



Drought, conflict and recovery

Even as East Africa recovers from a year of crisis, the Sahel is gripped by drought and conflict, and millions are at risk, especially children. Learn how the IRC is helping. [FULL STORY INSIDE](#)



Crisis in Mali

It's been a year of chaos and despair for a nation once seen as a model for West Africa.

By Peter Biro

A former French colony, Mali often had been cited as a democratic model for Africa. But in March 2012, mutinous soldiers, angry over the government's mishandling of a rebellion by nomadic Tuaregs in the country's vast northern desert, overthrew President Amadou Toumani Touré and his elected administration. Soon after the coup, the Tuaregs seized control of much of the north, only to be pushed from power by Islamic extremists with ties to Al Qaeda.

The political turmoil erupted amid a mounting food crisis brought on by a drought that has gripped all of Mali and the Sahel region. By September, over 450,000 Malians had fled the north in search of food or safety, a quarter million of them seeking sanctuary in nearby Niger, Burkina Faso and Mauritania. Another 175,000 are listed as internally displaced.

The crisis is having an especially devastating impact on young people. More

than half of all Mali's displaced are children, according to UNICEF.

"Because of food shortages, malnutrition among children is a serious and growing problem," says Tasha Gill, who directs the IRC's programs in Mali and Niger. "This is being exacerbated by the fact that many families are not aware that their children are malnourished and don't seek out help that's available."

The IRC has responded to the crisis with emergency food programs in the densely populated Kati district, just outside the Malian capital, Bamako, a destination for displaced people. The IRC is also providing nutrition support to local health clinics, setting up special centers for mothers and children, and sending aid workers to villages to help families recognize the signs of malnutrition. The IRC even hired a theater troupe to tour remote villages and perform open-air skits to get the message across.

AT A GLANCE

Drought in the Sahel



More than 18 million people are at risk of hunger in Africa's Sahel region, as drought, high food prices and conflict push malnutrition levels above emergency thresholds in some areas.

COUNTRIES AFFECTED

Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Burkina Faso

CAUSE

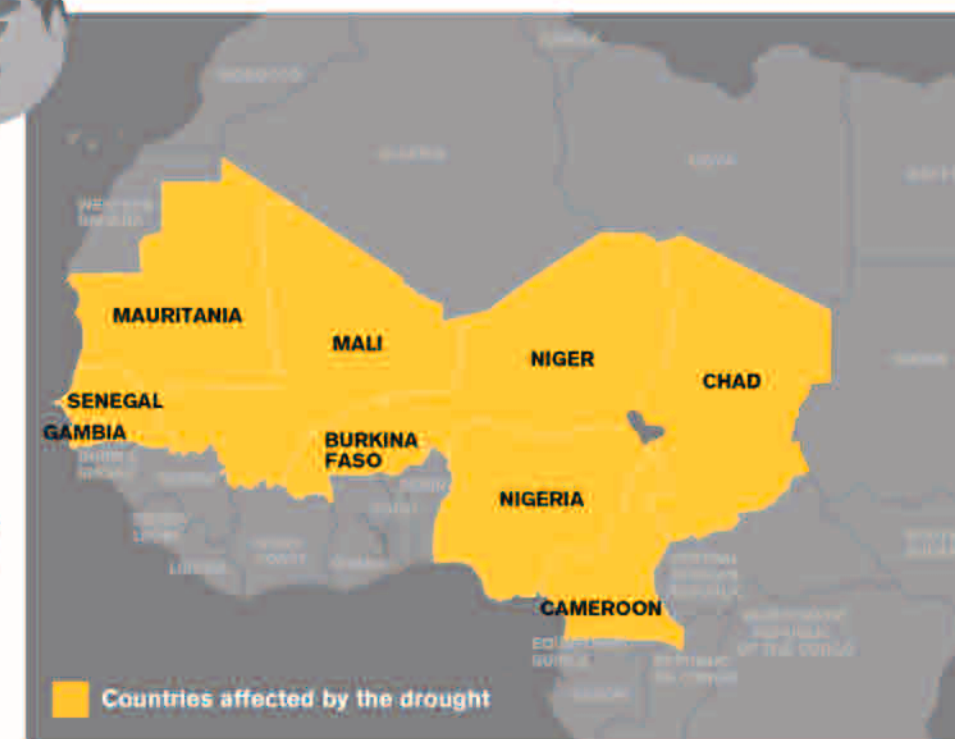
Poor weather conditions—including severe heat and low rainfall—combined with conflict, poor governance and lack of infrastructure to handle climate changes.

THE IMPACT

10 million people are food insecure; 1.5 million children suffer from severe malnutrition.

THE IRC IN THE SAHEL

The IRC has set up health, nutrition, water and sanitation programs in eastern Mali and is aiding people displaced by fighting in the north. In the drought-stricken Bahr El



Gazal region of Chad, the IRC is scaling up emergency medical and nutrition programs. The IRC is also providing free health care for children, pregnant women and other vulnerable groups in Bahr El Gazal.

PROGNOSIS

Although fall rains may help, the U.N. warns that a steep rise in aid funding is needed to contain the crisis and feed the needy.

Source: UN OCHA 8/12

In the conflict-ridden north, aid efforts have been hampered by Islamic extremists who are preventing outsiders from operating in the region. IRC staff members who are natives of the north have managed to deliver vital aid to displaced people.

"They've restored water access in many areas and are working to prime wells and water points," Gill says. These intrepid aid workers are distributing water purification kits and conducting hygiene promotion campaigns. Still, many people continue to lack clean water, putting them at high risk of cholera.

The severity and rapidity of the humanitarian crisis has shocked many Malians who long viewed their country as stable, Gill adds. "It's a difficult time for everyone, but especially the children. We're doing our best to serve the needs of the Malians and help them get through these multiple crises." ■



Malians in a village outside the capital Bamako watch an IRC theater troupe perform skits about how to prevent and treat malnutrition.