



Joint News Release

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WFP AND UNHCR WARN OF RAPIDLY WORSENING REFUGEE CRISIS IN HUNGER-STRICKEN SAHEL

ROME/GENEVA – The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) has launched a regional emergency operation alongside the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in response to the specific food needs of hundreds of thousands of people who have fled conflict in Mali and crossed the border into neighbouring countries.

“We are working side by side with UNHCR to help families who have been forced from their homes in Mali and now need urgent food and shelter,” said WFP Executive Director, Ertharin Cousin. “The refugees from Mali have fled conflict in their own country, and now find themselves across the border in neighbouring states that are already suffering from the severe effects of a regional drought.”

So far, WFP has reached internally displaced people and refugees with food assistance in Mali, Mauritania, Burkina Faso and Niger, as part of its overall regional Sahel emergency operation which aims to support around 9.6 million people affected by the Sahel crisis -- a combination of insecurity, drought, crop deficit and high food prices.

The new WFP regional emergency operation aims to assist 300,000 internally displaced people (IDPs) and 255,000 refugees this year. It gives WFP the flexibility to respond to a complex, evolving refugee situation. UNHCR will serve as WFP’s primary partner in this response, which will cost around US\$77 million.

“The Sahel represents a deadly combination of drought and displacement by conflict. This is not only a dramatic humanitarian problem but it has become a threat to global peace and security,” said Antonio Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees. “Donor support is crucial if any humanitarian effort is to make headway.”

UNHCR is working in Niger, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania to help the tens of thousands of refugees who continue to cross from Mali – many bringing livestock with them. This



includes digging wells for refugees and for host communities, plus establishing refugee sites. Inside Mali, UNHCR is working with its partners to reach internally displaced populations.

The influx of refugees from Mali has exacerbated the severe and large-scale food crisis in the Sahel, where many lives risk being lost to hunger and malnutrition, as it is placing an added strain on already vulnerable, food insecure communities, some of whom have been reduced to eating wild plants to survive.

Preventing and treating acute malnutrition amongst 3.5 million children and pregnant and nursing mothers is at the core of this WFP Sahel-wide response. Food insecurity during the lean season leads to significant peaks in acute malnutrition and infant mortality in a region where malnutrition rates are high even in non-crisis periods.

“Time is not on our side,” said Cousin. “If no new food or cash contributions are received immediately, the resulting inability to pre-position and distribute enough food at the peak of the lean season, from June to September, would be catastrophic for the most vulnerable, food insecure people – especially women and children,” added Cousin.

WFP’s plans to scale up emergency operations to reach 9.6 million people during the peak of the lean season could be derailed unless sufficient funding can be secured to help bridge a shortfall of around US\$ 360 million.

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For additional data and information on the Sahel emergency, visit
<http://data.unhcr.org/MaliSituation/regional.php> and www.unhcr.org.

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