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**Transition from relief to development: the multidimensional and  
interconnected challenges in the Central Sahel region**

**ECOSOC-Humanitarian Affairs Segment**

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*As delivered*

Excellencies and distinguished delegates,

Mr. Steiner has summarized the situation in the Central Sahel, where a convergence of widespread insecurity, hunger, state fragility and climate change have for years threatened the safety, dignity and well-being of people in the region. It is in every sense of the word a crisis.

And now, the socio-economic effects of COVID-19 risk pushing this crisis to its tipping point.

**Already, the need for humanitarian assistance has increased substantially.**

A record 7.5 million people in Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali need humanitarian assistance and protection which is up from 6.1 million in 2019. So almost a million and a half increase in one year.

Forced displacement has uprooted 1.2 million people.

5.5 million people in the Central Sahel, out of 12 million in the larger Sahel, are just a step away from facing emergency levels of food insecurity. These are the highest levels of food insecurity we have witnessed in this region in a decade. The socio-economic fallout from COVID-19 is likely to double these numbers.

Insecurity, one of the drivers of crisis, has worsened as armed groups have dramatically expanded their footprint in the Central Sahel over the past decade.

There has been a fourfold increase in the number of civilians killed in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso since 2018. More than 1,000 civilians have lost their lives in the first four months of this year alone.

Tragically, amongst our colleagues, 40 aid workers have lost their lives since 2012.

Mali has also become the world's deadliest peacekeeping mission losing many members of the peacekeeping operation there.

To add to the problems buffeting the people of the region, Mali and Niger are among the 20 countries most vulnerable to climate change globally.

The Sahel Desert is encroaching. Cyclical droughts and erratic rains have become the norm. Many lives and livelihoods dependent on agriculture and pastoralism are at risk. People's ability to recover from multiple shocks has also diminished as result.

And the pandemic is aggravating and creating new needs in these conflict-ravaged, food-insecure areas.

**How can we move from addressing needs to reducing them, and making meaningful and lasting improvements in the lives of the millions of vulnerable people in the Central Sahel?**

Allow me to highlight three lessons that we have learnt in the region, and the Horn of Africa through the work of the Joint Steering Committee to Advance Humanitarian and Development Collaboration, which Mr. Steiner just referred to.

**First, sustained development investment is key to strengthening basic services.**

Across humanitarian and development organizations the priorities are clear -- food security and nutrition, displacement and livelihoods demand our full attention and support.

The Humanitarian Response Plans for these countries in the region have requested US\$1.2 billion in 2020 alone for their vulnerable populations.

The humanitarian system is making an important contribution in responding to the needs of the most affected communities, but more development is required if they are to emerge from this vulnerability.

Progress is being made in humanitarian and development collaboration as well.

We are getting better at sharing analysis to help achieve shared objectives. We are also engaging governments, bilateral and multilateral donors from the outset towards collective outcomes – I would like to here acknowledge the important role that the Government of Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali are playing in this regard.

The generosity of donors has also to be translated into greater engagement as joint partners in humanitarian, development and peace collaboration on the ground from the outset. This approach, with shared analysis, setting common priorities, for programming and funding will help us deliver a collective vision for change.

**Second, the drivers of need, including poverty and fragility, must be addressed.**

In an increasingly militarized region, security has become the central focus of governments and the international community. But this has yet to stabilize the region and tackle the root causes of the crisis.

Greater focus on another strategy is urgently needed.

One that addresses the root causes of disenfranchisement - unemployment, human rights concerns and poor transparency.

And we must prioritise women and girls – those who in every instance are the furthest left behind. Whatever is invested in the region's economic development, be it the critical sectors of health or education, this group has to be in the forefront of our programming.

**Third, we must scale up and safeguard humanitarian assistance to save and protect lives.**

The lean season is starting across the Sahel now, and people's ability to cope is depleting fast.

We must address pre-existing humanitarian needs and those resulting from the virus. Yet, so far, only 20 per cent of the \$1.2 billion that we requested through Humanitarian Response Plans for countries across the Sahel has been received.

Despite COVID-19 restrictions, aid organizations are on the ground delivering food, healthcare, water and other essentials, while also ensuring the safety of vulnerable people and humanitarian workers.

In 2019, humanitarian workers reached more than 10 million people with humanitarian assistance, out of 15 million initially targeted in 2019 (in the whole Sahel). 2.8 million were assisted out of a target of 4.7 million in Central Sahel.

**Humanitarian action is inevitably connected to the human rights, development, and peace agenda.**

When humanitarian assistance saves lives and reduces human suffering, it lays the foundation for peacebuilding.

Security efforts to keep the peace must ensure they do no harm.

As long as humanitarian needs exist, all parties to conflict must respect international humanitarian law so humanitarians can reach people most in need of help and protection.

**ENDS**