

UNHCR, WFP CHIEFS ALARMED OVER THREATS TO AID FLOW IN CHAD

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The UN refugee agency and the World Food Programme on Monday appealed for the rapid restoration of order in volatile eastern Chad following weekend unrest in which mobs looted warehouses storing vital aid supplies for hundreds of thousands of Darfurian refugees and Chadians.

Both agencies reported that their main warehouses in the eastern Chad town of Abeche, the hub for relief efforts for 218,000 refugees from Sudan's neighbouring Darfur region and some 90,000 internally displaced Chadians, had been pillaged, reportedly by local residents, during the turmoil on Saturday and Sunday. Abeche was occupied by rebel forces on Saturday, then re-taken by government troops on Sunday.

High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres and WFP Executive Director James Morris warned that the aid lifeline in the remote region along the Chad ? Sudan border was extremely precarious and urged all sides to honour humanitarian principles so the flow of relief could continue.

"There are more than 300,000 uprooted people in 12 refugee camps and various sites for internally displaced Chadians who are almost totally dependent on outside help from WFP, UNHCR and our partners," Guterres said. "Chadian host communities also get help from us. The loss of our main stockpiles for the eastern region and the restrictions on our staff because of continuing insecurity are jeopardising that fragile lifeline."

Initial reports from WFP staff indicated a total of 483 metric tons of food valued at about US\$500,000 had been looted from its warehouse in the centre of Abeche. Another WFP warehouse on the outskirts of town was apparently untouched.

"Stealing food from people who have lost everything is the most shameful and inhumane act that anyone can possibly commit," said WFP Executive Director Morris.

Food commodities looted from WFP included 355.6 metric tons of cereals; 61.5 MT of sugar; 35.2 MT of oil; 21.9 MT of pulses; and 9 MT of dry skimmed milk. But all WFP food aid stocks for December distributions to the Chadian refugee camps were already delivered and positioned in the camps, and a substantial amount of food for January was in place at the camps as well.

More WFP food deliveries for the Chad camps are expected shortly, with convoys already en route from Khufra, Libya, with 1,140 metric tons of cereals and vegetable oil. WFP still needs another US\$5.5 million immediately to buy all the necessary food commodities before the start of the next rainy season in June. There is a six-month lead time between receiving funds and pre-positioning

food in the refugee camps.

UNHCR's heavily looted warehouse contained about US\$1.3 million worth of relief items ranging from blankets, tents and plastic sheeting to stoves, kitchen sets, medical supplies, communications gear and water purification and storage equipment ? all essential supplies for running the remote refugee camps along a 600-km stretch of eastern Chad near the Sudanese border. The Abeche warehouse is UNHCR's central supply depot for the region, distributing to seven satellite warehouses closer to outlying camps. Stocks in those smaller outlying warehouses should help provide a buffer for the time being, but lost supplies will need to be replenished quickly.

Abeche was reported quiet on Monday morning and local authorities said they would send out teams to try to locate and recover stolen aid supplies.

UNHCR has about 300 staff assigned in Chad, including 95 internationals and over 200 nationals. Most of UNHCR's staff are in the east. WFP has 44 international staff and 227 national staff, most of them also in the east.