

“Stop taking these donations”: Material donations in Burkina Faso generate backlash

Tracking Aid Narratives on Social Media: Recent Observations from the Sahel
07 May 2025

This briefing by Insecurity Insight analyses social media activity from 21 April - 04 May 2025, assessing observed narratives based on 12 months of systematic social media monitoring in [Burkina Faso](#), [Mali](#) and [Niger](#).



SUMMARY: Between 21 April and 04 May, 218 social media posts on the aid sector generated 571 comments across Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso - a 50 percent increase in number of comments for the previous two week monitoring period. This increase is largely driven by a sharp rise in conversations around UN agencies in Burkina Faso, and by an uptick in posts related to protests at a UN refugee camp in Niger.

PAST EDITIONS: [“We have to leave these organisms” \(06-20 April\)](#); [“All the NGOs are there to supply terrorists” \(31 March-April 06\)](#); [“They want to come back with the virus” \(24-30 March\)](#); [Wolves in Sheep's Clothing \(17-23 March\)](#); [WFP funding cuts \(09-16 March\)](#); [All](#)

SPOTLIGHT ON: UN Motorcycle Donation Triggers Suspicion Despite Official Messaging in Burkina Faso

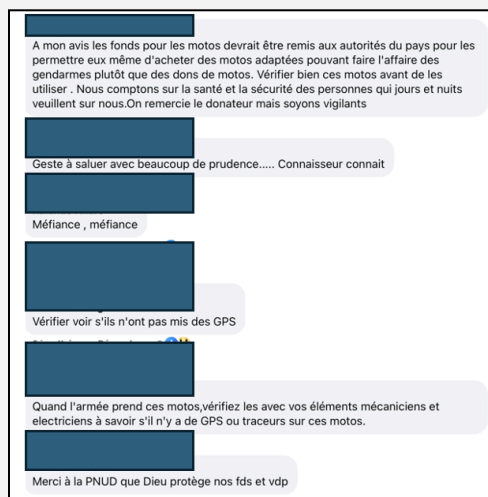
On 2 May 2025, 11 Facebook posts across various media platforms reported that a UN programme had donated 100 motorcycles to Burkina Faso's national gendarmerie to support security operations. Among these, a post by a state-run media outlet drew the most attention, with 91 of the 117 total comments appearing beneath it. While the announcement framed the donation as a gesture of solidarity and operational support in a challenging international context, the public response revealed a sharply contrasting narrative.

The overwhelming tone of user reactions was one of mistrust. Many commenters speculated that the motorcycles could be equipped with hidden GPS trackers, listening devices, or other surveillance tools. Calls for thorough inspections—“piece by piece” dismantling by technical experts—were widespread. Others questioned why external actors were providing such support at this stage, suggesting that the donation was either belated or politically-motivated. Some advocated returning the motorcycles altogether, while others recommended their use be limited to administrative tasks in urban areas to avoid compromising security operations.

The fact that the majority of critical responses were concentrated beneath a government-endorsed post is notable. Despite the official framing of the donation as a positive development, social media users did not hesitate to challenge the legitimacy or intentions of international assistance.

What This Tells Us

- **State messaging was met with notable scepticism:** While we cannot conclude that state narratives are broadly challenged, the concentration of critical responses under a state media post is noteworthy. It suggests that even government-aligned messaging does not shield international actors from negative aid sentiments being spread across social media. It is also a striking difference in comparison to previous posts about military participation (military featured in social media pictures as participating and supporting the initiative) in UN vaccination campaigns that did



not evoke criticism (see [14-20 April report](#)). It is unclear who the social media users objecting to the gendarmerie being given motorbikes are, and while username analysis does not suggest they are linked to Russian accounts, the volume, consistency in wording, and repeated allegations across comments raise the possibility of a coordinated campaign by an external actor.

- **Aid is interpreted through the lens of sovereignty and control:** The recurring belief that foreign gifts come with hidden agendas reflects a broader narrative linking international support to strategic interference or influence.
- **Trust in institutions is fragile:** Many users emphasised the need for Burkina Faso to procure its own security equipment, questioning the sincerity and timing of the donation, reinforcing a view that international support may be self-serving or symbolic rather than meaningful.

Key Takeaways

Media Post on Article Contest Covering WHO Gender and Reproductive Health Guidelines in Burkina Faso Generates Positive Sentiment

Reactions to a single Facebook post from local media accounted for 234 of the 575 comments collected during the examined period—an outsized share that underscores how a single, well-framed narrative can dominate sentiment dynamics. The post celebrated the journalist, winner of a health reporting competition focused on themes drawn from WHO guidelines. While the competition itself was about UN guidelines, nearly all of the engagement centred on the journalist. More than 150 user comments congratulated them, and framed the achievement as a point of communal pride. The UN was not acknowledged in the comments, instead, the community responded overwhelmingly to the local figure at the heart of the story. This example provides useful insight into how positive sentiment can be generated around development initiatives—especially when they are anchored in recognisable, respected, and locally grounded individuals.

What this tells us

- **Human stories drive engagement:** The volume and tone of comments were driven by the presence of a relatable, admired individual. Users engaged with the journalist as a community member and role model—not with the competition itself or its organisers. This confirms that **personalisation and local relevance** are powerful tools for digital engagement.
- **Positive sentiment is possible—and instructive:** In contrast to posts where UN agencies face criticism or suspicion, this case shows how digital spaces can also become sites of **praise, pride, and positivity**—when the framing is right.
- **Social media strategy should elevate local champions:** This case suggests replicable tactics for institutions seeking to generate goodwill online:
 - **Feature local individuals**, not just international staff, project pictures or logos;
 - Link messages to **community identity and pride**;
 - Integrate **agency attribution naturally** into the narrative;

SPOTLIGHT ON: Ongoing grassroots criticism of UNHCR in Niger intensifies

Between 2 and 3 May 2025, four Niger-based X accounts posted ten times in English about the situation of Sudanese refugees in Agadez. Unlike earlier criticisms that focused primarily on broad living conditions, this latest wave introduced a series of **much more serious allegations**—including claims of medical negligence leading to three deaths in the past two weeks, a beating of a refugee near a local office, threats in response to protest actions, and the suspension of food assistance.

What distinguishes this recent activity is not only the severity of the claims, but the **strategic manner in which they were delivered**. Each of the ten posts was framed as a repost of an official message from United Nations Geneva, marking UNHCR's 75th anniversary and reaffirming its protection mandate. Still, the post received little to no engagement on X.

This coordinated online action by these accounts since October 2024 represents a **clear escalation**—both in narrative tone and in the type of accusations being made. The consistency across accounts, and the decision to tie the messaging to a prominent UN anniversary, underscores a growing digital awareness and deliberate effort to reach international audiences.

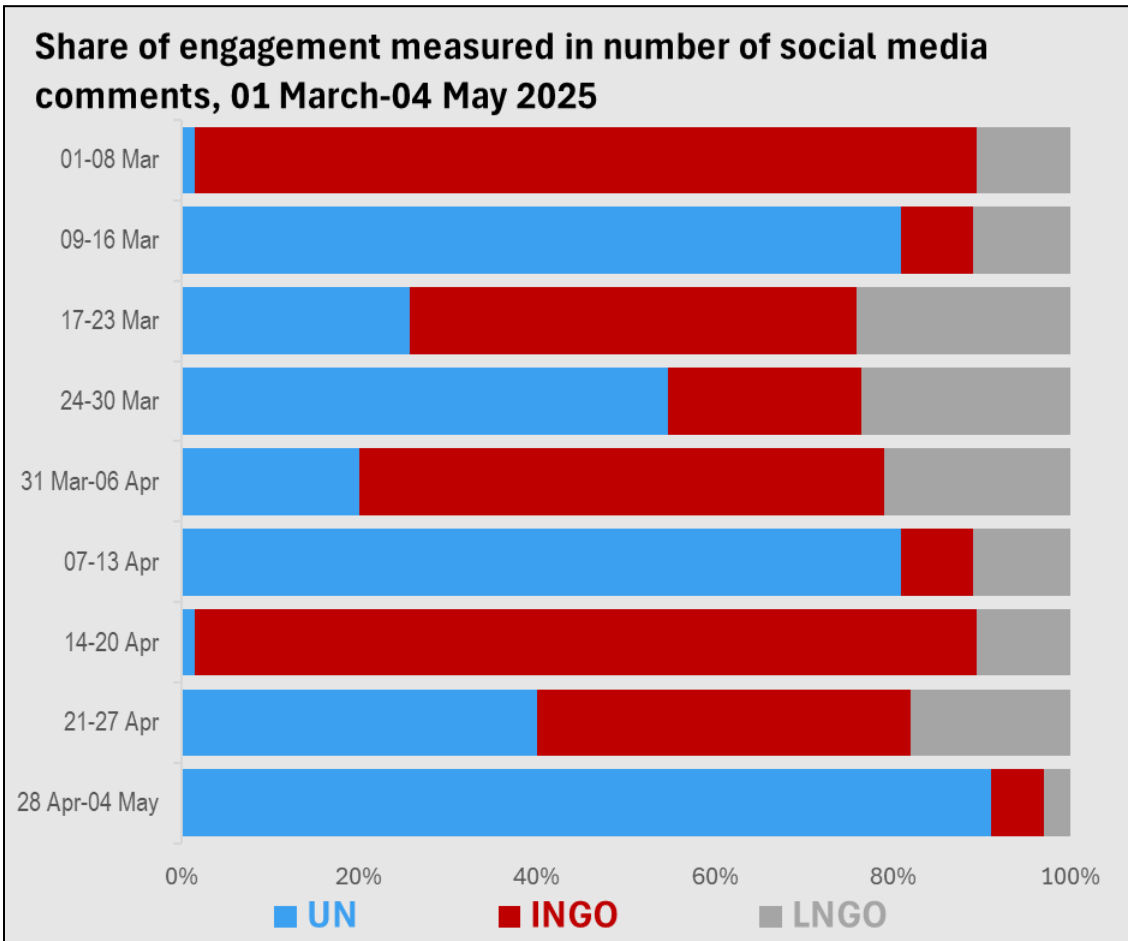
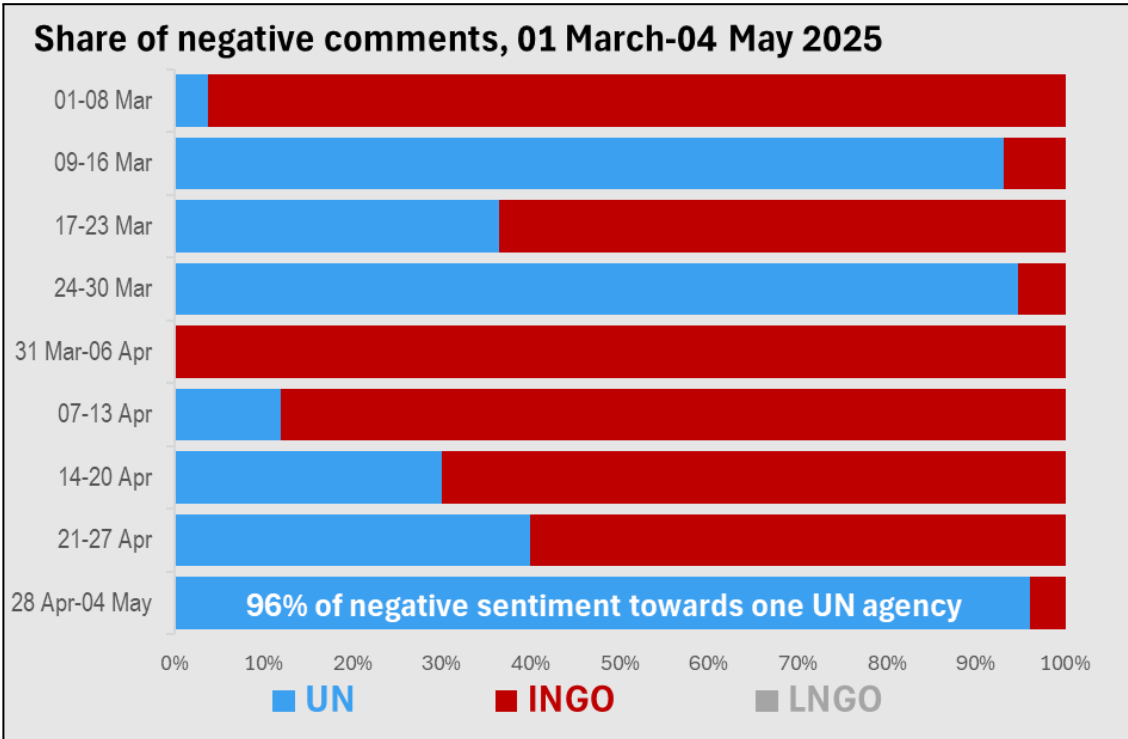
What This Tells Us

- **Narratives aim for international reach:** Posts in English, tied to a high-profile UN message, reflect a clear intent to engage global audiences and attract outside attention to local grievances.
- **Serious allegations deserve attention, not dismissal:** While the validity of the claims could not be independently verified as part of the social media sentiment analysis, the nature and consistency of the allegations suggest they reflect genuine grievances. Social media here functions not simply as a space for disinformation but as a tool for vulnerable groups to voice concerns that may otherwise go unheard. Ignoring such claims risks overlooking real issues behind the posts.
- **Grievance-based appeals remain rare in the Sahel:** Unlike other contexts where social media often mobilises around personal suffering or rights violations, digital narratives in the Sahel typically frame aid as interference in sovereignty rather than call for its improvement. Indeed, this would suggest that both aid agencies and local critics of aid delivery face difficulty being heard, as broader narratives of interference dominate the discourse.
- **Aid critics remain absent from operational critiques:** Prominent sceptics of aid did not amplify these allegations, suggesting their focus lies more in ideological opposition than in highlighting concrete delivery failures.



Patterns of aid narratives on social media continued

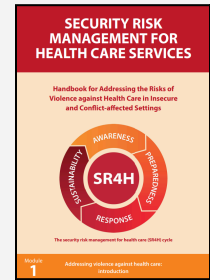
- Between 1 March and 27 April, LNGOs did not receive any negative comments. Their visibility has remained low throughout the period, with **18% of comments** during the week of April 21–27, dropping to just **3%** in the most recent week (April 28–May 4)—their lowest level in two months.
- INGOs also saw a significant drop in both engagement and negative sentiment. After accounting for **33% of total comments and 70% of negative sentiment** during April 14–20, their share fell to **42% of comments and 6% of negative sentiment** the following week, and just **4% of comments and 6% of negative sentiment** between April 28 and May 4. Negative comments during this period were largely **general and not tied to specific organisations**.
- This decline in visibility for INGOs and LNGOs coincided with a **rise in attention to two UN agencies**, driven by two highly engaging topics covered in this brief: the **motorcycle donation to Burkina Faso's gendarmerie**, and the **health journalism contest**. These two topics generated a surge in comments—both critical and celebratory—resulting in UN actors receiving **96% of total comments** during the week of April 28–May 4, up from **40%** the week prior. Negative sentiment toward UN agencies also peaked during this period, rising to **91% of all negative comments**, largely in reaction to the motorcycle donation (the negative sentiment in Niger about the Agadez refugee camp did not impact this trend as the posts received little to no engagement).



More resources

Security Risk Management for Health Care Services (SR4H) Handbook

Health care provision has unique characteristics that shape its specific exposure to security risks in conflict zones. The Security Risk Management for Health Care (SR4H) Handbook – available in [Arabic](#), [English](#), [French](#) and [Spanish](#)– provides guidance on how to implement a range of actions intended to promote respectful and violence-free environments and prepare individuals or organisations to face and respond appropriately to violent incidents, also dealing with the aftermath of such events.



While this handbook is primarily aimed at health programme managers providing frontline services, it is also highly relevant for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working with partners who implement healthcare services. The handbook helps to identify practical activities that local health partners can implement and that NGO partners can include in partnership agreements and budget for. **The SR4H Handbook brings together some of the best practices on security risk management and proposes a framework adapted for health care providers working with limited resources. The objective is to promote an approach that considers the safety and security of health professionals while ensuring patients' access to care.**

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We welcome questions and feedback. Share what you're observing both on the ground and online. Your insights help us keep the analysis accurate and up-to-date. Email: info@insecurityinsight.org

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Data Use and Privacy Disclaimer

This report includes analysis of publicly available social media content collected from open platforms. All data has been anonymised to remove or obscure identifying details, and no content from closed groups was used. The analysis was conducted in the public interest and in line with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), under a legitimate interest basis. The purpose of this analysis is to support humanitarian dialogue, inform policy, protect aid workers and those they help, and contribute to public interest research.

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