

# Worsening Crisis in the Sahel

*Food Security, Donor Priorities and Geopolitical Shifts*

The situation in the Sahel worsens with rising living costs, inadequate external humanitarian donations, and a deteriorating security situation. Over the past year, Russia has increased its presence in the Sahel security theatre through the deployment of Wagner Group in Mali, which subsequently sidelined France and other European actors engaged in the country.

## Brief Points

- While the Russian invasion in Ukraine has not directly caused adversity in the Sahel, it has contributed to the intensity of certain challenges (e.g., food security) in the region.
- Donors may neglect the Sahel region as they prioritize support for Ukraine. Even a continuation of support at recent levels will be insufficient due to the increase in need as a result of the worsening humanitarian situation in the region.
- Russia has exploited anti-French feeling in the region and has become involved in the security theatre of Mali. Russia may develop deeper roles in other Sahelian states.

## Introduction

Over the past decade, the security situation in the Sahel region has deteriorated drastically: fighting involving violent extremist groups has displaced millions of people; civilians face violent threats from state security forces and various non-state actors; a humanitarian crisis is unfolding; climate change has shortened the growing season; and the region is still reeling from the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Each of these conditions has been exacerbated by the rise of global food prices to record levels (including in the Sahel) – one of the indirect effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In this brief, we examine how this invasion affects the Sahelian states of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger.

## Indirect Effects of the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

Specifically, there are two aspects of the invasion that have indirectly affected the Sahel region. First, the invasion exacerbated a global food security and energy crisis that had worsened significantly during 2021. Second, the crisis unfolding in Ukraine has attracted significant attention from the donor community, and it is likely that donors will prioritize allocation of funding to Ukraine, which then means de-prioritizing other crises, such as those in the Sahel.

## Food security and energy market

In June 2022, the World Food Programme (WFP) estimated that approximately 12.6 million people in the Sahel will face food insecurity between June and August 2022.<sup>1</sup> Of these 12.6 million, 1.4 million were expected to face ‘emergency food insecurity’. WFP also estimated that up to 6.3 million children in the region are at risk of acute malnutrition by the end of 2022, which would be a 21% increase from 2021. Thus, the Sahel region requires a significant increase in food aid and emergency aid in the coming months.

Several Sahelian states have experienced increased food prices since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, especially Mali and Burkina Faso. Figure 1 breaks down price rates by staple items and illustrates that wheat and cooking oil prices rose significantly, while maize, millet and sorghum became steadily more expensive. These price increases are, in

addition to the Russian invasion, reportedly due to conflict and insecurity affecting production and trade flows in the Greater Lake Chad Basin and the Liptako-Gourma region, compounded by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, droughts and flooding. The effects of the Ukraine invasion have been transferred to the Sahel in the form of increased transport costs in the region, due to rising fuel prices, and a concomitant rise in imported fertilizer for farmers.

## Donor priorities and increasing humanitarian needs

As noted above, the Sahel region relies upon considerable humanitarian and development aid from international donors, but many are concerned they may lose that support if donors shift their focus to Ukraine. To illustrate this concern, we show in Figure 2 the collective humanitarian aid sent to Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, and Niger for 2017–2022 as calculated by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.<sup>2</sup> The amount of support has risen substantially since 2017, as the support required by these four states has nearly doubled over the past five years. Even so, the amount of funds provided to those states has not kept up with the increasing need.

Indeed, Figure 2 demonstrates that these four states received approximately 55% of their funding needs in 2020, but that this percentage dropped sharply in 2021. Numbers from October 2022 suggest that this may drop even further. This is a troubling trend given that a further deterioration in food security in the region, exacerbated by the effects of the invasion of Ukraine, will further increase the need for humanitarian assistance.

The shortfall in support can be compared to the Ukraine Flash Appeal, which raised 72.4% of USD 4.292 billion by 3 October 2022. It appears likely that donors have viewed Ukraine as a more pressing emergency than the Sahelian states covered in this brief.

## Russia and Sahelian Security Politics

Russia’s involvement in the Sahel predates its invasion of Ukraine, and its engagement has deepened since February 2022 when the Wagner Group (a private Russian security firm) was deployed in Mali. This deployment can be seen in the context of a wider competition between Russia and NATO members as the Wagner Group played a role in ousting France from Mali. Although Wagner Group is not an official branch of the Russian state, they maintain strong links, and it is widely recognized that Wagner Group works in the interest of the Russian state.<sup>3</sup> Wagner Group’s activities can thus be seen as an extension of the Russian state’s interests. Hence, Russia appears to be involved in a global competition for influence, which has intensified after its invasion of Ukraine.

## Mali turns from France and towards Russia

Though France has maintained an influential role in Malian security affairs during the country’s post-colonial period, it announced the withdrawal of French troops from Mali in February 2022. A central point of contention between Mali and France was Mali’s deployment of Wagner Group. Also the European Union (EU) announced in March 2022 that its training mission in Mali could not continue to support the country’s security forces so long

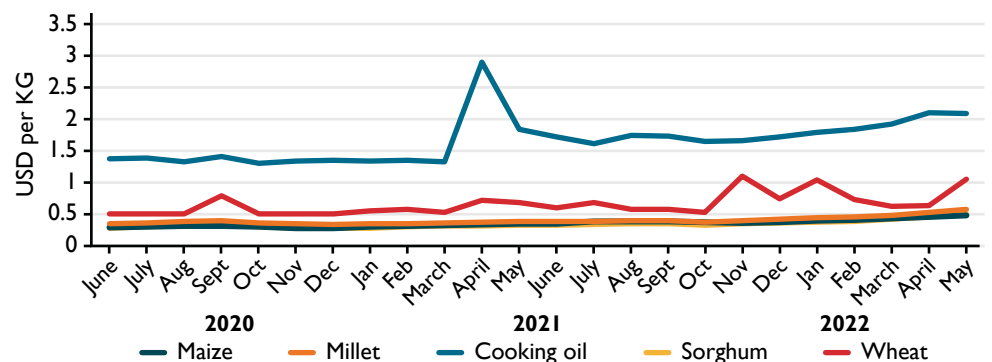


Figure 1: Food prices in the Sahel, June 2020–May 2022. Source: Author’s compilation of data provided by the OCHA Humanitarian Data Exchange

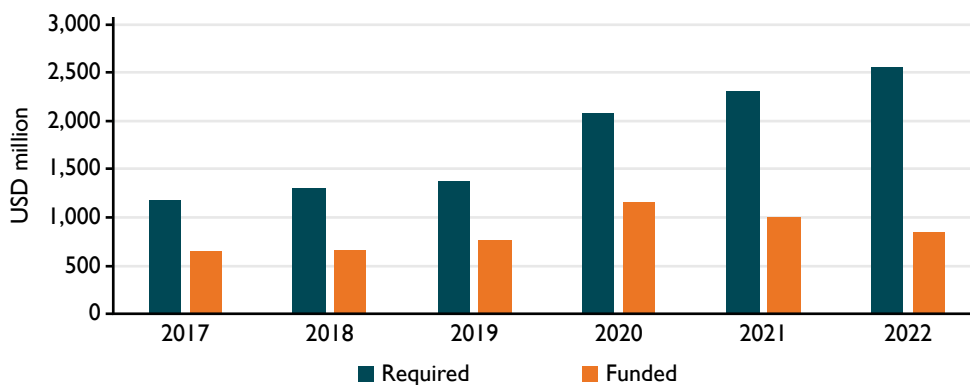


Figure 2: OCHA appeals and response plans to Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali and Niger, 2017–2022. Source: Author’s compilation of data from: Financial Tracking Service in October 2022.

as they cooperated with Wagner Group. Since then, Mali’s alignment with Russia, and its distancing from France and Europe, has become increasingly obvious. Later, in May 2022, Mali withdrew from the G5 Sahel Joint Force, a regional military coalition that had been heavily supported by France and the EU.

These developments marked a definite turn of direction for Mali, who seemed to be tying its future to Russia by admitting the Wagner Group and cutting ties with France and the EU. Media commentators have also noted that the withdrawal of French troops may reduce pressure on the Malian government to uphold democratic processes and respect human rights – as these topics had been key focal points for France. Indeed, this speculation may be correct: the interim military government in Mali has been taking steps toward building a more permanent authoritarian regime by strengthening its military and postponing elections while facing down allegations of coup attempts and criticism for arresting members of the Malian political elite.<sup>4</sup> There was, on the other hand, no significant response from Russia in the wake of these developments.

The deployment of the Wagner Group in Mali and the subsequent military cooperation between the private security company and Malian armed forces have triggered new aggressive dynamics in the country’s conflict. For example, in March 2022, 300 civilians were killed in Moura, Mali, and investigations revealed that Wagner Group and Malian armed forces were behind the attack.<sup>5</sup> Wagner Group’s deployment and its cooperation with the Malian armed forces thus have significant implications for human

rights in Mali and the security of its civilian population.

### Military coups

In August 2020, special forces in the Malian armed forces overthrew President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in a military coup. Although protests in Mali in recent years have been motivated by anti-French sentiment, the 2020 coup was initiated in response to political corruption and poor military salaries. Following strong international pressure to appoint a civilian president and hold elections as soon as possible, the military leader of the coup, Assimi Goita, assumed the position of vice-president. This external pressure, especially from France, may have motivated the second ‘coup within a coup’ in May 2021, when the civilian president and other civilians were arrested and a military leadership was installed.

Investigations have found that Russia was directly involved in spreading disinformation aimed at encouraging anti-French sentiment in Mali. Indeed, an investigation into the Wagner Group has stated that disinformation campaigns are part of Wagner Group’s “playbook”, which is aimed at encouraging protests that ease the later deployment of its mercenary troops.<sup>6</sup>

The military coup in Burkina Faso in January 2022 was led by the military officer Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba. Prior to the successful coup, Damiba allegedly requested that the prior president Kaboré follow Mali’s lead and allow the Wagner Group to operate in the country. Kaboré denied these requests. There is thus reason to believe that the role of Russia may have been an

important contributing factor to the coup, both as motivation for Damiba in addition to through Russian disinformation campaigns to inspire the Burkinabe population.<sup>7</sup> Following the coup, pro-military demonstrations popped up in Ouagadougou, with protestors waving Russian flags and voicing anti-French sentiments. Given these developments, one must wonder whether more pro-Russian coups could appear in the Sahel in the years to come.

### Social unrest and violence

Over the past decade, the Sahelian region has experienced increasing violence and insecurity. Many attacks are orchestrated by groups associated with al Qaeda and the Islamic State, or militias. In addition, there are challenges of transnational crime, violence against civilians conducted by security forces, and inter-communal and inter-ethnic violence, amongst other factors. Over the past few years, Sahelian states have also experienced an increase in social unrest, with protests and demonstrations becoming more common, especially in capital cities.

Most vocal protests in recent years have been those with anti-French sentiments that have taken place in Sahelian capital cities, though these are often rather minor in size. In recent months, anti-French and pro-Russian sentiments have often gone hand in hand during these protests. The protests have also increased in size. Many of these protests have later been shown to be part of Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns.<sup>8</sup> These campaigns were ongoing both prior to the coups in Mali in 2020 and 2021, as well as prior to the coup in Burkina Faso in 2022. However, the protests have become even larger following the coups and during Wagner Group’s deployment in Mali. On 1 April 2022, thousands gathered in the streets of Bamako, Mali, to criticize France and sanctions by ECOWAS on Mali. A month later, thousands gathered again in Bamako to support the interim military government – and thereby also Russia’s presence in Mali.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, this Russian influence was spreading. On 14 May 2022, in N’Djamena, Chad, protests occupied city streets to criticize French influence in national politics.<sup>10</sup> Following the military coup in Burkina Faso in January 2022, public rallies have materialized, urging the country to follow Mali’s example by moving away from France and allowing the Wagner Group to deploy. Therefore, one should not yet

dismiss the potential of a domino effect in the region of such geopolitical shifts.

Although, more recently, demonstrations have focused primarily on the political aspects of alliances and partner-states, protests about living costs and food prices are becoming more frequent and fervent. On 5 March 2022, Chadians occupied the streets in N'Djamena, calling for a government response to the rising prices for food, housing and other living needs. Then on 1 May, another protest in Chad broke out in Sarh, asking for stronger consumer price controls. In June, similar protests occurred in Mali.<sup>11</sup> Though currently modest in quantity, these protests signal dissatisfaction with food prices. Once the Mali-France-Russia tensions fade more to the back of people's minds, the severe humanitarian and food security situation in the region may thus foster more protests and civil unrest in Sahelian cities.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine may also impact certain aspects of violence in the Sahel. The effect of the invasion of Ukraine on food prices may have triggered more competition for control over fertile land in the Sahel, which is already a security challenge that includes tensions for instance between farmers and herders, which extremist groups exploit. The Russia-Ukraine conflict and the subsequent threat of lack of food access may bring these types of tensions more to the front of the security situation in the Sahel, which would make the security dynamics even more complex due to the localization and dispersity of such disputes.

## Conclusion

The situation in the Sahel is worsening on most fronts as food insecurity rises and international aid to the region decreases. Although Russia's invasion in Ukraine has not caused these challenges, it has made indirect impact. The shift of the donor community towards Ukraine comes at

an especially bad time as the level of humanitarian crises intensifies in the Sahel, threatening even more instability in an already fractious landscape. Finally, pro-Russia sentiments are increasing in the Sahel, both among the population and among the political leadership as seen in Mali. The Sahel is going through substantial changes and challenges at this time. With Russia having opened a door into the Sahel region through Mali, parallel to having shut doors to at least NATO members following its invasion of Ukraine, one could expect that Russia will advance its geopolitical interests further in the Sahel region going forward. ■

## Notes

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## THE AUTHOR

Marie Sandnes is a Doctoral Researcher at PRIO. She researches the G5 Sahel Joint Force for her doctoral thesis and is interested in regional security cooperation, military cooperation, geopolitics, counter-terrorism and security force assistance.

## THE PROJECT

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