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West Africa desperately needs help with its food shortage

by Tony Magliano

Making a Difference

Imagine being very hungry almost all the time. Imagine telling your children to wait until the end of the day to eat a very small meal. Imagine eating every other day. Imagine not eating at all.

Very sadly, more than 18 million people in West Africa's Sahel region -- an area between the Sahara Desert and the African tropics -- do not have to imagine severe hunger. They are either experiencing it or getting very close to it.

According to the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Food and nutrition crises in the region have grown in frequency and severity in recent years, mostly driven by sporadic rainfall, insufficient local harvests, high food prices and insecurity. As a result, people's resilience has been eroded, undermining their capacity to respond to what have become recurrent emergencies."

Nine Sahel countries -- Niger, Chad, Mali, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Gambia, Mauritania, Cameroon and northern Nigeria -- are facing severe food shortages.

I called the Republic of Mali and spoke with Catholic Relief Services' country representative, Timothy Bishop, to hear a personal firsthand account of the crisis.

"Unlike the United States, almost everyone in Mali farms. And if the crops don't grow, families don't eat. It's that simple," Bishop said.

He said in the time leading up to the September harvest, Mali's population normally experiences a hunger period -- the "lean" season -- when people eat fewer meals. But since last year's sporadic rains and subsequent poor harvest, countless families have used up their food reserves and are facing a severe

hunger crisis.

Bishop told me more than 3 million people in Mali are currently suffering from severe hunger.

"Mali's government is absolutely doing a lot to help, but its resources are very limited," he added. "If adequate international assistance is not forthcoming, countless families will be reduced to begging and eating tree leaves. And some may starve."

Catholic Relief Services' country representative in Niger, Bill Rastetter, emailed me to say, "Few people have more than the minimum, and many don't have even that. There will be no one answer for the entire region (Sahel), or even one country. The results will vary, and many people will continue to be in need."

Please make a difference by sending as generous a donation as possible to Catholic Relief Services, P.O. Box 17090, Baltimore, MD 21203-7090. Kindly earmark your check for "West Africa food crisis relief." Donations can also be made online at crs.org or by phone at 1-877-435-7277.

Bishop asked we also contact our congressional delegation, urging them to ensure that Mali, Chad and Mauritania be placed on USAID's Food for Peace priority country list. For these suffering nations to receive long-term U.S. food assistance, they must be added to this list.

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Additionally, Catholic Relief Services asks us to urge our U.S. senators and congressperson to oppose any amendments that further cut international food assistance in the Agriculture Appropriations bill and support increased funding for long-term Food for Peace programs. Cutting this assistance will not balance the federal budget, but it will cause suffering people to starve to death.

As disciples of Jesus, we know these words of his all too well: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink." However, knowing this essential teaching is simply not enough. We must tirelessly act on it.

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist.]

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