



# It's Time to Change How We're Supporting Countries of the Sahel

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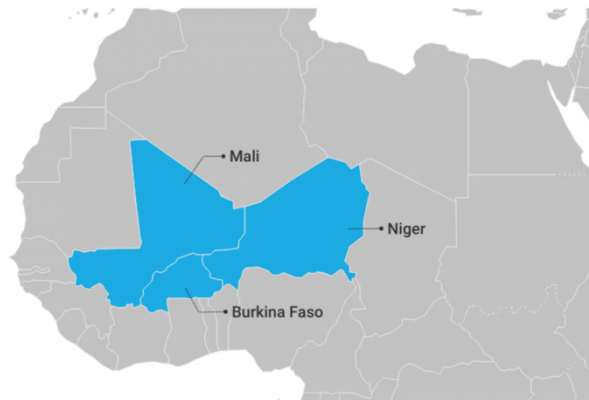
## I. Introduction

The Central Sahel nations of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger are in tumult. Over the last decade, violent non-state actors—many with links to Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State—have wreaked havoc throughout the region. But now new crises of politics and governance have eclipsed the region's violence and skyrocketing humanitarian need. In mid-August, a military coup rocked Mali, leaving regional partners stunned. In Niger and Burkina Faso, the political fates of the neighboring nations are tied up in their upcoming contentious elections.

The Sahel has always suffered from sporadic interest and support from the international community, which only really occurs in response to crises and instability. Now, there is a very real danger that international donors and partners will view the unpredictability of the region's political landscape as a reason to pull back or at least pause their already limited engagement in these troubled countries.

Instead, they should seize the moment as an opportunity to change course and take meaningful steps to address the Sahel's worsening humanitarian crises. As regional governments sort out these vexing governance challenges, donors—many of which have invested heavily in security assistance—must now prioritize funding for humanitarian assistance delivered by UN agencies and non-governmental organizations.

The [United Nations' October 20 donor conference for the Central Sahel](#) is the perfect time to begin.



Source: [UNICEF](#)

## II. Regional Political Crises

Following months of protests, Mali is now struggling to determine its path back to civilian leadership in the wake of a [military coup in mid-August](#). Meanwhile, tensions over Burkina Faso and Niger's November and December elections risk increasing political and ethnic violence. Across the region, this political instability could exacerbate the rapidly deteriorating humanitarian trend lines.

**Mali:** Over the summer, Malian protesters took to streets calling for the ousting of President Keita for further destabilizing the country, inconsistently implementing a 2015 peace deal, and fueling its corrupt economy. On August 18, mutinous Malian soldiers detained the President until he announced his resignation on national television. The transition of power has left a window for armed groups to fight for control of rural areas. The coup may have the [popular support](#) from Mali's population—hungry for change—but what the new government will do next to provide for its people and address causes of conflict is yet to be seen.

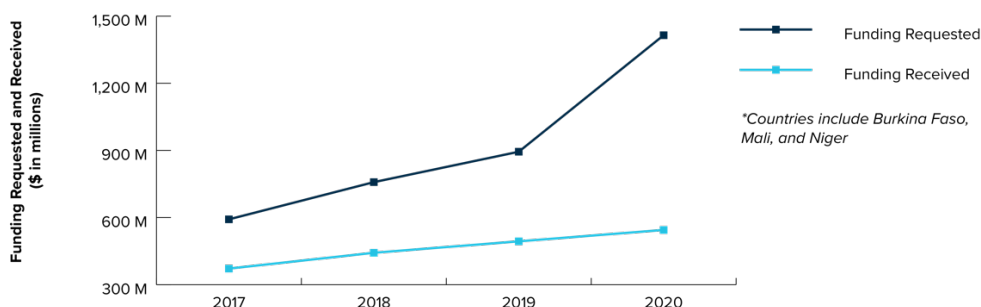
**Niger:** As Niger struggles to fight insurgencies on both its eastern and western borders, the drawn out legal battle to [determine who can run as the head of the opposition](#) party in forthcoming national elections continues. Niger's presidential and parliamentary elections could serve as an example for peaceful and transparent elections. On the other hand, a failure to use this opportunity to solidify democratic practices could be detrimental to its wavering stability.

**Burkina Faso:** The situation in Burkina Faso is perhaps most concerning. Recent legislative [changes to the electoral code](#) will allow the presidential and parliamentary elections to take place without opening voting stations in unstable regions. In addition to this contentious amendment, the government is also coming under fire for its failure to adequately address [human rights abuses](#) by the Burkinabé forces and the [volunteer fighters](#) they fund and train. These troubling political dynamics have dangerous ramifications for the civilian population.

## III. Displacement & Humanitarian Need

Conflict and resource scarcity across the Central Sahel have forced 2.6 million [people](#) to flee their homes—with about [half of this total being from Burkina Faso](#). For more than a decade, insurgents have destabilized Mali and Niger. These groups only recently started wreaking havoc in Burkina Faso. This has sparked a tense battle between government forces and insurgents, but now many displaced Burkinabés cite fear of attacks from their own military as the reason for their displacement. In all three countries, civilians are caught in the crossfires and struggling to meet their basic needs. Yet the UN humanitarian appeals for the Central Sahelian countries have received only around [40 percent of the necessary funding](#) for 2020.

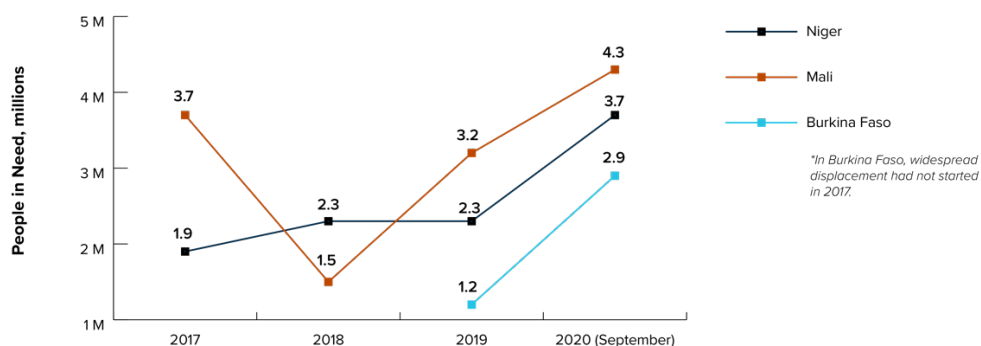
## Central Sahel: Funding for Humanitarian Crises 2017–2020



Source: OCHA

A year ago, the trendlines were already of acute concern, as the threat to civilians spiraled into a full-blown protection crisis. Then this spring, [efforts to limit the spread of COVID-19](#) left people jobless, and included closure of trade routes and markets and suspension of health services and aid deliveries. Even prior to the coronavirus pandemic, much of the region's population already struggled to survive. COVID-19 prevention measures have only amplified resource scarcity. As a result, more people now require assistance. At present, more than [7.3 million people](#) in the region are food insecure, and nearly 11 million people need humanitarian aid. These numbers continue to climb daily.

## People in Need in the Central Sahel 2017–2020



Source: OCHA

Communities are often under threat and attacked by non-state actors and government security forces alike, and inter-communal fighting has increased as resource scarcity stoke tensions. Making matters worse, armed groups have increased their use of improvised explosive devices.

Communities across the region have little physical or legal protection. Civilian victims of the violence have little recourse to legal remedies or other avenues to hold the perpetrators accountable. Communities are often at risk of physical attacks, gender-based violence, sexual abuse and exploitation, and other human rights abuses. Psychosocial support is rarely available to victims due to insufficient humanitarian funding. These people are deserving of protection, and disproportionately funding military response to the exclusion of critical humanitarian support is not the answer.

In the face of cascading violence and humanitarian need, such low donor engagement is appalling. This prohibits humanitarian agencies from protecting and providing for those in need. Aid organizations must be given the funding required to meet the needs of civilians and adapt their programming as the political and security landscapes shift.

#### **IV. Ways Forward**

Despite the political turbulence, this is no time for donors to disengage. Over the next year, instability will take an additional toll on the safety of civilians, economic activities, food security, and aid delivery. Of course, addressing the threat of armed factions who ruthlessly attack communities across the Central Sahel requires assistance to promote safety and security. But the [vast discrepancy between military support and humanitarian funding](#) is alarming. Especially when meeting people's basic needs would undoubtedly decrease violent competition over resources.

Government representatives from Europe and North America have repeatedly acknowledged that there is “no purely military solution” to these crises. But the funding levels tell a different story. The international community's support to counterterrorism and stabilization efforts for the Central Sahel is more than \$2 billion a year; about four times more than humanitarian funding.

The disruption of governance and the tumultuous political landscape across the region may well give development donors and security assistance partners pause as they consider assistance. However, deteriorating humanitarian conditions—combined with the threat of even greater suffering—means that humanitarian aid and operations can and should be taken to scale in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. Rather than pulling back, governments should use the October 20 donor conference to augment their commitments and focus attention on the humanitarian dimensions of the regional crises.

Humanitarian assistance is only a temporary solution. But it is critical—as it can buy time and meet the needs of the civilian population, while donors and diplomats work to find meaningful ways to compel the governments of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger to improve governance and seek a resolution to the regions' conflicts.

#### **Donors must:**

- Dramatically increase their financial contributions for the remainder of 2020 and all of 2021. At present, the humanitarian responses in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have only

received 40 percent of their total requirements for 2020. Donors should work together to fill this immense gap.

- Ensure that humanitarian funding can be used flexibly as the political and security contexts alter the extent of the crisis and hinder access to populations in need.
- Recognize the severity of this protection crisis and make it a priority in the humanitarian response.
- Show their commitment to the people of the Central Sahel by fulfilling in a timely manner the pledges they do make.

Finally, states that continue to engage bilaterally with representatives from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger must call for unrestricted humanitarian access, and for the removal of any bureaucratic impediments that slow down the provision of aid.