

UNHCR Sahel Crisis Response

16 – 30 April 2020

In the Sahel, the COVID-19 pandemic represents an **unprecedented health and sanitary emergency** adding to an **already dramatic humanitarian situation** characterized by chronic poverty and unemployment, widespread food insecurity, school closures, lack of health services and growing insecurity.

The movement restrictions and various preventive measures introduced in the region to curb the spread of the virus are having a **dire impact on local economies** which may fuel political unrest and exacerbate tensions. In light of these challenges and risks, governments of the region are **starting to relax or lift some of these restrictions**.

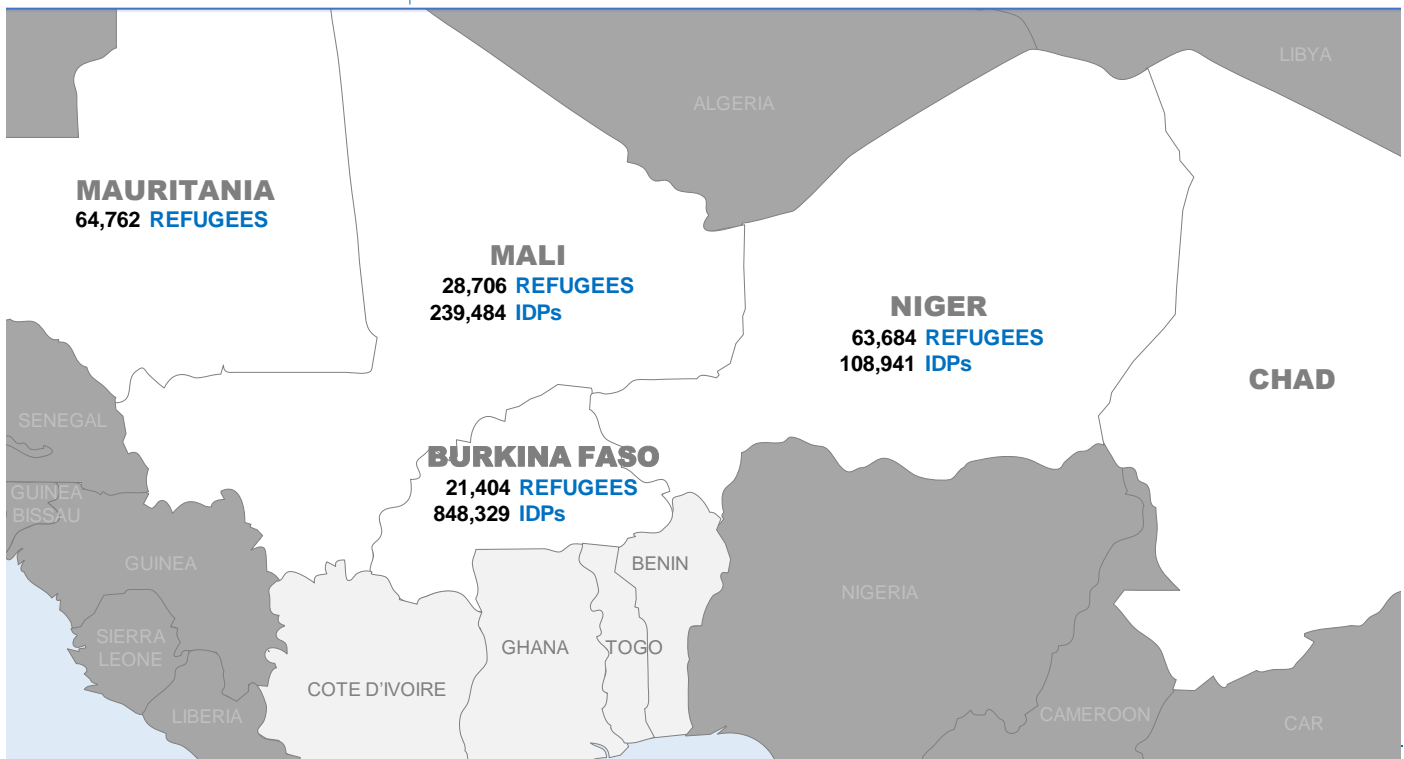
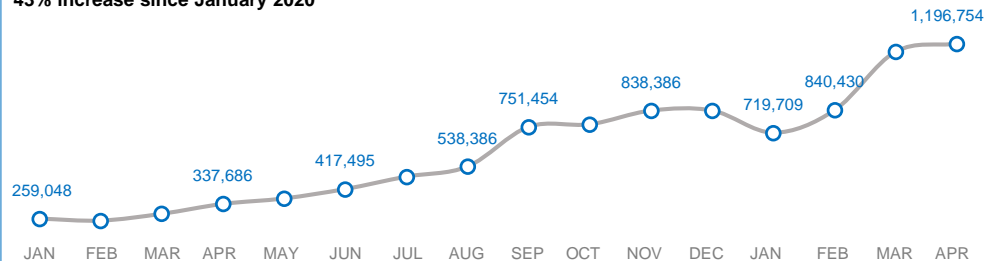
As **forced displacement continues** across the Sahel, UNHCR is scaling up its response and adapting it to public health measures. In coordination with governments, assistance to affected populations is focusing on addressing SGBV, ensuring access to education and shelter, in an environmentally conscious manner in a region affected by climate change.

KEY FIGURES

2,023,033 PERSONS OF CONCERN
1,196,754 IDPs
178,556 REFUGEES
644,113 RETURNEES
3,610 OTHERS

EVOLUTION OF IDP POPULATION (January 2019 – April 2020)

43% increase since January 2020



OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Political and security developments

- As described in the previous report, the COVID-19 pandemic represents an extraordinary and unprecedented health emergency adding to an already dramatic humanitarian situation in the **Sahel**. Governments have adopted sweeping measures to curb the spread of the virus including closing borders, imposing travel bans, prohibiting mass gatherings, shutting down schools, and closing markets. None of the preventive measures targets refugees or IDPs but their socio-economic impact is likely to disproportionately affect these vulnerable populations, especially in terms of food security. Already alarming before the pandemic due to the combined effects of recent climatic shocks, recurring droughts, conflict and insecurity, the food crisis in the Sahel is now worsening partly because of confinement, market closures, barriers to cross-border trading. And with humanitarian relief efforts further hindered by COVID-19, parts of the region are at high risk of sliding into famine very soon. In **Burkina Faso**, demonstrations including thousands of IDPs have already taken place in Kaya in the past couple of weeks, demanding food, alleging the problems of insecurity that do not allow them to have access to agricultural lands. There is also serious concern that the COVID-19 pandemic may fuel the conflict as a result of the impact of the pandemic on the economy, livelihood, education and governance, further weakening social cohesion and exacerbating socio-economic disparities and communal tensions in the region. To mitigate the impact of the pandemic and address some of these risks, the Governments of the region are starting to relax or lift some of the restrictions.

Population Movements

- Countries in the **Sahel** have imposed complete border closure, directly impacting ongoing repatriation processes from Burkina Faso and Niger to Mali. However, despite these restrictions, population movements continue in the Sahel within countries and across borders, triggered by the ongoing conflicts and violence and the dire humanitarian situation that the spread of COVID-19 risk intensifying in the coming weeks.
- In **Burkina Faso**, the deterioration of the security and humanitarian situation in the Sahel and Centre-Nord regions has led to an increase in internal displacement. As of 22 April 2020, the number of internally displaced people reached over 848,000, representing an increase of 11,000 in approximately a month. The Centre Nord continues to record population movements to more secure areas, such as Kaya and Barsalogho, following attacks by unidentified armed groups increasing the population in these communities and placing additional strain on the basic services and resources available in the various localities.
- **Mauritania** is hosting the largest number of Malian refugees with a total of 62,508 individuals, as of end of April 2020. With the conflict extending to central and even western Mali, the number of refugees entering from border points along the southern border and to Fassala on the southeastern border has spiked in February. Refugee movements were significantly reduced following the closure of the border to control the proliferation of the COVID-19.
- In **Niger**, the volatile security situation forces people to flee on a daily basis. Since January 2020 we have witnessed a sharp rise in IDP flows in the regions of Tillabery and Tahoua with more than 8,000 persons left their homes in the Nigerien-Malian border area to look for safety in Ayerou and Abala during the month of April alone. In the Intikane area, over 4,300 persons have arrived since beginning of the year, of which over 2,600 IDPs and around 1,700 Malian refugees coming mostly from the Gao region. Due to the COVID-19 situation, screening and registration activities are currently suspended as they imply a gathering of people which is currently prohibited by the authorities.

Protection Monitoring

- The implementation of Project 21 has started with the organization of trainings with partners in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger before initiating the pilot phase. The new harmonized regional-wide protection monitoring tool was jointly developed by UNHCR and DRC in consultations with 20 protection monitoring actors in the three pilot countries as well as at Regional level. Adapted to COVID-19 pandemics, this transnational project will help foster evidence-based understanding of the protection environment, risks and needs, which allows protection actors to align protection interventions, to conduct regional advocacy, and to better coordinate protection activities. The three-months pilot phase, which include distance training of monitors, will be followed by the system review period to prepare for an implementation in wider region. Findings and analysis will be shared monthly in summary snapshots and quarterly in narrative reports. The Regional Protection Monitoring project was formally launched in **Mali** with a pilot phase in Mopti region.
- In **Burkina Faso**, the protection and security situation are closely followed by UNHCR. In the Sahel Region, due to limited access, UNHCR continues its protection monitoring activities through the various partners. From 16 to 30 April, some 14 incidents were reported, including deaths, SGBV, attacks on property, as well as threats and kidnappings. In the Centre Nord Region, ICAHD protection committees organized 17 outreach sessions for 369 IDPs on issues of sexual and gender-based violence, COVID-19 prevention, hygiene and sanitation. In the Nord Region, after the Government expressed its willingness to organize the return of the IDPs who fled the deadly incidents of Bargha on 8 March, UNHCR is closely monitoring the conditions in the envisaged return areas while successfully advocating with the authorities to ensure that these IDP returns are safe, dignified and voluntary.
- In **Niger**, UNHCR's monitoring partners are CIAUD in Tahoua, ANTD and CIAUD in Tillabery. UNHCR also works an extensive network of monitors, focal points and informants in remote and hard-to-reach areas to do protection monitoring. Through the continuous presence of these monitors and focal points, trained by UNHCR, data (protection incidents) is collected and shared in real time to inform UNHCR's response including its leadership role in the protection cluster. In Wester Niger alone, protection monitoring during the first quarter of 2020 allowed to document 191 protection incidents (129 for the Tillabery region and 62 for the Tahoua region) including armed incursions (24%), theft and looting (24%), physical violence (19%) which caused the death of 549 people.



"We left our village after an attack on a nearby military base... I hurt my foot on the way, my husband and children had to carry me."

*Aissa Dangui, 50 fled from Tahoua with her family during unrest in February.
 ©UNHCR/Boubacar Sidde*

UNHCR RESPONSE

Covid19

- To address the new challenges created by the COVID-19 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**, on 28 April, UNHCR made an in-kind donation worth 329 million FCFA (US\$ 540,000) to the Region of the Sahel, including 20 refugee housing units used for triage/isolation, pharmaceutical products and an ambulance, some 2,000 wash kits, 50 hand washing devices, jerry cans for the transport and stock of water, soaps as well as 35,000 masks made by refugees. It also included the constructions of classrooms, latrines and administrative blocks for four schools in Dori, and the installation of four 5,000-liters water reservoirs and water trucking system. In the Nord Region, UNHCR donated to the local health authorities some 30,000 information leaflets and medication. UNHCR's partners, Intersos and Plan International, continue their sensitization and awareness efforts on COVID-19 and prevention measures amongst IDPs, asylum seekers and host communities. In the Haut Bassins Region, as of 30 April, 142 communal and over 1,300 familial hand-washing devices as well as over 11,000 soaps were distributed to some 9,700 IDPs living in the area. In addition, 136 refugee families and 100 host families each received a hand washing device. In regions heavily affected by forced displacement and conflict, these interventions not only aim at addressing the needs of affected populations but also to preserve the peaceful coexistence between IDP, refugee and host communities.
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- Abdoulaye, master dressmaker and member of the host community in Dori, Burkina Faso, brought his expertise to help make 3,000 protective masks that will allow Dori's IDPs and refugees to protect themselves from COVID-19. ©UNHCR/M. Kone*
- In **Chad**, UNHCR has launched the construction of 20 isolation points in the refugee reception centers as part of its COVID emergency preparedness and response plan. All the 15 health centers serving the refugee areas in the South have also been provided with personal protective equipment (masks, gloves, hydroalcoholic gel, soap) to help prevent the spread of the virus in case of an outbreak in the area. UNHCR is also pursuing its awareness-raising efforts through community outreach in the main refugee hosting areas using megaphones in camps, radio broadcasting (Amdjarass) and motorized audio in surrounding camps and villages to respect distancing measures. The Maro and Belom camps have been entirely covered and UNHCR reached 11,961 people, including refugees, in hosting areas near the camps and at the Haraze and Maro health centers. Similar information campaigns are organized in Eastern Chad.
 - In **Mauritania**, UNHCR conducted an impact assessment of its awareness-raising activities in Mbera camp, the largest refugee camp of Malian refugee. A total of 107 children and 150 adults were engaged in through door-to-door visits to measure their level of knowledge on COVID and the basic preventive measures. Over 90% of respondents showed a correct understanding of the messages shared. Door-to-door interventions were found to be most effective in a camp where a large proportion of refugee adults are illiterate; this was followed by social media, and parents. These results are informing the second phase of the aware-raising campaign which is ongoing and will be similarly assessed.
 - In **Niger**, UNHCR and INTERSOS trained the first 20 out of 269 government and humanitarian emergency workers on psychological first aid helping others manage stress. Moreover, UNHCR provides staffing support to national health services in all refugee hosting areas, for an initial period of three months: 17 medical doctors, 44 nurses, 18 midwives, 15 referring nurses, 2 lab analysts, 11 hygienists, 11 WASH staff, 12 psychosocial support staff and 20 additional community sensitization agents. UNHCR is also training up to 600 healthcare staff in all six refugee hosting regions reaching. In Tahoua and Tillabery, UNHCR is supporting the authorities

to rehabilitate and extend existing health structures to allow for the isolation and treatment of potential COVID patients. In Tahoua, a first isolation center outside the city.

Communication with Communities - #DontGoViral campaign in Niger

In **Niger**, UNHCR partnered with “Poings Levés”, an artist collective of seven committed singers gathered around rapper Danny Lee, to raise awareness on the COVID-19 pandemic in Niger and the prevention measures to adopt. The result of this collaboration is the song *Protect your Life*, with lyrics in Djerma, Haoussa, Tamashek and French in order to reach the whole population within West & Central Africa. This UNHCR initiative is part of the national response plan for Infection prevention and control and Risk communication and socio-community involvement. Broadcasted on 3 national televisions and radios and widely shared on social networks, the song has been integrated in UNESCO’s [#DontGoViral campaign](#), launched with the "Innovation for Policy" (i4Policy) Foundation to fight against the spread of the virus and the misinformation that accompanied the pandemic. The [video clip](#) accompanying this powerful song features several refugees living in Niamey who are contributing to prevention through the production of soap and bleach to be distributed among Niger’s most vulnerable communities, with the support of UNHCR and its partners.



The seven members of the Nigerien hip-hop collective "Poings Levés" raising awareness on COVID-19 as part of the UNESCO’s [#DontGoViral campaign](#).
 ©Olivier Girard

Shelter and Core Relief Items

- In many parts of the **Sahel**, refugees and IDPs are often residing in overcrowded camps and sites or among host communities often living in already precarious conditions in historically underserved area. Due to poverty, many people resort to building precarious 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 social distancing and handwashing, exposing themselves to heightened risks of contamination as COVID-19 spreads towards major hosting areas. To address this issue, UNHCR operations are implementing targeted shelter interventions and the distributions of core relief items and exploring ways to decongest the most affected hosting areas in coordination with the national and local authorities.
- In **Mali**, on 28 April, the Faladie IDP site, in Bamako caught fire. No human casualties were reported but the incident caused the destruction of most of the displaced persons’ tents and belongings. UNHCR, in collaboration with the Malian government and local partners, provided emergency assistance to the survivors and assisted them to relocate to the Mabile IDP site nearby. Shelter kits and non-food items as well as charcoal and handwashing kits were distributed. UNHCR as leader of the Protection Cluster and co-lead of the Shelter/NFI Cluster is coordinating with the authorities to expedite the establishment of a new site in Bamako, which would allow displaced persons to dwell in safety and dignity. During the reporting period, UNHCR also set up 32 family tents in an IDP site in Mopti in collaboration with the Regional Directorate of Civil Protection (DRPC) and delivered CRIs including synthetic mats, thermal blankets, set of kitchen utensils, jerry cans, mosquito nets and solar lamps to IDP households.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

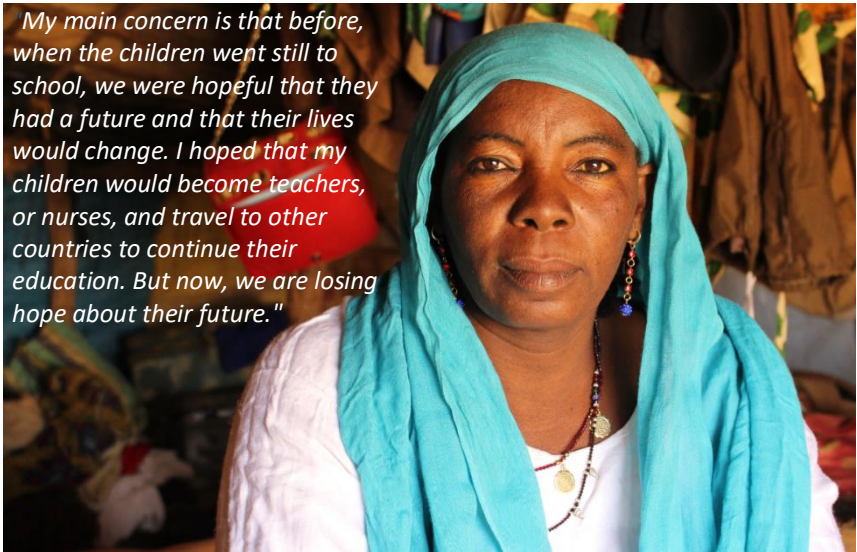
- In the **Sahel**, sexual and gender-based violence is endemic and includes widespread abuse and exploitation, trafficking, forced and early marriage, unwanted pregnancy, and increasing instances of rape and other forms of sexual violence as the conflict exacerbates, etc. This dramatic situation is now further aggravated by the spread of COVID-19 which is expected to disproportionately impact women and girls traditionally caring for sick family members and being exposed to negative family coping mechanisms like child marriage in times of crisis. 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, strengthen health and support structures (including new mobile health services) in main hosting areas which have historically been underserved.
- In **Burkina Faso**, UNHCR sustains its efforts at prevention, awareness-raising and assistance to survivors of SGBV. In the Centre Nord region, ICAHD, conducted 9 awareness sessions with 185 IDPs, including 91 women, 78 men and 16 children, on SGBV. In addition, 25 women with specific needs were provided with individual cash grant assistance. In the reporting period, 16 cases of SGBV were reported, including 02 cases of sexual violence, all received psychological care and those of sexual violence were also referred for medical support. UNHCR is closely working with the Protection Cluster and SGBV Sub-Cluster to update and disseminate information about referral pathways in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak.
- In **Mauritania**, UNHCR monitors SGBV incidents for any potential increase due to the confinement and curfew. The Operation enhances communications with both men and women on SGBV prevention and legal, safety, health, and psychosocial support.
- In **Niger**, UNHCR is strengthening 11 centers reserved to victims of sexual and gender-based violence throughout the regions of Tillabery and Tahoua. To ensure adequate assistance and counselling while respecting all precautions in the framework of the COVID-19 prevention, the premises will be scaled up and staffing will be increased with the recruitment of 50 additional case workers, social workers, psychologists and legal counselors. These centers will also be equipped with 2000 dignity kits to be distributed to vulnerable women.

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 the 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 will exacerbate the education divide. In response, UNHCR has taken emergency education measures to ensure displaced children and youth 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**, UNHCR is actively preparing for the progressive reopening of schools, planned for beginning of June, in coordination with local authorities, education personnel and operational partners. Construction and rehabilitation of WASH facilities in schools, installation of COVID-specific handwashing facilities for teachers, students and support staff, teacher training in hygiene and health security, and monitoring of schools for safe practices will be organized to ensure the safe resumption of classes. UNHCR has also made an in-kind donation to the Region of the Sahel that includes the constructions of classes, latrines and administrative blocks for four schools in Dori.

- In **Mali**, refugee, returnee and IDP hosting education infrastructure are supported through rehabilitation, construction and equipment of classrooms. In that line, UNHCR has been awarded funding from the Japanese government for emergency education. The project will ensure access to quality inclusive education in a protective learning environment for 1,500 displaced girls and boys in the Mopti, Timbuktu and Gao regions through the construction, rehabilitation and equipment of classrooms; distribution of learning; and teachers and education personnel will receive training on inclusive education, MHPSS, peace education and education in emergencies. Within the COVID-19 framework, UNHCR Mali is playing an active role in the decision making, elaboration and rapid execution of a MoE-led national COVID-19 response. The strategy aims to ensure the continuity of learning in a protective and inclusive environment, and to prepare the safe reopening of schools. UNHCR has been granted generous funding by Education Cannot Wait in support of distance learning, MHPSS and SEL, improved school water facilities and hygiene awareness raising for 10,000 displaced girls and boys of central and northern Mali.

- In **Mauritania**, on 20 and 21 April, in coordination with Save the Children and the local authorities, UNHCR organized a teacher training on distance education for primary school teachers working in Mbera camp. The topics covered included how to ensure the quality of distance education, how to adjust programmes, and how to develop appropriate learning tools in the context of school closures.



My main concern is that before, when the children went still to school, we were hopeful that they had a future and that their lives would change. I hoped that my children would become teachers, or nurses, and travel to other countries to continue their education. But now, we are losing hope about their future."

Eligmate Awanaka is a 46-year old mother of 8. Her children are currently at home in the refugee hosting area in Intikane. Due to the COVID crisis, schools are closed in Niger, including in refugee hosting areas. ©UNHCR/Boubacar Siddo

Energy and Environment

- The **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. Over the past years, the region has been experiencing an overall decrease in rainfall, but also a depletion of soils due to agricultural overexploitation and progressive deforestation of the original savannahs as a result of cutting firewood, bush fires and stray animals. The crisis now makes it even more difficult and dangerous for pastoralists to reach grazing lands and for farmers to access their land at critical periods of the growing season, which could threaten food insecurity in the coming months. To address this critical dimension of the regional crisis, UNHCR is adopting a do-no-harm approach and eco-friendly response aimed at strengthening community-based preparedness to prevent climate related forced displacement and promoting and supporting the use of clean energy, and plastic and waste collection in areas hosting displaced populations.
- In **Mali**, the fire incident that ravaged Faladie site for displaced persons in Bamako underscored the importance of transitioning to cleaner and safer energy sources. UNHCR is exploring the possibility of installing solar lamps to reduce the use of fuel and the risk of fire incident while ensure a more regular energy supply to address the frequent power outage in most refugee areas.
- In **Niger**, in the Tillabery and Tahoua regions, UNHCR and partners have rehabilitated degraded land through the technique of the "half-moon" and assisted forest regeneration. In Ouallam, 960 households have received recharged kits to cook on gas so to save trees. In Ayerou and Intikane, refugees and host communities have received training on how to improve their shelter built in local clay.

COORDINATION AND PARTNERSHIP

- In **Mauritania**, at the request of the Government and in close cooperation with the authorities, UNHCR coordinates the humanitarian response for the Malian refugees in Mauritania. UNHCR is a member of the 2018-2022 United Nations Sustainable Development Partnership Framework (CPDD), jointly signed with the Mauritanian Government, representatives of other United Nations agencies and international NGOs, which integrates humanitarian and development interventions. UNHCR also participates in the United Nations Country Team. National NGOs are also indispensable partners of UNHCR for the implementation of projects.

COMMUNICATION AND ADVOCACY

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

- [UNHCR says all parties must protect civilians as more fighting sweeps across Sahel](#) (24 April 2020)
- [In Niger, Malian refugees make masks to help fight coronavirus spread.](#) (UNHCR Broadcast, 30 April 2020)
- [Malian refugees in Niger make face covers to prevent the coronavirus spread](#) (UNHCR Broadcast, 01 May 2020)
- [When hip-hop saves lives: UNESCO, i4Policy, UNHCR join forces in #DontGoViral campaign to fight infodemic around COVID-19](#) (UNESCO Broadcast, 07 May 2020)
- [#DontGoViral campaign \(official\)](#)
- [Regional information platform on COVID-19 and tools for engagement and communication with communities in West Africa](#)

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