BURKINA FASO AND THE SAHEL’S NEW FRONTLINE
RESPONDING TO THE WORLD’S FASTEST GROWING DISPLACEMENT CRISIS

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Cover Photo: Men stand outside a house in a district that welcomes internally displaced people (IDP) from northern Burkina Faso. Photo by Olympia de Maismont/AFP.
CONTENTS

4  SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7  BACKGROUND

9  THE GOVERNMENT’S RESPONSE
   Aiding Citizens in Need

13  THE GROWING PAINS OF NEW HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE
   The Need for Stronger UN Leadership and Coordination
   Optimizing the Response

15  INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

16  CONCLUSION
SUMMARY

Burkina Faso is currently experiencing one of the fastest growing displacement crises in the world. The country has emerged as the latest epicenter of conflict in Africa’s troubled Sahel region. Once known for its harmony and unity across ethnic, religious, and linguistic lines, Burkina’s civilian population is increasingly caught in the crossfire as armed groups plunge the country into violence. Intercommunal tensions are on the rise, and the country now is grappling with its first major humanitarian crisis in recent history.

In recent years, a motley assortment of armed groups has wreaked havoc across the Sahel. Some have links to transnational jihadism, whereas others are criminal in nature or rooted in ethnic or communal identity. Together, they are exploiting the weakness of state authority, local grievances, and porous borders. Most recently, these groups have spread into Burkina Faso, especially in the Central-North, Sahel, and East regions of the country, which border Mali and Niger. However, the roots of the crisis have been growing for years.

The 2014 ousting of former President Blaise Compaoré created a power vacuum that allowed armed groups from Mali to enter Burkina Faso. Burkinabé jihadi and other insurgent groups have since formed and are taking control of large swaths of territory. The violence has spread across communities at an alarming speed. Over the course of 2019, fighting forced more than half a million people to flee their lands. People have been cut off from their livelihoods, and food insecurity is rapidly worsening. Aid groups are now warning that 900,000 people could be internally displaced by April 2020.¹

For its part, the government of Burkina Faso is struggling to meet the needs of its population. The minister for humanitarian affairs is in charge of the government’s response to the crisis. Response efforts require more effective inter-ministerial coordination, however, and many senior officials lack the necessary understanding and acceptance of the principles that guide the work of humanitarian organizations. In certain instances, the resulting friction between humanitarian groups and the government has delayed or restricted aid provision.

Meanwhile, aid groups were initially caught off guard by the crisis. The UN has subsequently managed to establish key humanitarian coordination mechanisms, but more must be done to bolster the response. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) currently estimates that $295 million will be required in 2020 to provide humanitarian assistance to those in need.² Donors will need to quickly ramp up funding.

With donor support, the UN should move quickly to enlarge its humanitarian footprint, deploying additional qualified staff and strengthening key tools such as the Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM), which creates a shared alert and response plan for aid groups. In addition, international aid agencies should deepen their collaboration with local groups that have the trust and knowledge of their communities.

Burkina’s military continues to struggle to stop the spread of insecurity. As a result, communities have formed “self-defense” groups. These local militia now regularly clash with insurgents and criminal elements, fueling cycles of retaliatory violence. In a troubling move, the government changed the national penal code to prohibit criticism of the military and block any contact with armed groups. The new law, whose provisions on contact are too broad, has prevented human rights organizations from verifying the numerous claims of abuses committed by Burkinabé forces and forbids humanitarian organizations from negotiating with armed groups to secure access to populations in need.

Prospects for peace in Burkina will depend heavily on the course of the broader conflict across the Sahel region. The government of Burkina should be applauded for responding to the crisis. However, it also must be encouraged to adopt a holistic approach that addresses the roots of the conflict and meets the basic needs of its population.

Recommendations

The Government of Burkina Faso must do the following:

To the President of Burkina Faso:
• Designate the prime minister to lead an inter-ministerial effort to address the crisis—The minister of humanitarian affairs lacks the authority to coordinate the relevant line ministries. Only the prime minister is in a position to mobilize the necessary effort involving the entire government that will be required to respond to the humanitarian crisis.
• Alter recent changes to the penal code that prohibit humanitarian groups from having contact with armed groups—Lifting this restriction will allow humanitarian groups to negotiate access to populations in dire need of assistance.

To all Burkinabé Officials:
• End restrictions on the independent operations of humanitarian organizations—The government must allow aid groups to operate in accordance with humanitarian principles and allow organizations to provide aid to all in need, not only those in government designated “host sites.”

UN Agencies and humanitarian organizations must do the following:
• Bolster the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)—OCHA needs to strengthen its team on the ground to improve coordination, ensure wider coverage of affected regions, and improve the dissemination of detailed and up-to-date information on the crisis.
• Partner with Burkina’s civil society networks—Burkina Faso has a vibrant landscape of civil society groups. International aid organizations should partner with and invest in these groups to expand their reach and increase local acceptance.
• Expand the presence of the RRM across Burkina Faso—With donor support, the RRM must be expanded to all affected regions to alert the humanitarian community of new displacements or outbreaks of specific needs and direct the response.

Donor governments must do the following:
• Encourage Burkinabé officials to grant humanitarian organizations unconditional access to populations that require assistance—Donor governments must use their diplomatic levers to encourage the government of Burkina to end restrictions on humanitarian access to populations in need.
• Bolster humanitarian funds to be proportionate to the growing needs—Donors must contribute to meeting the $295 million that OCHA estimates is needed to address the worsening situation. Donor countries should also allow aid organizations to shift their previously allocated funding from development programming to emergency humanitarian support.
BACKGROUND

Since its 1960 independence from France, Burkina Faso has enjoyed an impressive degree of unity across ethnic, religious, and linguistic lines. However, 27 years of corrupt rule led to widespread frustration with former President Blaise Compaoré. In 2014, a popular uprising ousted Compaoré but left a power vacuum that allowed militant groups from Mali to enter the country, shifting the epicenter of the Sahel crisis’ violence from Mali and Niger into Burkina, and forcing the small West African nation to grapple with its first humanitarian crisis in recent history.

Burkinabé jihadi and other insurgent groups and criminal elements subsequently emerged and spread across the country. They now threaten the security of Burkina’s southern neighbors: Ghana, Benin, Togo, and Cote d’Ivoire. Burkina has been shaken by the onset of violence as these armed groups exacerbate communal tensions, especially in the Central-North, Sahel, and East regions that border Mali and Niger.

When the crisis began, armed groups targeted government institutions and national security forces. To seize control of communities, they employed brutal tactics and manipulated local grievances over failures in government service delivery. For its part, the Burkinabé military has been unable to restore security and prevent armed groups from taking over key parts of the country’s northern and eastern regions. As a result, communities have formed local “self-defense” groups that often engage in cycles of tit-for-tat violence with the armed groups. Inter-communal clashes, almost unheard of in the past, are now frequent and deadly.

The situation continues to worsen as all parties to the conflict, including the Burkinabé military, increasingly target civilians they perceive to be affiliated with or sympathetic to armed groups. The speed at which the violence exploded across the country shocked even the most seasoned humanitarian staff. As a senior UN official put it in an interview with Refugees International staff, “We knew the situation would get worse, but we didn’t know it would happen so fast.” Since early 2018, more than 2,500 Burkinabé civilians have died. Between January and May 2019, Burkina was the third highest-ranking country in the world in fatalities from civilian targeting, with 670 reported casualties, following Syria and Nigeria.

“We knew the situation would get worse, but we didn’t know it would happen so fast.”

-Senior UN official

As of early December 2019, 95 health centers and 1,784 schools had been forced to close because of the widespread violence.

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5. Human Rights Watch, “We Found Their Bodies.”
Insecurity has rapidly pushed 1.5 million people into dire humanitarian need and forced more than half a million people to flee their lands. In January 2019, there were 60,000 internally displaced people (IDPs). According to government figures, that number had soared to more than 560,000 by January 2020. Because of access and capacity constraints, even this figure is likely to underestimate the reality. The Norwegian Refugee Council currently estimates that 900,000 could be displaced by April 2020.

Before the crisis, Burkina Faso enjoyed a relatively high degree of agricultural self-sufficiency. However, the violence has impacted predominantly rural areas, where an estimated 80 percent of the population relies on agriculture for income and food provision. Those displaced by the fighting have been cut off from their lands and livelihoods. As a result, food insecurity is rapidly worsening.

The government and aid agencies have scrambled to respond, but the overall relief effort has been slow to take shape. Government ministries, UN agencies, and international NGOs have struggled to mobilize staff with the necessary expertise and conduct assessments in a timely way. That said, both the government and international relief organizations have made important progress in recent months.


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12. NRC, “Burkina Faso Shattered.”
RESEARCH OVERVIEW

A Refugees International team conducted its initial field work in Burkina Faso from September to October 2019, and follow-up consultations in late 2019. The team sought to assess the launch of the humanitarian response to the growing crisis and the effectiveness of its coordination and implementation. Team members conducted interviews with representatives of UN aid agencies, foreign embassies, and local and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

THE GOVERNMENT’S RESPONSE

The Burkinabé military so far has been unable to confront the armed groups effectively. Unfortunately, in its efforts to stop armed incursions, the army has increasingly begun to violate human rights, often with impunity. There are numerous accounts of Burkinabé forces indiscriminately killing civilians. In some cases, the government has initiated investigations of these abuses. However, aid workers report that violations continue and that there have been no consequences for the perpetrators. One UN official told Refugees International that humanitarians now encounter increasing numbers of IDPs who have fled their regions because they fear the Burkinabé forces, not because of the threat of armed groups.

In a troubling move, the National Assembly of Burkina Faso passed a law in 2019 that modified the country’s penal code. Changes included new articles prohibiting the “de-moralization” of Burkinabé forces and any contact with armed groups. In practice, the article against the “demoralization” of national forces has blocked human rights groups’ reporting on the military’s conduct. The article outlawing contact with armed groups prevents humanitarian actors from negotiating access with these groups. The government of Burkina Faso should alter this law. An amendment would allow humanitarian groups to access populations in dire need of assistance and allow human rights reporting.

Across the country, local self-defense militias have formed to protect communities. According to UN estimates, there are currently up to 40,000 Burkinabé self-defense groups—known as Koglweogo, which means “guardians of the bush.” Humanitarian organizations told the Refugees International team that some of the Koglweogo are known for targeting civilians they wrongly associate with extremist groups. This month, Burkina’s parliament voted to provide support in the form of training and financial backing to these groups. Although training the Koglweogo might improve their tactics, the Burkinabé
Women and children sit under a hut in a district that welcomes internally displaced people from northern Burkina Faso. Photo Credit: Olympia de Maismont/AFP/Getty Images.
government likely is unable to ensure enough oversight of their activities to hold them accountable for wrongdoing.

Aiding Citizens in Need

The government continues to take steps to respond to the humanitarian crisis resulting from the conflict. At present, Burkina’s minister for humanitarian affairs leads the coordination of the government’s efforts. The Ministry of Social Action and National Solidarity’s National Council for Emergency Relief and Rehabilitation (known by the French acronym CONASUR) is charged with collecting all official data on the number of IDPs in each region and implementing the government’s response.

However, inter-ministerial coordination remains poor. There is no single body with the authority to oversee the work of all ministries—including those for health, education, and water and sanitation—that have essential roles in the response. Therefore, President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré should make Prime Minister Christophe Joseph Marie Dabiré responsible for managing and coordinating all national efforts, including those ministries designed to meet the humanitarian needs of the civilian population impacted by the violence.

For decades, Burkina Faso benefitted from extensive international development programming, facilitated by close coordination across the UN, NGOs, and the government. When the crisis broke out, however, that history of close cooperation appears to have complicated the shift to an independent humanitarian response. Indeed, at the onset of the crisis, the government wanted all aid funds to be channeled through its ministries and other public sector institutions. International humanitarian organizations resisted this demand. The resulting friction slowed the initial response. Instead of focusing on relief efforts, humanitarian actors were forced to dedicate time to dialogue and building trust with government officials. They sought to explain the importance of a principled response, especially to gain access to areas controlled by armed groups.

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Although governments can and often should be responsible for implementing development assistance, their role in humanitarian aid provision can be especially complicated in conflict settings. To ensure that aid can reach those in greatest need, it is vital for humanitarian groups to adhere to humanitarian principles by remaining neutral in the conflict and operating independently from the government. Unfortunately, the government of Burkina Faso has not welcomed this shift in approach, preferring to maintain control over aid delivery.

Government officials should accept that humanitarian principles dictate how aid organizations operate. Aid organizations bemoaned to the Refugees International team that the government was permitting service provision only for displaced communities that had resettled in officially designated “host sites.” This list restricts access to newly displaced

communities that have yet to settle, as well as those that have sought shelter in sites not yet recognized by the government. One example of this situation involves a number of schools in the capital city of Ouagadougou, where many IDPs sought refuge while the schools were unused over the summer of 2019. In the government-controlled countryside, many such schools were added to the list of official host sites. However, none of the schools in the capital made it onto that list, leaving these IDPs ineligible to receive assistance. The government must remove restrictions on access to these populations.

As the crisis spread rapidly across Burkina Faso, CONASUR struggled to update data and reach newly affected regions. Gaps in funding and capacity mean that CONASUR must compile data manually, not digitally, thus slowing its ability to perform its mandate. To address this situation, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is supporting CONASUR with expertise and funding to build its capacity. This partnership is crucial in helping CONASUR collect up-to-date data on the crisis and expand its geographic coverage. UNHCR should continue—and, if possible, expand—this support to build CONASUR’s capacity by providing the necessary technology and enabling its presence in all accessible affected areas. An aid worker explained to the Refugees International team that “until CONASUR’s capacity and capabilities improve, many of the displaced will not be on the radar and they will be out of the reach of aid organizations.”

In addition, CONASUR has attempted to block humanitarian organizations from carrying out protection monitoring exercises in officially designated host sites. The government asserts that protection and protection monitoring are its responsibilities but so far it has failed to deliver. Refugees International appreciates and encourages the government of Burkina to play a significant role in addressing the consequences of the crisis. However, it must not block the efforts of humanitarian organizations to fill gaps in the response—in fact, the government should welcome the involvement of organizations seeking to monitor, record, and address protection violations—including rights abuses and sexual and gender-based violence reported by IDPs.

THE GROWING PAINS OF A NEW HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

As noted above, the rapid onset of the crisis took many international aid organizations by surprise. As the conflict worsened, UN agencies and NGOs alike sounded the alarm, mobilized qualified staff, and worked to attract more attention and funding from the international community. Despite these efforts, relief activities and donor funding have not kept pace with rising humanitarian needs. A senior-level UN representative told the Refugees International team that international donors were slow to react because they were in a state of disbelief that Burkina, known for its stability, would succumb to the armed violence that has plagued much of the Sahel.

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The Need for Stronger UN Leadership and Coordination

The UN’s delay in formally establishing the cluster system until mid-December 2019 also hampered the response. This structure is responsible for coordinating the interventions of UN and non-UN humanitarian organizations around different sectors.

In Burkina, the UN’s Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), a key humanitarian coordination player, is under-funded, understaffed, and absent from some affected regions. These limitations impact OCHA’s ability to lead coordination and information sharing between humanitarian groups or publish updates on the crisis as frequently as needed. Bolstering OCHA’s footprint across the affected regions would help aid organizations ensure better coverage and improve the dissemination of detailed and up-to-date information on the nature and scope of the humanitarian crisis.

Another crucial element of the humanitarian architecture is the role of the UN’s Humanitarian Coordinator (HC) in country. In the development context that characterized Burkina Faso before the crisis, UN efforts were led and coordinated by the Resident Coordinator (RC). In major humanitarian crises, the UN usually appoints an HC who is “responsible for leading and coordinating the efforts of humanitarian organizations (both UN and non-UN) …” In many cases, the incumbent RC is designated to serve as a “double-hatted” HC/RC. In Burkina, the UN secretary-general followed this model, appointing the RC to serve as the HC as well. This expansion of responsibilities strengthens oversight of humanitarian efforts and coordination. Given the government’s slow acceptance of humanitarian principles, the double-hatted HC/RCs must work to evolve their existing relationship with the government and balance the cooperation required for development programming with the independence and neutrality demanded by an effective humanitarian response.

Optimizing the Response

Over the course of the next year, the conflict is very likely to increase the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance. To prepare for this contingency, international relief organizations must take advantage of their local connections and expertise. Burkina Faso’s strong civil society networks—from human rights advocates to development groups—are eager and willing to shift the orientation of their work to alleviate humanitarian suffering. Many of these organizations are trusted and well established within their communities.

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a network of national and international organizations—to share information on new clashes, displacement trends, and pressing needs.

However, these national NGOs must be trained on humanitarian principles, standards, and strategies to negotiate with armed groups regarding access to communities in need. The Refugees International team interviewed representatives of 30 local NGOs; all of them had access to remote communities and were keen to play a part in the relief effort. However, representatives of only five NGOs were aware of these humanitarian principles.

In addition, as the cluster system takes shape, each cluster must gather and map out actors with the capacity, access, and means to respond to urgent needs by sector. This process will allow clusters to create contingency plans and respond quickly when new needs arise. Local NGOs must be included in this exercise. This information could feed into the “3W map” traditionally used by humanitarian groups to indicate who is doing what and where.

As in many humanitarian contexts, the Rapid Response Mechanism (RRM) in Burkina Faso, jointly led by humanitarian NGOs and UN agencies, builds on the cluster system to help aid groups establish systems and partnerships to respond in a timely, coordinated, and standardized manner. The RRM alerts the humanitarian community about new displacements or outbreaks of specific needs and helps direct and coordinate the response. The RRM in Burkina Faso is not yet operational across all affected regions. Donors should fund the expansion of the RRM’s coverage as a priority.

INTERNATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Key international stakeholders are beginning to focus on the crisis in Burkina Faso. However, the nature and scope of the conflict are poorly understood, as are the parties involved. A first order of business will be to identify the key drivers of the violence. The United States, the European Union, France, and the United Kingdom must ensure that they better understand the motives, ambitions, and varied modus operandi of armed groups in Burkina Faso, and the Sahel more broadly. As these key international stakeholders develop their approaches to address security threats, they must keep in mind that meeting humanitarian needs is also vital to re-establishing peace.

The government of Burkina Faso is responsible for protecting and providing basic services for its population. Representatives of international stakeholders and UN officials should use their leverage to engage with Burkinabé officials—both applauding their efforts to address the crisis and encouraging them to allow humanitarian groups’ unhindered access to populations in need.

As violence seeps further into Burkinabé regions, donors must continue to bolster their humanitarian funds in proportion to the growing needs.

As violence seeps further into Burkinabé regions, donors must continue to bolster their humanitarian funds in proportion to the growing needs. They also should be flexible in shifting previously allocated money from
development programming to emergency humanitarian support. Such a shift would allow organizations whose development projects have been halted by the violence to use their unused funds to address the immediate concerns of their communities.

**CONCLUSION**

Burkina’s prospects for peace are intricately linked to trendlines and events across the broader Sahel. There is no purely military solution to the region’s conflicts. Donors and aid organizations alike must address the regional crisis by giving the citizens of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali the support they require to obtain protection and assistance. As the international community responds to the instability and violence in Burkina, it should recognize the government of Burkina Faso for the important steps it has taken to date. However, it should also encourage officials to improve their role in and relationship with the humanitarian response. Donors must step up and do their part, as a dearth of funding threatens to slow that response. Finally, UN agencies and aid organizations must prioritize efforts to build relationships with local groups and empower them to respond to the needs of their communities.
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