



# IN BRIEF

## Sahel Zone: A Political Powder Keg

### Armed conflicts threaten food security

*Aid organizations, including Welthungerhilfe, have been warning since last November about a looming food crisis in the Sahel. Despite various preventative measures – this time, the international community moved faster and more decisively, with impressions of the crisis in the Horn of Africa still in mind – the crisis is worsening. Available funds and measures undertaken have proven insufficient. Some 8 million people in Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, Senegal and Chad are already in a state of acute food insecurity and another 7 million are threatened with the same. The causes of the crisis are complex. Superficial triggers are a chain of poor or irregular rainy seasons in recent years. Other factors, such as high food prices, repercussions from the war in Libya and continued migration also increase the population's vulnerability. The international community must increase its efforts drastically if the imminent threat of famine is to be averted. At the same time, structural problems in the region must be addressed.*

For the third time in a decade, we are facing an acute food crisis in the Sahel zone. Various early warning systems predict that the crisis will peak in mid-year. That is when the meager stores of food in the region will be depleted for this population, which depends primarily on rural subsistence farming. The next harvest will still be a long way off.

Recurring droughts leave farmers barely any time to recover from the previous crisis. Their savings are depleted and their livestock inventory reduced. The populations are extremely vulnerable; their traditional coping strategies have been exhausted and they are forced to turn to negative coping strategies such as migration, the sale of resources such as draft animals, tools, bicycles and land, consumption of poor-quality food and seeds, etc. The number of children not attending school has grown.<sup>1</sup>

About 8 million people already are in a state of acute food insecurity and dependent on emergency aid. There is a risk that the same number of people will again be unable to find sufficient food. An estimated 1 million children will suffer from malnutrition (Severe Acute Malnutrition – SAM) this year.<sup>2</sup> Severe lifelong consequences on their development are possible.

The international community already has made significant efforts to address the situation. But their efforts to date have not been enough to avert the crisis. The World Food Programme (WFP) currently is preparing to distribute 570,000 tons of food in the coming months. So far, only half of the needed funding is available.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> WFP 2012 : 1

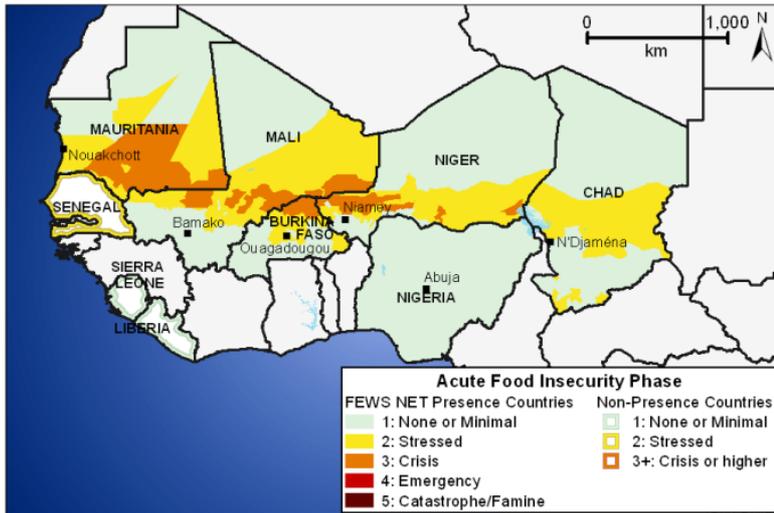
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<sup>2</sup> European Commission 2012: 1

<sup>3</sup> WFP (2012)

### Enough food, but it's unaffordable

One important trigger for the food crisis is delayed or insufficient rainfall in some regions. Thus failing harvests due to significant droughts are particularly affecting the regions of Kayes, Koulikoro and Mopti in Mali; central Senegal; the northern, eastern and north-central areas of Burkina Faso; the entire



Map showing likely developments in the food situation between July and September 2012

Source: FEWS Net 2012

Niger with the exception of the regions of Maradi and Dosso and the regions of Logone and Tandjilé in Chad; parts of Mauritania and Gambia as well as the northern, western and eastern center of Senegal.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, there is a severe deficit in animal feed in the entire Sahel region. The low water level on the Niger River and the resulting lack of flooding of pasturelands led to early migration of pastoral communities from Mali, Niger, Chad and Mauritania to the southernmost neighboring countries. Overgrazing and major conflicts with settled farmers are likely to ensue.

But it would be wrong to blame the threatened crisis solely on the lack of rainfall or irregular rains and poor harvests. It is true that one poor rainy season followed the next over the past decade – perhaps also due to climate change – but even so, the most recent harvest in West Africa and the Sahel zone was actually 4 percent above the average for the last 5 years, with an estimated

55,451,000 tons.<sup>5</sup> In fact, 2010 saw a record harvest.

The problem is that rainfall was extremely uneven over these regions, so harvest productivity also fluctuated widely. In principle, markets in the region could compensate the food deficit in the drought-affected regions. In other words, there is enough food in the Sahel zone and it also reaches nearly all local markets. But the people in outlying regions do not have enough income to purchase sufficient additional food from outside. Thus the food crisis is not caused primarily by a limited availability of food but rather by difficulties in gaining access to food, due to high prices. In fact, food prices in many Sahel countries are higher than usual. According to the “Famine Early Warning System Network” (FEWS-Net) grain prices are currently at least 20 percent and more above average. In some regions Welthungerhilfe staff is reporting price increases that are considerably higher. While prices seemed to stabilize in February and March, April saw a return to steep increases. These high prices take an especially hard toll on poor and very poor households, which simply cannot afford to purchase more food.<sup>6</sup>

Whether food prices rise further depends partly on the political situation in the Sahel region, particularly in Mali.

### The Sahel: A political powder keg

The desert-like region of the northern Sahel zone, encompassing 3,000,000 square kilometers and crossing several international boundaries, has turned into a lawless zone where trafficking in drugs, in illegal weapons, in human beings and in automobiles is rampant. Not a single country in the Sahel region is able to control its entire territory. Thus a transparent web of politically and economically motivated armed groups operates with impunity here.

<sup>5</sup> UN-OCHA (2012a): 6

<sup>6</sup> FEWS Net (2012a and 2012b)

<sup>4</sup> UN-OCHA (2012a): 6

*“The situation has worsened since the end of the war in Libya.”*

Among the most significant groups is the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (*Mouvement National de Libération de l’Azawad* – MNLA), founded in 2011. The movement, which primarily consists of Tuaregs from the north of Mali, is fighting to separate the Azawad region from Mali and set up an independent Tuareg country. One reason for this is the lack of development in the region. Between January and April, several cities in northern Mali – including Timbuktu – came under their control. They received support from the *Ansar Dine* group, which aims to introduce Sharia law in Mali.

The Malian government’s loss of control over its northern regions led to a military coup in March, with the goal of quashing the Tuareg uprising. But, under pressure from neighboring countries, the armed forces returned power to the hands of a civil transitional government under Parliamentary President Diounounda Traoré, who was to organize free elections in May. But ongoing tensions prevented him from carrying out this plan. It remains unclear when democratic elections can take place. Meanwhile, tensions in the capital, Bamako, are rising – not least because Traoré is considered a representative of the old, corrupt system and is not accepted by segments of the population.<sup>7</sup>

Another important group that is gaining more influence in the Sahel zone and that is in close contact with *Ansar Dine* is *Al Qaida in Maghreb* (AQIM). The group, which has its roots in the Algerian civil war and went by the name “Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat” (GSPC), is committed to Jihadism. It is said to have contacts to Osama Bin Laden’s Al Qaida movement. In 2007 the group carried out attacks on the offices of the Algerian prime minister and a police commissioner in eastern Algeria. In recent years,

the group gained notoriety for kidnapping tourists in the Sahel region.<sup>8</sup>

Increasingly, the Sahel Zone also is becoming a haven for armed groups that are fighting in neighboring countries, like the hundreds of members of the radical Islamic group Boko Haram who have poured from Nigeria into Niger and Chad. And the Al-Shabab militia is increasingly looking to the Sahel zone as a refuge from fighting between Ethiopian and Kenyan armies.

The situation has worsened since the end of the Libyan war. About 400,000 migrants, mostly young men without any prospects for the future, have returned to the Sahel zone. Now their families must feed them, exacerbating the food shortage. Given their precarious situation, they are easily recruited by armed groups. Not to mention the fact that the returnees include many Tuareg who fought as mercenary soldiers for Qaddafi and are now aligning themselves with other armed groups. Some also brought weapons into the Sahel zone from the Libyan war.<sup>9</sup>

### **The security situation makes the food crisis worse**

The tense security situation has many negative impacts on the food situation across the entire Sahel region.<sup>10</sup>

- The conflict in the northern part of Mali has blocked some trade routes within the country itself and between the countries of the Sahel zone. Both local and cross-border markets received minimal food stores – which meant that prices continued to rise in the affected areas.
- Traditional nomadic migration routes have been interrupted by the conflict in northern Mali. Currently, large numbers of cattle are being driven towards southern Mali and Burkina Faso, Mauritania and Niger, where food and water for an-

<sup>7</sup> Leymarie (2012)

<sup>8</sup> Zandt (2012): 2

<sup>9</sup> Leymarie (2012)

<sup>10</sup> See also Oxfam et al. (2012)

### Welthungerhilfe in the Sahel Zone

Since the 1970s, Welthungerhilfe has worked in various countries of the Sahel zone. Currently, Welthungerhilfe is active in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger.

The organization's sectoral priorities are agricultural development, food security, provision of water and sanitary facilities, promotion of civil society and gender equality.

Welthungerhilfe also supports the Millennium Village of Kongoussi in Burkina Faso. Within the framework of the Millennium Village initiative, Welthungerhilfe has joined with the local villagers to help realize one or more Millennium Development Goals. The Millennium Village in Kongoussi was created in 2006. Following the first project phase, which concluded in 2010, major improvements were noted in the quality of life for villagers in terms of their economic situation, school enrollment and health status.

imals and people are so scarce that survival is in doubt. In addition, the first conflicts – sometimes deadly – have broken out between local farmers and the nomadic cattle herders.

- A traditional coping strategy during crises – to seek work and a source of income across international boundaries – has been stymied by the conflict.
- Since January more than 240,000 people have been expelled from northern Mali. About half of them found shelter in neighboring countries. The refugees are urgently in need of outside assistance.
- Due to the precarious security situation, many of these refugees and internal expellees cannot be reached by aid organizations. There already are reports of armed groups looting food stocks.

The Famine Early Warning System Network (FEWS-Net) of the American development organization USAID has predicted that the food situation in Mali will worsen drastically should the conflict between the Malian government and the MNLA rebels continue to escalate.<sup>11</sup>

### A multi-pronged solution

An adequate response to the food crisis requires action on various fronts. Welthungerhilfe considers the following requirements especially important:

1. It is clear that a lasting solution to the crisis depends on an improved security situation in the Sahel zone. However, current efforts by the international community and individual countries (including the USA, France and EU member states) to tackle the security problem using military means have been far from successful – whether in the form of financial support for the expansion of military and police apparatus in various countries or through direct military maneuvers such as the "Pan-Sahel Initiative" and the "Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership". Moreover, these efforts actually miss the true target – poverty and underdevelopment in the region – particularly in the case of the Tuareg uprising. Thus, despite increasing calls for military engagement in the Sahel zone, the German federal government should rather focus on peace-building measures in the security zone, such as the demobilization of soldiers returning from Libya.
2. In addition to peace-building measures, long-term investment in development measures is essential to ensuring regional stabilization and improvement of the food situation for people in the Sahel zone. The crisis in the Sahel may appear to be acute, but in fact it is chronic. Even in "normal" years 226,000 children die of malnutrition in the Sahel Zone. Given that the population is growing by more than 3 percent, given environmental destruction, widespread corruption and poor governance, the next crisis is not far off. Germany should therefore increasingly invest in rural development and site-specific agriculture in the countries of the Sahel zone. The federal government should strengthen local markets and promote improvements in infrastructure to facilitate transportation and storage of food. In addition, Germany should call on the leaders of Sahel zone countries to make food security a priority. This includes investing in short-term crisis prevention, such as improvement of warehouses, creation of financial reserves and development of crisis management systems. But it is particularly important to aim for long-term stabilization. The upgrading of rural areas and an integrated, transparent and participative regional policy that pays special attention to the agricultural sector and promotes decentralized structures for efficient public services would be an important step here.
3. Due to the lack of investment in long-term development measures, and given the acute crisis, financial resources must be released quickly to avert the looming catastrophe. According to the United Nations, the approximately \$565 million set aside to address the Sahel crisis rep-

<sup>11</sup> FEWS-Net (2012b)

resents only 35 percent of what's needed (about \$1.5 billion as of 9.5.2012, 4:30 PM). This gap in funding absolutely must be closed in a hurry. A study by Oxfam and Save the Children from 2011, prepared in the wake of the famine in the Horn of Africa, shows that many more lives could have been saved at much less expense if funds could have been made available months before the outbreak of acute famine. In the Sahel region, it is still possible to prevent the worst from happening.

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