

United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs
and Emergency Relief Coordinator Valerie Amos
Statement at Member States Briefing on Western Sahel
New York, 27 May 2011

Excellencies,

Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for coming to this briefing on the Sahel. I am joined on the podium by my colleague UNDP Administrator Helen Clark.

Last July, we faced a food crisis that affected 10 million people, and when I visited Niger in October I saw how the national and international relief effort had helped avert a much worse situation.

Until countries in the Sahel can address the underlying structural problems they face, the cycle of drought which leads to hunger and insecurity will be repeated.

Across the region, from Senegal, to Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, the desert is advancing, and shifting weather patterns are causing droughts one moment and floods the next. The region is on the front line of climate change, and desperately needs help to adapt. Sahelian countries are also confronting some of the world's fastest rates of population growth, while struggling with weak governance, high youth unemployment, rapid urbanisation, and organised crime.

Food crises in the Sahel used to take place every 10 to 12 years. The last two crises, in 2005 and 2010, were just five years apart. I fear their frequency is accelerating.

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If there is not a crisis this year, there is a good chance we will see one next year. We must break this cycle.

This means that we must adapt our responses so we are not only responding to emergency needs, but working together to address the symptoms and the underlying causes of chronic food insecurity.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We must bridge the artificial gap between emergency response, recovery and development. It is time to recognise that humanitarian crisis and underdevelopment are two sides of the same coin.

Niger is a case in point. 80 per cent of Nigeriens live in the countryside, and depend on rain-fed agriculture and livestock breeding for their survival.

Between 20 and 30 per cent of people still suffer from food insecurity after the drought of 2010, although a better harvest has provided some hope.

In the first three months of 2011, more than 64,000 children in Niger were treated for severe acute malnutrition. The country's overall malnutrition rate is above the critical threshold, according to WHO standards. This situation is clearly unsustainable.

Parts of Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal, Chad, Mauritania, Senegal, and northern Nigeria face similar challenges.

And the situation is being compounded by rising food prices. The FAO Food Price Index, which measures monthly changes in international prices of key commodities, averaged 232 points in April 2011 - some 36 percent above April 2010 levels. Helen Clark and I recently wrote to all UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinators highlighting the threat this poses to the poorest and most vulnerable people.

In the Sahel, UN agencies and NGOs, along with national governments in the region, are already responding through hundreds of projects spanning emergency relief to long-term development.

WFP, for example, has a major regional operation targeting more than 1.1 million beneficiaries in Chad, where 1.6 million people were affected by the food and nutrition crisis in 2010. UNICEF is expanding its therapeutic feeding program to reach 100,000 children throughout the Sahel. FAO is managing livelihood support programmes that are helping to sustain the most vulnerable agropastoral households.

But it is clear that an effective response to the recurrent crises in the Sahel requires a longer-term engagement involving a genuine strategic partnership between national and regional authorities, relief and development agencies, and donors.

To that end, I am encouraged to see national governments and regional authorities taking an increasingly active role in addressing the chronic nature of this crisis.

At March's Sahel Summit in Chad, the Interstate Committee for Drought Control launched the beginning of a new regional strategy to tackle malnutrition.

The International Conference on Food and Nutrition Security in Niamey, at the end of March 2011, identified new priorities to break the cycle of food and nutritional insecurity, which will be discussed at a donor's conference later this year.

But we, as aid workers, development agencies, NGOs and donors must also develop a more integrated response that bridges the gap between humanitarian relief and longer-term development.

Our strategies must systematically tackle chronic underinvestment in agriculture, basic services, rural infrastructure and water management, as well as support disaster risk reduction strategies.

This requires financial support. We have asked for \$187 million to help 2 million people in Niger, \$22 million of it for early recovery, including critical resilience building projects. Only 2 per cent of the \$22 million has been funded.

The Consolidated Appeal for Chad for \$506 million is still less than half funded, and other Sahelian countries, under the West Africa Regional Appeal, have received limited attention.

We must not let the people of the Sahel down, even if their plight has faded from the headlines.

But we are also clear that humanitarian intervention alone is not enough to end this crisis.

On that note, I invite Helen Clark to take the floor.