

**COMPOUNDED CRISES RISK WREAKING HAVOC IN SAHEL, UN AND NGOs ALERT**

Dakar, 14 May – United Nations aid agencies and Non-Governmental organizations warned today that a rapid deterioration of the Sahel crisis is driving humanitarian needs across the region to unprecedented levels – much of it resulting from escalating conflict, rising food insecurity, structural inequalities, and the direct and indirect consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic such as the rise in gender-based violence. The unparalleled compounded crises risk devastating the region, putting millions at risk and require an urgent scale-up of support and resources.

In 2020, 24 million Sahelians, half of them children, need life-saving assistance and protection – the highest number ever recorded. Due to widespread violence and natural disasters, 6.9 million people are grappling with the dire consequences of forced displacement. Over 4.5 million people are internally displaced or refugees – one million more than in 2019 – and 2.5 million returnees are struggling to rebuild their lives. “The clock is ticking for what is an unprecedented displacement and protection crisis in this region. Hundreds of thousands of people have already been driven from their homes and now face the added uncertainty brought by the coronavirus,” said Millicent Mutuli, Director of UNHCR’s Regional Bureau for West & Central Africa. “Local communities across the region have demonstrated remarkable generosity in hosting them but cannot cope anymore, without urgent support as national capacities are overwhelmed. The situation in Sahel was already rapidly becoming untenable, with a multi-level humanitarian crisis. We need to act quickly to avert a humanitarian catastrophe.”

Insecurity and attacks are severely disrupting basic social services, jeopardizing the future of thousands of children and depriving violence-affected communities of critical services. Closure of schools present a further barrier to learning, and deprive children, especially girls, of a protective environment. “Conflicts, displacement, violence and now, COVID-19, are having devastating impacts on children, their health, nutrition status, education and their protection rights. 9.7 million children are at risk of acute malnutrition, including 3 million of severe acute malnutrition. Children and young people also face increased risk of being victims of abuse and violence against children, sexual exploitation, child marriage, and adolescent pregnancies. It is crucial that measures are put in place to curb and stop the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, address both the immediate and the longer-term multi-faceted needs of children,” said Marie-Pierre Poirier, Regional Director of UNICEF.

Food insecurity in 2020 is expected to spike to unprecedented peaks, with more than 12 million people facing a critical lack of food. “The Sahel was already facing a staggering rise in hunger due to a toxic cocktail of armed conflict, population displacement, climate change and disruption in trade across and within borders before COVID-19 swept across the region. As the annual lean season looms and the socio-economic impact of this pandemic begins to bite, we could witness a catastrophic situation for already vulnerable people if humanitarian support is not sustained and robust social protection measures are not put in place by governments,” said Chris Nikoi, Regional Director of the World Food Programme.

“At FAO, we are concerned with the succession and superposition of crises experienced in the Sahel from the level of food insecurity, COVID-19 and potential invasion of desert locusts that may devastate livelihoods and food production and weaken resilience in the Sahel,” said Gouantoueu Robert Guei, FAO Sub-regional Coordinator. Pastoralist communities, already hit hard by the impacts of climate change and insecurity, are also further impacted by border closures, which risks increasing conflicts between herders and farmers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has the potential to shatter fragile health systems, hitting vulnerable population the hardest. “These communities are struggling to survive in precarious living conditions, without adequate access to water and sanitation, and already facing multiple epidemic risks,” warned Mamadou Diop, Regional Director of Action Contre la Faim. “We must safeguard people’s access to health services – including psychological and sexual health services, especially in conflict-affected areas, where needs are outpacing available resources.” Close coordination and linkages between health and humanitarian operations will be crucial to mitigate multi-

sectoral consequences of the pandemic and ensure a coherent and efficient response to protect the most vulnerable.

At-risk people remain blocked in precarious situations also due to unexpected border closures. “Migrants and displaced populations have limited access to public health care systems and may not be tested or treated for COVID-19,” said Sophie Nonnenmacher, IOM Regional Director a.i. “This pandemic is an opportunity to strengthen governments’ leadership in building more inclusive societies by including them in national preparedness and response plans, regardless of their status.”

With growing insecurity in the region, it has also become increasingly difficult to access vulnerable communities. “Continued violence and military operations are not likely to halt despite the COVID-19 pandemic and will continue to pose significant challenges in terms of access and a principled humanitarian response. Aid workers are at the forefront of the response in displaced and host communities– and they are essential to protect them from a devastating outbreak,” said Maureen Magee, Regional Director of the Norwegian Refugee Council. Teams must be enabled to stay on the ground to deliver assistance, adapting their response to ensure that critical support is provided safely.

Regional and international solidarity is essential, and the support of donors is urgently needed. “We need urgent concerted action to support life-saving humanitarian operations, at a critical time when the lean season is looming, and the pandemic quickly advances in the region. It will be crucial that resources and capacities are not diverted from ongoing humanitarian operations,” said Julie Belanger, Head of OCHA’s Regional Office for West and Central Africa. “If we don’t act now, the crisis will cost many more lives, devastate communities and spill-over into new regions and West African coastal countries. The future of millions of people, four out of five being under 35 years old, is at stake.”

Additional resources are urgently required to bring aid operations to scale and turn the crisis around. In 2020, the humanitarian community has requested for US\$ 2.8 billion to assist 17 million people in the Sahel. As of May, only 18 per cent of the funds have been received. In addition, as per the second iteration of the Global Humanitarian Response Plan for COVID-19 (GHRP) in May 2020, the financial requirement to respond to the pandemic in the Sahel stands at \$638 million, with less than 4 per cent funded.

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