

# Isolation and hardship hit Morocco's mountain Berbers

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In a country on the doorstep of western Europe and popular for sunshine holidays, an unusually bitter winter has hit isolated mountain villages, causing hardship not usually associated with Morocco.

On an icy morning in December, Salem Said trudges with his son along a snow-swept road to the only school in this area of the Atlas Mountains.

The predominantly Berber region is a victim of poor infrastructure and harsh winters, as starkly illustrated on Friday when a week-old baby died in Anf gou village after falling ill because of the extreme cold, according to witnesses.

They blamed her death on the lack of vital medical treatment.

An unusual bout of heavy snowfall has made many roads unpassable, leaving vehicles unable to supply the weekly markets in the villages of the Middle and High Atlas, where temperatures plunged to minus 5 degrees Celsius (23 Fahrenheit) last week.

"The lorries and pick-up trucks can no longer drive along this road. I travel dozens of kilometres (miles) by mule to get supplies," said Moha Ouaali, a father struggling to provide for his family during the winter months.

"People like us have no life here," he sighed, glancing towards his three mules, laden with bags of wheat and other food that they hauled along

the mountain road.

Holding the hand of his 8-year-old son, sometimes carrying him, Salem Said battled on foot through the snow to get to the school in the village of Timahdite, three kilometres (two miles) away.

"I have to take him, because he can't go on his own," he said, as he criticised the lack of state support for the people of the area.

"We are not asking for the moon. A simple, passable road to link us up is all we're asking for," said Said, before heading off towards the school.

Despite its huge tourist trade and proximity to Europe, much of rural [Morocco](#) remains below the [poverty line](#), and the country ranked 130th in the latest human development index published by the United Nations.

The local authorities themselves do not hide their frustration at the lack of resources, a factor that they say limits the region's development and its links to the outside world.

"There is one snow-plough for the whole region, it's not enough," an elected local official told AFP by phone.

"Don't forget that the municipal budget is very limited. Without the state developing a nationwide strategy for road infrastructure in rural areas, the problem of isolation will return every year," the official added.

The region of Timahdite, as well as Anf gou in the High Atlas, around 100 kilometres (60 miles) south, is considered the worst affected by the problem, and residents say the first snowfalls this year have been particularly bad.

"The effects of the snow are not just negative. It also allows the wells

and the reservoirs to fill up. But the lack of infrastructure isolates the inhabitants, especially the poorest," said Lahcen Ouhalli, a local activist with the Moroccan Association for Human Rights.

"Those who have the means buy tractors that they use to get their supplies. They are less isolated than the others, who only have their mules, their donkeys and their feet," he added.

Fadma Bouba, a mother in Timahdite, readily admits to her dependency on the more primitive form of transport.

"It's thanks to the donkey that I can get around and buy what I need. Otherwise, with this snow and this cold, we couldn't do anything."

The family of the 40-day-old baby that died in Anfgou will feel more isolated than most this winter, although they are not the first to suffer such tragedy in recent years.

More than 20 children froze to death in the same deprived village in the High Atlas in the winter of 2006-2007, and according to unconfirmed local press reports, at least four children have already died from cold weather this month.

In response, Morocco's Health Minister Hossein El Ouardi visited the area.

And his ministry said last week said that it was launching a campaign to provide medical aid to the Timahdite region, as part of ongoing efforts to combat the effects of the extreme weather and to improve healthcare.

But a doctor in the region said better access to medical treatment during the winter months was not enough.

"We need to educate women in these villages about not exposing their children to the cold," he told AFP.

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