

UNHCR Sahel Crisis Response

01-15 May 2020

Undisrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the Sahel **conflict continues to escalate and expand in the region**, leaving coastal countries fearful that the violence may spill onto their territories.

In **Burkina Faso**, the first half of May 2020 was marked by the departure of most refugees from **Mentao camp** to the city of Djibo, following the **violent incident** of 2 May. Home to over 5,700 refugees, the camp is now almost empty.

In coordination with governments and partners, UNHCR is **scaling up its response**, focusing on addressing SGBV, ensuring access to education and shelter, in an environmentally conscious manner in a region affected by climate change.

KEY FIGURES

3,125,856 PERSONS OF CONCERN
1,520,063 IDPs
820,825 REFUGEES
678,413 RETURNEES
106,555 OTHERS

EVOLUTION OF IDP POPULATION (January 2019 – April 2020)

36% increase since January 2020



OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Political and security developments

- The **Sahel** continues to grapple with a dire humanitarian situation exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19 combined to the pre-existing challenges faced by the region. Despite increased international military support, the conflict continues to escalate, uninterrupted by the pandemic, especially in the Liptako-Gurma.
- In **Burkina Faso**, the security situation remains extremely critical especially in the Sahel, Nord and Est regions, where armed groups organized several ambushes against security forces causing the death of at least 15 soldiers in the first half of May 2020. Many civilians have also been killed during the counterinsurgency operations organized by the National Security Forces (NSF) and Koglweogo self-defence groups in response to these attacks. Refugees and IDPs are directly impacted by this climate of violence. On 2 May, anti-terrorist units entered the camp of Mentao near the city Djibo and searched several houses after an attack on soldiers earlier that day. Over 30 refugee men and boys were beaten by government forces. Although it is contested by the authorities, some refugees declared to have received an ultimatum to leave the camp in the next 72 hours. UNHCR issued a press statement condemning the violence and ensured the victims of the incident received medical support at the health centre in Djibo. The Government expressed its regrets about the incident and announced the opening of an investigation. Denying any ultimatum, authorities reiterated its determination in ensuring the respect of the civilian character of the refugee camps and to guarantee international protection and the respect of the rights of refugees on its territory. The Government also committed to strengthen security in the refugee camps while working on the relocation of refugees from Mentao to a safer area in coordination with UNHCR and all relevant actors.
- In **Niger**, in the Tillabery region, several incursions by jihadist groups targeted villages near the Malian border killing at least 20 civilians. These attacks reflect a willingness of these groups to demonstrate their strength in the area after significant setbacks against governmental forces and their allies. Looting shops, stealing cattle, the attackers forced the inhabitants of the villages to leave adding to an already dramatic internal displacement situation in the region and putting additional strain on fragile, overwhelmed host communities.
- Adding to an already complex situation, the **Sahel** has also seen clashes between local jihadist and insurgent groups since the beginning of May 2020. This growing tension between competing armed groups affiliated to the Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State risk further destabilizing an already fragile region and fueling conflict, violence and instability beyond the Sahel. On May 11, a joint operation was launched by **Cote d'Ivoire** and **Burkina Faso** against jihadist armed groups near their shared border. This new development indicates that jihadist groups have been strengthening and expanding their range of operations, leaving coastal countries fearful that the violence may spill onto their territories.
- To reduce the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their economies and to address the growing risk of a food crisis in the region, the countries of the Sahel are progressively easing the preventive measures put in place to curb the spread of the virus. Among other measures, the Government of **Burkina Faso** reopened the main markets in Ouagadougou, lifted the quarantine on over 15 cities, reinitiated inter-city public transportation and initiated the progressive reopening of mosques as of 2 May and of schools from 11 May for the classes who have exams this year. On 9 May, the Government of **Mali** lifted the nationwide curfew imposed since 25 March. In **Niger**, the Government has also lifted the lockdown on the city of Niamey and authorized the reopening of mosques on the condition that certain preventive measures were followed including respecting social distancing and the use of mouth masks and hydroalcoholic gel.

Population Movements

- The border closures imposed by the Sahel countries in response to COVID-19 continue to impact the voluntary 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 ongoing violence and the dire humanitarian situation.
- In **Burkina Faso**, the first half of May 2020 was marked by the departure of most refugees from Mentao camp to the city of Djibo, following the violent incident of 2 May (mentioned above). The camp, which was home to more than 5,700 refugees, is now almost empty. The families who have opted for voluntary return to Mali are requesting an exceptional opening of the border and the facilitation of the return by UNHCR and the Governments of Burkina Faso and Mali. The others are awaiting relocation to a safer location. UNHCR and its partners have removed valuable assets to prevent theft or damage.
- **Mauritania** continues to host the largest number of Malian refugees in the Sahel, with a total of 62,508 individuals, as of end of April 2020. Since early March and the tightening of border controls due to the COVID-19 proliferation, refugee arrivals have been significantly reduced. The few refugees who have arrived were placed in quarantine and tested for COVID-19 before being allowed to enter the country.



Malian refugee women part of the VRPC group during the IVD celebrations in Bassikounou (South-east Mauritania) ©UNHCR/Viola E. Bruttomesso/December 2019

- In **Mali**, UNHCR and its governmental partner, the National Commission in Charge of Refugees (CNCR) continued the registration of Niger refugees newly arrived in Menaka region, in the northeast of the country. As of 13 May, there were some 2,168 registered individuals, bringing the total number of Nigeri refugees in Mali to 3,192 individuals. As of 15 May, the CNCR conducted an initial registration of 1,384 new Burkinabe refugees, in Mopti region, in central Mali, with the support of UNHCR. A UNHCR registration mission is being planned to complete the registration process and confirm these figures. Finally, as at 5 May, UNHCR and its partners registered 4,880 returnees from Burkina Faso, mainly in Gao and Timbuktu regions.

Protection Monitoring

- In partnership with the Danish Refugee Council, UNHCR is spearheading the Project 21, a harmonized regional-wide protection monitoring system. DRC and UNHCR jointly organized successful online training for monitors in Mali and Niger. The system has been jointly developed by UNHCR and DRC, adapted to COVID-19 pandemics, and consulted with 20 protection monitoring actors in the pilot countries as well as at regional level for their feedbacks. This transnational project aims to bring 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 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. DRC and UNHCR hope to make this project as participative as possible with more protection actors.
- In **Burkina Faso**, UNHCR is closely monitoring the protection and security situation. In the Sahel Region, due to limited access, UNHCR continues its protection monitoring activities through the various partners. According to the NGO ICAHD, protection monitoring activities carried out during the first half of May 2020 allowed for the identification and documentation of eight hundred and fifty-one (851) cases of violations in the Centre Nord region, including threats to freedom and security; attacks on physical or mental integrity; violations of children's right, right to life and right of property, amongst others. The monitoring activities led to the identification of 695 people with specific needs, including women heads of households and pregnant women, amongst others. Twelve were provided with food, dignity and infant kits. The other cases will receive support in the next days.
- In **Chad**, UNHCR continues to monitor the protection environment which has been negatively impacted by COVID-19 with the preventive restriction on movement hindering humanitarian assistance and services. Protection monitoring has been particularly impacted by the ongoing military operations in the Lake Chad Basin where all telecommunications have been cut after it was declared an active war zone after deadly attacks on government forces on 25 March 2020.
- In **Mali**, UNHCR's protection monitoring reported some 180 security incidents, including 32 in Gao, 91 in Mopti, 42 in Segou and 15 in Timbuktu in the first half of May 2020. The five most reported types of incidents were related to violation of property rights; violations of physical and/or psychological integrity; violation of the right to freedom and to the security of the person; the right to life and Sexual and Gender-Based Violence.

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**, in its efforts to reinforce the WASH systems and combat COVID-19 in the main refugee and IDP hosting areas, UNHCR and partners continued their distribution of hand-washing stations, soaps and masks in the eight targeted regions to date. The Office has also supported local health authorities to strengthen their infection prevention and healthcare response, through the provision of medicines, medical equipment and supplies. On 8 May, UNHCR has donated medicine and pharmaceutical products worth 9 million FCFA to the Regional Committee for the Management of Epidemic in Ouahigouya. In Dori, UNHCR and its partner VSF-B, have begun the production of the second tranche of masks. Of the 8,500 masks to be produced, 3,500 will be made by refugees and host communities. 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.
- In **Chad**, in N'Djamena, UNHCR donated 30 computers and modems to the National surveillance team as part of its support to the national coordination effort for prevention and response to the pandemic. About 100 healthcare providers from 11 camps in the Ouaddai and Wadifira Provinces, were trained early May on the prevention, treatment and epidemiological surveillance of COVID-19. Furthermore, more than 2000 reusable COVID-19 protective masks were produced by the Farchana professional training center and Refugees in DAR ES Salam Camp, with the financial support of UNHCR's partner Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and UNHCR for refugees and internal displaced persons.
- In **Mauritania**, UNHCR has distributed cash for social protection to over 1,000 refugee households (some 2,500 individuals) living in the urban areas of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou. Through UNHCR's outreach, hard-to-reach and marginalized refugee families were identified and prioritized to receive this cash assistance. These vulnerable households were facing eviction and inability to meet their most basic needs including water, food and hygiene products, having lost their jobs, mostly in the informal market because of the COVID-19 related measures. The assistance is being tremendously appreciated by the beneficiaries.
- In **Mali**, COVID-19 sensitization sessions continue in Timbuktu, Gao and Mopti, as part of the COVID-19 emergency project implemented by UNHCR's partner AMSS. Parallely, distributions of sanitary kits and tools to control the spread of the pandemic continue, benefitting both displaced populations and public health structures.
- In **Niger**, in the Tillabery and Tahoua regions, UNHCR's field offices continue to support the Ministry of Health and local authorities to identify sites to isolate and treat potential COVID patients. Meanwhile, the rehabilitation and extension of existing health structures are ongoing, and they will soon be operational. Tahoua has opened the first isolation center outside the capital this week for which UNHCR has donated 40 Refugee Housing Units for potential patients. In Tillabery, the health center constructed by UNHCR has been retained as key site. In Ouallam and Abala, prevention continues. Each refugee has received 4 pieces of soap. In all refugee hosting areas, UNHCR and partners have continued to raise awareness on good hygienic practices. UNHCR also continued to train refugee women and girls across the country in the production of hygiene products, including

bleach, liquid soap and antiseptic soap, in partnership with the NGO Forge Arts. The production will be soon distributed among refugees, IDPs, and to vulnerable households within host communities and local hospitals in areas affected by the virus. The effort of refugees and IDPs in Niger to be part of the response to COVID-19 continues stronger than ever.

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 under precarious conditions across historically underserved areas. 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.



Soap production by refugee in Niger as part of UNHCR's COVID response. ©UNHCR/Jean-Sebastien Josset

- In **Burkina Faso**, refugees from Mentao who have self-relocated to Djibo are lacking resources and some are selling their food to pay their rent. The overcrowded shelters represent protection risks and make basic preventive measures against COVID-19 impossible. UNHCR is exploring the possibility for a prompt relocation or for the provision of cash-based assistance for the rental of houses to reduce the promiscuity until more durable solutions (i.e. relocation or voluntary return to Mali) are found. During the reporting period, 6,463 refugees benefitted from the food distribution for March and April, which was completed in Djibo. Heavy rains in Kaya and Kongoussi in the Centre Nord region of the country led to some floods in IDPs sites in the late April. An inter-agency assessment by UNHCR, UNICEF, OCHA confirmed that some 1,239 individuals were impacted in Kongoussi and identified a site for relocation. In collaboration with regional authorities, UNHCR and its partner NRC provided shelter and NFI assistance to some of the families who suffered loss / damage of their accommodation. In Kongoussi, some 80 families of 652 individuals, were relocated to the identified site, where UNHCR constructed 80 RHUs. These families also each received an NFI kit, including blankets, mattresses, mosquito nets, jerry cans, buckets and kitchen sets. Similarly, UNHCR teams distributed 177 plastic sheets to the 59 affected families in sites in/around Kaya. With the rainy season fast approaching, UNHCR and other agencies continue their advocacy for the relocation of families living in flood prone areas to safer areas. In the Sahel Region, UNHCR, as the lead of the Protection Cluster, has brought together a committee for the development of a contingency plan to relocate IDPs and other populations at risk of floods.

- In **Chad**, UNHCR received CERF funding for the construction of 900 shelters and the distribution of NFIs to 3651 households. The implementation of the CERF project is in progress and at the end of April, UNHCR had complete 40 shelters and distributed critical relief items to 1,000 families in Amma relocation site for the IDPs from Diameron.
- In **Mali**, UNHCR has continued to support the IDPs and refugees temporarily relocated to the Mabile site for internally displaced persons after fire destroyed Faladie site on 28 April in Bamako. In collaboration with the Malian Government and the humanitarian community in Mali, UNHCR provided shelters and distributed NFIs, charcoal and handwashing kits. UNHCR is also supporting the over 150 Burkinabe refugees who decided to remain in Faladie site despite the difficult conditions after the fire incident. Meanwhile, UNHCR is supporting the Government to expedite the creation of a new site in Bamako to relocate the former residents of Faladie in adequate conditions.
- In **Niger**, in Abala near the Malian border, over 80 hectares of land have been allocated by the Government and subdivided for the construction of houses for forcibly displaced populations and their hosts. Despite the operational challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR continues to produce the bricks that will be used to build the houses and other structures in this new settlement. To date, 72 persons from refugee, IDP and host communities were hired and a total number of 343,370 bricks were produced.

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, UNHCR's partner ICAHD identified 401 cases of SGBV, including sexual assault, denial of resource or opportunity, sexual harassment, forced and early marriage, public indecency, sex for survival, rape and psychological abuse. Such incidents are very often linked to the lack of economic opportunities and the absence of community or family support. Women are particularly vulnerable to protection risks in displaced communities, especially those who lost their husbands. During the reporting period, 42 of the identified SGBV survivors in the Centre Nord Region received psychological care.
- In **Chad**, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) is a major protection risk which has increased since the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite these challenges, UNHCR continues its collaboration and coordination with stakeholders, including the Ministry of Women, Early Childhood Protection and National Solidarity and technical and financial partners, including UNFPA, OCHA, UNICEF to assure that assistance to SGBV survivors and prevention activities continue. These include awareness campaigns through radio programs, flyers, door to door sensitization and small focus groups in line with physical distancing measures.
- In **Mali**, the activities of the EU-UN Spotlight Initiative program, which aims to eliminate sexual and gender-based-violence, continue with some operational adjustments due to COVID-19. In this regard, UNHCR, recipient of funds from the Spotlight Initiative, participated in the revision of a 52-episode TV show script, which

addresses the issue through exploring different themes, such as early marriage, female genital mutilation, sexual violence and abuse, sexual exploitation, etc. Additionally, UNHCR participated in drafting key messages on SGBV in times of COVID-19 for video campaigns featuring public figures.

- In **Mauritania**, UNHCR monitors SGBV incidents for any potential increase due to the confinement and curfew. The Operation is enhancing communications with both men and women on SGBV prevention and legal, safety, health, and psychosocial support.
- In **Niger**, in Intikane UNHCR conducted a series of awareness-raising activities on gender-based violence to which 826 persons participated including 255 men, 298 women, 145 girls and 128 boys.

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 inequality. In response, UNHCR has taken emergency 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 prevention measures while upgrading water and sanitation facilities in schools.
- In **Burkina Faso**, the Minister of National Education, Alphabetization and Promotion of National Languages announced on 8 May that the start of exams level classes this year has been postponed from 11 May to 1 June, while the reopening of all other classes initially planned on 25 May is postponed until further notice. Nevertheless, some universities reopened, such as the one in Dori which offers Bachelor and Master degrees.
- In **Chad** schools and universities remain closed in the country affecting over 100,000 refugees. In close collaboration with the Ministry of Education and all education partners, the COVID-19 education response plan was approved in late April. The plan aims at providing continuing education to all children through television, radio, the internet and paper-based material. Meanwhile the implementation of the Education Cannot Wait First Emergency Response Fund to improve the WASH conditions in refugee hosting camps, sites and villages has started. In the urban areas of N'Djamena and Abeche, refugee students are playing an active role in door to door COVID-19 awareness campaigns that reached 18,194 individuals (79% Chadians, 31% refugees). In camps, sites and villages, refugee teachers' incentives have been sustained, allowing them to continue to



A woman IDP affected by the floods received a complete NFI kit to make it easier for her and her family to settle in the new site in Kongoussi, Burkina Faso. © UNHCR T. Zinta Thianhoun

dispense lessons and assignments remotely, as well as provide home tutoring for students preparing national examinations. Refugee teachers are also highly involved in COVID-19 advocacy campaigns as well as home visits for protection monitoring of vulnerable children.

- In **Mali**, within the framework of implementing the project funded by Education Cannot Wait, UNHCR organized an internal meeting with the different field offices and sections to prepare the delivery and distribution of 5,500 solar powered radios for school-going age children benefitting from this project. Distributions in central and northern regions, targeted by this project, will start next week to allow 11,000 refugee, internally displaced and host community children have access to distance education programme broadcasting through national and community radios. Additionally, UNHCR contributed to the development of the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) accelerated funding proposal, amounting to USD 10 million, to support the COVID-19 response, which was submitted on 14 May to GPE.
- In **Mauritania**, teachers trained by UNHCR on distance education in Mbera camp last month are in turn sharing the methodologies with other teachers, with the support of Save the Children. Some classes have also resumed, using the WhatsApp platform based on techniques from the training.

Energy and Environment

- The **Sahel** is one of the regions of the world most impacted by climate change, with the decrease in rainfalls and 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. 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 **Burkina Faso**, to reduce the use of firewood for domestic cooking and address the risk of deforestation in the Sahel, UNHCR and its partner AIRD refilled the gas bottles of 29 refugee households based in Dori and to Djibo. Following the same approach in **Niger**, UNHCR in cooperation with the NGO ADKOUL, has refilled 195 bottles of gas for refugee households.

COORDINATION AND PARTNERSHIP

- In **Burkina Faso**, UNHCR coordinates the humanitarian response for the Malian refugees in close collaboration with the Government and other partners. As for the IDP response through the Cluster System, UNHCR is leading the Protection and Shelter/NFI Clusters. The Humanitarian Response Plan 2020, issued in March, is currently being revised. The COVID-19 response has provided another opportunity for UNHCR to collaborate with its partners through the working groups on community engagement and accountability to affected populations established respectively by the UNCT under the leadership of the RC and by the HCT coordinated by UNOCHA. Both groups aim at showcasing and coordinating stakeholders' interventions on community engagement and accountability. While collaborating to both groups, UNHCR has recommended closer coordination between them to avoid duplications.
- In **Mauritania**, in the context of COVID-19, the UN system has organized itself along pillars of the COVID-19 response in support of the government. UNHCR contributes to all pillars, especially in the region of the Hodh Echargui where the health sector relies largely on UNHCR's interventions.

COMMUNICATION AND ADVOCACY

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

- [Malian refugees in Niger make face covers to prevent the coronavirus spread](#) (UNHCR Broadcast, 01 May 2020)
- [Burkina Faso: UNHCR condemns violence against Malian refugees](#) (UNHCR Broadcast, 04 May 2020)

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