

UNHCR Sahel Crisis Response

01 – 15 April 2020

The humanitarian situation in the **central Sahel region continues to deteriorate** with armed groups increasing their pressure. Conflict is fuelling more displacement and exacerbating poverty, chronic food insecurity and competition for scarce resources.

The measures to prevent the **rapid spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Sahel** adds to the challenge for UNHCR and partners to access, assist and protect over three million forcibly displaced people, representing a 15 percent increase since January 2020.

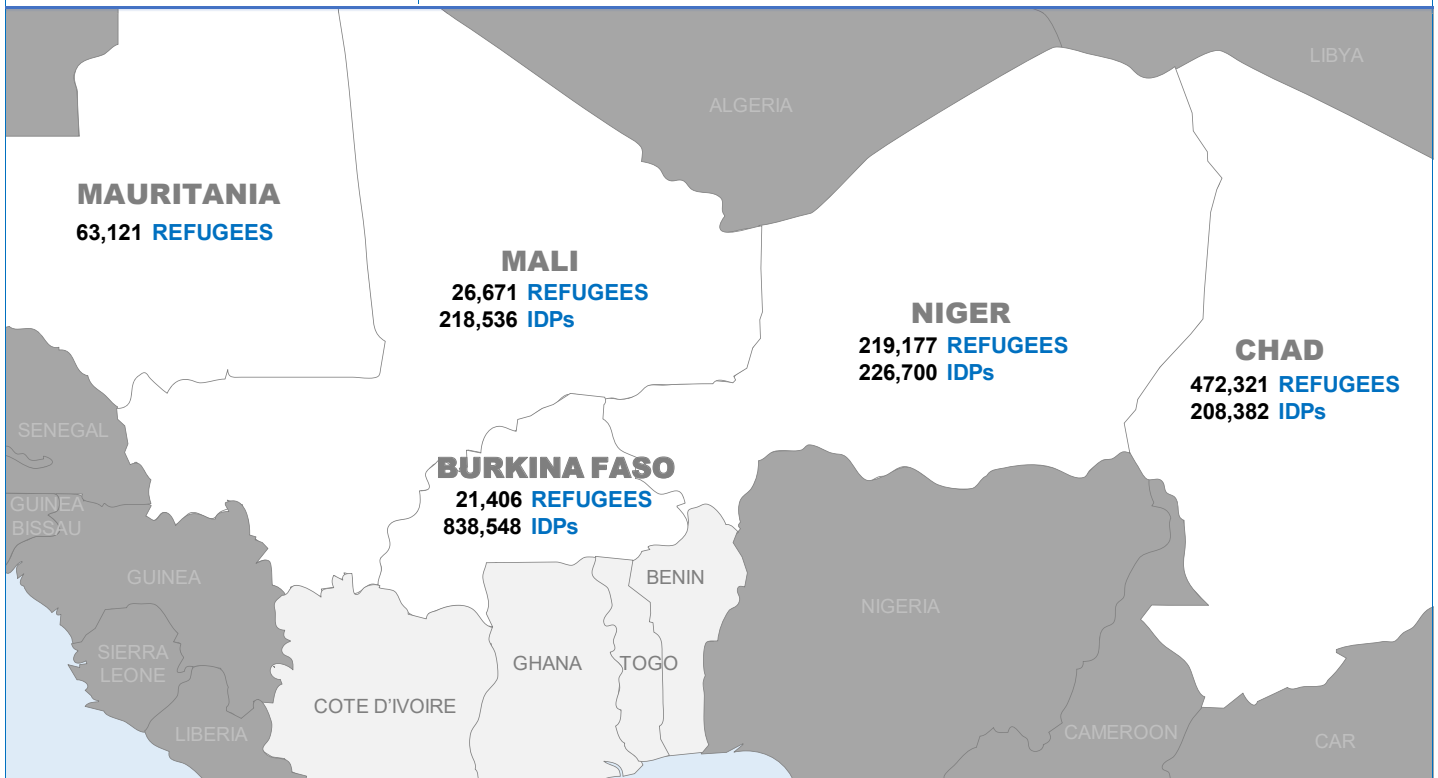
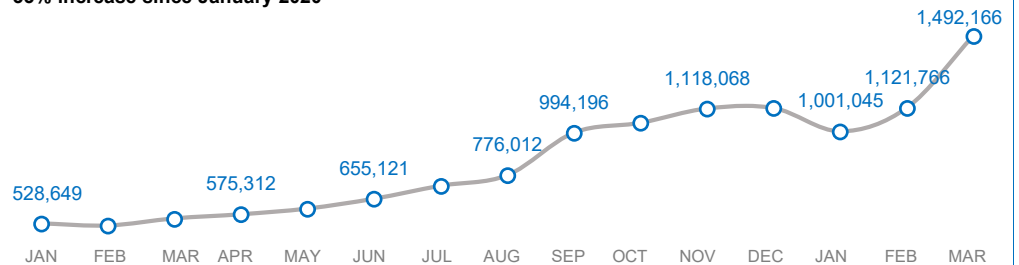
UNHCR is scaling up its response through a new regional strategy aimed at supporting governments of the G5 Sahel countries in catering to the needs of affected populations, including the forcibly displaced persons and people at risk of statelessness.

KEY FIGURES

3,075,447 PERSONS OF CONCERN
1,492,166 IDPs
812,212 REFUGEES
668,124 RETURNNEES
102,945 OTHERS OF CONCERN

EVOLUTION OF IDP POPULATION (January 2019 – March 2020)

33% increase since January 2020



OPERATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Political and security developments

- The COVID-19 pandemic represents an **extraordinary and unprecedented health emergency** for States in the Sahel. In response, Governments are taking necessary measures to prevent the spread of the virus and to protect populations. These measures are not specific to refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), stateless or returnees and bear a general scope. However, some of these measures may have a disproportionate impact on displaced population due to their specific needs and vulnerabilities.
- The **restrictions on movement** and the **economic slowdown** is having a dire impact on the livelihoods of refugees and IDPs, most of whom work in the informal sector which is usually the most affected by government controls and regulations in times of public health outbreaks. Furthermore, although no case of infection was officially reported so far among UNHCR's persons of concern in the Sahel, forcibly displaced populations are often at heightened risk of stigmatization in situations of pandemic. Feelings of distrust and instances of discrimination amplified by fake news, misinformation and the politicization of the issue could emerge should refugee or IDP population be heavily affected.
- The pandemic is already exacerbating protection risks and operational challenges in the Sahel in a region grappling with one of the most severe humanitarian crises in the world due to endemic poverty, fragile health systems, limited access to water and sanitation facilities and precarious living conditions in overcrowded shelters. 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.
- Besides the immediate protection and security implications above, COVID-19 is likely to contribute to **food insecurity** in the Sahel. Adding to the combined effects of conflict and displacement, the recent increase in climatic shocks such as recurring droughts and crop pests (locust outbreaks) has dramatically disrupted the crop and livestock production. With humanitarian relief efforts hindered by COVID-19, parts of the region are at high risk of sliding into famine within the next few months. According to WFP's 2020 edition of The Global Report on Food Crises, some 5.5 million people will face food insecurity in the Sahel by June, up from over 2.4 million at the same time last year representing a 128% increased (2.1 million people Burkina Faso, 2 million people in Niger and 1.3 million people in Mali).

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 placing additional strain on the basic services and resources available in the various localities. As of 25 March 2020, the number of internally displaced people nearly reached 839,000, representing an increase of 58,807 in less than a month. The security situation in the Centre-Nord region remains volatile with unidentified armed groups killing, looting and raping civilians in addition to burning places of worship and houses. Following attacks and ultimatums by armed groups, all 9,000 Malian refugees in the Goudoubo refugee camp fled for safety, at least 3,743 of them returned to Mali while others remained in Burkina Faso. The country is also seeing an influx with almost 3,000 asylum-seekers having arrived from the region of Mopti in Mali since the beginning of the year.
- In **Mali**, since January 2020, over 10,000 former Malian refugees returned from Burkina Faso and Niger, mainly due to attacks by armed groups and counter-insurgency operations. As of 07 April, in Gao, Menaka, Mopti and

Tombouctou UNHCR and its partners registered 3,743 former refugees who returned from Goudoubo camp in Burkina Faso to northern and central Mali due to insecurity. Another 6,000 Malian refugees also returned to the Menaka region of Mali from the troubled Tahoua and Tillabery regions of Niger since the Chinagodar attacks of early January. This brings to 82,510 the total number of returnees in Mali since 2013.

- In **Mauritania**, 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 increased in the past few months. These movements were significantly reduced following the closure of the border to control the proliferation of the COVID-19 in early April.
- In **Niger**, the volatile security situation also fuels displacement with people fleeing rising on a daily basis. Since January 2020, over 22,000 persons have fled the regions of Tillabery and Tahoua, around 17,000 looking for safety elsewhere in Niger and some 5,000 seeking refuge across the border in Mali.

Protection Monitoring

- In partnership with the Danish Refugee Council, UNHCR is spearheading the Project 21, a harmonized regional-wide protection monitoring tool which will be piloted in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in the second half of April 2020. The system has been jointly developed by UNHCR and DRC, adapted to COVID-19 pandemics, and involves consultations with 20 protection monitoring actors in the three 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, 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.
- In **Mali**, UNHCR and its partners CIAUD Canada and AMSS are monitoring the protection situation and recording incidents of abuse and rights violation towards IDPs, refugees, returnees and hosts in central and northern Mali. With intercommunal conflicts persisting in the Mopti, we are witnessing a clear deterioration of the protection environment with 962 incidents recorded in the first quarter of 2020 against 1,882 incidents documents for the whole of 2019.
- In **Niger**, UNHCR works with partners (CIAUD in Tahoua, ANTD and CIAUD in Tillabery) as well as with 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 in real time. The data is shared with the protection cluster for action and the cluster provides guidance to the humanitarian community to facilitate the response. Protection monitoring during the first quarter of 2020 allowed to document 191 protection incidents (129 for the Tillaberi region and 62 for the Tahoua region) including 34 that caused the death of 549 people. The main types of incidents reported are armed incursions (24%), theft and looting (24%), physical violence (19%).

UNHCR RESPONSE

Covid19

- To address the new challenges created by the spread of 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.

- Throughout the region, communication with communities continues to be enhanced to provide persons of concern and host communities with relevant, accessible, simplified, easy-to-understand information on COVID-19 and prevention measures to be adopted.

Communication with Communities – A Regional COVID-19 Information Platform

The UNHCR Regional Bureau in Dakar partnered with IOM in the framework of the Covid-19 Response Risk Communication and Community Engagement working group for West and Central Africa to launch a new website - <https://coronawestafrica.info/> - publicly released on 10 April which gathers tools (in English, French and local languages) for community engagement on the coronavirus. This “no logo” interagency website (validated by WHO, and involving 5 UN agencies, 12 NGOs) is searchable, interactive and provides compiled, categorized graphic, audio, video files adapted to very different audiences that will support community engagement activities around the Covid-19.

- In **Mali**, UNHCR is supporting the “Digital Communication” sub-commission of the One-UN COVID-19 communication plan, which will be implemented in line with the government of Mali’s communication plan and will involve awareness-raising campaigns through media, influencers, and other communication material and content. In terms of health meanwhile, UNHCR donated 100 family-sized tents following the request from the Ministry of Solidarity for support to the health structures in the regions of Gao, Mopti, Timbuktu, Menaka, Kayes and also Bamako.
- In **Niger**, UNHCR has purchased protection, hygiene and disinfectant equipment for a total amount of 720,000 USD which has already been distributed in all refugee and IDP sites, in all public administrations and services in the 6 regions hosting refugees, and in all health facilities (regional hospitals, integrated health centers and emergency health centers). Following a needs analysis undertaken with the Regional Directorates of Health, UNHCR is installing 350 Refugee Housing Units (RHU) with A/C to support authorities in setting up isolation cells. This comes in addition to the 54 RHUs UNHCR already set up in the capital city of Niamey’s stadium. UNHCR is also working with the World Bank to reorient a part of an ongoing project with the Government benefiting refugees and host communities to mitigate the negative socio-economic effects of the crisis. Concretely, UNHCR would like to reorient funds foreseen under the component on economic opportunities and use cash transfers. The project has a target population of 62,500 persons of which 31,500 are refugees. UNHCR will carry out an analysis on the impact of COVID-19 on the formal and informal livelihoods of displaced populations to better guide its future interventions and those of partner organizations.

Shelter and Core Relief Items

- In many parts of the **Sahel**, refugees and IDPs are often residing in heavily overcrowded camps and sites or among host communities often living in already precarious conditions in historically underserved area. Due to poverty, many resort to building precarious shelters with tree branches or cardboards and are thus deprived of privacy and exposed to theft and violence. With extremely limited access to basic water and hygiene facilities making the most basic preventive measures such as social distancing and handwashing impossible, these dire living conditions also expose forcibly displaced persons 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 **Burkina Faso**, between 1 and 15 April UNHCR and its partner NRC built 140 out of 1,700 shelters planned in the Centre-North region and distributed over 1,030 kits of core relief items to more 3,100 IDP families.
- In **Mali**, since the beginning of the year, UNHCR has distributed non-food items to 58,947 IDPs, representing 27 % of the total IDP population. In addition, UNHCR has covered the shelter needs of 7,907 IDPs by providing new housing to the most vulnerable and kits for others to build or upgrade their shelters.

- In **Mauritania**, to prepare for the needs of potential new arrivals in 2020 and in view of the harsh climatic conditions in Mbera and the difficulty to access the camp at over 1,400 km from the capital, UNCHR retains an emergency shelter and CRI stock of 600 tents and 120 RHUs as well as 7,250 sets of blankets, sleeping mats, and mosquito nets, and 2,250 sets of kitchen items, and water buckets.
- In **Niger**, with the support of GIZ, UNHCR and the Government can give Malian refugees access to land in an urbanized site where Nigerien families will be settled as well. For 4000 vulnerable households among the refugee and host population, a social house is part of the package. UNHCR has set up brick factories in Ayerou, Ouallam, Abala and Intikane and creates jobs for 1500 persons of the refugee and host community.

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 in **Burkina, Mali** and **Niger** 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 **Niger**, UNHCR, in partnership with WFP and UNDP, is providing training on the production of soap, bleach and mouth masks to over 5,000 refugees and hosts, among whom over 90% women. These items will be distributed in all refugee hosting areas benefitting both refugees and local communities. Apart from improving health conditions and hygiene in the camp, this activity promotes women as economic agents, generates an income for refugee households and stimulates the local economy, mitigating the negative socio-economic impact of COVID.



One of over 400 Refugee Housing Units donated by UNHCR to serve as emergency medical facilities and isolation units in Niger. ©UNHCR/Marlies Cardoen

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 basic prevention measures while upgrading water and sanitation facilities in schools.
- In **Chad**, the Education Cluster, of which UNHCR is an active member, is supporting the ministry in the development of a comprehensive education response plan to COVID19 in collaboration with the local education authorities to take into account the different level of access to connectivity (radio, mobile phone and internet) between regions.
- In **Mali**, UNHCR along with 5 other organizations (UNICEF, Save The Children, AMSODE, EDUCO, EU) is part of the strategic committee established by the Ministry of Education for the development and implementation of the response plan to the COVID-19 situation to ensure the continuity of learning in a protective and inclusive environment, and to prepare the reopening of schools.
- In **Niger**, UNHCR is closely working with the Education Cluster and the Ministry of Education to ensure continuity of education through distance education approaches including the development educational content such as self-learning programs and materials for students in all regions. In Ouallam, UNHCR and its partner have launched the construction of 10 emergency classrooms on the urbanized site where Malian refugees live. Moreover, they have received furniture to equip the classrooms, amongst others 250 school banks, 29 desks and chairs, 10 chalkboards.



Zeinabou is a Malian refugee living in Niamey. She has been trained by UNHCR in sewing and dressmaking; skills she now uses to produce face masks. ©UNHCR/Marlies Cardoen

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 [Burkina Faso](#), in view of the growing insecurity in and around Goudoubou refugee camp, solar panels and other sources of energy in the area, which had been vandalized, were dismantled. In this context, UNHCR and its partner AIRD continue to work to address the energy needs of relocated refugees. On 14 April, they distributed natural gas kits to refugees who have self-relocated to the commune of Dori. They will continue to identify families in need of support and make kits and refills available.

COORDINATION AND PARTNERSHIP

- In order to lend support to protection clusters at national level in terms of advocacy, facilitate coordination between countries and regional IASC, providing visibility through data driven analysis, and serving as a platform for information sharing and best practices, the Regional Bureau in Dakar has initiated bilateral and multilateral consultations with key stakeholders including donors to revitalize the Regional Protection Working Group (RPWG). A task force composed of UNICEF, UNFPA, OCHA, UNWOMEN, IOM, OHCHR, UNHCR and SOS has been established to draft the strategy as well as the TORs which are being commented on and will be further adopted. Through the Regional Protection Working Group, appropriate support will be provided to the protection crisis in the Sahel.

COMMUNICATION AND ADVOCACY

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

- [Across West Africa dual challenge of conflict and coronavirus threatens millions of people](#) (17 April 2020)
- [Spotlight - 6 Faces of the Sahel Crisis](#) (17 April 2020)
- [UNHCR calls on warring parties to protect civilians in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions](#) (23 April 2020)

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