



Source: UNHCR Women and children fetch water near a site for internally displaced persons in Barsologho, north-central Burkina Faso, where some 1,400 people are sheltering, having fled an attack on the village of Yirgou in 2019

# The Eye of the Storm

## Sahel & Northern Burkina Faso

*Standing in the dust of Dori, the capital of Sahel province in Burkina Faso, the view is plain – climate change is crippling livelihoods, exacerbating food insecurity, and intensifying armed conflict and violent extremism. In January 2020, I joined my colleagues in charge of global humanitarian coordination of food security, shelter, water and sanitation aid in Centre-Nord and Sahel provinces of Burkina Faso. The magnitude of the humanitarian protection crisis, and clear risk of further deterioration, was confronting. Burkina Faso needs immediate at-scale humanitarian attention, as well as, retention and increase of active peace and development programmes in accessible areas.*



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## What is happening in Burkina?

Burkina is one of the poorest countries in the world (183 out of 188), with 18 out of 20 million people living in extreme poverty and poverty. Most of the youth are partially, or fully, unemployed.

Since 2015, violent extremism has been on the rise. Many parts of the country are now under the control of various armed groups, who target and kill civilian populations, traumatizing communities, changing their way of life and forcing almost 600,000 to flee their homes.

The armed groups have rapidly expanded since June 2019. Today, they have operational reach over one third of the country. Initially concentrated in Burkina Faso's northern Sahel province, the attacks have steadily spread to the Nord, Centre-Nord, Boucle du Mouhoun, and Est regions. These groups are not only expanding geographically but also in numbers – recruitment of children and youth is enabled by high levels of poverty, food insecurity, communal, ethnic and religious tensions, rivalries between pastoralists and agriculturalists, and disputes over control of gold mines and smuggling routes.

The impact of the violence in these territories is stark. Of the five million people affected, about 2 million need urgent humanitarian health, food, shelter and water aid. Kids - half of the population – are experiencing increasing abuse, early marriage, labor in exploitative conditions, and recruitment by armed groups, forcing them out of the few schools that existed. Young women are particularly targeted and abused. The elderly, people with special needs and people with reduced mobility, a group that constituted 15% of the population

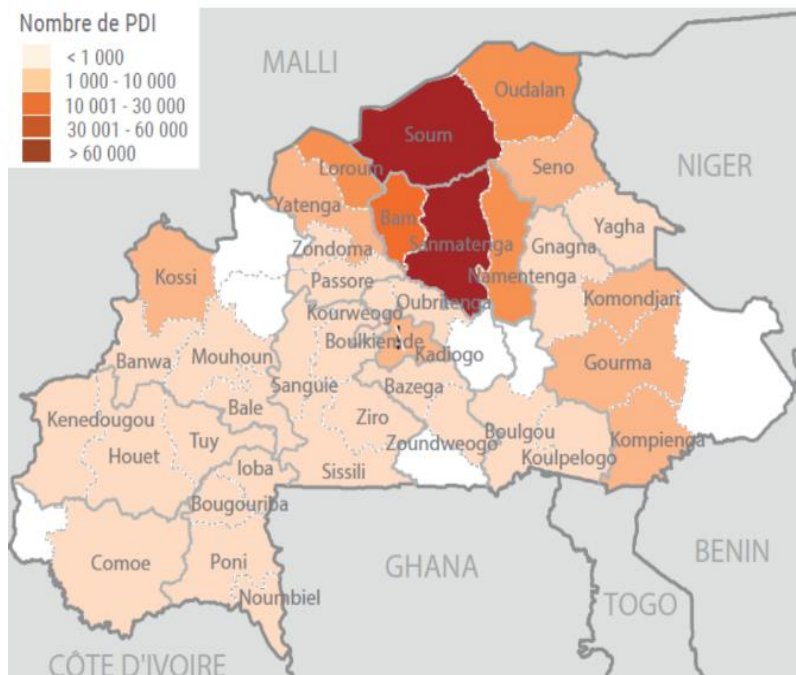
prior to the outbreak of violence, are often left behind.

The country's capacity to find solutions is undermined by the spread of weapons, stigma, restricted movement capacity, abuse, trauma, lack of services and livelihoods, and youth disillusionment.

People affected by the crisis need immediate emergency assistance and protection. Without it, people are left with few options. Concurrently, Burkinabés in non-conflict affected areas require support to get out of poverty through access to basic services. This is essential for communities around the violence belt. Without it, fragility and insecurity are left to escalate creating unrelenting suffering.

## How is climate change making it worse?

The main economic activities in Burkina – agriculture, forestry and livestock farming – are increasingly impacted by climate change. Land degradation is posing a serious threat to these



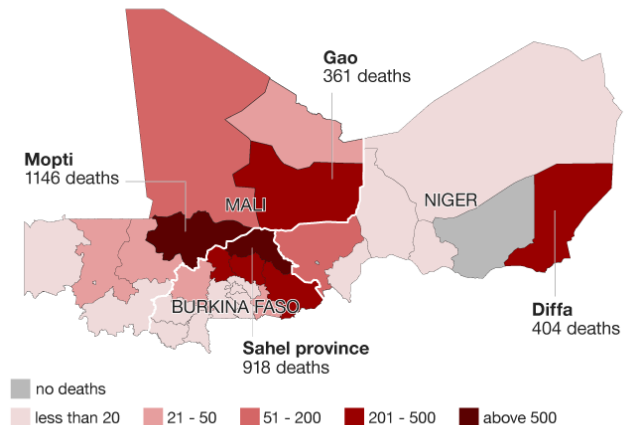
activities; one third of the national territory is already degraded and expanding at an average of 360,000 hectares per year. The Sahel is also experiencing an overall decrease in rainfall and depletion of soils due to agricultural overexploitation and progressive deforestation of the original savannahs by cutting firewood, bush fires and stray animals.

The impact of these climatic shocks is threefold: First, it is increasing poverty and unemployment and weakening coping capacity of farming communities. Second, it is primarily un-employing young people exposing them to defacto recruitment by armed forces. Third, high temperatures and unusable land is accelerating displacement and intercommunal fighting over land and scarce water resources. These factors combined create an ideal climate for violence.

Over the last nine months, 250 civilians have been killed in 20 violent attacks. While violence was initially targeting government institutions, the target is shifting toward civilians and civilian infrastructure.

### Sahel crisis casualties from 2019 attacks

Worst-hit regions



Source: acleddata.com



## What should and can we do about it?

Terrorism, violence, underdevelopment and climate change accelerating each other, like in Burkina, is no longer an exception in humanitarian crisis. Over a dozen conflict contexts around the world are affected by climate change & environmental disasters. Most of these same conflicts include some form of violent extremism. Humanitarian aid, development programs and climate response must come closer together. To achieve this in Burkina, here are the priorities:

### 1. Advocate for protection of civilians

Advocating for the protection of civilians in Burkina should be the focus and calculus for all humanitarian, development and security interventions.

### 2. Step up humanitarian action in hotspots

Humanitarian action should scale up in the hotspots of violence and key areas receiving displaced people. Quick and agile reactivity and scaling up capacity of humanitarians is vital. Assistance and protection action need to go beyond the comfort of stable and secure areas and focus on the hard to reach and limited access areas controlled by armed groups. Success for such humanitarian access depends upon systematic application and communication of humanitarian principles, as well as, investment in capacities of and partnerships with local actors.



### **3. Free up development resources for the displacement reception belt**

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Development action should increase across the country. It should target areas receiving the displaced, not only due to significant needs but as a preventive action against further spread of violence and displacement.

Today, significant funding and programmes are allocated for Burkina Faso. However, these programs have been designed for secure environments, and risk being frozen if insecurity persists. This would be counterproductive. Instead, development work should focus on fragile areas, take more risks, and dedicate resources to supporting the rule of law and presence of government institutions and services (particularly health, education, water access, and electric and roads infrastructure).

### **4. Keep supporting adaptation capacities to climate variability & change, especially to vulnerable groups**

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While addressing Burkina's urgent humanitarian and development needs, it is crucial to continue supporting communities to adapt to climate change through disaster risk reduction, preparedness, early warning systems and addressing the underlying factors.

### **5. Ensure that protection is central to humanitarian action and essential for development aid**

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No single approach or actor will be able to respond alone to the depth and breadth of the

crisis: progress will need strong support from states, international organizations and civil society at large. Yet this collaboration needs to keep its focus on protection of people as its main outcome. Interventions should be designed to avoid harming people and be customized to consider the fact that crises affect different groups of the population differently.

Humanitarian and development actors need to be closer, more engaged and more accountable to affected populations. They need to be more supportive of people's own efforts as first responders, and more concerned about how to design an international response in support of local actors ■



UNOCHA / Gilles Clarke

