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Contacts:  
Alice Thomas and Mark Yarnell

# MALIAN REFUGEES: UNDERFUNDED RESPONSE ADDS STRESS TO SAHEL FOOD CRISIS

Another food crisis in the Sahel has put 18 million people at risk. Armed conflict in Mali has now compounded the situation, forcing more than 180,000 people to flee to neighboring countries. These refugees are arriving in remote areas facing acute food and water shortages. While agencies have quickly scaled up to provide life-saving assistance, resources are dwindling and additional support is needed for both Malian refugees and their host communities. Allowing the situation to languish risks lives and threatens to undermine an already-fragile coexistence. Going forward, humanitarian assistance must be accompanied by long-term investments that address the threat that food insecurity, climate change, and regional instability present to the Sahel.

## BACKGROUND

In the Sahel region of Africa, poor rainfall, low agricultural output, and high food prices have left an estimated 18 million people without enough access to food and placed more than a million children at risk of dying from severe acute malnutrition. The current crisis falls on the heels of droughts in 2005 and 2010, rendering households more vulnerable and with fewer available coping mechanisms.

Compounding this crisis, in January 2012 armed conflict broke out in Mali when Tuareg separatists and an Islamic militant group with links to Al Qaeda took control of large areas of northern Mali, forcing thousands to flee their homes. Since then, the situation in Mali has deteriorated. The rebel groups are seeking to consolidate their control of the north, leaving most of that part of the country inaccessible to aid agencies. Meanwhile, a coup in the capital Bamako, which was followed by an uncertain transition of power, has left a power-vacuum. As of writing, over 325,000 Malians have been displaced, including more than 180,000 who have sought refuge in neighboring countries. Initially, the displaced populations fled to escape violence and

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Donors, including the U.S. and the EU, must provide immediate additional funding to support both Mali refugees and host communities.
- The U.S. State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) must assign dedicated staff to the region to oversee the crisis.
- UN agencies must prioritize, and donors must support, the provision of a safe environment in the camps including providing education for tens of thousands of primary and secondary school children, and increasing protection staff.
- UNHCR must coordinate closely with aid agencies responding to the food crisis, especially at the local level, and participate in cluster meetings.
- The U.S., the EU, and other major donors must develop a comprehensive assistance strategy for the Sahel that links the emergency response to longer-term assistance to address the threats that food insecurity and climate change present to the region.

conflict. But as the rebellion continues to restrict trade and severely limit humanitarian access within Mali, thousands more have been forced to flee in search of food.

## **A POORLY RESOURCED RESPONSE IN A CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT**

The Malian refugees have fled to remote areas near the border where food and water are extremely scarce, and banditry and kidnappings present security risks. Setting up camps and delivering life-saving assistance to these regions present significant operational challenges. Moreover, the refugees, many of whom are pastoralists, are spread out over wide distances. Road access is limited and will grow worse when the rainy season begins in late June and early July. Because the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) had virtually no presence in Niger and Burkina Faso prior to the Mali crisis, it has had to scale up operations quickly.

UN agencies and partner organizations are prioritizing the delivery of life-saving services, such as food, water, health, and shelter. But even those basic services are stretched thin. For example, in the Mangaize refugee camp in Niger, now home to several thousand refugees, there are only 50 tents available. These are reserved for the most vulnerable. The remainder of the camp population is making do with sticks and plastic sheeting which are unlikely to withstand the upcoming rainy season. In addition, many of the refugees arrived malnourished. There is concern that without sufficient food, their condition will deteriorate. In the Abala camp in Niger, numerous refugees expressed to RI their concern about the quality and quantity of food distributions, highlighting the inadequate availability of nutrient-rich food for their children. In addition, the lack of potable water in these desert areas is a constant challenge. Aid agencies have been trucking water to many of the sites and are racing to drill wells to establish sufficient water sources for the refugees and their animals before the rainy season begins.

As of writing, UNHCR's Revised Appeal (released in late May) was only 13 per cent funded. RI is alarmed by the weak donor response to the crisis and concerned that without additional financial resources, there is a significant risk that refugees will not receive even the most basic assistance. Donors also must ensure that host governments receive sufficient support given the multiple pressures they face in responding to the needs of both refugees and their own populations, not to mention security concerns regarding the potential spillover of violence from Mali.

At present, the U.S. State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) does not have any dedicated staff based in the region. This hampers the ability of the U.S. to effectively monitor this complex crisis, oversee the response, and to coordinate closely with UN agencies, other donors, host governments, and USAID (which is responding to the food crisis). RI urges PRM to assign a refugee coordinator to the region as soon as possible.

Of equal concern is the need to address broader protection needs in the camps and to provide a safe and secure environment, especially for women and children who comprise the majority of refugees. RI was troubled to find that the vast majority of children in the camps have not received any educational support, even though many have been in camps since January. This includes secondary school-level children aged 12 to 18 who, given the close proximity of the camps to the Mali border, are at risk of recruitment by armed groups. It is unlikely that these children will be able to return to Mali any time soon. Ignoring their educational needs not only limits their future opportunities, but also threatens their immediate welfare and well-being. UNHCR must prioritize finalizing country-level agreements with UNICEF on education and child protection programming.

More broadly, the poor educational response with respect to the Mali refugees highlights the need for increased predictability regarding emergency education in displacement crises, and for a more integrated response that brings in protection, education, and other sectors from the onset. One way to do this would be for UNHCR and UNICEF to revise their global memorandum of understanding to clarify responsibilities and identify mechanisms for facilitating financial support for education and child protection.

There are broader protection needs that also must be adequately addressed, including maintaining a peaceful coexistence both within the camps and between refugees and host communities. At present, the environment in the camps is generally peaceful. However, there are group dynamics among various "factions" of refugees who do not feel comfortable living in close proximity to one another. UNHCR and its partner organizations are addressing these sensitivities by negotiating the spacing of tents and the placement of water points. However, the continued arrival of new "factions" of refugees is forcing a constant change in group dynamics with some of the new arrivals already starting to challenge existing leadership of the refugees' self-formed committees that negotiate with the host governments and aid agencies.

Additional protection staff is urgently needed to address these concerns and ensure a safe and peaceful environment. This is particularly true in Burkina Faso, where, at the time of RI's visit, UNHCR did not have a Senior Protection Officer assigned to the field base. While several protection assistants were assisting the Field Coordinator to manage protection issues, staff members were stretched thin and working beyond their capacity to address the needs of tens of thousands of refugees spread out over hundreds of miles.

The ability of the refugees to move freely also must be addressed. At present, UNHCR is in the process of moving refugees away from the border and into formal camp settings in order to facilitate the delivery of services. This is understandable given the significant operational challenges UNHCR faces in accessing these remote and insecure areas. However, UNHCR will need to adapt its response in a logistically feasible manner that considers the particular cultures, lifestyles, and livelihoods of the refugees - many of whom are nomadic pastoralists who prefer to remain spread out across a wide area and may be unlikely to agree to move into camps. Host governments must allow, and UNHCR must encourage, programs to assist these populations. UNHCR also must take a flexible approach to those refugees residing in the camps who need to leave from time to time to tend to their animals.

## **INCREASING SUPPORT FOR HOST COMMUNITIES**

The areas of Niger and Burkina Faso to which the Malian refugees have fled are among the hardest hit by the food and nutrition crisis. The arrival of tens of thousands of refugees into these areas has put additional pressure on regions where food, water, and vegetation are extremely scarce to begin with - especially now, during the leanest months of the year. The significant numbers of livestock that refugees brought with them are placing additional demands on limited supplies of water, animal fodder, and pasture land. The impact of the refugees is also being felt on local markets where food prices, which were already alarmingly high, have reportedly increased. In addition, deforestation and other environmental impacts have already become a serious concern. Women and children in the Abala refugee camp in Niger now spend up to three hours per day in search of firewood. A proposed project to deliver efficient cook stoves and fuel to the camp - if implemented - should mitigate the problem somewhat, although not entirely.

Several of the agencies assisting refugees were already operational in these areas in response to the food and nutrition crisis, and are well aware of the need to ensure that the needs of struggling local populations are met. For example, several agencies have adopted a policy to increase local public services available to both refugees and host communities, such as through increasing staff at local health clinics, rather than building separate health clinics for refugees only. In several host communities, local schools have integrated a limited number of refugee children. According to UNHCR's Revised Appeal, additional schools will be asked to accept refugee children.

These and other efforts aimed at encouraging local integration and peaceful coexistence are strongly encouraged. But they will not be possible without sufficient financial resources from donors to ensure that assistance for refugees does not come at the expense of vulnerable host communities facing malnutrition. For example, in one of the regions of Niger hardest hit by the food crisis, there are now over 9,000 refugees living next to a town (Abala) with a local population of 10,000. Initially, the World Food Programme (WFP) was making blanket food deliveries to both refugees and host populations. At the time of RI's visit, however, limited resources forced the agency to limit food distributions to only the most vulnerable local households. There are concerns that these distributions might be cut off all together.

A central component of the refugee response strategy must be to ensure that host communities' needs are met by providing vulnerable, local households with equal access to water points and to food distribution and cash programs. In addition, UNHCR must minimize environmental impacts on refugee receiving areas. RI strongly supports UNHCR's plan to hire an environmental officer in Niger and encourages the hiring of additional environmental staff in Burkina Faso and Mauritania. In addition, programs such as the one in Abala to provide efficient cook stoves and fuel should be extended to all refugee camps. UNHCR and other agencies must work closely to ensure that local public services such as health clinics and schools that extend services to refugees are provided with sufficient financial and human resources to do so. Finally, UNHCR and other agencies must work to ensure a continued peaceful coexistence through the implementation of conflict mitigation/resolution measures and providing mechanisms by which local communities may participate in decisions regarding refugees that may affect them.

Finding the right balance between refugee assistance and support for host communities will depend on close coordination between UNHCR and other agencies responding to the food crisis. The appointment of a Regional Humanitarian Coordinator is a positive development in this regard. The ongoing challenge is ensuring that coordination happens at the local level as well. Many agencies with whom RI spoke felt that it had been helpful to have UNHCR attend relevant cluster meetings and to work closely with agencies responding to the food and nutrition crisis. However, some agencies expressed concern that with the arrival of new UNHCR staff in the coming weeks and months, there was a risk that coordination might suffer, with UNHCR opting to pursue its mandate more independently. This would be a mistake. RI encourages UNHCR to pursue the current course of operating within the broader response going forward.

## **DEVELOPING A LONG-TERM STRATEGY FOR THE SAHEL**

The crisis in Mali cannot be viewed in isolation, but must be seen in the context of the broader challenges facing the countries of the Sahel. The eruption of violence in Mali has exacerbated stress and placed additional burdens not only on populations that were extremely vulnerable to begin with, but also on national governments struggling to face a litany of other challenges.

A concern expressed by many agencies and NGOs is the failure of donors to address the underlying, systemic problems facing the Sahel, including chronic food insecurity and malnutrition, poverty, environmental degradation, population growth, and political instability. Humanitarian funding is important, of course, in terms of both early interventions and providing life-saving assistance. During the most recent food crisis, smart, well-timed, and well-targeted interventions by both national governments and aid agencies proved effective in mitigating the situation (e.g., cash-for-work programs followed by cash distribution during the planting season; blanket and supplementary feeding programs). Yet, there was a strong sense that more and more frequently, short-term humanitarian assistance was being used as a band aid to patch up larger, deeper development gaps. As one agency staff put it: “We find ourselves in a situation where we are relying more frequently on emergency aid. Prevention is not happening, and with population doubling every 20 years, we are fighting a losing battle.”

The recurrence of humanitarian emergencies in the Sahel (and elsewhere) have led many to call for increased funding to help vulnerable populations increase their “resilience” – in other words, their ability to withstand and recover from

recurrent droughts, food shortages, high prices, and other “shocks.” With climate change likely to increase the frequency and force of droughts, desertification, floods, and other climate-related events in the Sahel, many donors and NGOs see increased resiliency as an important solution.

However, in order to be effective, resiliency programs must be implemented at a scale and within timeframes sufficient to overcome the countervailing pressures of climate change, environmental degradation, and population growth. Some NGOs with whom RI spoke said that in certain communities, “resiliency” projects such as building water catchments or measures to increase soil productivity have proved effective. But others felt that these types of projects are neither new nor innovative in a game-changing way. Part of the problem may stem from the fact that funding for resiliency programs often comes from USAID’s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), which is responsible for implementing disaster risk reduction programs. The short time frames for OFDA programming, however, are not suitable for the types of multi-year programs that are necessary to make resiliency effective.

Resiliency programs must be scaled up and effectively linked to longer-term development assistance. Moreover, while programs to increase agricultural output are no doubt essential to address food insecurity, they must be coupled with more comprehensive strategies aimed at supporting other livelihoods, including pastoralism, and access to basic services like education, healthcare, child nutrition, and family planning. This will require more direct budgetary support to national governments, something the U.S. must be willing to commit to on a larger scale.

The international community has long ignored the chronic issues facing the Sahel region. As one donor government official noted, “[we] accept chronic levels of food insecurity in the Sahel because that is what is ‘normal.’ But what level of suffering can we honestly consider normal?” The U.S., the EU, and other major donors must develop a comprehensive assistance strategy for the Sahel that includes long-term assistance to governments to address the threats that food insecurity and climate change present.

*Alice Thomas and Mark Yarnell traveled to Burkina Faso and Niger to assess the situation of Malian refugees in May 2012.*