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Children on the move, children left behind

Uprooted or trapped by Boko Haram

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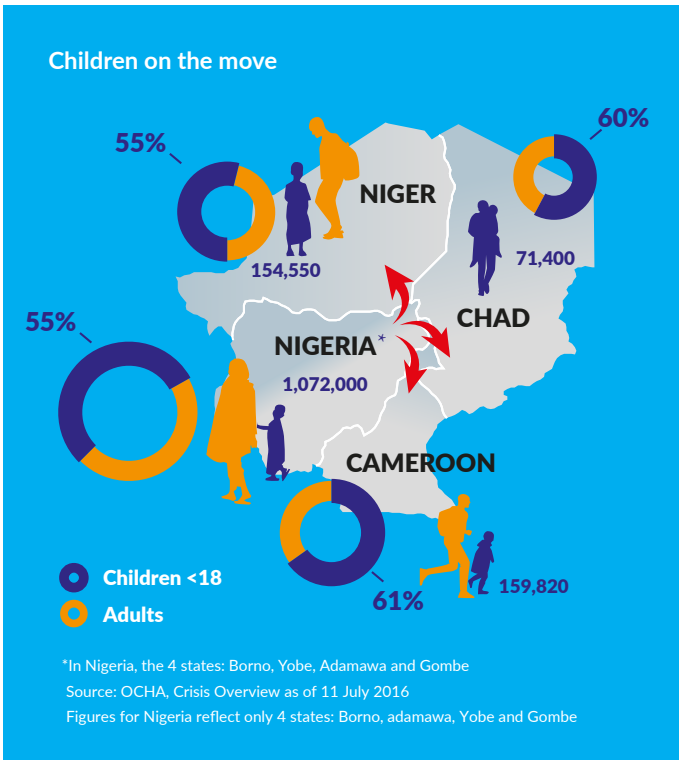
A major humanitarian crisis is unfolding in Africa's Lake Chad Basin, where violence and destruction have caused huge population displacements, left hundreds of thousands of children trapped behind conflict lines and led to a dramatic increase in malnutrition.

Local communities are doing what they can to help those in need, offering shelter to many of the 2.6 million people forced to flee their homes – 1.4 million[1] of them children – but they themselves rank among the world's poorest and most vulnerable.

As world leaders discuss the plight of refugees and migrants, they need to pay attention to this major displacement crisis and its profound impact on children. The international community needs to act urgently to scale up humanitarian assistance in the Lake Chad Basin, an area that comprises parts of Nigeria, Niger, Cameroon and Chad.



Conflict, poverty and climate change

A number of factors have led to the complex humanitarian crisis in the Lake Chad Basin, which is home to 21 million people.

Conflict

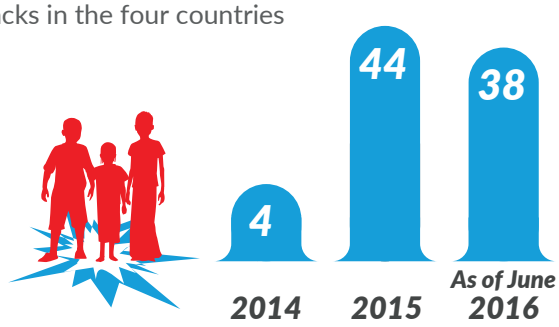
A spiral of violence has uprooted communities in the region since 2013, when the conflict between government forces and armed groups started to escalate. Fear of abuse, sexual violence, forced recruitment or death have forced children to leave their towns and villages, often with as little as the clothes on their back.

Many of the children caught in the conflict have been subjected to unimaginable violence and abuse; they have lost their families, their homes and years of education. In north-east Nigeria alone, an estimated 20,000 children[2] have been separated from their families.

Since the start of the conflict, thousands of children – boys and girls – have been forcibly recruited by armed groups and used to carry out attacks. Since 2014, 86 children[3] have been used in 'suicide' attacks in Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

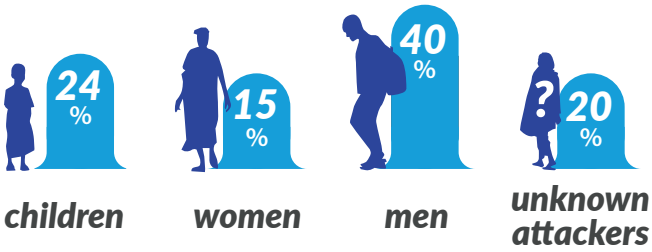
Number of children used in suicide attacks

Estimated number of children used in suicide attacks in the four countries



Nearly 1 out of every 4 suicide bombers is a child

Profile of suicide bombers (Jan 2014 - June 2016)



Poverty

Communities in the Lake Chad Basin are among the poorest in the world, and the conflict has exacerbated the situation. Against a backdrop of economic crisis fuelled by plummeting oil prices, insecurity has taken a heavy toll on farming and herding. Land is not cultivated and livestock is often stolen by Boko Haram or left behind. Around 3.8 million[4] people are currently facing severe food insecurity across the area.

Climate change

Lake Chad, which was once the largest water reservoir in the Sahel, provided a livelihood for nearly 21 million people in four countries. The lake now covers less than one tenth of its original surface, with devastating consequences for local communities. In the words of President Mahamadou Issoufou of Niger at the opening of the Paris Climate Conference in 2015: "Lake Chad is dying."

Chad

Living on the edge

"I wanted to take my school books, but I couldn't even do that," explains Khadija. "All we left with were the clothes on our backs; we walked for days, barefoot."

Khadidja, 15, was forced to move five times over the past six years. The first time she moved with her family was after a severe drought ravaged her village in Nigeria. The second, when Boko Haram threatened her school. Soon after that, she had to flee again when Boko Haram attacked her village.

"When I arrived in Baga my feet were badly injured from walking in the bush with all those thorns. I had to go to the clinic so they could pull them out with tweezers; it took hours."

But Khadija would soon hear the sound of gunfire again, when Baga, which is also in Nigeria, was attacked by Boko Haram in January 2015.

"We ran to the lake and jumped into a boat to flee to Chad," she says. "We were all in shock, people in the boat spoke of lifeless bodies lying on the ground and houses burned; I had to cover my ears."

But Ngouboua, where they sought refuge, turned out not to provide safety for the girl and her family. Boko Haram attacked again and they had to flee once more. Now she lives in Dar Es Salam refugee camp, in Bagasola, uncertain about the future.

"I'm sure it is not over yet."

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A nutrition crisis

Malnutrition among young children is typically high in the region, where epidemics, droughts and floods are recurrent; and violence has further aggravated the situation. In 2016, more than 475,000 children[5] are expected to suffer from severe acute malnutrition in conflict-affected areas, up from 175,000 at the beginning of the year.

In north-east Nigeria's Borno state alone, an estimated 49,000 children – out of 244,000 children[6] suffering from severe acute malnutrition – will die if they do not receive treatment. Nigerian authorities declared a nutrition emergency in Borno in June 2016.

The situation might be even worse: as some of the areas previously under the control of Boko Haram insurgents become accessible, it is becoming evident that many more children are in desperate need of food and therapeutic treatment. Towns and villages are in ruins and communities have no access to basic services. In Borno state, for example, 60 per cent[7] of health facilities are partially or completely destroyed, and 75 per cent[8] of water and sanitation facilities require rehabilitation.

An estimated 2.2 million[9] people – over half of them children – are feared to be trapped in areas under the control of Boko Haram and in dire need of humanitarian assistance over the next six months.

Since the beginning of 2016, over 96,000 children[10] with severe acute malnutrition have received therapeutic treatment across the region. UNICEF and its partners continue to expand nutrition programmes including training health care workers and community volunteers, and opening new treatment centres.

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Nigeria

A silent crisis

"There was no food… and I was not able to feed my child with breast milk."

Jadie Abu, and her five children had to flee from Mafa when Boko Haram attacked their village. By the time they arrived in Maiduguri, also in Nigeria, her two-year-old son, Samuel, was malnourished.

"Because of the crisis we lost almost everything. We only live with the very little we have. It's very difficult for us to get food because all the roads are blocked. This is why my child and I were malnourished."

In Maiduguri, Samuel received treatment for malnutrition at a UNICEF-supported clinic. He is now recovering and putting on weight.

"We have left everything, including our animals to come and seek safety here," says Jadie. "I still have hope that the conflict will stop soon so I can go back to where I come from."

The kindness of neighbours

A defining feature of this crisis is the way neighbouring communities have opened their doors to the people who have fled their homes. At this time, more than eight in ten people[11] escaping violence in the Lake Chad Basin are sheltered in host communities – not in camps. The vast majority are hosted by relatives, friends or neighbours who, in many cases, have themselves faced multiple crises, such as droughts and floods.

Maiduguri, a city in north-east Nigeria with a population of one million, has already received more than 700,000 displaced people[12]. In Cameroon's Far North region, more than 190,000 displaced[13] people are living in host communities, while Niger's Diffa region has welcomed one displaced person for every two of its residents[14] since the start of the crisis.

The house is small but the welcome is big

"It was natural for me to offer them shelter," says Francois. "If one day they decide to leave, it will be their choice, but if they decide to stay, my home will be theirs after I die. They are my family now."

When three young girls, tired and terrified, stood in front of Francois' farmhouse in the Far North region of Cameroon, he opened his doors, and offered them food, water and shelter.

The girls had been separated from their family after Boko Haram attacked their village. Their mother went searching for the girls and her son.

Her search eventually took her to Dzawandai village where she found her three girls safe in Francois' house. A year later, she stumbled upon her son while shopping for food in a neighbouring village. He too had been taken care of by a foster family.

Now, mother and children are all reunited under Francois' roof – but there is no word of the father, who has been missing since the attack.

Call for action

The Lake Chad crisis is a children's crisis that should rank high on the global migration and displacement agenda. It is one of the world's most neglected crises, and the children's voices must be heard.

Given the magnitude of the crisis, there is an urgent need to scale up humanitarian assistance. New areas previously unreachable in north-east Nigeria are becoming accessible; the extent of the humanitarian needs is becoming more apparent and will likely grow.

Children fleeing violence in the region face multiple protection risks, from violence and exploitation, to detention, trafficking and separation from their families. Their needs must be put first, and their rights must be respected, protected and fulfilled. Children associated with armed groups should be released and reintegrated into their communities without delay.

Three years into the humanitarian response, the crisis remains underfunded, and the basic needs of children and families continue to grow. UNICEF has received only 13 per cent[15] of its funding requirement this year for its humanitarian response across the four countries. Together with other partners, our teams are working in challenging circumstances, but funding shortfalls and insecurity are preventing us from reaching all those in need.

Summits on Refugees and Migrants

On 19 September 2016, the 193 Member States of the United Nations will have the opportunity to take action on behalf of refugees and migrants. At the UN General Assembly High Level Plenary Meeting on Large Scale Movements of Refugees and Migrants, governments will come together to create a more responsible, predictable system for responding to large movements of refugees and migrants and strengthen governance of international migration. The UN meeting will be followed, on 20 September, by the Leaders' Summit on Refugees, hosted by US President Barack Obama.

UNICEF is calling on governments to make children central to the discussions and outcomes of the summits – including the 1.4 million children displaced by the conflict in the Lake Chad Basin, who deserve the world's full attention so that the crisis can be resolved and they can go home and live normal lives as soon as possible.

UNICEF will take advantage of the global summits to advocate for a number of key principles for children on the move:

- Protect child refugees and migrants, particularly unaccompanied children, from exploitation and violence.
- End the detention of children seeking refugee status or migrating.
- Keep families together as the best way to protect children and give children legal status.
- All refugee and migrant children keep learning and have access to health and other quality services.
- Press for action on the underlying causes of large scale movements of refugees and migrants.
- Promote measures to combat xenophobia, discrimination and marginalization in countries of transit and destination.

Number of Children UNICEF aims to reach in 2016

579,700

children who will receive psychosocial support in child protection programmes

473,600

children under 5 with severe acute malnutrition who will be admitted for treatment

4.3 million

people will benefit from primary health care services

1.4 million

people with access to safe water

1.1 million

people with improved sanitation

520,000

children participating in schools / learning programmes

13,900

unaccompanied and separated children placed in alternative care and/or receiving case management

***These numbers reflect the chidren UNICEF plans to reach with existing partners and resources available.**

How many children received assistance in the Lake Chad region in 2016?

UNICEF key achievements in north-east Nigeria and neighbouring countries, as of June.

168,000

children received psychosocial support in child protection programmes

96,000

children under 5 with severe acute malnutrition were admitted for treatment

2 million

people benefited from primary health care services

444,000

people have access to safe water

132,000

people have improved sanitation

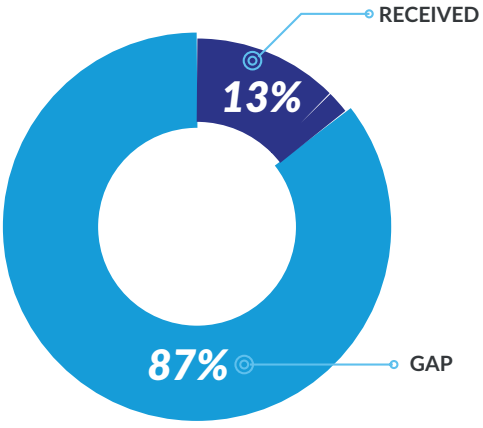
109,000

children participated in schools / learning programmes

Urgent funding needs

Given the scale of the crisis, UNICEF has revised it funding needs to **US$ 308 million** to provide lifesaving assistance to families affected by Boko Haram violence across Nigeria, Niger, Chad and Cameroon.

By mid-August 2016, UNICEF has received only US$ 41.2 million – 13 per cent – of its funding requirement for the humanitarian response across the four countries.



#BringBackOurChildhood

Moutari, 15, remembers the first time he had to flee from Boko Haram in Nigeria

"I was on my way to visit a neighbour when I heard the explosions. I immediately ran, I knew there was not enough time for me to go home."

The boy ran with a few friends towards Toumour, the closest town in Niger, across the border. But he felt sick and had to stop halfway; his friends continued, leaving Moutari to spend the night alone in the bush.

"I was so scared I couldn't close my eyes all night; I laid down under a tree, I saw people passing by but I was too sick to follow them."

The next morning, feeling much better, Moutari reached the town and immediately searched for his family. He found his younger sister, but their mum was nowhere to be seen. He decided to leave his sister in Toumour to search for his mother – to no avail. When he returned his sister was gone.

People said she had left with their mother, but no one could tell him where they had gone. Moutari decided to stay in the town and wait. A few days later, they were reunited: "My mother had come back for me," he says with a big smile.

The family now lives in Diffa, Niger.

Sources

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[2] Humanitarian Response Plan Nigeria, 2016

[3] Child Protection Fact Sheet on Suicide Attacks, Lake Chad Basin, January 2016-July 2016.

[4] OCHA, Lake Chad Crisis Overview as of 11 July 2016.

[5] National Health Information System in Nigeria, Chad, Niger and Cameroon as of end June 2016.

[6] UNICEF Situation Report on Nigeria, June 2016.

[7] Mid-April Joint UN Assessment in Borno State, Nigeria.

[8] Mid-April Joint UN Assessment in Borno State, Nigeria, 2016.

[9] OCHA and IOM estimates of population in 20 previously inaccessible LGAs.

[10] UNICEF Situations Reports: Situation Report on Cameroon, July 2016; Situation Report on Niger, May/June 2016; Situation Report on Chad, June 2016; Situation Report on Nigeria, June 2016.

[11] IOM Nigeria Displacement Tracking Matrix, June 2016.

[12] IOM Nigeria Displacement Tracking Matrix, June 2016.

[13] IOM Cameroon Displacement Tracking Matrix, April 2016.

[14] Projection Institut National de la Statistique, INS 2012-2035.

[15] Revised Humanitarian Action for Children Appeal for Nigeria, August 2016.

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