



Executive Brief: Central African Republic - Rapid Emergency Food Security Assessment in the North and North West Provinces

Overview, scope and methods

The Central African Republic (CAR) is one of the poorest countries in the world and is getting poorer every year. It ranks 172 out of 177 countries on the 2006 Human Development Index and its index has dropped by 9 percent between 1985 and 2005. Political instability and insecurity are the chief reasons for the lack of any substantial development since 1996.

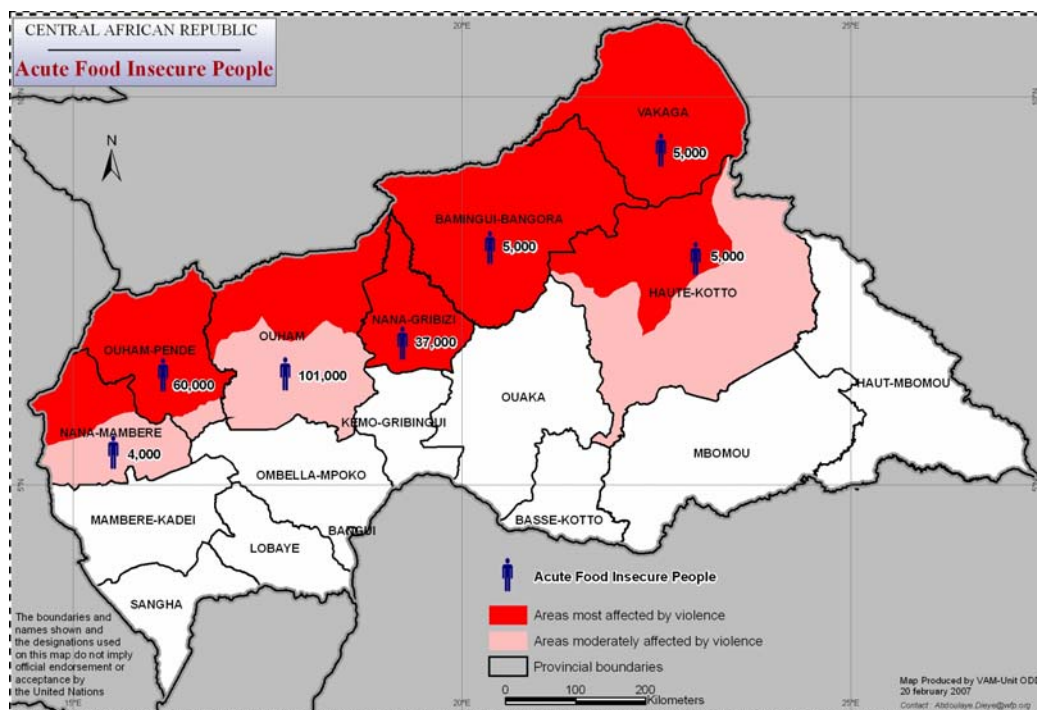
During the past six months, violence has intensified in the North due to banditry and increased activity by rebels and government troops, leading to a humanitarian crisis with more than 200,000 internally displaced people (IDPs). People have been killed, more than 100 villages burned to the ground, and children are regularly kidnapped for ransom.

The lack of data on the extent of the crisis and its impact on food security has hampered the humanitarian response. Therefore, WFP has conducted a rapid emergency food security assessment (10 to 24 February 2007), so that its Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO) can be adapted to reflect the current food security needs of the population.

The assessment consisted of secondary data analysis, key informant interviews and an analysis of household and village level data collected during a field mission in the provinces of Nana Gribizi, Ouham and Ouham Pendé in the North and North West of the country. Primary and secondary data were triangulated¹ by the mission team and conclusions were presented to partners on 23 February.

How many people are food insecure? Who and where are they?

The mission team estimated that **222,000 people are currently internally displaced²**. This number has increased by 70,000 since September 2006. Amongst them, **190,000 people are in a state of acute food insecurity due to the humanitarian crisis. An additional 32,000 people have become food insecure due to the violence, but are not necessarily displaced.**



¹ The primary data collection method does not permit to draw statistically representative conclusions.

² This is in addition to the 20 000 refugees in East Cameroon and approximately 45 000 refugees in Chad.

The two acutely food insecure groups can be described as follows:

- Food insecure IDPs: Entire households have left their villages after attacks by rebels and/or military groups. Their houses, food stocks and sometimes even their fields have been burned; animals and other assets have been stolen. The IDPs are generally hiding in the bush, living under trees or in temporary shelters, often close to their agricultural land.
- Food insecure villagers: These households have only been partially affected by the crisis. They include, for example, villagers who have been attacked by bandits but whose houses have not been destroyed, and villages where only a part of the population has been robbed of their assets. WFP recommends assisting 27,000 people in the conflict area.

In 2004, WFP conducted a vulnerability study which showed that 30 percent of households (about 375,000 people) in the crisis affected area were **chronically food insecure** during a relatively peaceful period. This means that any shock that affects their harvest or revenue streams can have dramatic effects and make them food insecure.

Definition: Food insecurity exists when people do not have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (FAO 2002, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2001*).

What are the causes of food insecurity?

Political instability and village attacks by bandits, rebels and military men are the main causes of food insecurity. Between 1996 and 2002, six coups d'Etat took place. The 2002-03 rebellion led to the installation of a new president and democratic elections in 2005. However, various new rebel groups emerged in 2005, attacking major towns such as Paoa and Birao and expanding their geographical control. The military responded by attacking rebel strongholds and burning more than 100 villages. Incursions from Chadian bandits and armed forces added to the violence. A substantial part of the area is controlled by rebels, whereas other parts are left to the mercy of bandits.



Coumpo Site, Paoa, after the attack at the end of January 2007: burned houses and groundnuts

Food availability: Traditionally, the Northern provinces Ouham, Ouham Pendé and Nana Gribizi have been surplus producers of maize, cassava, sesame and groundnuts. Due to insecurity in the fields and theft of draft animals, cultivated areas have diminished substantially. In addition, the sale of agricultural products is almost impossible due to insecurity, leading to a substantial decrease in the production of cash crops such as cotton, maize, sesame and groundnuts. Production of cotton, the main cash crop in the 90's, has gone down by 90 percent between 1998 and 2005. The population has had to rely once again on subsistence agriculture.

A few months before the lean season, basic food stuffs – cassava and groundnuts – are still available in the area, albeit at low levels. Food availability in markets is also low, a dangerous sign two months before the start of the lean season. Almost no trade takes place with other parts of the country or with neighbouring countries, because of insecurity. Imported goods such as sugar, oil and salt are often non-existent in rural markets.

Food access: Although the availability of cassava does not seem to pose a problem as yet, **access to food is problematic.** Food stocks and seeds kept in houses were often stolen or burned by armed troops or rebels. Many fields have also been burned, destroying the cassava in the ground. Only a minority of IDPs have been able to save their food and seed stocks before the destruction of their villages. IDPs have on average 0-2 sacs of basic food stuffs to span the gap before the next cereal harvest.

The main agricultural season starts in April, while the harvest will take place in August or September for maize, groundnuts and peas and in October/November for millet and sorghum. Without external support, the local population will reduce the area under cultivation because of the lack of seeds and insecurity that prevents people from going to the fields. People also lack energy to do field work due to hunger and the fact that households may need to spend their remaining energy looking for leaves, fruits or roots to eat. In addition, there is a risk that households will harvest their crops too early in the season, jeopardizing crops yields.

Food Utilisation: Food frequency and diet diversity has significantly decreased. With only one meal a day, sometimes less, made of wild products (roots, tree barks, wild leaves and fruits), and perhaps some cassava or cereals, the situation is alarming.

Households interviewed during the field visits had consumed on average one meal the day before the interview. Some of them said they only eat once every two days. According to the 2004 WFP vulnerability survey, households used to eat twice a day and their diet used to be reasonably diverse. Meat, fish and oil have completely disappeared from the diet and cereal consumption has become rare. More than three quarters of households interviewed had consumed roots (bazou, ngassé), tree bark (balawa) or wild fruits the day before the interview.

Furthermore food preparation is made more difficult by the fact that people live in the bush, with no cooking instruments and far away from water collection points.

Access to safe water is critical. IDPs don't have access to safe water due to insecurity and the distance they have to walk to safe water collection points. 75 percent of the households interviewed drink surface water. Before the crisis, access to safe water was already the poorest in the world with only 22 percent of the population having access to it in 2004. Even before 2006, the health situation was deplorable.

Child malnutrition: According to the latest nutrition survey dating from 2005, 13 percent of children suffered from wasting, 35 percent were stunted and 30 percent were underweight. According to NGOs present in the area there is no nutritional crisis and the situation is not currently alarming. However the situation needs to be monitored carefully. Access to safe water has become more difficult, sanitary conditions are not satisfactory and food frequency and dietary diversity has deteriorated in recent months. **The months ahead will be critical, with households' stocks running out and the wet season ushering in disease.**

Recommendations

The Food Security Assessment Mission recommends the provision of 33 000 tons of emergency food assistance and a revision of the relief component of the existing PRRO as follows:

- Provide a full 6-month food ration to 190,000 internally displaced people who are food insecure. The assistance should be provided between April and September;
- Provide a full food ration to 40,000 food insecure people in dispersed villages including a total of 27,000 in the conflict area; and
- Implement these distributions jointly with FAO seed-distribution activities.

Number of beneficiaries by province

	General distribution	Targeted distribution
Nana Gribizi	35,000	2,000
Ouham	95,000	6,000
Ouham Pendé	45,000	15,000
Nana Mambéré	-	4,000
Haute Kotto	5,000	-
Vakaga	5,000	-
Bamingui	5,000	-
Total	190,000	27,000

Cash interventions are not recommended as markets are not functioning well and the level of insecurity is high. Food-for-work activities would be possible only after the harvest in October and if implementing partners' capacities are strengthened.

- It is recommended to conduct a **new food security assessment mission** in July / August 2007 to update the information for the 2008 operation. The NGO "Action Contre la Faim" is currently conducting an in-depth food security and nutrition analysis. The results may be used to update and refine WFP's operation in the meantime.
- It is recommended to establish a database with respect to **the number displaced people**. This work should be done by a UN agency and validated by the UN country team.
- WFP should intensify its efforts to set up a food security monitoring system in order to provide information on agricultural products prices.

Several constraints need to be taken into account, including:

- the security situation: food distributions are possible in areas controlled by the rebels or the government, but the situation needs to be monitored as it could change rapidly. Areas under bandit control are not accessible (south west and west of Ouham Pendé) but the situation could change during the upcoming rainy season when banditry usually declines;
- the weak domestic and international transport capacity: the throughput of the Douala corridor has to be increased considerably and a special operation will be needed to upgrade domestic transport capacity; and
- the limited capacity of operating partners to implement food distribution activities: although some new international NGOs have started working in CAR recently, their capacity has yet to be verified.

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