UN Calls for Urgent Food Assistance to Sahel Region
30/01/2012 14:12:00

An independent United Nations human rights expert has urged the global community to take quick action to prevent millions of people in Africa’s Sahel region from slipping into a full-scale food emergency, warning that drought, poor harvests and rising food prices have left the region on the brink of a humanitarian crisis.

Olivier De Schutter, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food said: "We must not wait until people are starving in order to act.

"The world must respond immediately to avert a full-scale food and nutrition crisis," he added, noting that most of the local governments affected have responded by declaring a state of emergency and requesting international assistance.

The Sahel is an eco-climatic regional belt spanning the breadth of West and Central Africa and contains a number of countries which have been regularly afflicted by food insecurity.

Last year, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reported that several areas of the Sahel had been affected by irregular rains during the 2011 cropping season and that an early end to the rains would lead to a significant drop in production and increased food insecurity.
As of today, Chad and Mauritania are experiencing a grain deficit of more than 50 per cent compared to last year. In Niger, the price of millet was 37 per cent higher in November 2011 than in the previous year and other key cereals are up to 40 per cent higher than the regional five-year average.

Mr. De Schutter noted that the food crisis was the result of both natural causes and the lack of prevention.

"This crisis may look like a natural calamity, but it is in fact a symptom of our failure to be better prepared and to react more swiftly to early warning signs," he stated. "The failure of the international community to act, now and in the future, would result in major violations of the right to food."

The area currently affected by the crisis covers a vast swath of territory, including Chad, Mali, Mauritania and Niger but concerns have also been extended to other countries in the region such as Burking Faso and Senegal.

In Niger, Mali and Mauritania alone, almost 10 million people will be affected. Among those most in danger are children who face the highest risk of mortality linked to malnutrition, followed by pregnant and lactating women and adolescent girls.

"The warning signs are all there. The lean season will come earlier and last longer than usual," Mr. De Schutter warned, adding that the region would be more reliant on food imports. "This could spell disaster for the millions of people whose food needs will rise as their purchasing power plummets," he noted.

Mr. De Schutter also underscored the need for widespread preventive measures, calling on the international community to ensure that emergency food reserves be pre-positioned in risk-prone regions and emphasizing the need for further local investment in climate-resilient agriculture such as diverse farming systems and agroforestry.

He nevertheless noted that the need for longer-term structural actions should not prevent swift and immediate action.
"We have the technology to predict food shortages accurately, and we have learned some lessons from previous crises. Now we need the international response," he said.

"The world must not make the same mistakes it did in delaying its response to last year's crisis in the Horn of Africa. We have a chance, and a duty, to save lives."