

UNHCR Sahel Crisis Response

16-31 May 2020

On 30 May 2020, a **coordinated attack on the Intikane refugee camp in the Tahoua region of Niger** killed three refugee leaders, caused severe damages and forced thousands of persons to flee.

Despite movement restrictions and border closures imposed by Sahel countries to limit the spread of COVID-19, ongoing violence and the dire humanitarian situation **continue to force people to flee**.

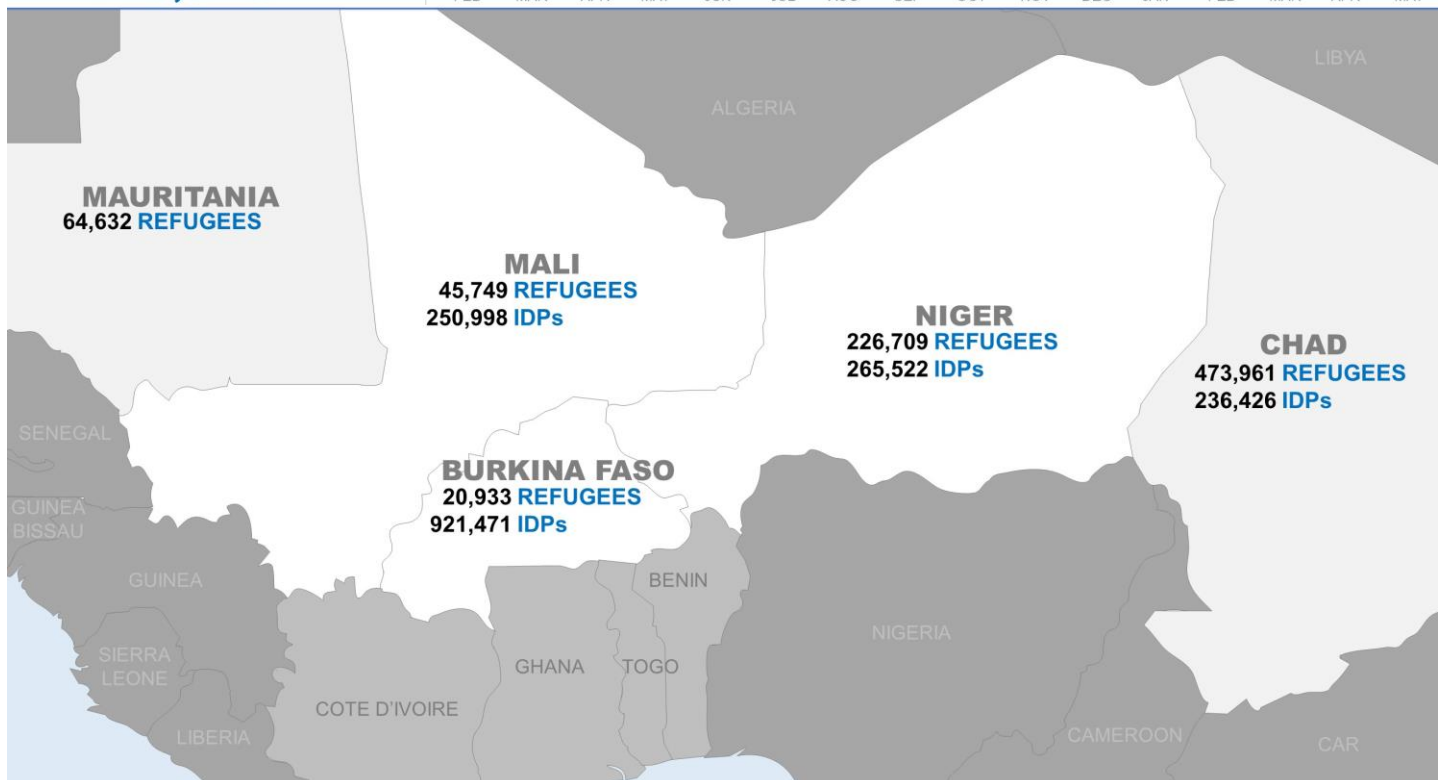
In this challenging context, **UNHCR is stepping up its response** in the Sahel, putting emphasis on providing shelter, education and programmes to prevent and address sexual and gender-based violence.

KEY FIGURES

3,302,064 PERSONS OF CONCERN
1,674,417 IDPs
831,984 REFUGEES
649,738 RETURNEES
145,925 OTHERS

EVOLUTION OF IDP POPULATION (January 2019 – May 2020)

55% increase since January 2020



OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Political and security developments

- The security situation continues to deteriorate rapidly in the **Sahel**, causing humanitarian needs to reach unprecedented levels. Conflict, climate shocks, endemic poverty, and chronic vulnerabilities are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, creating an additional burden on governments' limited resources.
- In **Burkina Faso**, there has been an intensification of violence by armed groups. The end of May was marked by several attacks and more than 50 people died across the country. On the night of 24-25 May, the gendarme post in Faramana, a city on the border with Mali in the Region of the Hauts-Bassins, was attacked, causing the deaths of two gendarmes, while another remains missing. The post was set on fire and several weapons were either burnt or stolen. Incidents in the Region du Nord are becoming more frequent and deadlier, with recent attacks resulting in 15 deaths in Loroum and in 10 deaths in Bilbalogo, close to Barsalogo. The security threat posed by armed groups is moving further south into Burkina Faso, closer to the countries of the Gulf of Guinea. On 30 May, an armed group entered a market in Kompienbiga in the south-east of the country, bordering Togo and Benin, and fired gunshots into the crowd, leading to an estimated 25 to 35 deaths, according to official sources. In addition, UNHCR has been informed of the presence of unidentified armed men in Mentao camp during nights, stealing and destroying equipment. UNHCR is liaising with the Government to facilitate the transfer of the remaining equipment to UNHCR's office in Djibo.
- In **Niger**, the civilian population and their leaders continues to be targeted by armed groups despite recent setbacks against government and coalition forces. A series of attacks in different villages in the Tillabery region, around 100 kilometers from the Malian border, killed at least 20 civilians. On 30 May 2020, about 50 armed men on motorbikes launched a coordinated attack on Intikane, a site hosting some 20,000 refugees and over 15,000 internally displaced Niger nationals about 70 kilometers from the Malian border. The assailants killed three local leaders, torched relief items stocks, destroyed communication antennas, and sabotaged the water supply, causing thousands of people to flee. This attack has put even more pressure on humanitarian support activities in the area.



Situated about 70 kilometers from the Malian border, the Intikane site is home to some 20,000 refugees and over 15,000 internally displaced Niger nationals. © UNHCR Niger

- In **Mali**, the security situation remains challenging, particularly in the northern and central parts of the country, where armed conflicts, terrorism and crime-related incidents continue to be reported, threatening the security of civilians, as well as of humanitarian actors. Despite the growing spread of COVID-19 and measures put in

place for physical distancing, demonstrations are being held in the streets to denounce electricity outages. Teachers are also organizing sit-ins to express discontent towards the government for freezing their salaries for the three past months.

Population Movements

- Despite movement restrictions and border closures imposed by **Sahel** countries in a bid to limit the spread of COVID-19, ongoing violence and the dire humanitarian situation continue to force people to flee across the Sahel, within countries and across borders.
- In **Burkina Faso**, in the Centre Nord, growing insecurity linked to the presence of armed groups around the cities of Pissila and Barsalogo have led 232 IDP families (over 2,150 individuals) and 5 asylum-seeker families (32 individuals) from Mali to flee to Pibaeore in Namenteinga Province. In the meantime, UNHCR's partner reported the voluntary return of 575 households to their places of origin in Barsalogo commune. Protection monitoring is on-going to assess the returnees' needs.
- In **Mali**, UNHCR and its governmental partner, the National Commission in Charge of Refugees (CNCR), completed the first phase of registering Nigerien refugees. As of 18 May 2020, 13,712 Nigerien refugees were registered in the Menaka area, representing a total of 1,799 households, composed of 7,578 females and 6,134 males.
- In **Niger**, insecurity in the Tillabery and Tahoua regions continues to force Malian refugees and Niger nationals to flee their homes to find safety in neighbouring areas. An increasing number of Malian refugees think it is safer to return to their home country than remain in **Niger**. Following the security incident in **Intikane**, over 9200 individuals have left the refugee hosting area, of which some 400 have returned to Mali, mostly to Tamalat, Inchinanane, and Aghazzarakane. A verification exercise is ongoing, but it is estimated that over 8000 persons (most of them Malian refugees) have arrived in the village of Telemces, located some 25 km from the refugee hosting area of Intikane. The remaining individuals are scattered in different villages in Tillia Department.



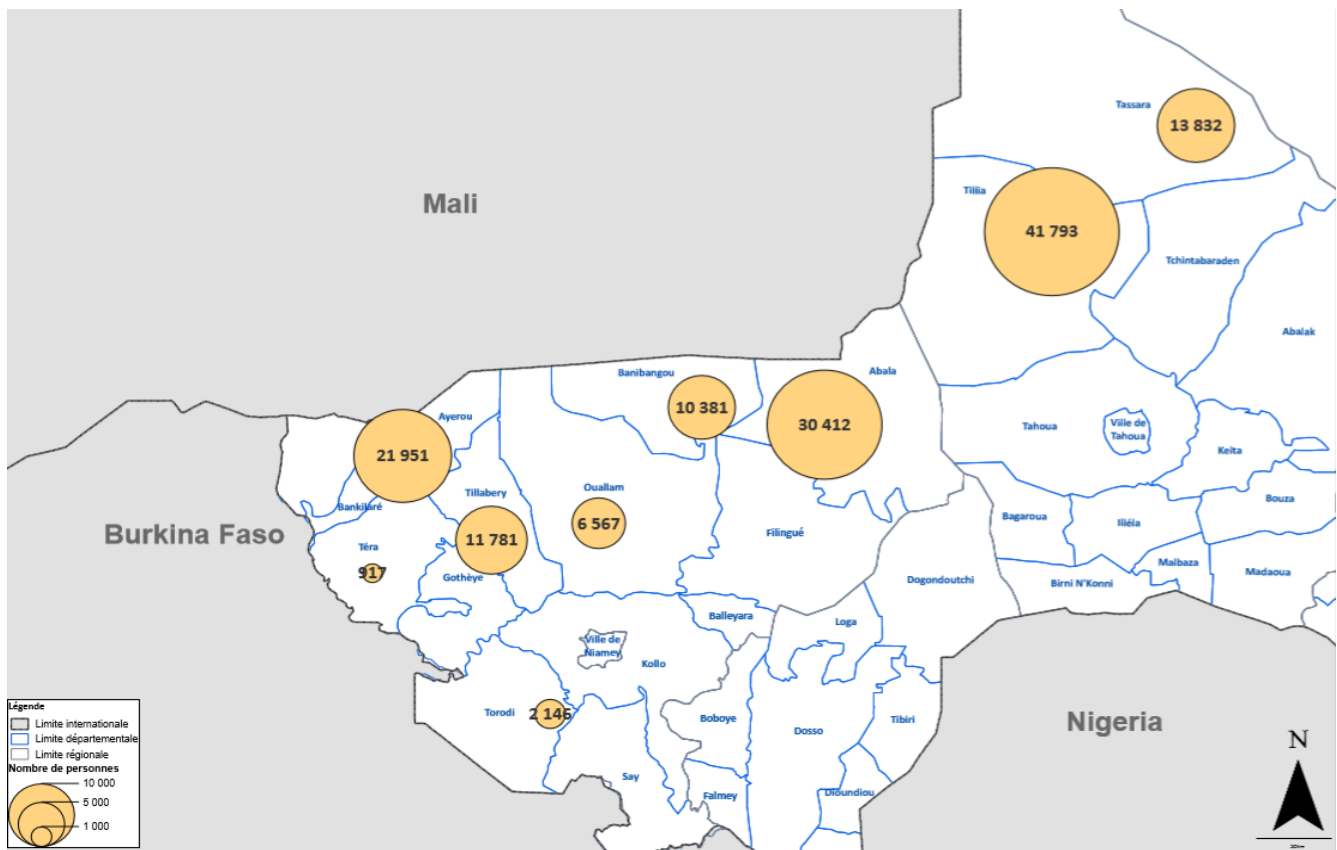
UNHCR is working to support the survivors and is providing urgently needed assistance such as organizing water delivery to make sure that refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and host communities have water available for drinking and hand washing, which is critical in preventing COVID-19 from spreading. © UNHCR Niger

Protection Monitoring

In partnership with the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), UNHCR is spearheading Project 21, a harmonized region-wide protection monitoring system. Following a successful online training organized by DRC and UNHCR, monitoring is being rolling out in Mali and will soon begin in Niger. In Burkina Faso, training preparation has taken place. The system was adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic and consulted with 20 protection monitoring actors in the pilot countries as well as at regional level. This transnational project aims to bring a stronger evidence-based understanding of the protection environment, risks and needs, which allows actors to align protection interventions, to conduct regional advocacy, and to better coordinate protection activities. The three-month pilot phase will be followed by a review period to prepare to implement the system

in the wider region. Findings and analysis will be shared through monthly summary snapshots and quarterly narrative reports. DRC and UNHCR hope to make this project as participative as possible and include more protection actors as it evolves.

- In **Burkina Faso**, in the Centre Nord, partners identified 1,128 cases of human rights violations. The most recurrent violations are gender-based violence (42.46%), physical or mental harm (35.28%) and to the right to property (18.43%). Kaya municipality records the highest number of rights violations – 433 out of the 1,128 cases recorded. Monitoring and awareness-raising activities enabled the identification of 1,047 people with specific needs, including mostly women heads of household who have lost their husbands. 88 received psychological support or assistance. In addition, protection committees developed 70 awareness sessions benefitting over 900 individuals on social cohesion, child protection, hygiene and sanitation, and SGBV. In the Sahel, severe violations to the right to life, property, freedom and security were also reported.
- In **Niger**, the displacement crisis is being closely monitored with the support of a broad community-based network, and protection analysis is carried out on a regular basis. As the national protection cluster lead, UNHCR provides regular capacity building and coordinates efforts with humanitarian actors to ensure that emerging humanitarian and protection needs are identified to form an appropriate collective response.



In Western Niger, the recent displacement created large concentrations of IDPs in the departments of Tillia (41,793), Abala (30,412), Ayerou (21,951), Tassara (13,832), Tillabery (11,781), Banibangou (10,381), Ouallam (6,567), Torodi (2,146) and Tera (917).

© UNHCR Niger (UNHCR Data, 31 May 2020)

- In **Mali**, UNHCR reported 131 security incidents, including 30 in Gao, 62 in Mopti, 29 in Segou and 10 in Timbuktu. The five most reported types of incidents were related to violations of: property rights; physical and/or psychological integrity; the right to freedom and to the security of the person; the right to life and SGBV.

UNHCR RESPONSE

Covid19

- To address the new challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic in the Sahel, UNHCR Operations are strengthening national healthcare systems, WASH structures and services in the main hosting areas and expanding livelihoods opportunities and cash assistance to help mitigate the negative socio-economic impact of the pandemic on refugees and IDPs.
- In **Burkina Faso**, as of 31 May 2020, there were 883 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 53 deaths and 741 recoveries. A third treatment centre was established in the country in Ouagadougou. To date, there are no confirmed cases among populations of concern to UNHCR nor among UNHCR staff. So far, UNHCR and its partners distributed 2,111 hand washing devices, 22,389 bars of soap, 9,000 bottles of liquid soap and 35,870 masks. In addition, UNHCR provided medicine, pharmaceutical supplies and information posters on COVID-19 in the nine regions totaling USD 1,089,084. On 28 May 2020, medicine, hand-washing devices, bins, an ambulance and RHUs for the isolation centre were handed over to the authorities of Kaya, in the Region of the Centre Nord. Communicating with communities on the pandemic is especially important to UNHCR. Through a partnership with *Fondation Hirondelle* (FH), a non-profit organization specialized in journalism and the provision of information to populations faced with crisis, UNHCR has been broadcasting a short daily COVID-19-related news programme for IDPs and host populations through 37 partner radios across the country in local languages. Over 850 IDP and host community families completed questionnaires to assess their knowledge on the COVID-19. The results will help identify information-needs and gaps and will inform future radio programmes.
- In **Mali**, three cases of COVID-19 were reported among IDPs in Mopti, as well as one case among the host population. They are all receiving medical care, and a dedicated inter-agency meeting was held to develop recommendations to prevent the virus' spread. UNHCR continues its COVID-19 sensitization efforts in Timbuktu, Gao and Mopti, as part of the COVID-19 emergency project implemented by UNHCR's partners. In parallel, distributions of sanitary kits to curb the spread of the pandemic continue, benefitting both displaced populations and public health structures. -In addition, 560 hand washing kits will be distributed in 140 schools in Mopti, Gao, and Timbuktu, to support the schools reopening.
- In **Niger**, UNHCR continues the production of hygiene products in several refugee and IDP sites, such as the ETM transit centre in Hamdallaye as well as in Niamey, Maradi, Agadez, Abala and Ouallam. Currently, 667 people from the refugee, IDP and host communities have been trained and are becoming active producers of liquid soap, bleach and moringa soap. In the last week of May alone, they produced 443 litres of bleach, 382 litres of liquid soap, 3,397 litres of antiseptic soap, and 1,000 litres of moringa soap as well as 480 masks. UNHCR is coordinating the distribution of the products among vulnerable households in Niamey and to public hospitals in areas affected by COVID-19. UNHCR is also launching a project to produce washable masks in



In Temelces, the large influx of refugees and IDPs since the beginning of the year has increased pressure on already limited basic services and natural resources such as water. © UNHCR Niger

Niamey, Maradi and Agadez in the upcoming weeks to support the long-term sanitary measures put in place by Niger Government. At the same time, sensitization efforts are ongoing to inform displaced populations on COVID-19 and explain basic preventive measures.

Shelter and Core Relief Items

- In many parts of the **Sahel**, refugees and IDPs often reside in overcrowded camps and sites or among host communities living in already precarious conditions, in historically underserved area. Due to poverty, many people resort to building tenuous shelters with tree branches or cardboards and are thus deprived of privacy and exposed to theft and violence. In these dire living conditions, with limited access to water and hygiene facilities, forcibly displaced persons are often unable to apply the most basic preventive measures such as physical distancing and handwashing, heightening their risk of contamination as COVID-19 spreads towards major hosting areas. To address this issue, UNHCR is putting in place targeted shelter interventions and distributing core relief items as well as exploring ways to decongest the most affected hosting areas in coordination with the national and local authorities.



“As a precaution, I wear both a face mask and my turban, and avoid going to the mosque to pray. I also try to wash my hands regularly but it is difficult without running water so I have to go to the water point. The cash we received during our relocation from the camp has allowed us to make some provisions (food and other necessities) so we can stay home as recommended”

Mohamed Ag Attaher, Malian refugee, 64 years old, living in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. © UNHCR / A. M. A. Ahmed.

- In **Burkina Faso**, heavy rains have impacted several IDP families living in flood prone areas in the Provinces of Seno, Soum, Oudalan and Yagha in the Sahel Region. UNHCR and partners assessed the extent of the damage in these areas and advocated for the urgent relocation of affected families to more suitable locations. Local authorities authorized them to urgently be moved to the stadium in Dori, pending longer term relocation to other identified sites. Some RHUs have been erected in the sites that were already deemed viable following a multi-sectoral assessment. Similarly, Djibo authorities made sites available for families impacted by the rains and discussions are on-going with authorities in other Provinces. In addition, UNHCR and its shelter partner distributed 221 shelter materials to IDPs living in host communities in Kaya, Tougouri, and Kongoussi. Moreover, 32 RHUs were built for IDPs in Kongoussi and provided 217 solar lamps for IDPs living in Kongoussi, Kaya and Barsalogho. In follow up to discussions between UNHCR and the Government of Burkina Faso on the relocation of refugees from Mentao camp to a safer location, CONAREF requested UNHCR’s support to conduct a joint assessment of Gouboubo refugee camp and its facilities. CONAREF will identify the refugees who would be relocated, prioritizing those from Mentao. The authorities agreed that security arrangements would need to be strengthened to make this a viable option.
- In **Mali**, the monthly Shelter Cluster and Cash Learning Partnership (CaLP) (part of the Cash Working Group) meeting, focused on guidance, standard operating procedures, and the redefinition of the minimum package of items, within the framework of the Non-Food Items and shelter intervention strategies.



Construction of social housing for the most vulnerable refugee and host community households is ongoing in the Tillabery region. UNHCR has pledged to construct 4000 social houses in Tillabery. © UNHCR / Marlies Cardoen

- In **Niger**, UNHCR is planning to build 4000 social houses for the most vulnerable refugee and host population households in Tillabery region, using the hydraform technique. The Abala brick factory is working at full speed with a total of 343,370 bricks produced to date and 72 persons hired. In Ayerou, due to insecurity, brick production has been suspended since mid-February. The brick factory hired 68 persons. Finally, in Ouallam, 45 people have been hired since the start of production. Delayed by COVID-19, land allotment activities are restarting in Abala where 80 ha have been subdivided so far.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

- In the **Sahel**, sexual and gender-based violence is endemic and includes widespread abuse and exploitation, trafficking, forced and child marriage, unwanted pregnancy, and increasing instances of rape and other forms of sexual violence as the conflict persists. This dramatic situation has been further aggravated by the spread of COVID-19, which is expected to disproportionately impact women and girls who traditionally care for sick family members and are exposed to negative family coping mechanisms in times of crisis, like child marriage. Focusing on prevention and response through awareness raising and provision of comprehensive support to SGBV survivors, UNHCR is working with partners to implement strong referral mechanisms and strengthen health and support structures (including new mobile health services) in main hosting areas which have historically been underserved.
- In **Burkina Faso**, a total of 36 GBV cases were reported during the second half of May, including cases of sexual violence, psychological violence, child marriage, forced levirate (obligation for a widow to marry her deceased husband's brother) and social and economic discrimination (479 cases since January 2020). All received psychosocial support and medical treatment in addition to NFI's, including hygiene materials as required. In this difficult context, UNHCR continued its outreach efforts with prevention, awareness-raising activities on SGBV and information sharing on how to seek support. A total of 48 group discussions reaching 750 people were organized on issues such as denial of resources, opportunities and/or services; forced marriage/child marriage; and on the referral mechanism in place to receive assistance. In the Sahel region, a GBV baseline assessment is being conducted jointly with the GBV Sub-Cluster in the regions of the Nord, Centre Nord and the Boucle du Mouhoun to identify needs and gaps and improve the existing referral pathway.

UNHCR finalized partnership agreements with to strengthen referral, as well as medical and psychosocial care for survivors of SGBV.

- In **Mali**, in Timbuktu, UNHCR provided four SGBV survivors with direct assistance and they were included in income-generating activities (IGA) to foster their economic inclusion and empowerment. In Mopti, an awareness-raising session was carried out on the consequences of early marriage reaching 10 people. In parallel, with its SGBV response, UNHCR is continuing to consult with the SGBV Sub-Cluster, field actors and stakeholders to inform the SGBV component of its regional response in the Sahel. UNHCR is also expanding its SGBV response capacity in areas of the country where the needs are the most pressing. Complementing the actions of other UN agencies, UNHCR will target four locations in the northern and central parts with a limited availability of SGBV services and the highest concentration of displaced populations. This new programme will supplement efforts made by UNHCR through the Spotlight initiative which also aims to eliminate SGBV but targets other geographical locations.
- In **Niger**, UNHCR and its partners are closely following population movements resulting from the Intikane incident, ensuring that women and girls' needs are placed at the center of the response. In Maradi, under the lead of UNHCR, the SGBV Working Group reviewed the local SGBV SOPs which will be finalized by end of June. A total of 28 SGBV cases were registered including rapes, sexual assaults, forced marriages, resource denial and physical assaults. 2470 persons including 796 women, 420 men, 797 girls and 457 boys were reached through SGBV sensitization activities.



Malian refugee women who lived in Goudoubo camp before they were moved following the increase in attacks and the repeated threats on their community since the beginning of 2020. © UNHCR / Sylvain Cherkaoui

Education

- The combined impact of insecurity and the spread of COVID-19 in the **Sahel** is particularly devastating on the education sector with school closures no longer restricted to conflict areas but generalized to entire countries. The negative outcomes of prolonged school closures are likely to disproportionately impact displaced children, who not only see their education interrupted but also lose the safety offered by a school and get exposed to a higher risk of abuse, neglect, violence and exploitation. The situation is especially precarious for girls who are more at risk of permanently dropping out, exposing them to forced marriage. Ensuring continuity of education for displaced children and youth is challenging, especially in rural areas where the digital divide exacerbates the education divide. In response, UNHCR has taken emergency education measures to ensure displaced children and youth's access to safe distance learning alternatives, support health training for teachers and community awareness-raising activities on COVID-19, and prevention measures while upgrading water and sanitation facilities in schools.
- In **Burkina Faso**, with the reopening of three grades, which have exams this year, on 1 June, UNHCR and its partners visited schools in refugee hosting areas to find places for refugee children who had fled the Goudoubo refugee camp. In Wendou, authorities have provided three classrooms to accommodate children from both the refugee and host communities living in the area. In addition, UNHCR, with the support of *Education Cannot Wait*, began purchasing radios for primary and secondary refugee students to ensure their access to education

in similar conditions to Burkinabe students. Material support will also be provided to 20 schools in the Sahel region to fight the spread of COVID-19.

- In **Niger**, UNHCR is supporting the Government to reopen classrooms as of 1 June 2020. UNHCR and its partners have installed handwashing devices and soap dispensers in the Sayam Forage camp primary school in the Diffa region and will be monitoring the resumption of primary school classes in Bosso, Chétimari, Diffa, Kabléwa and Mainé Soroa municipalities. Similar activities are implemented in the Tahoua and Tillabéry regions where handwashing devices and soap dispensers were placed in the schools attended by the refugees in the communes of Ayorou, Abala and Ouallam and in the ZAR school in Intikane.
- In **Mali**, 5,500 solar-powered radios are ready to be deployed to support children's distance learning in central and northern Mali. In these low resource/low connectivity areas, where very few households have access to electricity, TV or internet, radio education is one of the few ways children can continue learning. This intervention will ensure learning and protection to 11,000 refugee, IDP and host community children affected by COVID-19 school closures.

Energy and Environment

- The **Sahel** is one of the regions most impacted by climate change in the world. This has been caused by decreased rainfall and a depletion of soil due to agricultural overexploitation and progressive deforestation of the original savannahs as a result of cutting firewood, bush fires and stray animals. To address this critical dimension of the regional crisis, UNHCR is adopting a do-no-harm approach and an eco-friendly response. It is to strengthening community-based preparedness to prevent climate-related forced displacement and promoting and supporting the use of clean energy as well as plastic and waste collection in areas hosting displaced populations.
- In **Burkina Faso**, to reduce the use of firewood for domestic cooking and to address the risk of deforestation in the Sahel, UNHCR refilled 63 bottles of gas for refugees from Goudoubo camp.
- In **Niger**, UNHCR and its partner, refueled 195 bottles of gas for refugee households. Gas cookers are favored because they reduce pressure on the scarce wood in refugee hosting areas. Activities to identify land reclamation sites and solid waste collection sessions in Ayorou, Abala and Ouallam. In Ouallam, 960 households have received recharged gas cooker which help prevent deforestation in the hosting areas.

COORDINATION AND PARTNERSHIP

- To support a comprehensive and sustainable response to forced displacement in the Sahel, UNHCR believes strongly in the need to build and sustain partnership and collaboration to raise awareness of the crisis and mobilize financial and technical support from all relevant stakeholders.
- In **Niger**, thanks to the EU Trust Fund, UNHCR pursues its collaboration with the Regional Directorates of Health, Education and Hydraulics to ensure the inclusion of refugees in national systems. With the support of GIZ, UNHCR and the Government are providing access to land in urbanized sites where over 4000 houses will be built for the most vulnerable refugee and host population households. Moreover, a strong tripartite collaboration has been developed among the World Bank, the Government of Niger, and UNHCR to improve access to basic public services and further support economic opportunities. With the support of ILO, Malian refugees will be included in a market-based livelihood intervention in fish production and waste management. UNHCR is also collaborating with the World Bank Group to implement the Learning Improvement for Results in Education (LIRE) project approved in April 2020. The project aims to: 1) improve the quality of teaching and

learning conditions nationwide, including in select refugee hosting communities; and 2) strengthen the Government's education policies, including for persons under UNHCR's mandate. Due COVID-19, the project will also focus on developing and strengthening capacity to provide distance-learning programmes. In line with the COVID-19 response, the World Bank Group and UNCHR have also exchanged on the WB emergency HEALTH project and UNHCR has provided valuable guidance and shared its experience in supporting the Government its response plan.

COMMUNICATION AND ADVOCACY

Communication and advocacy pieces recently published by UNHCR on the Sahel crisis:

- [Self-help project in Niger churns out hygiene products in fight against coronavirus](#) (UNHCR Story, 18 May 2020)
- [UNHCR outraged at killings of two refugees and one community member in Niger](#) (UNHCR Press Release, 01 June 2020)
- [Malian refugees, local hosts flee after Sunday attack on site in western Niger](#) (UNHCR Briefing Note, 02 June 2020)

DONORS

Special thanks to:

DONORS WHO HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO UNHCR OPERATIONS IN THE SAHEL (2020)

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