [UN Human Rights Bureau](#) suggest that at least 40 civilians and IDPs were killed and 42 others were injured during the attacks, while three IDP sites were torched.¹

On 1 December 2023, five days after the deadly attacks, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Burkinabè Red Cross (BRC) [denounced](#) on X (formerly Twitter) and the [BRC website](#) the diffusion of "false information on its activities in Djibo".

According to the joint ICRC and BRC press statement, an audio clip was being shared on WhatsApp claiming that the BRC was aware of the impending attack on Djibo and that it had taken the precaution of evacuating its staff from the area by a specially assigned helicopter. In other words, the audio clip implied that the Red Cross was complicit with the attackers. The Red Cross stated that the allegations were false and that the clip constituted disinformation.

Findings

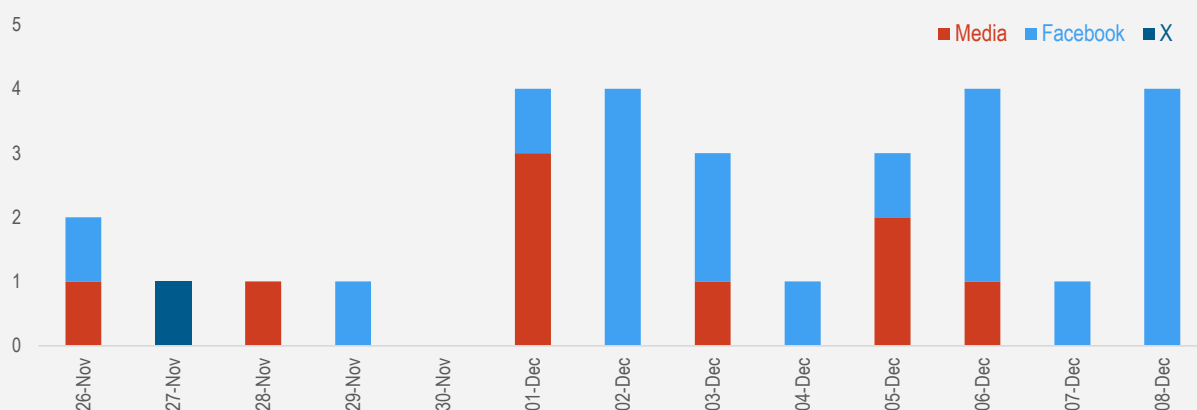
This social media monitoring was carried out to identify any possible rumours appearing on public social media of alleged complicity between the Red Cross and JNIM prior to the Red Cross denouncing this disinformation on a public social media channel. It also examines how the information was discussed on social media following the reaction of the ICRC and BRC to the disinformation.

The following findings are based on data collected on Facebook and X between 26 November and 30 December 2023 related to the Djibo attack and the rumours around the prior evacuation of BRC staff from the locality.

- **No evidence that other rumours or allegations similar to those made in the audio clip were circulated on public social media platforms in the aftermath of the Djibo town attacks and prior to the Red Cross’s denunciation of the claims made in the clip, suggesting that the claims are deliberate disinformation to discredit the BRC using a private social media channel.**

Analysis of public discussions on Facebook and X related to the Djibo town attack prior to the Red Cross’s public denunciation of the disinformation indicates that these discussions focused on the Burkinabè army’s measures taken against JNIM and did not include any mention of the Red Cross or any aid organisations.

Figure 1: Number of media posts related to the ICRC and BRC in Burkina Faso between 26 November and 8 December 2023



Note: An increase in media posts can be noted around the beginning of December, when news of the audio clip allegations emerged. In the days prior to the Red Cross’s statement regarding the clip on 1 December 2023, the organisation was rarely mentioned on social media, and when it was mentioned it mostly featured in job advertisements. A shift can be seen following the Red Cross statement denouncing the audio clip. Between 1 and 8 December, 24 social media and website posts referred to the Red Cross, a significant number of which referred to the audio clip. These figures do not include the individual comments on social media in reaction to some of these posts.

Source: Insecurity Insight

No evidence could be found that the rumours or allegations expressed in the audio clip on WhatsApp were circulating and featured among public discussions on Facebook and X prior to the Red Cross's statement on 1 December. This may indicate that active users of these social media platforms were unaware of these false allegations until the ICRC and BRC publicly denounced the disinformation.

These findings suggest that the audio clip was the main and possibly the only source of these rumours regarding the Red Cross. Most likely, the clip was deliberate disinformation aiming to publicly discredit the Red Cross, because there is no evidence that the allegations resulted from misinformation.

- **The majority of social media users who engaged around the allegations appear to believe the disinformation given in the audio clip to be true, suggesting a lack of trust in INGOs and highlighting aid agencies' vulnerability to disinformation.**

Examination of public discussions that followed the Red Cross's denunciation of the disinformation suggests that the majority of social media users on Facebook and Twitter either believed the claims made in the audio clip or suspected them to be true. The proportion of users in this category tends to be at least two-thirds of the total of commentators, with the remaining third of users defending the Red Cross.

Social media users on Facebook and Twitter who believed the allegations to be true include some of these typical reactions to the audio clip and its allegations given below. Profiles in this category do not appear to be fake and seem to belong to ordinary people who are active on social media.

- A belief that aid organisations are in contact with jihadist groups and somehow cooperate with them. An example of such a reaction is the following: *"International organisations are complicit with the terrorists in the Sahel"*.
- Claims that the Red Cross is linked to or acts on behalf of France, which is seen as hostile to the interests of Burkina Faso in its war with jihadist groups. An example of this is: *"The Red Cross acts on behalf of France, [it] should disappear from Burkina ..."*. Similar reactions are those that link the Red Cross or INGOs to the "West".
- Demands that the Burkinabè authorities put an end to Red Cross activities in Burkina Faso.
- Demands that an investigation be conducted into the Red Cross and its alleged ties to jihadist groups. Social media users who react in this way tend to suspect the allegations to be true, such as in this comment: *"All they need is to investigate [the Red Cross], I remind you that it is the Red Cross which transported rebels and arms to operation zones ..."*. Moreover, calling for an investigation into the Red Cross and its activities is in itself an assumption that the organisation may indeed not be adhering to its principle of neutrality.
- Social media users who defended the Red Cross highlighted that the organisation is a neutral actor and that it plays a key humanitarian role in Burkina Faso. Some of the people actively defending the BRC appear to be employees of the BRC and ICRC.

- **The media outlets reporting on the story remained neutral, in contrast to the reception by social media commentators.**

Edited media reports on the audio clip demonstrated factual reporting, in contrast to the highly opinionated and divided commentators on social media. Indeed, most media outlets focused on relaying the Red Cross's statement condemning the clip, including the organisation's description of the allegations as "false information".

Furthermore, to our knowledge, the media outlets did not comment on the audio clip prior to the Red Cross's statement, despite the clip's viral circulation on WhatsApp, indicating that these outlets responded to the press release from the Red Cross rather than filed stories based on independent investigations.

Analysis

The readiness of most social media users who reacted to the allegations made in the audio clip to accept their validity seems to attest to the low trust in international organisations in Burkina Faso among the wider public who may not be direct aid recipients. It highlights aid agencies' vulnerability to disinformation campaigns aiming to discredit their work and presence in the country. Most social media accounts that were analysed appear to belong to ordinary users and do not seem to be set up for the purpose of spreading a particular opinion.

Finally, it is probable that the mistrust in the intentions of the aid sector in Burkina Faso preceded the release of the audio clip shared on WhatsApp, and that the disinformation effort was only reinforcing previously held ideas about aid organisations. This can be clearly seen in the virulent criticism targeting the United Nations after the UN Human Rights Bureau published a [statement](#) on the Djibo attacks that appeared to contradict the government narrative of events. In February 2023 [Insecurity Insight](#) reported that online reactions to the ambush and killing of MSF (Médecins Sans Frontières) aid workers in the Boucle du Mouhoun region were characterised by allegations that the organisation was aiding armed groups and acting on behalf of Western governments.

The Red Cross's communications strategy

On 1 December 2023, presumably upon obtaining knowledge of the audio clip, the Red Cross issued a statement to publicly address and reject the allegations made in the recording. According to systematic social media monitoring, the Red Cross's statement amplified the reach and circulation of these allegations in Burkina Faso on public social media sites. Rumours and public discussions about these allegations only started on Facebook and Twitter after the Red Cross's statement was published, and were further strengthened after local media started to write about the story.

Despite the allegations made on social media after the Red Cross's statement, going public allowed the Red Cross to push back against the circulating disinformation. Indeed, on Facebook and the Red Cross Facebook page Red Cross employees were able to directly intervene in discussions around the allegations, thus providing an active voice for the organisation as well as an alternative narrative to that presented in the audio clip. The press statement also helped to engage local edited media and bring the subject to an audience beyond social media users.

Concluding remarks

Social media, humanitarian principles, and the role of trust

The findings presented above point to a striking absence of understanding of humanitarian principles among most social media users. Ignorance about these principles is unlikely to be new; however, the increasing use of social media to present or discuss false interpretations reinforces such perceptions, which then influence the wider public discourse.

The lack of knowledge about humanitarian principles and the opinions expressed on social media raise important questions about how aid agencies can better communicate humanitarian principles and defend the reputation of the aid sector in the age of social media. Protection for the humanitarian space requires that the wider society endorses these humanitarian principles and that public opinion is prepared to defend them. At present, this appears to be limited to the edited media and individuals with personal connections to the aid sector.

Trust is key in ensuring that the intentions and working practices of humanitarian organisations are believed and endorsed by the wider society. Indeed, the above findings suggest that underlying mistrust in humanitarian organisations made it easier for the disinformation to be believed in the first place, as well as harder for organisations such as the Red Cross to counter the disinformation targeting it.

If false allegations are widely circulated through private channels such as WhatsApp, it remains difficult to assess the number of people exposed to it, and countering reactions is a challenging task. Public social media discussions of such allegations allows for a much better assessment of public sentiments and offers the possibility to speak about the humanitarian principles that govern aid agencies' contact with non-state actors. Such discussions may benefit from being disseminated to a wider public.

Recommendations for agencies

- Monitor the way in which aid programmes are represented on social media and design strategies to counter misinformation and disinformation about aid agency objectives.
- Be aware that the humanitarian imperative to provide food and medical aid without discrimination is very easily turned into social media disinformation that accuses aid programmes of favouring a particular social group or even rebel groups.
- Be aware of the extent to which an anti-terrorism discourse has influenced many social media users and that this can mean that humanitarian impartiality may be interpreted as “aiding terrorists” not only among governments, but among the general public too.
- In addition to armed actors, communications about humanitarian principles should probably also engage the wider public to strengthen societal consensus in favour of humanitarian principles.
- Be aware of the media environment, and work closely with edited media outlets to ensure that trained journalists support these outlets' role in tackling disinformation in the public sphere.

Methodology

Publicly available social media data was first collected in Burkina Faso for the period 1 November to 31 December 2023 using key words in French linked to or referring to the Red Cross, the audio clip and its claims, the Djibo attacks, and IDPs and IDP camps. To do so, Insecurity Insight used proprietary technology powered by an artificial intelligence tool to identify pertinent data on X and Facebook. The analysis is based on at least 600 X Tweets, retweets, and comments, and Facebook posts and comments.

Should you wish to provide us with any feedback or to get in touch, kindly write to: info@insecurityinsight.org

¹ The Burkinabè authorities [protested](#) following the publishing of these figures by the UN Human Rights Bureau, demanding a meeting with UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeinab Hamza Diaby to implore the UN to “provide the least amount of space possible to terrorists”.

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