



Protection Messages for Senior Officials Central Sahel Updated January 2022

In the areas affected by conflict and violence in the Central Sahel, civilians, particularly women and children, are faced with severe protection risks and incidents in an increasingly unstable context. The following messages reflect priority protection issues and needed actions in the Central Sahel region, based on analysis from the Protection Clusters in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.¹ Additional contributions were made by the Global Protection Cluster's Advocacy and Human Rights Engagement Task Teams. **These messages are being shared with donor and member state representatives ahead of the "Senior Officials Meeting on the Humanitarian Situation in the Central Sahel region", which is set for 27 January 2022.**

Brief Overview of the Protection Crisis in the Central Sahel

Protection risks in the Central Sahel continue to grow, reflecting the combined and devastating impacts of armed conflicts and violence involving state and non-state actors, human rights violations and atrocity crimes, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, growing food insecurity and high levels of poverty. Further compromising the rights and resilience of communities are forced displacement, access constraints, early and forced marriage, the imposition of repressive policies, intra- and inter-communal tensions and criminal activity. As a result, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are at the epicenter of a fast-growing crisis with over 12.8 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in 2022.² **Ultimately, the situation must be approached as a protection crisis with the response aimed at addressing immediate protection risks as well as the drivers of these risks, ensuring the fundamental rights of people are at the forefront of the national authorities' and international community's approach and actions.**

Burkina Faso – Conflict is impacting communities across the country and more than 1.5 million people are internally displaced (a four-fold increase in one year).³ In 2021, violent attacks claimed more than 2,000 lives and new displacements are continuing to date. Insecurity is also impacting people's access to markets, basic social services (including health and education), their ability to cultivate crops and pursue livelihoods, which in turn are contributing to growing food insecurity.

Mali - Insecurity, climatic shocks, and communal conflicts are expected to continue in Mali in 2022, aggravating the most protracted security and humanitarian crisis in the Central Sahel. More recently, the actions of non-state armed groups have been on the rise with an increase of human rights and international humanitarian law violations. More than 400,000 people are displaced internally. While the crisis has seriously impacted social cohesion among communities, women and girls are bearing the brunt of the violence and are at heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence, with a 40% increase of reported GBV cases from the

¹ Each of these Protection Clusters comprises a broad membership of national and international protection organizations and experts, many of whom are engaged in regular protection monitoring and a wide range of protection programmes.

² 2022 GHO data for Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali

³ [Sahel Emergency | UNHCR](#)

previous year. The deterioration of the security situation has also drastically reduced humanitarian access with certain areas and entire villages besieged by armed groups.⁴

Niger – Conflict dynamics in Niger are changing, including in the Tillaberi, Tahoua, Diffa and Maradi regions, which have recently experienced mass and targeted killings, kidnappings, intercommunal tensions, the absence of basic services and increased violence involving non-state actors⁵. These violations are leading to both internal and cross border displacements. The Protection Cluster estimates that 1.1 million people will be in need of protection in 2022 – with a sharp increase of people in need of mental health and psychosocial support.⁶ Child protection is of particular concern with a high rate of child marriages (76% of girls are married before the age of 18), and limited access to education in light of school closures. Further insights on protection priorities in Niger are highlighted in the GPC’s recent article, [Tillaberi: Western Niger’s Protection of Civilians Crisis](#)

Key Protection Messages for the Central Sahel

1. Protection risks are severe and rising, particularly for women and girls, while access to needed services are limited.

- The critical lack of state presence and services in the three border areas, combined with ongoing violence and the strong proliferation of self-defense groups, increases serious risks for the civilian population. In particular, the lack of access to basic services is often further compounding protection risks. For instance, across the Sahel, over 6,000 schools are closed or non-operational due to violence, jeopardizing children’s current and future education, especially girls who are the least likely to return to school after prolonged interruptions.⁷
- Humanitarian actors have at times been forced to suspend operations in light of growing violence, military operations, criminality and logistical challenges in certain locations.⁸ This has a direct and harmful impact on communities who are faced with severe protection risks, leaving them without access to basic assistance and protection. However, humanitarian and protection actors continue to deliver life-saving assistance amidst a challenging operating environment, and they need additional resources to scale up their response efforts. In 2021, Burkina Faso’s protection needs were funded at 23%; Mali’s were funded at 26% and Niger’s reached 46%.⁹ This is simply unacceptable, leaving millions without even the very basic protection supports they need to stay safe.
- Ultimately, the situation in the Central Sahel must be approached as a protection crisis by all actors to ensure the drivers of risks, underlying root causes and the fundamental rights of communities are at the forefront of the national authorities’ and international community’s response. This includes strengthening of protection services as essential to ensuring respect for human rights, strengthening security and dignity and better meeting needs.

Recommendations

- *Donors and Member States* should further invest in protection-focused response efforts across the triple nexus in proportionate and sustainable ways. Urgent protection supports are needed with case management and referrals, access to civil documentation, legal assistance

⁴ [Mali Protection Analysis Update July 2021 | Global Protection Cluster](#)

⁵ [Niger Protection Analysis Update June 2021 | Global Protection Cluster](#)

⁶ Niger Humanitarian Response Plan, 2021.

⁷ As of 29 November, Lake Chad and Central Sahel humanitarian overview.

⁸ SOM Regional Note, January 2022.

⁹ Global Protection Cluster data, January 2022.

and access to justice, GBV and childcare services, PSEA, assistance for victims of explosive devices, psychosocial and mental health supports and beyond. Such investments must take on a strong localization focus, recognizing the unique assets different local partners and community-based approaches bring, including with respect to trusting relationships with communities and access.

- Alongside protection response efforts, *Donors and Member States* must further prioritize longer-term support for basic services as well as tailored community-based protection, human rights and peacebuilding approaches, including mediation programs, non-military peace initiatives, community based early warning systems and community social cohesion - that address the root causes of conflict and support communities with protective factors.
- *National Authorities and Member States* must not reduce the crisis to its security aspect and instead must comprehensively address its root causes, making a firm commitment to resolve it by first addressing the drivers of violence through increased support for non-military peace initiatives and non-violent protection mechanisms. Further commitments, coupled with concrete actions, to realize durable solutions where appropriate for those displaced internally and across borders are also needed to ensure any return process or other solution is pursued in a way that supports the rights of displaced people.

2. The militarised approach to the crisis is driving vulnerability and insecurity.

- The military operations in the Liptako Gourma region (called the region of the three frontiers between Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali) are part of what drives forced displacement and cross-borders mixed movements. Violations by all parties to the conflict, including Non-State Armed Groups and Government security forces, are eroding trust while driving intercommunal tensions and violence, family separations and the disintegration of social cohesion.
- Civil-Military Coordination mechanisms are functioning in all three countries and need to be further reinforced to support the protection of affected civilian populations. This in part reflects variable capacity and resources dedicated to such mechanisms, including how their effectiveness is largely tied to the capacities of a given coordinating body and the degree of engagement by its constituent parties. Participation by national militaries has been a challenge due to competing priorities and limited resources available.
- In an increasingly complex environment with shrinking humanitarian space, ensuring the respect of humanitarian principles is essential. This includes the need for clear distinction between different kinds of operations and agencies, particularly stabilization and humanitarian agencies, which supports operational safety and principled responses.¹⁰ The blurring of boundaries can pose a direct danger to humanitarian actors.

Recommendations:

- *The international community* must refocus its approach and actions in the region, moving away from a military response to implementation of an integrated protection response, leveraging existing institutions and mechanisms.
- *Civil authorities, military and humanitarian actors* must continue to invest in strengthened capacity for cohesive and effective civil-military coordination mechanisms at sub-national, country, regional and cross-border levels. Further tools and resources are needed to improve coordination and dialogue between military, civilian and humanitarian actors on IHL, humanitarian principles and civil-military coordination. Sharing good practices and lessons-learned across contexts is also needed to build on successes in the region. Additional capacity, including via scaled-up staffing, of the Civil-Military Coordination mechanisms and more

¹⁰ SOM Regional Note, January 2022

strategic engagement through this forum by regular Armed Forces and regional military actors such as the G5 Sahel Joint Force, are needed given the critical role such mechanisms play.

- *State actors and other armed groups* must (re)affirm and (re)commit to respect for international humanitarian law and human rights law as well as humanitarian principles which aim to protect and safeguard humanitarian assistance.
- *Civil authorities and humanitarian actors* can pursue more in-depth and continuous community consultations to inform the development of tailored approaches to security needs by different communities, reflecting a range of perceptions, relationships and risks vis-a-vis state and non-state armed groups.
- *Donors* should support revitalized community-based mechanisms for managing protection cases, with the strong involvement of civil society organizations and the Human Rights Commissions of each country.

3. The grave violations of human rights happening in the region must be further monitored and reported on, with clear prioritization of prevention and accountability efforts by national duty bearers and the international community.

- During 2021, armed extremist groups killed over 800 civilians in attacks in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger and committed other grave violations, including recruitment of children and sexual violence.¹¹ There are also documented incidents of government security forces and pro-government militias¹² as well as international armed forces¹³ in these countries having unlawfully killed civilians and perpetrated enforced disappearances during counter-terrorism operations. An environment of impunity is fueling these human rights abuses, further eroding trust and social cohesion and undermining longer-term prospects for sustainable peace. The cycle must be stopped.

Recommendations:

- *The international community* must support national authorities in taking urgent steps to stop the upsurge in killings of civilians, including through the establishment of early warning networks and protection response mechanisms, such as the creation of committees composed of civilians, security forces and civil society groups, to collectively identify needs and design urgent protection response efforts.
- *Duty bearers* must ensure the investigation of alleged abuses and violations committed by defense and security forces, and elements of armed groups, while also strengthening the judicial system to ensure access to justice for civilians and the judicialization of military operations.
- Any funding from *donors and member states* that supports the security forces must be conditioned on respect for international human rights law, international humanitarian law and human rights due diligence. At the same time, direct funding is needed for a range of initiatives aimed at improving respect for these laws.
- Respect of IHL by all parties to the conflict and right-based advocacy in that matter needs to be pursued by *all parties*.

¹¹ [HRW, Sahel: Top UN Rights Official Visits Burkina Faso, Niger, December 2021](#)

¹² [HRW, Sahel: Top UN Rights Official Visits Burkina Faso, Niger, December 2021](#)

¹³ [MINUSMA Final Report Bounty, March 2021](#)