

UN agencies urge global action as drought looms over Africa's Sahel region

United Nations agencies have urged greater international support to stave off severe food insecurity in Africa's western Sahel; a region reeling from the effects of conflict and now threatened by drought and rising hunger.

According to estimates, about five million people in northern Senegal, southern Mauritania and parts of Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso and Chad, will require food and livelihood assistance, after having exhausted their food reserves – which may run out by the end of this month.

In normal weather conditions, supplies would last beyond June, into September.

"We are hearing of people cutting down the number of daily meals and children dropping out of school," Abdou Dieng, the Regional Director of the UN World Food Programme (WFP) for West and Central Africa, said in a news release on Thursday.

"Those are telling signs of a looming disaster that the world cannot continue to ignore."

It is feared the region's children will be the worst affected, with more than 1.6 million at risk of severe acute malnutrition this year – representing a 50 per cent increase compared with the last major nutrition crisis in the Sahel, in 2012.

Marie-Pierre Poirier, the Regional Director for West and Central Africa at the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said that it was "tragic that the same mothers are coming back to the clinics year after year with their children for treatment."

It is tragic that the same mothers are coming back to the clinics year after year with their children for treatment of severe acute malnutrition

– UNICEF official Marie-Pierre Poirier

This year, the numbers have been the worst, she added.

"We can break this cycle if we invest now in building resilience – making families, communities and national authorities better equipped to prevent and deal with similar shocks in the future," said Ms. Poirier.

Strengthening resilience is also the top priority for the UN Food and

[Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO).

[“What will help stabilize the Sahel is support for pastoralists and agro-pastoralists](#), during this lean season and in the future, to cope with shocks that include climate change and conflicts,” said Coumba Sow, the Sub-Regional Coordinator for Resilience for FAO across the region.

To mitigate the impact of the immediate crisis, the three UN agencies have developed a joint response to cover food needs, protect livelihoods and address malnutrition.

They have also prepared longer-term interventions, including improving access to local food resources as well as strengthening health and social services to allow communities and countries at large, to prevent and deal with similar shocks in the future.

Implementing these programmes however, relies on sufficient funding.

Fully funded, the WFP [response](#) (requiring \$284 million) will provide food and nutrition to some 3.5 million people. UNICEF’s [response](#) (\$264 million) will protect almost 1 million children from severe acute malnutrition and provide them access to water and sanitation facilities and education until the end of the year.

The FAO [response](#) (requiring \$128 million, of which \$45 million is urgently needed) will help the situation from further deteriorating for 2.5 million livestock and other farmers, and their families.

[UN chief denounces terror attack on electoral commission HQ in Libyan capital](#)

United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has condemned Wednesday’s attack on the electoral commission headquarters in the Libyan capital, Tripoli, and reiterated the world body’s commitment to support the country.

In a [statement](#) attributable to his spokesperson, the UN chief also extended his condolences to the families of the victims and sincere sympathy to the wounded.

According to reports, at least 12 people were killed and seven wounded when terrorists attacked the High National Election Commission on Wednesday.

In the statement, Mr. Guterres also underscored the UN’s commitment to the implementation of the Action Plan for Libya.

The plan, which was [endorsed](#) by the Security Council last October, [aims to bring about peace and stability in the country](#) and end a protracted crisis that has caused immense suffering and contributed to instability beyond the Libya's borders.

Violence between rival groups has plagued the oil-rich North African nation since shortly after the 2011 overthrow of former leader Muammar Gaddafi, leading to a humanitarian and economic crisis.

The Action Plan contains seven main priorities, beginning with reinvigorating an inclusive political process by building on recent positive developments. Other priorities include strengthening national security; supporting migrants; and securing predictable support for humanitarian assistance.

The statement added that the UN Special Representative for Libya, Ghassan Salamé, is working very closely with all parties towards the plan's full implementation.

['Marathon of suffering' in Syria conflict, far from over: UN humanitarian advisor](#)

The fighting in Syria "is not over" and neither is the "marathon of suffering" for millions of people in the war-torn country, a senior aid official at the UN said on Thursday.

Jan Egeland, Special Advisor to the UN Special Envoy for Syria, was speaking to journalists after a scheduled humanitarian task force meeting in Geneva.

"It's not over, and that's what I fear, people think it's over," he said, amid reports that "tens of thousands of people" from Rural Damascus were preparing to evacuate to Idlib in the north-west of the country.

"We've still only 23 per cent of humanitarian programmes funded and we're now in May," Mr Egeland said, warning that there was "no cash ...available to humanitarian actors" as "desperate, exhausted people arrive now every day in Idlib. There is no money for the operations."

He called on countries not to slow down their support "before this marathon of suffering is over."

Mr. Egeland's comments come amid ongoing aid-access challenges, in many areas of Syria, linked to mass displacement and acute needs caused by more than seven years of war.

One year ago, well over four million people lived in so-called hard-to-reach locations where aid access was extremely unreliable, and hundreds of thousands more were trapped by surrounding forces.

Today, two million people remain in hard-to-reach areas in Syria and 11,000 still live in besieged locations; but the apparent progress in terms of numbers, is deceptive, the UN Special Advisor explained:

“It is a good thing that people are not any longer living massively in besieged areas, and that much fewer people live in hard-to-reach areas. But when this comes at the cost of horrific battles in heavily populated areas, and when it comes because of agreements made by a small group of military people and politicians, too often humanitarian concerns and the protection concerns for the civilian population is lost.”

According to the UN [Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs](#) (OCHA), displacement in some parts of Syria is as high as it was at the beginning of the crisis.

OCHA’s records indicate that for every person who returns home voluntarily, another three people are newly displaced.

Areas of particular concern include Afrin in the north, the former ISIL stronghold of Raqqa, as well as Eastern Ghouta outside Damascus and Yarmouk in the south of the capital – where the UN has highly-restricted access.

But Mr. Egeland said his “worry number one” was Idlib, which is already home to more than two million people.

“They are living out in the open, they are living in congested displacement camps...crammed in collective centres,” he said.

“They arrive at 2am, you know, sort of every night now, just to find that they can hardly get a bed anywhere offered by completely overwhelmed humanitarian actors. So we cannot have a war in Idlib,” he implored.

Amid reports that armed groups are continuing to strike what Mr Egeland called “bad humanitarian agreements” to allow civilians to leave several conflict zones including the besieged Shia towns of Foah and Kafraya in the north-west and Yarmouk south of Damascus, he said it was important that people went to a place of their choosing.

Mr. Egeland also expressed concern for the 40,000 people living in displacement camps near eastern Ghouta – previously home to 390,000 people – amid a reported lack of freedom of movement for civilians, particularly men.

The veteran aid chief also defended the value of the UN-coordinated “deconfliction system” which offers protection to humanitarian locations whose location is communicated to warring parties.

More than 660 sites had now asked the UN to transmit their coordinates to Member States whose militaries are operating within Syria, Mr. Egeland said, and more than 500 of those requests had come this year alone.

“I’m surprised really by those who say they really want to help protect medical facilities, that they are questioning the whole value of trying to get a deconfliction system up in the Syria war, like we have it in Yemen, we have it in Afghanistan, we have it in Mali and many other conflicts,” he added.

[Mental health ‘neglected issue’ but key to achieving Global Goals, say UN chiefs](#)

Mental health remains one of the most neglected global health issues, even though it is critical to the achievement of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted by world leaders, top United Nations officials have said at an event in London.

“One in four people experience a mental health episode in their lifetime, but the issue remains largely neglected,” said UN [Secretary-General António Guterres](#) in his opening remarks to a roundtable discussion on mental health, co-organized by his office, the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), and the Wellcome Trust, a charitable foundation that supports scientists and researchers.

“The UN is committed to working with partners to promote full mental health and wellbeing for all,” Mr. Guterres added.

The UN is committed to working with partners to promote full mental health and wellbeing for all – *UN Secretary-General António Guterres*

The roundtable discussion, held Wednesday evening, included Deputy Secretary-General Amina J. Mohammed, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, [UN Children’s Fund](#) (UNICEF) Executive Director Henrietta Fore, and some 20 others from academia, government and civil society.

A main message coming out of the discussion was growing support for the notion that there can be “no health without mental health” and there is a need to look beyond the health sector, for creative solutions to tackle the root causes of deteriorating mental health.

Inadequate care does not come about in a vacuum, and there are societal as well as environmental factors involved, the roundtable heard.

Ms. Mohammed explained that mental health is not just an issue for the health

sector because it also related to equality and basic individual rights. In this regard, she called for greater cross-sectoral investment to address the problem.

The event was held on the margins of the annual meeting of the UN Chief Executives Board (CEB) – one of the semi-annual meetings that brings together, under the chairmanship of the Secretary-General, the executive heads of 31 agencies and specialized UN organizations.

[UN chief condemns violence in Central African Republic capital Bangui](#)

Voicing concern over inflammatory rhetoric in the wake of widespread violence in Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR), United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has called on all actors to remain calm and to work together to bring peace to the country.

[“There is no justification for incitement to violence or hate speech,”](#) said the Secretary-General in a statement attributable to his spokesperson.

At least 22 people have been killed and over 100 injured in clashes, which erupted following the arrest of a member of a criminal group by CAR’s security forces.

In the ensuing violence, a church was attacked and a pastor killed. Two members of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the country, known by its French acronym MINUSCA, were also wounded – one seriously – when they were pelted with stones by a crowd.

In the statement, the UN chief also called on the national authorities to investigate the attacks and promptly bring those responsible to justice.

He reaffirmed his support to the country and to MINUSCA’s role to protect civilians and stabilize the country.