

“Before NGOs We Were Working”

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

20 May 2026

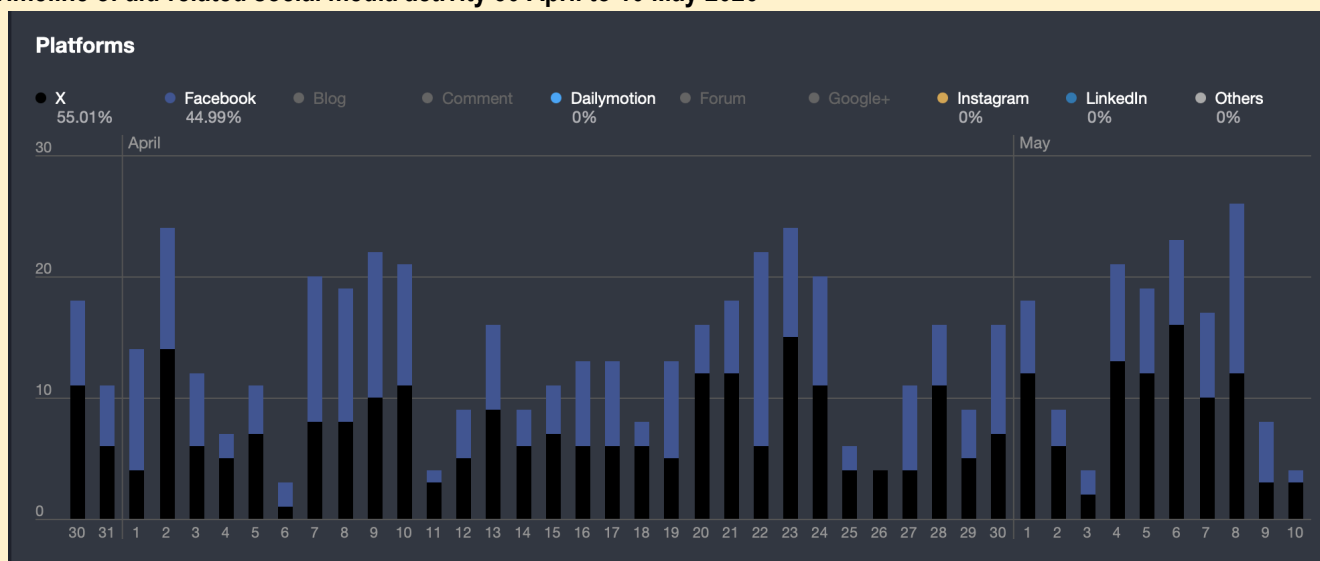
This briefing by Insecurity Insight analyses public social media activity from 30 March - 10 May 2026, assessing observed narratives based on over 14 months of systematic social media monitoring in [Mali](#).



Understanding how aid actors are portrayed online is increasingly critical. Social media narratives shape community perceptions of humanitarian organisations and can influence operational access, and staff safety. As online discourse becomes more central to how aid is understood and contested, monitoring these narratives is an important component for aid acceptance, security management, programming and communication with affected populations. By tracking aid-related narratives on social media, this briefing provides insight into how public sentiment towards aid actors in Mali is developing. It aims to support policymakers and humanitarian practitioners in strengthening community acceptance in a rapidly shifting aid environment. **This briefing is part of a longer-term initiative for Mali to examine how aid agency acceptance or rejection is expressed on social media.** The content is selected based on predefined lists of UN agencies, international NGOs, local NGOs and civil society organisations and general key words related to humanitarian and development assistance. Comments associated with posts that attracted the highest number of comments were analysed qualitatively to identify dominant narratives. **This edition covers examples of**

- public reactions to NGO regulation and taxation in Mali and neighbouring AES countries posted before the 25 April attacks by armed actors across Mali;
- a higher-than-usual volume of critical posts from individual users following the coordinated 25 April attacks, including narratives linking NGOs, UN agencies and human rights actors to selective concern, foreign influence or armed groups;
- limited spillover into Mali of the Human Rights Watch report on Burkina Faso;

Timeline of aid-related social media activity 30 April to 10 May 2026



Although the timeline shows clear spikes in aid-related social media activity, these increases were not driven by a single dominant topic.

Graph generated by Meltwater

Past editions: [“How Can You Impose Taxes”](#) (09 Feb-30 Mar), [“Even More Unemployment”](#) (05-11 Jan), [“Hope They Aren’t Wearing Microphones”](#) (15 Dec-04 Jan), [“Madam, You Are Mistaken, You Are Not Nigerien”](#) (08-14 Dec), [All](#)

Key Takeaways

MALI: 10% NGO TAX DISCUSSED ALONGSIDE WIDER AES REGULATION OF NGOS

Eleven posts that referenced Mali’s 10% tax on NGO income reflected a range of different framings of NGO regulation, including legal compliance, sovereignty, civic-space restriction and rejection of Western influence. The posts and corresponding comments often linked the tax in Mali to NGO suspensions or dissolutions in Niger and Burkina Faso, suggesting that some users interpreted these measures as part of a wider AES approach to increasing state control over NGOs, or, in more hostile comments, as steps toward reducing or removing Western NGO presence. Together, these posts reached approximately 66,000 users.

The discussion was not uniform. One account that has repeatedly appeared in monitoring of harmful information against the aid sector and displays AES-linked imagery framed NGO suspensions and regulation as a matter of legal compliance, arguing that associations, NGOs and unions that do not respect national laws should face consequences. A Facebook post took a more openly hostile position, stating that there would soon be “zero Western NGOs in the AES” because “imported democracy” was not wanted. However, another AES-oriented account portraying itself as a media platform neutrally relayed Amnesty’s concern that civic space in Burkina Faso was being restricted.



Some users welcomed the removal of Western NGOs and described them as instruments of imperialism, foreign influence or “silent war” against Africa. Others pushed back, arguing that NGOs provide services that governments are not currently able to replace, particularly in rural areas and displacement-affected communities. The following are the key narratives found in this comment section:

- **Western NGOs are framed as instruments of foreign influence:** These comments linked NGO presence to imported democracy, external interference, and the division of African societies.

“ We don’t want Western NGOs anymore—the ones waging a silent war in Africa right now; they’re dividing Africans 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔 ” (“Nous ne voulons plus les ONG occidentaux ce eux qui font de guerre silencieuse maintenant en Afrique ils divises les africains 🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔🤔”)

- **State control and legal compliance are presented as necessary:** This reflects a broader narrative in which NGO regulation is portrayed not as repression of civic space, but as the restoration of order in AES countries.

“It’s not enough to shut them down; we need to replace them, fill the void, and take on the role that these NGOs used to play” (“Ils ne suffit pas de fermer, il faut remplacer, occuper et jouer le rôle que jouaient ces ONG”)

- **NGOs are defended as essential service providers:** 16 percent of comments challenged the anti-NGO framing by asking whether national governments could replace the services provided by NGOs. Users referred to electricity

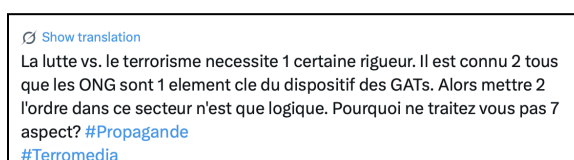
shortages, food aid, schools, WASH initiatives, and support to displaced populations. These comments suggest that the practical value of NGOs remains visible to some users.

“What Western NGOs have done is exactly what your government could do... Your government can’t even provide electricity, let alone take on the role of NGOs” (“Ce que les ONG de l’Occident ont fait est ce que ton gouvernement peut faire ça... Ton gouvernement n’arrive même pas à donner de l’électricité à plus forte raison de jouer le rôle des ONG”)

WHAT THIS TELLS US

- The discussion shows that NGO regulation in Mali and neighbouring AES countries is not clear cut. On one side, suspensions, dissolutions and taxation are framed as necessary measures to restore sovereignty, legal order and control over foreign-funded organisations. Public support may therefore shift over time if restrictions, taxes or suspensions lead to visible service gaps, especially where governments are not able to replace NGO services quickly.
- The comments defending NGOs suggest that some users are actively pushing back against anti-NGO narratives, particularly where they fear the practical consequences of NGO restrictions. This defence was often linked to concerns of job losses and wider economic hardship if NGOs reduce operations or leave. The main risk for aid actors is that debates over taxation, suspension or regulation may quickly shift from questions of sovereignty and legal compliance to blame over lost services, lost employment and worsening conditions for affected communities.

Higher-than-usual volume of critical posts targeting the aid sector after the coordinated 25 April attacks



Between 30 April and 10 May, forty-seven posts containing critical content against the aid sector reached approximately 95,000 users. 89% were posted on X, with the remaining content observed on Facebook. This represents a higher level of critical content from individual social media users than is usually observed in Mali; monitoring is likely linked to the wider online reaction following the 25 April attacks.

The content was produced by 20 individual accounts. Four of these accounts have appeared repeatedly in previous monitoring of harmful information against the aid sector and were responsible for 38% of the critical posts. This suggests that the increase was not only the result of a broad shift in public opinion, but also reflected **renewed activity by a small number of recurring voices** who already engage in hostile or suspicious narratives about aid actors, NGOs, the UN, and human rights organisations. The content was not uniform. Some posts criticised the UN, HRW, the ICC or NGOs in general for perceived silence over attacks against Malians or alleged abuses by non-state armed actors. Others framed NGOs as foreign-influenced, politically motivated, or linked to armed groups.

KEY NARRATIVES

- **The UN and international institutions are accused of selective concern:** Several posts questioned why the aid sector or international media appeared more vocal on state abuses than on the attacks attributed to armed groups.
- **NGOs are portrayed as linked to or legitimizing terrorism or armed groups:** One post stated that NGOs are a “key element” in the system of terrorist armed groups, while another argued that NGOs and private security companies are “not neutral” in Africa.
- **Human rights organisations are framed as hostile or propagandist:** HRW was repeatedly criticised, including through posts calling for HRW to be banned in Africa or describing HRW and Reporters Without Borders as “propagandist NGOs”. This overlaps with narratives in Burkina Faso where criticism of HRW extended into wider anti-NGO sentiment.
- **Criticism also included aid diversion claims:** One post alleged that Malian authorities were diverting aid intended for internally displaced people and host communities in Ménaka, and presenting distributions as their own life-saving action. This may still affect trust in aid delivery by suggesting that assistance is captured or politicised by authorities.

WHAT THIS TELLS US

- The volume of critical posts is notable because it was driven largely by individual users rather than media pages or official actors. However, the role of four recurring accounts indicates that a small number of repeat voices can significantly shape the visible harmful-information environment. Their posts helped keep aid-linked criticism active across different themes.
- While much of this content is frequently shared by such accounts, the allegations of associations between NGOs and armed groups remain an important operational risk factor. Even when individual posts have limited engagement, repeated claims that NGOs are not neutral or are part of the support system of armed groups can affect perceptions of neutrality and acceptance, especially at checkpoints, in areas with high insecurity, or among audiences already suspicious of foreign-funded organisations.
- The discussion also shows that criticism of one actor can spill over to the wider aid sector. Posts targeting HRW, the UN, the ICC or international media were often extended to NGOs more broadly, especially when framed through sovereignty, anti-Western sentiment or accusations of selective concern.

25 April coordinated attacks draw aid actors into security and sovereignty narratives

On 25 April, 2026, armed Islamic militants and separatists launched one of the largest coordinated attacks in Mali in recent years. Attacks were carried out simultaneously in Bamako, Gao, Kati, Kidal, Mopti and Sévarél, impacting military bases, government sites, transport infrastructure, and killing the Defense Minister General Sadio Camara. Heavy gunfire and explosions were reported around dawn around the military base in Kati, roughly 16km south of the capital Bamako.

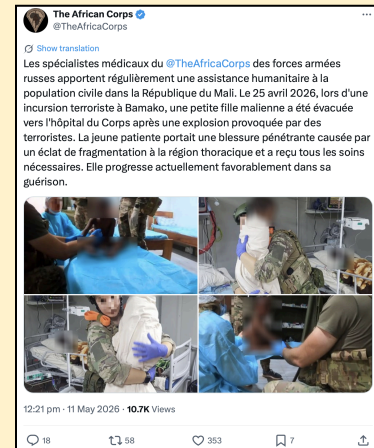
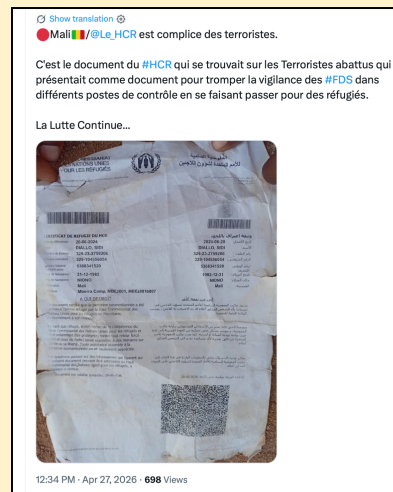
Following these coordinated attacks, social media narratives were dominated by military, political and nationalist content. **Aid actors were not central to the overall conversation.** However, monitoring from 25 April to 13 May shows that UN agencies, humanitarian organisations, human rights actors and international institutions were at times drawn into wider narratives about terrorism, and foreign influence. Insecurity Insight also produced an internal, unpublished snapshot analysing the initial online reactions between 25 and 27 April. Readers who would like to access this analysis can contact Insecurity Insight directly (info@insecurityinsight.org).

The material collected after the initial 25–27 April snapshot shows the following broad types of aid-related content: International and humanitarian institutional posts referred to the attacks in mostly neutral or operational terms. Several posts reproduced or commented on the 07 May briefing by Mali’s foreign minister to the diplomatic corps in which he “condemned the culpable silence or the double standards of certain international organisations and so-called human rights NGOs”. Third, harmful or critical content from individual users continued after the attacks. This was analysed in more detail in the previous section on the higher-than-usual volume of critical posts targeting aid-linked actors. The April attacks appear to have created a more permissive environment for individual users, including recurring accounts

already observed in previous monitoring, to link aid actors, NGOs, UN agencies or human rights organisations to terrorism, foreign influence, selective concern or anti-state behaviour.

KEY NARRATIVES

- **Humanitarian documentation framed as an infiltration risk:** During the first 48 hours after the attacks, one post alleged that attackers used documentation associated with a UN refugee agency to pass checkpoints by posing as refugees. The authenticity and context of the document could not be verified from the available material. However, the framing is significant because it repurposed a civilian protection document to imply that humanitarian systems could enable infiltration. Such narratives can increase suspicion toward refugee certificates, beneficiary documents and other humanitarian paperwork. This specific narrative did not resurface in the later public social media posts reviewed.
- **Neutral and positive humanitarian references remained visible:** Not all aid-related content was hostile. The Malian Red Cross was mentioned for supporting dignified burials in Kidal. UNICEF highlighted the impact of the attacks on children and its commitment to supporting affected children and families. Posts about Gao described local NGOs participating in peace and cohesion activities. These posts received limited but neutral engagement. These references suggest that practical, community-based humanitarian action remained visible.



Russian-linked accounts posting around the 25 April attacks

Social media accounts displaying Russia-linked indicators, such as Russian-language content, Russian flags, or pro-Russian imagery, also **framed military medical care after the attacks as humanitarian assistance**. Posts by African Corps-linked or pro-Russian accounts described medical treatment provided to a Malian child wounded during the 25 April attack in Bamako as assistance to the civilian population. The post shown in the report explicitly says that Russian Armed Forces African Corps medical specialists “regularly provide humanitarian assistance to the civilian population” in Mali. Engagement with the posts were limited, but the posts are relevant because they place humanitarian language within military and geopolitical messaging. Africa Corps reported treatment of a wounded civilian after the 25 April attack is not unusual in a crisis. It is noteworthy that in a crisis context accounts supportive of Africa Corps displays of humanitarian and medical support were prominently introduced into the social media discussions where humanitarian neutrality and foreign influence were being debated online.

Disinformation and rumours around the attacks reported by journalists and observers were only partially visible in the content identified through the monitoring

The New Humanitarian reported on false reports of non-state armed actors appearing in schools and markets in Bamako, and described one case where a market video appeared to have been manipulated with added gunfire to provoke panic. It also reported that students fled schools following rumours of jihadist sightings, although journalists who visited the area found no evidence. In the monitored social media data, only one example of this type of content was captured (see right). This does not mean wider disinformation was absent: content may have been deleted, circulated on private platforms, posted by users using VPNs or locations outside collection parameters, or not included aid-related keywords used in the query.

Violence that directly affecting vital civilian services during the attacks were also not visible in the monitored social media data

Insecurity Insight's wider incident monitoring identified additional aid, health and education-sector impacts linked to the 25 April attacks that did not appear prominently in the social media data reviewed for this report. These included attacks on a community health centre in Gao region and the regional health directorate offices in Kidal region, damage to telecommunications infrastructure that hampered humanitarian operations in Rhaous, Tessit, Ménaka and Kidal communes, and damage to school facilities, latrines and water points in Mopti region, where classes were reportedly suspended until 4 May. This could indicate that social media users are careful not to post evidence of violence attributed to armed groups openly on social media. However, the absence of these incidents from the monitored social media results does not necessarily mean they were not discussed online. They may not have been posted publicly, may have been posted by users using VPNs or locations outside the collection parameters, or may not have used aid-related keywords included in the query.

WHAT THIS TELLS US

- The 25 April coordinated attacks created a more sensitive online environment. However, international and humanitarian institutional posts were generally neutral and did not appear to generate strong negative engagement towards the aid sector. However, official and semi-official Malian narratives amplified through media pages reached larger audiences and reinforced claims that some international organisations, and media actors were selectively condemning violence.
- Perceptions towards the aid and NGO sector are nuanced. Organisations associated with visible service delivery, local humanitarian action or community-based assistance may continue to receive neutral or positive engagement. Organisations associated with human rights, protection, accountability, international advocacy or UN statements face higher risk of negative framing, particularly when their work is interpreted through sovereignty and security narratives, themes that resonate with many by violence affected people in Mali.

MALI: LIMITED SPILLOVER OF THE HRW BURKINA FASO CONTROVERSY

In Burkina Faso, [Human Rights Watch's 2 April 2026 report](#) generated substantial critical engagement. Between **23 March and 28 April**, 75 posts reacting to the report reached approximately 1.4 million users and generated 713 public comments, 96% of which were critical of HRW. The Burkina Faso analysis found that this criticism extended beyond HRW to the wider aid sector and/or donors, and was amplified by individual users and prominent social media figures, including Nathalie Yamb. In Mali, direct spillover was much more limited: between 30 April - May 10 only six posts discussing the HRW controversy in Burkina Faso reached approximately 4,500 users. However, these posts echoed narratives identified in the Burkina Faso report, portraying HRW as lacking legitimacy, politically motivated, or part of a hostile external narrative against AES authorities.

WHAT THIS TELLS US

- The immediate risk to aid actors in Mali in relation to the HRW report appears low due to the limited volume and reach. However, the discussion shows how rights-related controversies circulate across AES online spaces and reinforce wider suspicion toward human rights, protection, accountability, or international advocacy actors.

Key numbers

Scale of analysis

- **Number of posts:** 574
- **Estimated total reach:** 6 million social media users
- **Total comments analysed:** 375

Comment distribution by organisation type

- **General aid sector:** 113 comments (30%)
- **INGOs:** 99 comments (26%)
- **UN agency:** 94 comments (25%)
- **LNGOs:** 43 comments (11%)
- **UN standalone:** 26 comments (7%)
- **Donors:** 20 comments (5%)

Distribution of critical comments by actor type:

- **INGOs:** 45 comments
- **General aid sector:** 33 comments
- **LNGOs:** 1 comments

Comment language

- **French:** 350 comments
- **Emojis / no text:** 22 comments
- **English:** 2 comments
- **Bambara:** 1 comment

**The decrease in the number of comments compared with the previous reporting period is likely due to a technical constraint: comments are no longer downloaded for posts with 15 comments or fewer.*

Other resources

Insecurity Insight regularly examines key discussions around aid activities driven by information posted by IP addresses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sahel, Sudan, and Syria. Understanding how aid actors are portrayed online is increasingly critical. Social media narratives shape community perceptions of humanitarian organisations and can influence operational access and staff safety. As online discourse becomes more central to how aid is understood and contested, monitoring these narratives is an important component for aid acceptance, security management, programming and communication with affected populations. **Subscribe** to our Social Media Monitoring mailing list for regular updates.

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. This document is published by Insecurity Insight - a Humanitarian to Humanitarian (H2H) organisation committed to the Humanitarian Principles. This document is funded and supported by the European Union (EU). The opinions expressed in the report do not in any way reflect the position of the EU who are not responsible for the content expressed in this document. 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. Join our efforts to protect humanitarian space. Subscribe to our **Social Media Monitoring** mailing list. Find more resources at the **Social Media Monitoring** website.

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