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The humanitarian situation in CAR constitutes a big concern for the humanitarian community. On the ground, several actions are conducted every day to meet the urgent needs of the affected people. But many challenges remain. In an interview Conducted by the Public Information Unit of BINUCA, Kaarina Immonen gave an update on the actions carried out, the obstacles and the coordination of the humanitarian assistance.

Question: As Humanitarian and Development Coordinator of UN in the Central African Republic, how would you evaluate the main challenges faced by the Humanitarian community in general, and the United Nations, in particular in Central Africa?

Kaarina Immonen: The biggest challenge faced by UN agencies and the humanitarian community in Central Africa is about getting access to people who are in desperate need of humanitarian assistance. Much of the civilian population in the interior of the country, are scattered in the bush having fled from violence and abuses and afraid to return to their villages. How do we reach these internally displaced persons, victims of human rights violations, dispersed throughout the vast interior of CAR? This is our main concern at the present time

The number of people living in extreme vulnerability is estimated at 1.6 million. Do you confirm this figure? What do these people need most?

Right! More than 1.6 million people are estimated to be food insecure and unable to find enough food on a daily basis. At the same time, 3 million people do not have access to

clean water sources and adequate sanitation. Over 14,000 children under the age of five are severely malnourished and could face death if urgent assistance is not provided; many more are at risk of being impaired by the effects of malnutrition in the longer term. As a consequence of the violence and looting to which these communities have been subjected over a long period, households have lost their food reserves, tools for agricultural production, seeds, livestock and revenues.

Within the general emergency affecting almost the entire rural population, there are specific issues and needs that require particular attention: the large numbers of people living with HIV are in urgent need to continued access to ARV treatment to ensure their survival. Also, to protect the population against malaria, to which they are more exposed because of their precarious living conditions, caused by the crisis, and the beginning of the rainy season there must be scaled up efforts to provide them with mosquito nets Finally, it is imperative to extend vaccination campaigns to reach those that are the most difficult to reach to protect them against the

outbreak of epidemics of infectious diseases, such as measles.

To sum up, in the context of Central Africa, large numbers of the population urgently need humanitarian assistance as a matter of life or death, but in the long run the entire population need assistance to rebuild their livelihoods and resilience capacities.

How can you summarize the ongoing humanitarian assistance in Central Africa ? What can be considered the most urgent?

Given the scale of the humanitarian tragedy, everything seems to be urgent. But precisely because the needs are so great and the numbers of people requiring assistance so vast, it becomes crucial to collect information through various assessments in order to identify priority areas and target populations. The assessments that have been conducted by the UN and partners reveal that about 1.6 million people are in desperate need of emergency assistance, either in food or agricultural inputs such as seeds and tools, to have access to food and to recover their farming activities. Of these, about 484,000 people will face food insecurity if assistance is not provided immediately.



Bossangoa ©BINUCA/Public information Unit



Refugees from Central African Republic at a transit centre in northern D.R.Congo © UNCHR / G. Castele

Households have exhausted their food stocks and most households now live on only one meal a day. In addition, 54,987 Central African refugees are living in neighboring countries including 42,663 in the Democratic Republic of Congo. For now, the UN and the humanitarian community are focusing on life-saving assistance to vulnerable populations in various sectors, the most critical being protection, food, health, nutrition, water, sanitation and education. This should be accompanied by a re-establishment of state structures in the regions of the country. As a result of the crisis almost the entire structure of government institutions, including those responsible for guaranteeing protection of people and law and order have been destroyed. Most schools remain closed as well as most medical facilities, whose supplies of medicines and equipment have been pillaged. Imagine a territory the size of France with extremely poor infra-structure with almost no institutions of the state or local government, with schools and hospitals destroyed and a vacuum of law and order and the entire population living in fear from the violence perpetrated by ill-disciplined and poorly controlled armed groups.

How do you cope with the provision of assistance to the most vulnerable in the countryside while addressing the security challenges?

Insecurity continues to severely limit the ability of humanitarian actors to reach those in desperate need of assistance. As you may be aware, most regional sub-offices of the UN have also been totally looted and more or less destroyed. Therefore, we are obliged to use logistic capacities of

humanitarian flights (UNHAS) to reach 27 localities. Only for the month of June, UNHAS undertook 138 trips, carrying 763 humanitarian actors and 20 MT of emergency aid. This of course significantly increases the operational costs of providing emergency assistance. Moreover, we urgently need additional funds to provide required support to vulnerable people. Out of a total of \$200,475,012 estimated as needed for the Humanitarian Appeal (CAP) for 2013, only \$62,213,294 or 31% has been funded. Nonetheless, all UN agencies saw no other option but to provide assistance under less than adequate circumstances; while we continue to press for fuller access. For many of the affected population groups a reduction

or absence of humanitarian assistance mean that they will be deprived of the basic food, water, sanitation and shelter necessary for their survival. In this context, the UN welcomes the recent decision to deploy the African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (AFISM-CAR), whose mandate includes ensuring the conditions necessary for the provision of humanitarian assistance to populations in need. In the same vein, we thank the European Commission and bilateral partners, including Sweden, Japan and Great Britain, for their effective contribution to the response to the humanitarian situation in CAR.

Some people are criticizing the UN for the slowness in assisting the affected population. What do you answer to that?

The UN and the humanitarian community at large has continued to provide humanitarian assistance even at the height of the conflict. For example, UNICEF and WHO have successfully carried out a vaccination campaign against measles to 99 percent of the targeted number of children in Bangui and distributed life-saving medical supplies to affected populations with NGOs and Ministry of Health as partners. FAO distributed agricultural kits and seeds with the assistance of national and international NGOs; WFP distributed food rations to health workers and patients through its NGO partners in four hospitals in Bangui; UNFPA distributed reproductive health kits to hospitals and UNHCR distributed food



ACF Therapeutic Feeding Centre Bangui ©OCHA/Christophe Illemassene

and non-food items to refugees. UNDP in partnership with the Municipality of Bangui and ACTED is addressing sanitation and flood prevention by ensuring the clean-up of water canals in the eight districts of Bangui through a cash for work programme.

The reality is that we have a high level of awareness of the most pressing needs and vulnerabilities, but the capacity to respond is limited. We must aim at reversing a further deterioration of the humanitarian situation. This means that we must providing urgent life-saving assistance to the communities in most urgent need, and at the same time assistance that can help rebuild the livelihoods and resilience of the affected population at large. This is a huge task, carried out in extremely difficult conditions which are also exacting a toll on the staff of the humanitarian actors. More suffering exists countrywide than any single organization, or for that matter, all humanitarian organizations acting jointly can alleviate. It is estimated that close to the entire population of Central Africa (4.6 million people) is either directly or indirectly affected by the crisis, with lack of access to basic services and exposure to lawlessness throughout the country. Despite all the efforts made, more remains to be done and the situation keeps deteriorating in certain regions which requires even larger efforts and more support from the international community.

How do you coordinate the assistance of various humanitarian actors to the affected population?

Coordination is particularly important when resources are limited



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in relation to needs. Coordinating relief efforts is about minimizing the duplication of humanitarian services, whether by filling gaps or preventing overlap, and ensuring various organizations are synchronized to work together to achieve a common objective, thereby enabling a more coherent, effective, and efficient response. We achieve this through the Humanitarian Coordination machinery where basically the different UN and NGO actors analyze needs and priorities by cluster or sector and divide up roles and responsibilities to avoid duplication and ensure complementary action. Fortunately, there is a growing interest in the crisis in Central African Republic which is materialized by the arrival of new humanitarian organizations, the return of those previously in the country and increased contributions from

humanitarian donors. Of course, this also increases the need for and complexity of coordination among UN agencies, NGOs and donors, but I think everyone has a good sense of the need for good coordination – and, importantly of collaboration!. At this stage, the main focus is on joint planning for a scaling-up our humanitarian response throughout the country and re-establishing operational hubs in the most affected sub-regions. I am very happy that the UN and humanitarian agency has agreed on a unified “One UN” approach to reestablish these centers, which makes sense both in order to establish such centers to be fully operational as early as possible, and to be cost-effective as they will serve all agencies active in the individual locations.

What is your plan for the next few days, weeks or months?

The humanitarian emergency currently unfolding in CAR is first and foremost a crisis of insecurity and our efforts to bring life-saving assistance must be accompanied by parallel efforts to protect communities or rather assist communities in protecting themselves and rebuild their resilience. This will include a multi-dimensional effort which includes support to nascent and re-established government structures for protection safety and security as well as access to justice and protection of human rights, community based conflict prevention and resolution mechanisms, and providing access to basic services in health and education and fostering basic livelihoods and resilience of communities.



UNHCR seeks protection of civilians in Central African Republic ©UNHCR