



Sahel: Joint statement by United Nations and international NGOs on the occasion of the G5 Sahel Summit in Nouakchott

Dakar, 30 June – United Nations humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organizations, signatories to this statement, take note of the organization of the G5 Sahel Summit in Nouakchott on 30 June and encourage the actors present to find lasting solutions to the security, humanitarian and development crisis in the region.

The security situation in the Sahel countries has deteriorated considerably in recent months. Conflicts prevailing in the region are having unprecedented humanitarian consequences on civilian populations facing insecurity and displacement. Humanitarian organizations are particularly concerned about reports of alleged extrajudicial killings, forced recruitment - including of children - abductions and hostage-taking, rape, as well as the growing stigmatization of and discrimination against certain groups suspected to be associated with armed groups. These numerous reports highlight the resurgence of serious human rights violations committed by various parties to the conflict.

Limited access to basic social services, lack of socio-economic opportunities for most of the population, including the youth, and chronic vulnerabilities are factors further aggravating the situation in the region. Children affected by violence in the Central Sahel are in urgent need of protection and support. The humanitarian crisis in the region, coupled with entrenched development challenges, threatens to reverse the progress made in recent years, while making the protection of civilian populations even more fragile.

In this context made even more difficult by the direct and indirect impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the region, this summit represents an opportunity to continue the constructive dialogue between political decision-makers, military officials and humanitarian actors in the region on issues related to humanitarian principles and protection.

The regional humanitarian community is open to dialogue with the G5 Sahel to advance the international humanitarian law agenda and to ensure that populations affected by the humanitarian crisis, including the most vulnerable groups, especially children, are assisted in accessing basic and vital social services. It is imperative to collectively reflect on innovative solutions to respond to humanitarian needs while reducing chronic vulnerabilities and curtailing the spread of the crisis.

In order to strengthen the protection of civilians and improve the humanitarian response for all vulnerable populations affected by conflicts and the COVID-19 pandemic, it is essential that G5 Sahel member states and their armed forces commit to:

1. **Reaffirm their international commitments in the areas of human rights, asylum and international humanitarian law, and to ensure the protection of civilians**, including displaced persons and refugees, women, girls, the elderly and persons with special needs, while strengthening actions to prevent gender-based violence.
2. **Place the protection of civilians at the heart of military operations in the G5 Sahel region** as was concluded at the third conference on the strengthening of relations between Defense and Security Forces (DSF) and populations in the G5 Sahel region, held on 20 January 2020 in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. It is essential that this strategy maintain the distinction between military and humanitarian responses.
3. **Condemn human rights violations and adopt permanent measures to investigate offences committed by defense and security forces, self-defense groups, and elements of armed groups**, to strengthen the judicial system and ensure access to justice for civilians.
4. **Ensure that the implementation of the Compliance Framework includes the application of the Human Rights Due Diligence Policy** and create the conditions for civilian and military members of the

G5 Sahel to respect and promote the highest standards of ethical and professional conduct, report misconduct and cooperate in duly authorized investigations, inquiries, evaluations and reviews to prevent and combat sexual abuse and exploitation.

5. **Ensure unimpeded humanitarian access to forcibly displaced populations, their host communities and the civilian population as a whole.** More specifically, stop attacks against children (in their homes, schools or health centres) and ensure safe access to all affected children, in accordance with humanitarian principles. Ensure the systematic and adequate participation of military and security forces in civilian and military coordination structures in each country. Facilitate dialogue and promote better humanitarian access and respect for international law.
6. **Develop, alongside humanitarian organizations, civilian and military guidelines aligned with international frameworks to ensure a clear distinction of mandates and roles between defense and security forces and humanitarian actors.** The principle that armed escorts may solely be used as a "last resort" should be explicitly recognised in order to guarantee maximum neutrality of humanitarian actors in conflict zones. The current context linked to the COVID-19 pandemic may lead some states to militarize humanitarian and health assistance in conflict-sensitive areas, which would pose a risk of deteriorating the perception of neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian actors and their acceptance by communities.
7. **Invest in basic social services (health, water and sanitation, and education).** In central and eastern Mali, northern Burkina Faso and western Niger, people's access to schools, health centres and other social structures is limited due to chronic under-investment. Insecurity and displacement create significant barriers to children's and families' access to food and nutritional inputs, risking deterioration of children's health and nutritional status. Insecurity and attacks also impede access to basic social services, including health centres and schools, and to basic necessities such as water, food and the ability to produce food and care for livestock.
8. **Guarantee the re-establishment of State authority presence, basic social services and the rule of law, thus preventing and combating violations and repeated attacks on the security, dignity and rights of civilians.**
9. **Promote the demobilization and reintegration of persons associated with armed groups, including a specific approach for the demobilization of children.** A clear and transparent process regarding the fate of ex-combatants, their judicial treatment and reintegration policies is necessary to create a climate of trust conducive to reintegration and thus, ultimately, the stabilization of the area.
10. **Encourage a political solution based on social cohesion, reconciliation and accountable local governance.** The protracted nature of crises and displacement requires greater mobilization towards the implementation of new approaches, including through strengthening the resilience of affected populations and their access to livelihoods so that they can create their own destiny.

The Regional Directors of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), Action Against Hunger (ACF), Oxfam, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Save the Children, and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC).