The Central Sahel border region between Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger is the epicentre of one of the world's fastest-growing humanitarian crises.

In less than two years, violence and insecurity have pushed 7.4 million people in Central Sahel to acute hunger levels – three times the number one year ago – and almost 1.6 million people into internal displacement, which is a twentyfold increase. Lockdowns and other COVID-19 prevention measures have pushed an additional 6 million people in the region into extreme poverty, with 4.8 million people – most of them children – in need of urgent nutrition assistance. Violence between armed groups, widespread poverty and natural hazards caused by climate change have pushed a record 13.4 million people to need humanitarian assistance across Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger. Five million of these people are children.

 Civilians are being killed in hostilities between armed groups and getting caught up in intercommunal violence and military operations. A dangerous cycle of violence has developed in part by grievances over access to land and water. These grievances are exploited by bandits and criminal and jihadi networks, fuelling further fighting, military crackdowns and intercommunal violence.
Frequent attacks have forced 150 health centres to close. More than 4,000 schools\(^1\) are closed because of direct attacks on education infrastructure and personnel. In Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, over 8 million children aged between 6 and 14 are out of school, which represents almost 55 per cent of children in this age group. This puts them at greater risk of exploitation, abuse, early and forced marriage, and forced recruitment into armed groups. Attacks against children have spiked over recent years. For example, Mali recorded 745 grave violations against children in 2019, compared to 544 in 2018 and 386 in 2017.

Local and international NGOs and UN agencies are on the ground to support and complement Governments’ humanitarian response. Their coordinated and sustained efforts have saved and protected millions of lives. Aid agencies have provided nutrition and food, health services, water and sanitation, shelter, education, protection and support to survivors of gender-based violence.

So far this year, 1.8 million people in Burkina Faso, 1.3 million in Mali and 1.9 million in Niger have received humanitarian assistance. This was achieved with just 40 per cent of the humanitarian funding we require. But with full funding, many more lives can be saved while alleviating human suffering.

Humanitarian organizations are seeking US$2.4 billion to provide emergency assistance until the end of 2021. We urge international donors not to look the other way and instead take immediate action to expand humanitarian work. This will not only save lives but also prevent bigger problems in the future that will be even more costly to address. Continued support to national and local humanitarian organizations will be critical to sustain access to vulnerable people in hard-to-reach areas.

Military and security measures against insurgents are a necessary part of the response to violence, but military action needs to be proportionate and avoid adding to the plight of civilians, who have already suffered terribly. All fighting parties must uphold their obligations to international humanitarian law and respect for humanitarian principles.

Military action on its own will not solve the problems of the Central Sahel. Humanitarian action can help prevent this emergency from deteriorating, but long-term, sustainable solutions are also needed to address root causes that are driving up humanitarian needs, such as ensuring good governance, investing in development, engaging in conflict resolution and the pursuit of peace.

These long-term solutions include:

- Inclusive conflict-resolution efforts to prevent tensions from turning into violence.
- Peacebuilding to help rebuild the social fabric.
- Equitable development support to help Governments improve access to education, health facilities and social protection.
- Creation of youth employment opportunities.
- Fair access to land, water and other vital natural resources.

Investing in these solutions can help break the deadly cycle of conflict and humanitarian crisis in the Central Sahel, and stop the violence from spreading to other countries like Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea and Togo.

\(^1\) As of October 2020.