



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency



# **Crisis in the Sahel: UNHCR emergency and protection response**

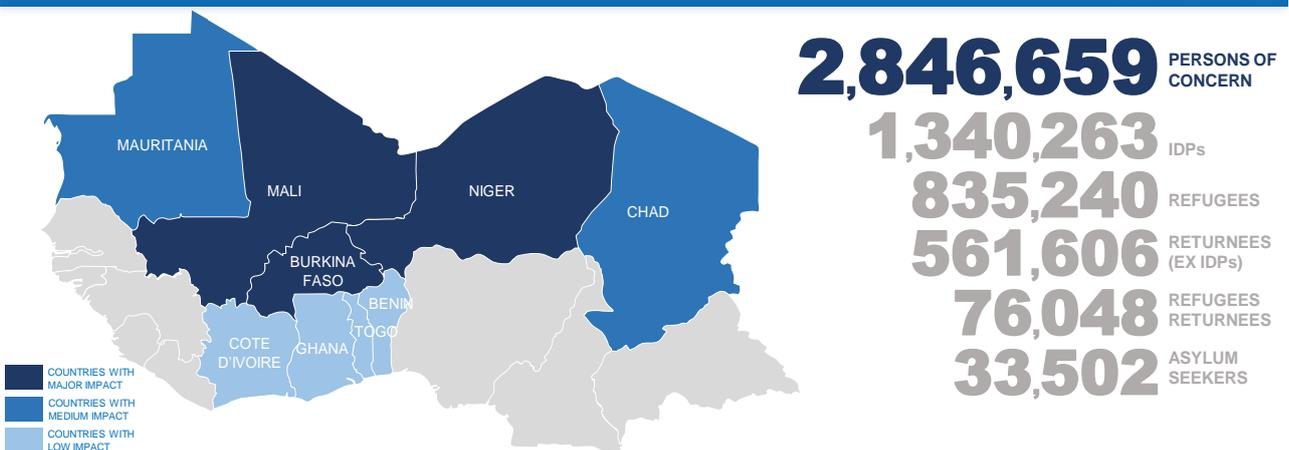
**February 2020**

# 1. Displacement in the Sahel: Trends and Scenarios

## 1.1. A severe humanitarian crisis today

The Central Sahel region (Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger) is facing a severe humanitarian and protection crisis, pushing millions of people to flee their homes. Indiscriminate attacks by armed groups against civilians, summary executions of men, widespread use of rape against women, as well as attacks on State institutions, including schools and health facilities, are the latest drivers of displacement impacting a region already struggling with climate change, extreme poverty, a lack of economic opportunities and scarce basic services.

PERSONS OF CONCERN IN THE SAHEL COUNTRIES AS OF 15 FEBRUARY 2020



	BURKINA FASO	CHAD*	MALI	NIGER	MAURITANIA	TOTAL
REFUGEES IN	25,871	442,672	26,670	221,282	59,338	775,833
REFUGEES FROM	11,530	10,363	163,734	2,200	44,177	232,004
REF. RETURNEES	-	-	76,048	-	-	76,048
ASY. SEEKERS IN	33	3,759	1,008	2,680	1,544	9,024
ASY. SEEKERS FROM	4,592	4,731	7,078	2,018	7,494	25,913
IDPs	765,517	170,278	207,751	196,717	-	1,340,263
IDPs RETURNEES	-	-	561,606	-	-	561,606
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>807,543</b>	<b>631,803*</b>	<b>1,043,895</b>	<b>424,897</b>	<b>112,553</b>	<b>2,846,659**</b>

\*The majority of refugees in Chad are from Sudan and CAR, \*\*Subtracting double counting

Massive displacements have been recorded, mainly internally but also across borders into neighboring countries, with a likely spill-over into the coastal countries of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Benin and Togo. Refugees finding themselves in the Liptako-Gourma, the border triangle that brings together Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, are seeking safety in areas that are also plagued by violence and poverty. Many have been displaced several times.

Local communities, often the first responders, have demonstrated remarkable generosity but can no longer cope. National capacities are overwhelmed, and the support of the international community is disproportionately dedicated to security, as compared to the limited resources made available for humanitarian or development response in the Sahel.

The approaching lean season, which is predicted to be one of the more serious in decades, coupled with the current intensification of the armed conflict, will likely generate further dramatic displacement of populations within the region and possibly southward to some of the Coastal countries and northward to North Africa and Europe.

## 1.2. A possible dramatic scenario tomorrow

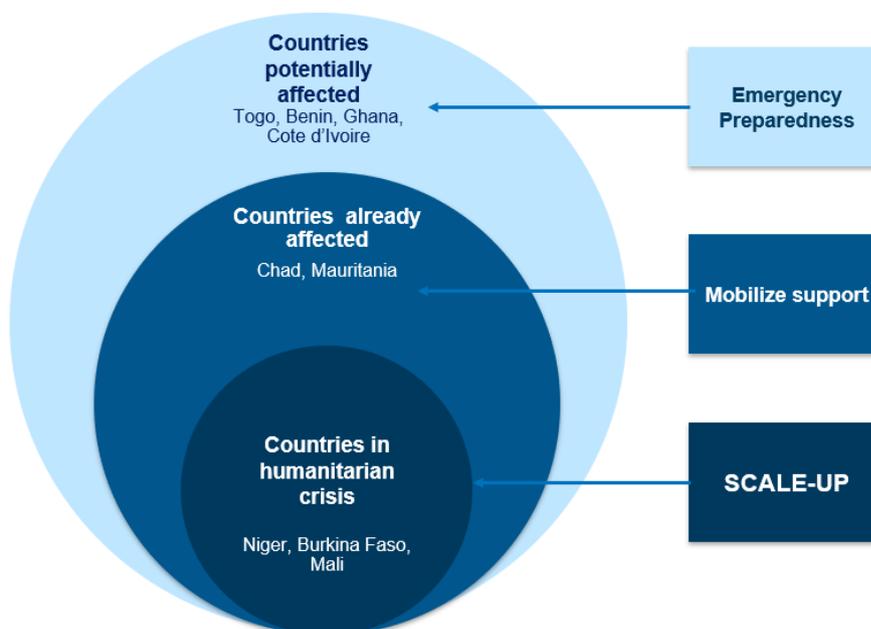
Considering the conflict dynamics in the last few months, the most dramatic scenario would see fundamentalist armed groups shifting their strategy, consolidating alliances in the Sahel, expanding territories under their control with the objective to link strategically with non-state armed groups in the Lake Chad Basin. This scenario would likely include a deliberate strategy to terrorize the society as a whole with attendant implications in terms of human rights violations, recruitment of youth, food insecurity, communal, ethnic and religious tensions, etc. Elections in several countries of the region, if not carefully handled, could themselves contribute to instability.

## 2. UNHCR's approach

Based on its mandate, UNHCR will work for the benefit of refugees, IDPs, returnees, persons at risk of statelessness and host communities, and in line with its responsibilities under the IASC, for civilians as a whole. Throughout its interventions, UNHCR will ensure it promotes inclusion as well as the meaningful participation of and accountability to affected people.

In terms of geographical scope, UNHCR will adopt a three-pronged approach:

1. Countries already facing a severe humanitarian crisis (Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali);
2. Countries already impacted (Chad, Mauritania);
3. Countries which might be impacted by a spill-over of the current situation (Benin, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo).



UNHCR's response is planned for an initial period of two years covering 2020-2021.

## 3. Priority areas of interventions

### 3.1. Responding Rapidly and effectively to new displacement

UNHCR has declared a regional emergency and has activated:

- A **Level 3** emergency in Burkina Faso, where the number of IDPs has sharply risen in the past few months to reach some 765,517 persons in February 2020, with a projection of more than a million IDPs by mid-2020.
- A **Level 2** emergency in Niger (Tilaberry and Tahoua regions) and in Mali (Central and North Regions).
- A **Level 1** emergency for the coastal countries mentioned above.

In addition to covering needs of refugees, UNHCR's operational response for IDPs will predominantly focus on shelter, with the objective of covering at least 25 per cent of the needs assessed as of January 2020, through emergency housing, cash for shelter, construction of urban settlements also for the benefit of host-communities.

Emergency preparedness will also entail development of regionally harmonized and consistent contingency plans. Regional stockpiles have been set up in Accra and Douala and shelter kits and non-food items can reach any impacted Sahel countries within days to cover the needs of 20,000 households. Emergency teams have already been deployed, while other staff with required profiles are on standby and ready to reach the field within 48 hours.

## 3.2. Placing protection at the center of the response

### Establishing an intergovernmental initiative: the Bamako Process

National authorities have the primary duty and responsibility to provide protection to forcibly displaced persons and local communities, as reaffirmed during the Regional Protection Dialogue held in Bamako on 11 and 12 September 2019. The Dialogue resulted in the Bamako Ministerial Declaration and Conclusions signed in Geneva on 9 October 2019 by Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Chad during a meeting co-chaired by the High Commissioner for Refugees and the Minister of Solidarity and Fight against Poverty of Mali.

The conclusions are organized around five areas of intervention:

1. Humanitarian access and civil-military coordination
2. Protection in the context of the UN framework for the prevention of violent extremism
3. Access to asylum in the context of mass influx and mixed movements
4. Solutions for refugees, IDPs and other civilian population
5. Access to civil registration, identity document and nationality

The Declaration foresees the elaboration of Regional and National action plans but didn't outline a follow-up mechanism. In addition, while this declaration represents an encouraging first step, the conclusions remain to be operationalized to facilitate immediate implementation.

On signing the Bamako Declaration, Governments urged in the text itself of the Declaration that the conclusions and recommendations be operationalized without delay. UNHCR will take this forward and propose the establishment of an intergovernmental process led by governments and organized around five technical committees matching the five areas of intervention of the Declaration. Each Committee would draw technical participants from the relevant ministries and be co-facilitated by governments and UN. The process will remain "light" and will prioritize the recommendations whose operationalization is realistic on the short term and with significant impact for displaced populations.

UNHCR will ensure a linkage between the Bamako Process and the UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel and seek the participation and support of other UN agencies, NGOs and other key partners to the various technical committees.

### Sexual and Gender Based Violence

In conflict-affected areas, with the alarming rise of armed groups, sexual violence is becoming endemic and includes widespread use of rape and other forms of sexual violence, abuse and exploitation, trafficking, forced and early marriage, unwanted pregnancy, etc. These are a cause of forced displacement but also a terrible consequence of the breakdown of family and community structures that results from displacement. UNHCR will work with other partners among them the military to ensure prevention actions, strong referral mechanisms for survivors of SGBV, provide support for reinforcement of existing health structures and partner with others to create new mobile health services in areas where these services have become inaccessible.

In this acute humanitarian context, in order to improve the quality of SGBV prevention and response program and have a concrete impact, there is a real need to reinforce existing health structures and create new SGBV mobile services in the large areas where these services are inaccessible. Mobile teams (outreach, case and health workers) will travel to target communities and will be supported by UNHCR, due to its presence and experience in these volatile areas, in order to provide the following services:

- **Direct care and support for survivors:** a basic mobile health response (Clinical care for survivors, clinical management of rape, psychosocial support).
- **Prevention** activities through community's members' and mobile outreaches.
- **Community protection:** Capacity building for community/religious leaders to provide support to SGBV survivors.
- **Advocacy and support for response services expansion.**

### Education

The impact of armed conflict and spreading insecurity on education in the Central Sahel region is devastating, with thousands schools destroyed, closed, and used for military purposes; teachers threatened, kidnapped, murdered; and children deprived of their right to education and exposed to increased risks of abuse, violence and exploitation. The conflict disproportionately harms girls' access to education and worsens the already

disadvantaged situation of young women and girls who are more impacted by forced marriage, early pregnancy, child-labor, and other types of violence, abuse, exploitation and GBV.

Education is without a doubt the strongest tool to: (i) protect children and youth affected by armed conflicts from death, injury and exploitation; (ii) alleviate the psychological impact of armed conflict by offering routine, stability and psychosocial support; (iii) avoid contributing to conflict and pursues a contribution to peace through a conflict sensitive curriculum.

In its operational response, UNHCR will ensure that learning places offer protection and safety by:

- **Strengthening the reception and teaching capacities of schools** (rehabilitation of schools and provision of temporary learning spaces) and the provision of alternative learning opportunities in areas where schools cannot reopen due to insecurity.
- **Preventing the radicalization and recruitment of children/youth** and supporting the creation of protective learning environments through measures to prevent attacks on education facilities and capacity-building of education personnel to identify and mitigate risks.
- **Ensuring the continuity of education for refugee learners** through the recognition of prior learning and support to make up for missed schooling and language differences, and the recognition of certificates for refugee teachers through harmonized approaches to include them in national teacher work force.

### A nature-centered response

Sahel is the most impacted region of the world by climate change with a +3 degrees increase scenario against the global average of 1.5 degree increase by 2050. Approximately 80 per cent of the Sahel's farmland is degraded due to global warming. This results in increasing local competition for natural resources, in particular for food and water. It is one of the direct root causes of the conflict.

Environmental causes act as threat multiplier for conflict and instability. While the competition for scarce resources is increasing and social cohesion and leadership structures are being damaged, the traditional mediation coping mechanisms are collapsing.

Considering the correlation between climate change and forced displacement, UNHCR will:

- Adopt a do-no-harm approach by progressively developing a model **eco-friendly response** for shelter and non-food items;
- Develop **community-based preparedness** including through mass information campaigns to prevent climate related forced displacement;
- Promote and support the **use of clean energy** by displaced and host communities;
- Engage youth in **plastic and waste collection** to build youth community centres with eco-friendly bricks.

### 3.3. Capitalizing on Partnerships for protection and solutions

The international community support to Central Sahel countries for response to forced displacement is far too low. The magnitude of the challenges remains invisible and not well appreciated at the global level. The media coverage is regrettably focused on the security and terrorist dimension. We need more evidence, more data to show the scale of the needs and the gaps. This will require joints efforts.

In close coordination with UN and NGO partners, UNHCR will raise awareness of the ever-increasing humanitarian needs through:

- **Data collection and analysis:** together with the World Bank (WB), UNHCR has established the Joint Data Center in Copenhagen, which will support Sahel countries in the collection, analysis and communication of key data. In addition, protection monitoring is being harmonized across countries to allow better understanding of the protection context. Protection monitoring shall also be used in strategic manner in supporting multisectoral intervention with a rights-based approach.

- **Communication and wider media coverage** of the humanitarian and protection crisis, including through joint statements with key protection partners and other advocacy interventions at the global level as cluster lead for protection, shelter and CCCM.
- **A proactive resource mobilization strategy:** UNHCR will play a catalytic role to attract financial and technical support for affected people in the Sahel.

This will directly ensure that:

- Scale of needs and gaps are better highlighted, not only for refugees and IDPs but also for host communities.
- Support is enhanced by an increasing number of key actors:
  - UNHCR, who has one of the biggest field presence throughout the region, is opening its offices to other UN agencies as a way to foster synergy in the operational response.
  - **Evidence based advocacy** will allow further development investment to address the root causes of forced displacement. UNHCR is supporting development partners in the Sahel with key data and analysis to ensure the prioritization of Sahel countries.
- Support provided is better oriented and targeted, and Governments can give better direction and coordination.