WEST AFRICA FOOD CRISIS AND MALI REFUGEE PROBLEM

Prepared by IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation - Africa Desk
14 MAY 2012
West Africa Food Crisis and Mali Refugee Problem

Prepared by IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation - Africa Desk

Sahel region in Africa faces two major problems today. Due to weak rain fall, countries in the region are under threat of seasonal drought and food insecurity. On the other hand, refugee flow from Mali to neighboring countries (Mauritania-Burkina Faso, Niger) is growing because of armed conflict in AZAWAD region between Mali National Army and rebel groups. This observation report has been written after Mauritania-Mali border zone trip conducted by IHH Foundation to provide food aid and to evaluate results of drought in the region and refugee situation on the border of Mali.

As observation team, during one-week trip, we have travelled by road from capital Nouakchott to the town of Nema, in the eastern part of Mauritania. Later, we have moved to the town of Bassikunu, 60km. away from Mali border. Then we were able to reach Mberra refugee camp on the border established by UNHCR. During our 1600 km. trip to the region, we found chance to see effects of drought and water shortage on people, animals and vegetation. We also found chance to listen residents of Mberra refugee camp which accommodates currently 62 thousand people fleeing from the cities of Gao, Tidal, Timbouktu in AZAWAD region of Mali.

DROUGHT in SAHEL
Since the beginning of 2012, International news channels have been announcing that Sahel countries in Africa face a new crisis created by regional drought. Increasing food prices as well as poor harvest due to erratic rainfall badly effect food security.

On the way to Mberra, we frequently passed villages where dead bodies of animals were laying on the ground. Residents told us drought was the reason for the carcass. The amount of water is very poor in the region and usage of water sources in the existing wells is very difficult. We saw very few number of water wells along the way. Existing wells are working with an old manual system and removing water from them requires some strong animals and at least two people. A small amount of water extracted from the well in one time was distributed amongst the thirsty animals to drink. But of course it was not enough. There was a long animal queue.

Weak vegetation is another element that negatively affects the nutrition of animals. We observed pastures where animals graze have been getting yellow under the harsh sun due to inadequate rain fall. Amongst the animals, camels are the best adopted those conditions. Due to lack of water, agricultural activities are limited and the only regular source of food is cows, goats and camels meat for people. Therefore, factors threatening the life of animals are also indirectly threatening the lives of people. Although current conditions affect the stock of animals, human life is not at danger yet.
The earliest rain is expected by September in the region. However, the most dry summer season is ahead. Obviously, food insecurity is going to deepen more in the region during May-June-July and August.

MBERRA REFUGEE CAMP

Town of Bassikunu is 60km. away from Mali border. Mberra refugee camp located 20 km. away from the town of Bassikunu is hosting refugees from Azawad region. According to UNHCR data, 62 thousand refugees who fled from Azawad region in northern Mali live there. A military unit of Mauritanian Army provides security of the camp and 10 international NGOs provide various services there.

While we were there we saw many new refugee arrivals to the camp and we had chance to listen problems of the refugees. Overall, the refugees were satisfied with their situation but they complained the lack of food and food items have not been distributed on time. We learnt that situation in Azawad area is worse because there is no regular channel to send aid materials there.

The majority of the refugees live in tents, but some of the refugees still do not have the tents amid hundreds of new tents in UNHCR stores. Another problem in the camp is lack of WC and bathroom. The refugees bring water to their tents by carrying from just a few centers.
There are three tents as schools to provide education to children in the camp but empty school tents are not ready for education yet. Youths working for Mauritania Red Crescent detect patients around the tents and direct them to hospital in the center of the camp. We often observed heat-related cases and a few emergencies. Especially hot and dusty environment is difficult for old men and women to live.

At the camp, refugees from Timbuktu, Gao, Tidal and other cities live together. But Tuareg and Arab originated groups are more numerous than the other ethnic groups. We witness neither ethnic tension between different clans nor violence against women and children in the camp site.

Due to increasing political instability in Mali, it is expected to increase the number of refugees. Regional drought and refugee problem following Malian political disorder threaten food security particularly in Mali and Mauritania. Insufficient amount of water and drought threatens life of animals and people as well as environmental health. In the dry summer season (May, June, July and August), it is expected to worsen the situation if enough support cannot be provided by international community.