

Geneva, Monday, 13 February 2006

Rare torrential rains leave 50,000 Sahrawi refugees in Algeria homeless

Rare torrential rains over the last few days in the desert region of Tindouf in western Algeria have left some 50,000 Sahrawi refugees in three refugee camps homeless and in urgent need of aid after flood waters destroyed their homes.

Since last Thursday, the highly unusual non-stop torrential rains destroyed 50 percent of the mud brick houses in Awserd, Smara and Laayoune refugee camps, leaving another 25 percent of shelters seriously damaged and on the verge of collapse. One woman was reportedly killed and several people injured by the floods.

Over the weekend, UNHCR, the World Food Programme (WFP) and local aid agencies carried out an urgent joint mission to assess the extent of the damage in the affected area. Access was only possible to two of the three affected camps -- Awserd and Smara -- with the mission reporting enormous structural damage to homes, schools, community centres and market areas. Laayoune camp has so far been inaccessible due to the floods, but initial reports indicate there could be severe damage. No serious damage has been reported from the two other refugee camps in the region.

"We are very concerned about the effect this will have on the Sahrawi refugees who have already lived under very difficult circumstances for so long," said Radhouane Nouicer, UNHCR's Geneva-based deputy director for the region. "UNHCR will join hands with all concerned agencies to address this situation without delay."

UNHCR will be sending lightweight tents, blankets, jerry cans, mattresses and plastic sheeting from its regional warehouse in Jordan. The refugee agency is also dispatching an emergency team -- including a site planner and water and sanitation specialist -- to the Tindouf region to provide additional expertise to UNHCR's team already on the ground. WFP is planning an emergency food distribution to affected families.

The five camps in the Tindouf area host refugees who fled Western Sahara in 1975 during the conflict over the right to govern the Territory after Spain withdrew from the region. UNHCR is presently supporting 90,000 of the most vulnerable refugees in the five camps.

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