

Recommendations to promote humanitarian access and the protection of civilians in the Sahel

The recommendations in this document are intended to contribute to future meetings of international partners as well as the next humanitarian dialogues.

They stem from an event held on October 24, 2022 on the sidelines of the Dakar Forum on Peace and Security, co-chaired by the High Representative of the Coalition for the Sahel and the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General of UNOWAS. Involving the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as part of the humanitarian community, this dialogue aimed to address the notion of human security. Faced with a worsening situation in the central Sahel, it explored ways to better protect civilians and assist vulnerable populations while ensuring respect for International Humanitarian Law and humanitarian principles.

This meeting was also an opportunity to recall the importance of an effective fight against the impunity of perpetrators of crimes against populations from all sides, including the state.

The unstable political and security context increases the concern for the protection of the populations of the central Sahel. Attacks against civilians are on the rise: since the beginning of the year, until mid-September, there have been 1,629 civilian victims of the conflict, including 926 in Burkina Faso, 456 in Mali (a part is linked to the Moura massacre, which led to a specific United Nations report) and 247 in Niger. A significant increase in humanitarian needs has been observed, but the response was only 35% funded as of September 30, 2022. These needs are likely to increase even more in the years to come.

Although the deteriorating context in the Sahel makes humanitarian access more complex and restricted, it is still possible for the moment when it is based on the acceptance of communities and the perception of humanitarian workers as neutral and impartial actors who do not take sides in the conflict, and respond only on the basis of needs and vulnerabilities of people. Being perceived or accused of being part of the conflict puts humanitarian personnel and aid at risk, as well as communities who could be victims of reprisals.

Thus, the implementation of QIPS projects (quick impact projects) or civil-military activities by the armed forces in sectors (infrastructure, telecommunications, etc.) and in areas that are different from those where the humanitarian actors is key to preserving the distinction between actors in a context where any symbol of the State can be a target of non-State armed groups.

For example, in Mali, in the Mopti region, access to the village of Dinangourou was severely restricted. It was only by preserving their neutrality – and after months of negotiation and dialogue – that humanitarian actors were able to reach thousands of people who had been without assistance for more than two years.

In countries with strong anti-terrorist regulations, humanitarian exemptions are essential so that dialogue with all stakeholders is not criminalized or that measures such as the use of escorts are not imposed at the risk of affecting the perception of neutrality of humanitarian actors.

To face these growing challenges and in the interest of the population, the use of civil-military coordination mechanisms, negotiation with all parties involved in the conflict and dialogue with local authorities are potential avenues to maintain access to affected populations as well as their access to basic social services.

We recommend:

To the States of the Central Sahel and to donor countries and institutions:

- to allow humanitarian actors to negotiate humanitarian access with all parties to conflicts, as guaranteed by international humanitarian law;
- to support the incorporation of humanitarian exemptions into local legislation with the aim of facilitating the movement of humanitarian workers (without escorts or prohibition of passage), as well as the transit and transport of goods intended for humanitarian assistance in order to reduce delays.

To national and foreign armed forces:

- to place the protection of civilians at the heart of the mandate of all military operations;
- to participate actively and at the appropriate level in the civil-military mechanisms (CMCoord) in place in the three States of the central Sahel, both at the central (in the capital) and decentralized levels (in the regions);
- to ensure a clear distinction between mandates, by ensuring that civil-military activities and QIPs are oriented towards sectors not covered by humanitarian actors (in particular infrastructure support) and that these interventions are coordinated with the humanitarian community prior to their implementation;
- to ensure that the training provided to the armed forces includes awareness raising on humanitarian action, humanitarian principles, international humanitarian law and the protection of women and children, including for commanders in the field;
- to fight against the impunity of state perpetrators of abuses against civilian populations and to ensure that investigations are conclusive and give rise to a fair judicial process.