

**UNITED NATIONS AND NGOS CALL FOR URGENT STRENGTHENING OF THE PROTECTION OF CIVILIAN POPULATIONS IN THE SAHEL**

Dakar, 11 June – United Nations humanitarian agencies and non-governmental organizations welcome the organization of a ministerial meeting on the Sahel on 12 June, following the establishment of the Sahel Coalition and the Partnership for Security and Stability in the Sahel (P3S).

**The security situation in the G5 Sahel countries has deteriorated considerably in recent months, leading to forced displacements and unprecedented humanitarian consequences and causing a need for the protection of civilian populations.** This situation is now exacerbated by the spread of COVID-19 throughout the region.

**The Sahel is facing growing insecurity, marked by the proliferation of armed groups, inter- and intra-communal violence, Improvised Explosive Device (IED) incidents, transnational crime and the multiplication of human rights violations by the various parties to the conflict.** Attacks against civilians are increasing, including in areas hosting internally displaced persons and refugees in Mentao and Dori in Burkina Faso, Intikane, Tahoua, Tillabéri in Niger and in northern Mali. Insecurity and attacks are hampering access to basic social services, including health centres and schools, and to necessities such as water and food.

**Limited access to social services and lack of socio-economic opportunities for most of the population, including youth, chronic vulnerabilities and weak national systems are factors aggravating the situation in the region.** The compounded humanitarian and development crises risk devastating the region and further leading to a protection crisis.

**There are many worrying reports detailing the widespread human rights violations being committed by the various belligerents.** Humanitarian organizations are concerned about extrajudicial executions, forced recruitment, including of children, abductions and hostage-taking, rape, as well as the growing stigmatization and discrimination against certain communities associated with armed groups.

**In this context, we call for the urgent strengthening of the protection of civilian populations in the region. Concerted and strengthened action is urgently needed to assist the most vulnerable and to curb the spread of the crisis.** If we fail to act now, the crisis will cause further suffering and forced displacement, cost more lives, devastate communities and spread to new areas.

Humanitarian organizations recommend to the Member states of the G5-Sahel, of the coalition, and to all armed actors to:

- 1. Commit to respect their international human rights and humanitarian law obligations.**
- 2. Ensure unhindered humanitarian access to forcibly displaced populations, their host communities and the civilian population as a whole.**
- 3. Promote the distinction between military and humanitarian operations. Due to the volatile situation in the Sahel, military and humanitarian actors operate in the same areas, making civil-military coordination crucial.** To ensure the functioning of these mechanisms, it is essential to guarantee the representativeness of security forces in civil-military coordination forums. Given the rapidly deteriorating security situation and the multiplicity of military actors, the need for clear guidelines on civil-military relations that respect humanitarian principles and individual mandates is essential.
- 4. Ensure the protection of civilians, in particular displaced persons and refugees, women, girls, the elderly and persons with special needs, and strengthen actions to prevent gender-based violence.** In central and eastern Mali, northern Burkina Faso and western Niger, the population's access to administrative services, schools, health centres and other social structures is limited due to the withdrawal

of staff and civil servants. The withdrawal or disengagement of administrative, judicial and police authorities from certain areas makes populations vulnerable and leaves them without state protection.

5. **Condemn human rights violations, fight impunity, guarantee access to justice for victims and commit to the enforcement of sentences and respect for the rule of law.**
  
6. **Promote a political solution based on social cohesion, reconciliation and local governance.** The protracted nature of crises and displacement requires greater mobilisation for the implementation of new approaches, in particular through strengthening the resilience of affected populations.

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), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

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