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**Reaction to announcement of improved harvest forecast for Sahel region:
Good news but governments and UN should not take the foot off the gas**

International aid agency Oxfam and leading West African farmers network ROPPA today welcomed an initial forecast of an improved harvest in the Sahel region but warned governments and the UN that the food crisis is far from over and an increase in aid is still need to help farmers and herders overcome the triple challenges of recurrent droughts, persistent poverty and political instability. The forecast was made today by a group of West African regional bodies monitoring food security, and UN agencies including the World Food Programme.

“This initial forecast of a better harvest is welcome news but governments, the UN and aid agencies should not see this as an excuse to take the foot off the accelerator. The food crisis for millions of people is far from over. Food prices remain sky high, incomes have been exhausted and millions will continue to require support to help them recover. It would be madness to walk away at the first sign of improvement. We would lose the hard fought gains made by support provided so far, and undermine the ability of people to get back on their feet and build a future” said Al Hassan, Food Security Policy Coordinator for Oxfam in West Africa.

While initial estimates for the coming harvest appear to be above average, and if realised would allow an improvement for many people across the region, not all areas are faring well. In Mali, the government estimates that production this year could be reduced by 20 to 30 percent. Rice production in the north could be as low as 30 percent of normal levels due to shortages of fuel and other inputs. The agency said that even in a good year 20 percent of the population go hungry and 230,000 children die from hunger-related causes.

“Many farmers are thankful for better times ahead, but many others were unable to plant successfully or have seen their crops been hit by flooding. To exit this food crisis, farmers will need seeds, tools and fertiliser to help them grow crops this coming winter, and support to increase our yields for years to come. Then we have to stop this crisis happening again. The needless loss of life and suffering should spur governments to start proactively addressing the root causes of these problems”, said Djibo Bagna from ROPPA.

Although rainfall has been good in most areas, it has been poor in pockets of Niger, Chad and Senegal, while serious flooding has also hit some zones, destroying, for example, thousands of hectares of land in the regions of Goz Beida and Koukou in eastern Chad. There remains poor pasture for livestock in the north of Senegal, in the south of Mauritania, in Tillabery and Tahoua in Niger, and in Bar El Ghazel in Chad.

Many farmers have not been able to take advantage of the rainfall due to the current food crisis. Emergency aid to agriculture was only just 24 per cent funded of what was required, and aid agencies have only been able to provide enough seeds, tools and fertilisers to less than half of the 9.9 million people targeted.

Food prices also remain extremely high across the region. In August, the price of millet was 62 per cent higher than the last five year average in Niamey, Niger and 73 per cent higher in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. In Bamako, Mali it was 96 per cent higher than the last four year average.

There is also the threat of a locust invasion, especially in Niger and Mali. Desert Locust breeding continues, in particular in central and northern Niger and most probably in Mali. The risk will be especially higher from mid-September to October, when swarms could form, migrate and threaten the crops.

Continued instability in Mali and increased stress on displaced people and host communities inevitably provide additional challenges and needs. Rice production in northern Mali could be at just 30 percent of a normal year and half of all livestock could be lost in some areas due to insecurity preventing migration, a lack of animal feed and veterinary services.

Oxfam and ROPPA said this is the third large scale food crisis to hit the region in less than a decade. To prevent the next drought from becoming a humanitarian emergency, donors need to support investment in the productive capacities of small scale producers, social benefit schemes and food reserves that would enable rapid responses to future crises and help communities manage volatile food prices.

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