UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing: West Africa Food Insecurity-WFP - UNHCR

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Shotlist

2. SOUNDBYTE (EN) Elisabeth Byrs, Senior Spokesperson, World Food Programme (WFP): “Over 21 million people across West Africa will struggle to feed themselves this coming lean season between June and August without sustained assistance. WFP estimates that an additional 20 million people could struggle to feed themselves due to the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in the next six months, doubling the number of food-insecure to 43 million in this region.”
3. Medium shot: UN Geneva and UN flag alley behind gates at UN Geneva, filmed from the Place des Nations. A motorcyclist passes from left to right.
4. SOUNDBYTE (EN) Babar Baloch, spokesperson, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): “West and central Africa is one of largest displacement situations in Africa; I mean we are talking about 5.6 million internally displaced people, more than 1.3 million refugees and 1.6 million stateless.”
6. SOUNDBYTE (EN) Elisabeth Byrs, Senior Spokesperson, World Food Programme (WFP): “We must sustain our assistance across the region. Especially in places such as Central Sahel, Central African Republic, Nigeria and Cameroon.”
7. Medium shot: UN Geneva flag alley, with UN flag in background.
8. SOUNDBYTE (FR) Elisabeth Byrs, Senior Spokesperson, World Food Programme (WFP): “Quand les gouvernements ont dû fermer les écoles et arrêter les repas scolaires, nous avons travaillé avec eux, nous travaillons avec eux, pour organiser les points de distribution, pour les
familles les plus vulnérables (puissant) prendre des rations afin de ne pas les pénaliser, étant donné qu’on est obligés de fermer les écoles pour des questions de confinement.”


10. SOUNDbite (FR) Elisabeth Byrs, Senior Spokesperson, World Food Programme (WFP) : “Nous avons mis en place des systèmes de surveillance, des systèmes d’évaluation pour nous permettre de cibler et de surveiller les populations les plus à risque, et ça nous faisons avec des partenaires, avec des gouvernements, bien sûr, et avec la communauté humanitaire internationale dans le sens le plus large du terme.”

11. Medium shot, UN flag flying at UN Geneva.
Food insecurity in West Africa could leave 43 million at risk as COVID hits: WFP / UNHCR

Well over 40 million people across West Africa face desperate food shortages in coming months, twice as many as before the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Food Programme (WFP) said on Tuesday.

Appealing for continued support from the international community for the agency’s global aid effort, WFP spokesperson Elisabeth Byrs warned that the new coronavirus risks weakening already vulnerable populations that have fled armed conflict and endured climate change emergencies.

An estimated 12 million children under five years old could be acutely malnourished in the lean season from June to August, up from 8.2 million in the same period last year.

The alert follows a similar warning from the UN agency about a potentially massive spike in global food insecurity in East Africa, as a direct result of the pandemic.

“We must sustain our assistance across the region,” Ms. Byrs said. “Especially in places such as Central Sahel, Central African Republic, Nigeria and Cameroon.”

During the lean season in June and August, more than 21 million people across West Africa “will struggle to feed themselves”, she explained, adding Gambia and Benin to the list of countries in need.

“One additional 20 million people could struggle to feed themselves due to the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 in the next six months, doubling the number of food-insecure to 43 million in this region,” she said.

Highlighting people’s vulnerabilities, Babar Baloch from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), described West and central Africa as “one of largest displacement situations in Africa…we are talking about 5.6 million internally displaced people, more than 1.3 million refugees and 1.6 million stateless (people).”

The UN refugee agency has repeatedly called for greater support for increasing numbers of people forced to flee for their lives amid renewed conflict in West Africa’s turbulent Sahel and Lake Chad region.

Burkina Faso has also witnessed massive displacement - of more than 838,000 people since January 2019 – a figure which keeps climbing with each passing day.

In recent weeks, the agency said that armed groups had targeted thousands of Malian refugees sheltering in camps near the border of Burkina Faso and Mali.

On Monday, the agency condemned attacks on 2 May on Malian refugees in Burkina Faso – “reportedly by the country’s security forces”, in Mentao refugee camp in which at least 32 people were injured.

The camp is located in Burkina Faso’s volatile Sahel region close to the border with Mali and hosts some 6,500 refugees, UNHCR said in a statement.

For WFP the priority continues to be to focus on the most vulnerable individuals.

They include “the urban poor - who live hand-to-mouth – (who) are most at risk”, Ms. Byrs said, highlighting how COVID-19 travel restrictions had compromised the transport of supplies and the functioning of open-air markets that serve most people, resulting in price increases in some countries.
Movement restrictions could also affect farmers as the planting season approaches, WFP said in a statement, warning that “an inadequate response” to current needs “would put the future well-being of millions of people in the region at stake, particularly women and young children”.

It could also lead to civil unrest in parts of a region already challenged by insecurity and violent extremism, the agency said, before adding that it was seeking to overcome challenges in partnership with the authorities.

A significant problem is the halt in school meal distribution, which has affected 18 million pupils supported through Government-led programmes and 2.2 million schoolchildren in WFP-supported schools.

“When Governments have had to close schools and stop (serving) school meals, we have worked with them,” said Ms. Byrs. “We are working with them, to organize distribution points for the most vulnerable families who can take food rations so that they aren’t penalized, as schools have been forced to shut, in line with confinement measures.”

“Quand les gouvernements ont dû fermer les écoles et arrêter les repas scolaires, nous avons travaillé avec eux, nous travaillons avec eux, pour organiser les points de distribution, pour les familles les plus vulnérables (puissant) prendre des rations afin de ne pas les pénaliser, étant donné qu’on est obligés de fermer les écoles pour des questions de confinement.”

She added: “We have put in place monitoring and evaluation systems to help us to target the most at-risk populations, and we do that with partners, with Governments of course, and the international humanitarian community, in the largest sense of the term.”

“Nous avons mis en place des systèmes de surveillance, des systèmes d'évaluation pour nous permettre de cibler et de surveiller les populations les plus à risque, et ça nous faisons avec des partenaires, avec des gouvernements, bien sûr, et avec la communauté humanitaire internationale dans le sens le plus large du terme.”

WFP urgently requires an additional US$ 574 million to provide crucial assistance for the next six months in West Africa. These requirements are likely to increase in the coming weeks as the impact of COVID-19 is fully analysed.