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Central African Republic: “It’s Not Poverty, It’s Misery”

As the rainy season approaches, some two hundred thousand people throughout the northern tier of the Central African Republic (CAR) face more months of hardship in makeshift shelters in forests and fields away from their home villages.

The length of their displacement ranges from almost two years to just a few months, but the persistence of violence in the region is preventing people from returning and beginning to rebuild. Despite increasing awareness among international agencies of the needs and vulnerabilities of the displaced, actual humanitarian response --- both in terms of programs initiated and agencies present --- remains feeble. Immediate, significant efforts are essential to avert a crisis.

As Refugees International documented in December 2006 (Central African Republic: An Unknown Emergency in a Dangerous Region), international agencies were slow to recognize and respond to the consequences of displacement in the CAR. On its just-completed follow-up mission, the RI team heard evidence of a continued complacency and unwillingness to recognize the extent of people’s suffering. References to “coping mechanisms,” humanitarian jargon for the strategies that people use year in and year out to survive in the face of harsh conditions, were too frequent for comfort. The idea seemed to be that Central Africans were used to going without food and medicine; used to sleeping in their fields without adequate shelter; used to their children getting sick and dying young. Lives lived in this manner should be unacceptable. As a Catholic sister told a humanitarian worker, “It’s not poverty, it’s misery.”

The situation is not yet a crisis, but the slightest shock --- more extensive violence or a crop failure due to drought or lack of seeds --- would have severe consequences for the displaced. One worrying indicator is that a nutrition survey conducted by an international non-governmental organization showed that mortality

among children under five in the conflict zone is 2.62 deaths per 10,000 per day, exceeding the emergency threshold of 2.5 deaths.

Vigorous advocacy by the UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator has increased recognition of the plight of the displaced in the CAR. In consequence, recent months have seen a parade of assessment missions by donor governments and by NGOs considering the possibility of establishing programs. The heightened awareness is positive, as more people are witnessing the extent of the damage that has been done to village life in the northern regions of the country, thereby increasing pressure on the government to stop the abuses that have been the primary cause of the displacement. The visits have also conveyed the message to Central Africans that they are not entirely abandoned.

But despite all the movement up and down the pot-holed dirt roads of the north, the presence of humanitarian agencies actually implementing programs remains very thin. The start-up period is inevitably slow as agencies deploy staff and scramble for funds. In the meantime, some Central Africans are experiencing the frustration of rising expectations with no evident payoff. A community leader in a village just north of Kaga Bandoro, who had walked in from his shelter along with 15 others in response to what proved to be a false rumor of an impending distribution, told RI, “We are tired of questions and photos. We are suffering.” In a village along the embattled road between Markounda and Maitikoulou along the Chad border, a man, angered that no mission had bothered to stop and walk into the bush to see his emergency settlement, told RI, “We just swallow your dust.”

There is little evidence that the displaced are prepared to return to their homes any time soon. The factors that drove their initial displacement remain: rebel movement through villages provokes disproportionate reprisals, including indiscriminate shooting and the burning of houses, by both the government's Presidential Guard and the regular army; bandits prey on civilians as they travel along isolated rural roads; Fulani nomads kidnap the children of farmers and hold them for ransom or barter them as slaves in exchange for cattle; and in the far north, along the border with Chad, Chadian troops in uniform conduct raids into Central African villages, looting homes and stealing cattle. Near anarchy prevails, and intimidated villagers have no choice but to live in the bush, and wait for peace and stability to return.

Thus, donors and international agencies need to direct their humanitarian assistance to where the people are, rather than attempting to use assistance to draw people back to their villages. The greatest need is for seeds and tools for planting during the 2007 rainy season that starts in April. The aid community is late, and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and international NGOs are scrambling to locate adequate quantities of seeds for basic grains such as corn, millet, and sorghum from in-country sources. Millet and sorghum are proving to be in short supply, so current FAO plans involve the distribution of primarily corn seed to allow each household to plant one half hectare, short of the normal two-hectare plot. There are concerns that farmers in the northwest prefer millet and sorghum; will they adapt to corn or will they eat the seed?

To prevent seeds from being consumed, NGOs are working with the UN World Food Program to organize a concurrent distribution of "seed protection" food rations. Most NGOs believe that a half ration is adequate, while WFP and one NGO are arguing that conditions justify full rations. There is a legitimate challenge to assessing needs, as the violence and displacement have had a differential impact. Was the village attacked during the harvest or not? Did the family lose their stocks of food and seeds, or were they able to retain some reserve in their fields? Under current conditions, it is virtually impossible to gain an accurate understanding of each household's situation. While RI believes that the case for half-rations is convincing, mainly to lessen the possibility of looting of food stocks or oversupply in the few functioning markets, some excess is probably inevitable under the circumstances.

In addition to seeds and tools, emergency distributions should include plastic sheeting for shelter during the rainy season and household items such as cooking pots and mosquito nets. There are hundreds of water pumps

throughout the region which require a comprehensive repair and maintenance program.

One strong grievance in the northwest region is the failure of the government to pay the money it owes cotton producers for the last peacetime crop. The European Commission has allocated four million euros to pay 114,000 individual farmers, and is working with the government to distribute the funds directly in convoys with security guards starting in May. There is virtually no commerce due to the insurgency and banditry in the north, and the infusion of cash at the household level would be a huge boon to the local economy, as well as eliminating a major grievance that is helping to fuel the insurgency. The EC will deserve tremendous credit if it manages to pull off this effort.

With its weak government and deep-seated chronic poverty, the Central African Republic presents great long-term challenges. But the current displacement situation is on a scale that lends itself to solutions, given the right combination of humanitarian response and political action. Donor governments and international agencies have the responsibility to act now to prevent a greater crisis, and point the CAR in the direction of recovery and reconciliation.

REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:

- ❑ Donor governments and international agencies intensify their efforts to respond to the humanitarian needs of the internally displaced, with a focus on seeds and tools; emergency shelter; rehabilitation of water pumps; and provision of medical services.
- ❑ The United States Congress support the initiative to include \$10 million in the FY2007 emergency supplemental appropriation bill for humanitarian needs in the CAR.
- ❑ The United Nations push forward as rapidly as possible with its plan to establish regional offices in Paoua and Birao.
- ❑ Non-governmental organizations, using internal funding sources if available and required, establish a presence and begin programs in key centers in the northern region.
- ❑ To facilitate increased humanitarian access, donors fund private humanitarian air service.

Vice President for Policy Joel Charny and Advocate Rick Neal just returned from a two-week assessment mission to northwest CAR.