

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

WFP: Despite risks, more staff on the ground in CAR

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By Elena L. Pasquini



The conflict in the Central African Republic has driven many to flee to neighboring countries like Cameroon and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which are now hosting more than 50,000 refugees. Insecurity in CAR makes it hard for humanitarian organizations to deliver aid there. Photo by: M.Morzaria / ECHO / EU/ CC BY-ND

Security is the main challenge for humanitarians in the Central African Republic — a month ago, [Médecins Sans Frontières](#) reported that [United Nations](#) and NGO staff had become targets of violence, and a few weeks later the country director of Caritas was shot.

But the [World Food Program](#) has chosen to overcome the threat and is scaling up its operations inside the country, strengthening its presence on the ground, reopening suboffices and hiring more staff to deliver and monitor food aid.

Devex spoke to Housainou Taal, WFP country director in Bangui, whose job is to try to respond as quickly as possible to the [rapidly worsening humanitarian emergency](#) in the lawless Central African Republic, where a starving and fearful population faces a dilemma: continue living hidden in the bush or return to crime and human rights violations in urban areas. Most of the displaced are farmers that will probably be unable to return to their fields in time to plant crops for the harvest season.

The numbers are daunting: 484,000 people are food insecure, of which 130,500 in urgent need, according to the U.N. agency. WFP is currently assisting 200,000 and intends to reach at least an additional 118,000, including 66,000 children, but \$6.5 million are needed to improve food assistance and another \$3.6 million to upgrade logistics and communication capacity.

Here are a few excerpts from our conversation with Taal:

What solutions and measures are you implementing to scale up operations and reach those most in need?

One of the difficulties in scaling up has been that WFP staff were not present in the field. [During the crisis] we were limited to Bangui. This scaling-up goes together with reopening of our sub-offices, [which will help us to monitor the assistance. Throughout the crisis we have been working with NGOs and they have been helping us to distribute the food [and] now we need to step up monitoring.

How are you going to do that? Are you developing new solutions, new strategies or an innovative approach to deliver and monitor?

Initially we are scaling up food distribution, but in September we are also doing a market assessment to look at the possibility of [implementing a] cash and voucher [program, which we hope to introduce by] 2014 to increase efficiency in food assistance. We have also been looking at local procurement.

One [innovation] will be the WFP office in Bambari, which will be like a U.N. hub, providing services like telecommunications to all the U.N. agencies. The idea is to work collectively, in terms of partnerships, to deliver very cost-effective and efficient assistance.

Are there any problems with the amount or type of supplies?

At the moment we have a problem with the taxation because the government has introduced new laws to tax supplies as they come in. ... The other [constraint] is coordinating ... the deliveries from outside the country [...]. Logistics colleagues are working very hard to make sure that goods arrive on time and we are able to re-open the sub-offices to provide these key services.

How long do you foresee engagement in the Central African Republic and on what scale?

The idea is to respond now and scale up so that by 2014 hopefully the needs are under control and then [the engagement] can start to decline as security gets [better].

Many international staff have left the country. Is there room for them to return? Are you recruiting just local or also international personnel?

Some of [the international staff] has moved to other operations, but the ones who are on contract with us have now returned to the country. We are looking at [how to fill] gaps.

You are delivering aid in areas which are extremely dangerous for aid workers. How are you trying to ensure the safety of the staff and convoys?

We are doing that in two ways. First, partnering with [the authorities and] NGOs, and then organizing escorts ... [Now] we also have UNWAS flights [so we can access these areas and monitor the distribution.

WFP aims to boosting its logistics and telecommunications capacity. What does that mean concretely?

We have launched a new special operation [to increase] WFP transport capacity by 240 tons by bringing in some additional trucks. That will provide more reliable means to access beneficiaries and also to support partners. ... We will have a logistics cluster coordinator working not only with WFP, but also with partners [and] an emergency telecommunications program that will help provide Internet and other services to NGOs and local communities in specific field locations.

Some NGOs left the country when the crisis broke out. What are the actors on the ground? How are you trying to coordinate them?

Lot of NGOs are [now back] in the country, and more want to enter ... That's why is very urgent for us right now to re-open the sub-offices, [and] engage with the partners and NGOs. ... Most of our programs are delivered directly by the NGOs.

Local or international NGOs?

Both, but more international NGOs. ... The NGO presence has increased in the past three months, but more international NGOs than local ones, as there are very few local NGOs. The country also suffers a serious capacity gap, even in terms of government: [Very few have the] capacity to deliver and implement, and that is also reflected in local NGOs.

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