

Seven million people in Lake Chad basin 'living on the edge' – UN relief official

23 January 2017 – Spotlighting the desperate plight of millions in Africa's Lake Chad basin, the top United Nations humanitarian official for the Sahel region called today for international solidarity with the people in urgent need.

"I wish I had good news, but I don't," Toby Lanzer, the Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel, told a news conference at the UN Headquarters, in New York that was largely focused on the crisis affecting Lake Chad basin countries, which include Cameroon, Chad, Niger and Nigeria.

"11 million people are in desperate need of humanitarian aid, 7.1 million of them are severely food insecure. [They are] living on the edge – surviving on, if they can, one meal a day," he noted.

Mr. Lanzer added that among them, the situation of children is particularly worrying. Some 515,000 children are severely and acutely malnourished and their lives are at risk if aid does not reach them urgently.

"No government on Earth can do what it takes to confront [these numbers] of severe food insecurity," he stressed. "This is a clear case where international solidarity with the governments of the region is needed."

He also noted the peaceful resolution of the political standoff in the Gambia prevented "yet another crisis" in the region, which already has at least 2.5 million internally displaced persons (IDP). Fearing violence this past weekend, some 52,000 Gambians fled to Senegal and Guinea Bissau, but are now starting to return.



Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the Sahel, Toby Lanzer, briefs journalists on the latest developments in Nigeria and the Lake Chad Basin region. UN Photo/Rick Bajornas

Response to bombing of IDP camp in Rann, Nigeria

Turning to the tragic bombing of a camp for IDPs in Nigeria's Rann, Mr. Lanzer hailed the efforts of the first responders – relatives of those in the camp, as well as nearby villagers – who rushed in to help the victims.

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The UN and humanitarian family too stepped in from the onset of the disaster, helping the first responders as well as helping transfer those severely injured to medical facilities.

The UN Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) also flew in medical supplies and teams on the day of the incident and in subsequent days.

“We sprang into action, in exactly the way we are meant to do,” said the UN relief official. “It was a tremendous effort from the local and community aid workers, as well as by international humanitarians.”

Improving security reveals depth of humanitarian suffering

Responding a question, Mr. Lanzer explained the scale of humanitarian suffering in the region has become increasingly evident with improving security situation as a result of the military campaign against Boko Haram. This has allowed humanitarian actors to reach many places which were impossible to get to earlier due to insecurity.

Speaking on the situation on the ground at that time, he said: “[We saw] towns and villages that were totally destroyed. [Places] that were completely cut off for over three years [and places] devoid of two-, three- and four-year olds because they have died.”

Upcoming conference in Oslo

Mr. Lanzer also informed the media about an upcoming conference for the region, to be held in the Norwegian capital, Oslo, on 24 February, to draw attention to the tragic situation there.

He further noted that the humanitarian appeal for the region for 2016 was only 52 per cent funded.

“When you are funded to this extent, a lot of lives are lost,” he said, “We hope that with the leadership of Norway, Germany, Nigeria and the support of the UN, we can convince many Member States to go to Oslo and make statements of political support and also, we hope, material support, that will allow the agencies to do their work to save lives, as well as give people a hand up.”