

SUDAN



SOMALIA



GAZA

Issue 22 | December 2024

# The EMPHNET Emergency Bulletin





## **Beyond the Frontlines: Communities Driving Public Health Responses**

**Emergencies often reveal the true strength of communities, as they step up to lead and take action. In crisis-affected areas, their efforts drive solutions, strengthen resilience, and address urgent health needs. This issue highlights the remarkable influence of community engagement, showcasing how local initiatives transform challenges into opportunities and hope.**



## Strengthening Community-centered Approaches for Health Emergencies in Crisis-affected Regions: A Call for Regional and International Actions

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of the healthcare systems across the globe, and the Eastern Mediterranean Region (EMR) was not exempt. One of the most crucial lessons learned was the importance of an adequate and equitably distributed health workforce. However, the ongoing conflicts in the region and resource constraints make it challenging to achieve this goal. Community-centered approaches have proven effective and efficient in response to emergencies, supporting the overstretched formal healthcare systems. These approaches are especially important in low- and middle-income countries where the burden of health emergencies, compounded by conflict and instability, continues to increase.

One effective intervention is Community-Based Surveillance Systems, which engage communities to monitor health risks and detect potential outbreaks. Simple, adaptable digital tools can help local volunteers collect and share data quickly with higher-level response mechanisms. These systems ensure timely reporting of health threats and enable communities to respond rapidly to emerging infectious diseases, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The recent World Health Summit (WHS 2024) highlighted the growing global recognition of community-centered approaches in managing public health emergencies. In this event, experts discussed the need for robust local capacities to prepare for and respond to health crises. The role of international and regional organizations in enhancing community protection was emphasized, particularly in light of the complex conditions driving health emergencies, including climate change, geopolitical

instability, and migration patterns.

EMPHNET has employed models of successful community-centered initiatives in the EMR. For example, in Gaza, the EMPHNET-Community Health Champions Program (ChampNet) was launched to address the shortage of healthcare providers and the significant barriers to access. Community health workers in Gaza were trained to carry out essential health services, such as vaccination, nutritional surveys, provision of dietary supplements, and health education, thus filling critical gaps in service provision.

Similarly, the “Volunteers for Vector Control (V4V)” initiative in Sudan focuses on controlling vector-borne diseases like malaria and dengue fever. By engaging local communities in activities such as breeding site management and disease reporting, this program serves to control the spread of these diseases sustainably.

Another example of the value of community engagement is the successful integration of Event-Based Surveillance (EBS) into national health systems across several EMR countries including Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Sudan. Communities were involved in identifying and reporting unusual health events, facilitating early detection and response to outbreaks. These efforts have contributed significantly to managing COVID-19 and other respiratory diseases, illustrating the effectiveness of community-driven public health interventions.

In conclusion, the involvement of local communities in health surveillance, outbreak detection, and emergency response is crucial, especially in regions like the EMR, where crises are often

prolonged and external aid may be unavailable or restricted.

Governments and international partners must invest more in community-centered health systems, ensuring communities have the tools and resources to withstand their health threats. Our collective efforts ensure that communities are equipped to protect their health and well-being, even in the most challenging circumstances. By **Dr. Mohannad Al Nsour, the EMPHNET Executive Director**

**Community-centered approaches have proven effective and efficient in response to emergencies, supporting the overstretched formal healthcare systems.**





## Mitigating the Risk of Vector-borne Diseases in Conflict-affected Countries: The Case of Sudan

Vector-borne diseases represent a major public health threat, with mosquito-borne diseases, such as dengue fever and malaria, ranking among the leading causes of morbidity and mortality worldwide, according to WHO.

In Sudan, malaria poses a varying degree of risk to the population. This disease is estimated to cause 3,361,374 cases and 7,768 deaths in the country, which represents 41% of the total malaria cases (8.3 million) and 49% of the total malaria deaths (15,900) in the EMR. According to the Sudan Malaria Indicators Survey in 2016, *P. falciparum* is the most prevalent malaria parasite in the country, followed by *P. vivax*. A facility-based study also revealed that the overall prevalence of *P. vivax* among febrile cases tested for malaria was 26.6%, with significant regional and residential variations.

Historically, the dengue fever outbreaks were limited to Kassala and Red Sea States in eastern Sudan, but the disease has spread to the southern and western regions in the past decade. By the end of October 2024, 4,544 cases and 12 deaths were reported across 21 localities in five states.

Sudan implements WHO strategies to control malaria and manage dengue outbreaks. As outlined in the National Malaria Control Strategic Plan (2021-2025), efforts to control malaria are ongoing with support from different international partners, as well as the government of Sudan. These efforts include early diagnosis and prompt treatment with artemisinin-based combination therapies, vector control through insecticide-treated nets, surveillance, and epidemic containment, among other measures.

The war, which erupted in April 2023, has displaced over 11 million people internally, with more than 2 million fleeing to neighboring countries. Those affected are living in overcrowded places, often in schools or temporary shelters, making them highly vulnerable to vector-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever. Additionally, the health system is severely disrupted due to conflict, with over 70% of facilities in affected areas and 40% in other non-operational or struggling regions, according to WHO. The government of Sudan's funding has become irregular, and support from partners, United Nations agencies, national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and bilateral relations is mainly directed towards emergency response, limiting malaria vector control efforts, while dengue vector control activities are focused primarily on outbreak containment.

To conclude, both national and international community support is needed to strengthen surveillance, improve diagnostics, and ensure access to effective treatment. Building on and complementing initiatives such as integrating the malaria vaccine into Sudan's routine immunization program and fostering community engagement through efforts like EMPHNET's "Volunteers for Vector (V4V)" initiative is essential. These actions are crucial for addressing the challenges of vector-borne diseases and empowering communities to play an active role in disease prevention and control. By **Dr. Elfatih Malik, Technical Advisor, EMPHNET's Sudan Office**

National and international community support is urgently needed to strengthen surveillance, improve diagnostics, and ensure access to effective treatment.



Read more about EMPHNET's V4V project





## The Impact of Community Champions in Gaza

In response to the urgent health needs in Gaza, EMPHNET has established the Community Health Champions Program (ChampNet). This program was launched to enhance the ongoing public health emergency response and to empower community members to take ownership of their well-being while supporting the recovery phase through capacity building and resilience strengthening.

### Community Health Champions in Gaza Drive Positive Change

More than 250 Community Health Champions across Gaza with diverse health backgrounds have implemented various public health activities aligning with EMPHNET's mandate. Those activities are implemented in collaboration with several partners.

### Raising Awareness on Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene

Over the past months, Community Champions led multiple Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene awareness sessions across Gaza, targeting key shelter groups. Through these sessions, children participated in hands-on learning activities focusing on hygiene practices, including Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) measures, handwashing demonstrations, and hygiene habits to encourage healthier routines.

They also conducted sessions for homeless men and women, during which they raised their awareness about diseases such as hepatitis A and poliovirus. In total, approximately 30,000 women, 20,000 men, and 18,000 children participated in these critical WASH initiatives every month.

### Working towards Better Mental Health for the People of Gaza

From another angle, EMPHNET's Community Champions provided vital activities for children and women across Gaza to reduce

psychological trauma and stress. For the children, their interventions focused on exercises and painting, thus creating an environment of emotional expression that builds resilience. These activities engaged around 500,000 children, enabling them to navigate their emotions and cope with the challenging circumstances.

Their interventions for women focused more on guided exercises, self-care practices, and debriefing activities. These activities benefited 70,000 women by helping them cope with stress more effectively.

### Raising Awareness of Sexual and Reproductive Health

The Community Champions focused on raising awareness of sexual and reproductive health. They covered key topics such as Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs), family planning, safe delivery, preconception care, IPC measures, and nutrition for pregnant women.

As part of their interventions, the Community Champions of EMPHNET partnered with a partnership with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to jointly organize activities to commemorate World Contraception Day. During these activities, they stressed the urgent need for uninterrupted access to contraceptives and safe family planning services, particularly during emergencies. Thus, this initiative ensured that individuals were well-informed about the various family planning methods available in Gaza and how to access these essential services based on location.

### Promoting Safety and Preparedness

Community Champions also facilitated important safety awareness initiatives that shed light on the essential skills for emergency response. First Aid

training sessions equip individuals with the knowledge and confidence needed to handle critical situations. Sessions also raised participants' awareness of the risks associated with non-explosive ordnance by teaching them safer behaviors and protective measures to mitigate the dangers of explosions.

### Strengthening Community Knowledge of Infectious Diseases

Many efforts were also made to enhance people's understanding of prevalent infectious diseases, including poliomyelitis, hepatitis, as well as skin diseases. Several health awareness sessions were held, informing around 800,000 individuals about prevention measures, the importance of vaccinations, and the signs and symptoms of these diseases. The sessions addressed treatment options, equipping the community with essential health knowledge.

### Educating the Women on Breastfeeding and Breast Cancer

Community Champions remained dedicated to supporting women by promoting healthy breastfeeding practices. They also organized educational sessions highlighting the importance of breastfeeding, covering optimal techniques and appropriate nutritional choices, and reaching 30,000 pregnant and lactating women.

In recognition of Breast Cancer Awareness Month and in collaboration with Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP-UK), various initiatives were implemented to raise awareness about breast cancer. Several sessions that hosted around 10,000 women emphasized the significance of early detection, regular screenings, and self-examination techniques. This dual approach empowers women with essential health knowledge and fosters a supportive

environment for maternal health and cancer awareness.

*"It was a valuable and enjoyable experience where I learned how to perform a self-examination and the healthy behaviors that can reduce the risk of breast cancer. The information provided was empowering, and I feel more equipped to take charge of my health and share this knowledge with others,"* added Dina Murtaja, one of the attendees.

### Addressing Malnutrition

The Community Champions also supported the "Find and Treat Campaign: Addressing Malnutrition in Gaza," which was implemented by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). As part of this initiative, they screened approximately 15,000 children under five years and 5,000 pregnant and lactating women, using mass Mid-Upper Arm Circumference (MUAC) screening to identify those in need. For individuals identified as malnourished, treatment, including Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Food (RUTF), was provided. Additionally, 1900 children with Moderate Acute Malnutrition (MAM) and Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM), as well as 600 pregnant and lactating women, were referred to existing or newly established Outpatient Therapeutic Programs (OTPs) for follow-up care, ensuring they receive the necessary support for recovery and improved health outcomes.

### Leading Post-Monitoring of the Polio Vaccination Campaign in Gaza

In response to the cVDPV2 outbreak in Gaza, EMPHNET's Community Champions raised awareness about the importance of vaccination, mobilizing individuals and informing them on how to access immunization services, as well as vaccinating children.

EMPHNET successfully conducted the Post-Monitoring Novel Oral Polio Vaccine Type 2 (nOPV2) Campaign across all of Gaza, utilizing Independent Monitoring Methodology. This methodology assessed vaccination quality across neighborhoods, districts, and governorates, identified reasons for missed vaccinations among children in households and health facilities, and calculated the percentage of vaccinated children through fingerprint confirmation.

To ensure the success of these efforts, the champions received training on two assessment tools before the monitoring process. These monitoring efforts facilitated the process and paved the way for various authorities, including the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), and UNICEF, to take action based on the recommendations provided.



**"Being part of these sessions has shown me how deeply children and women need spaces to express themselves and find relief from their daily struggles. It saddens me to see how much the children are affected by their circumstances"**

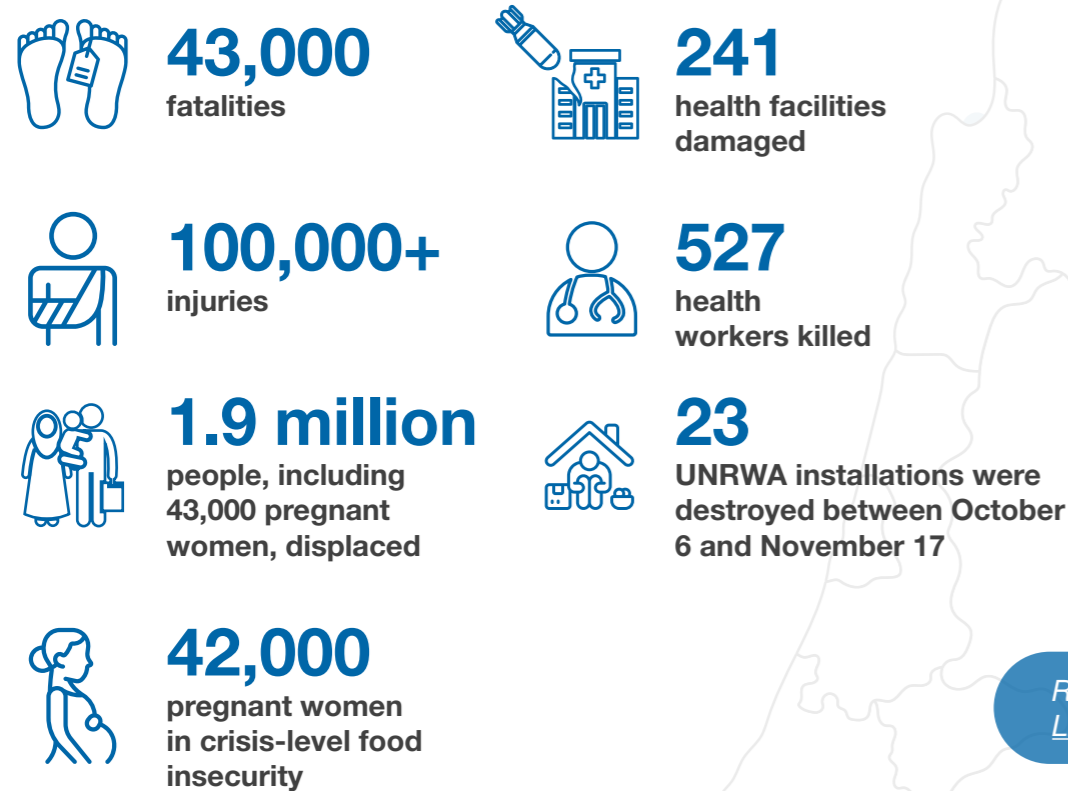
*said a Community Champion.*



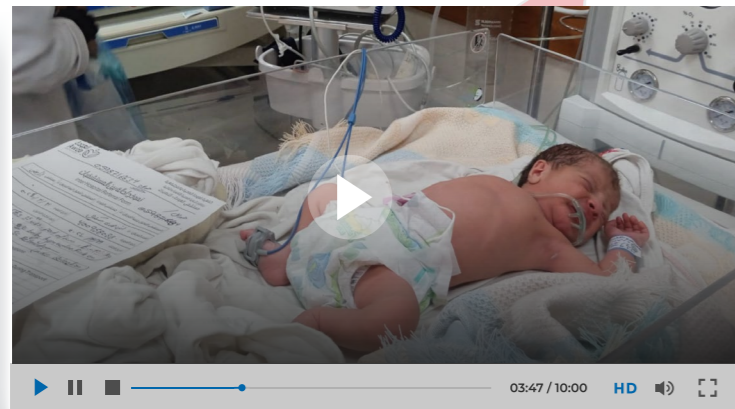
# Emergencies in Focus: A Global Overview

Within our turbulent world, crises are a fixture in the lives of communities both in the EMR and beyond. These crises range from natural disasters to human-made emergencies. All disasters affect healthcare systems and the health of populations. More importantly, they lead to the breakdown of health infrastructure, thus increasing the need for collaborative, coordinated, and efficient interventions.

## The Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza | up to November 20, 2024



[Read More](#)  
[Link 1](#) | [Link 2](#)



Watch the *Gaza Health Chronicles* series, featuring updates directly from the field

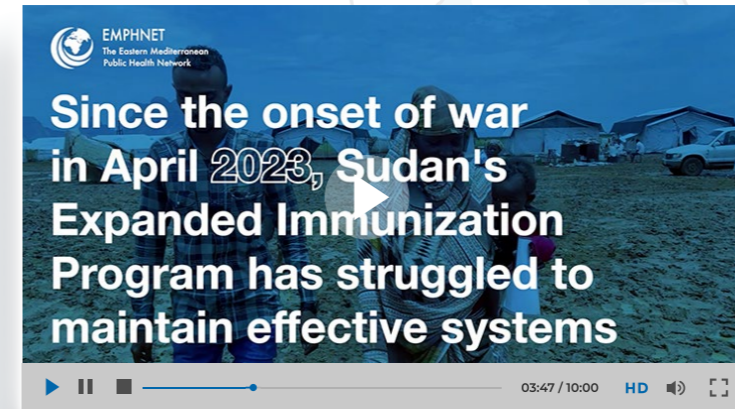
## Population Movement in Sudan | November 25, 2024



Urgent needs for these populations include:

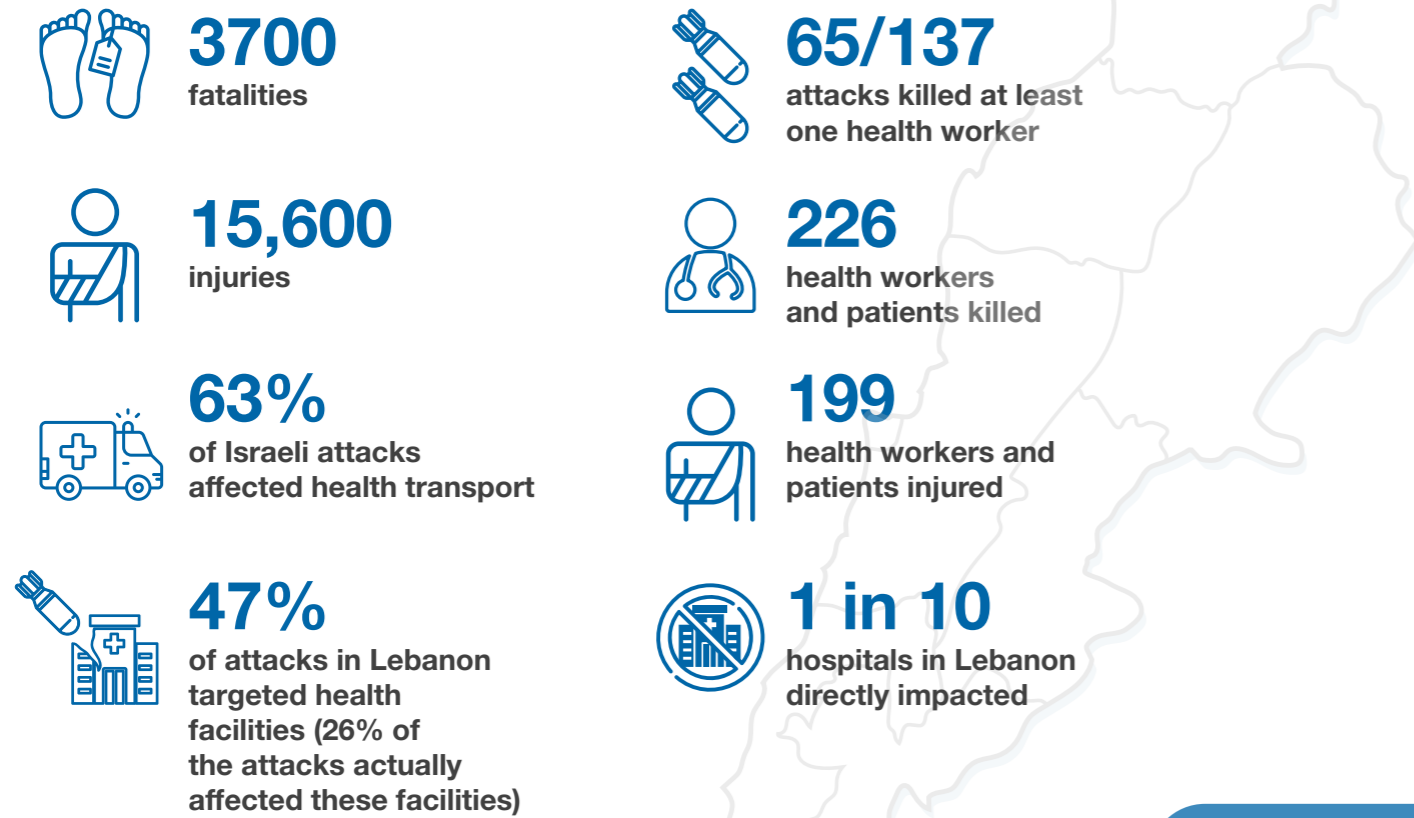


[Read More](#)



Watch the video to learn more about EMPHNET's contribution in Sudan

## The Loss and Damage in Lebanon | up to November 22, 2024

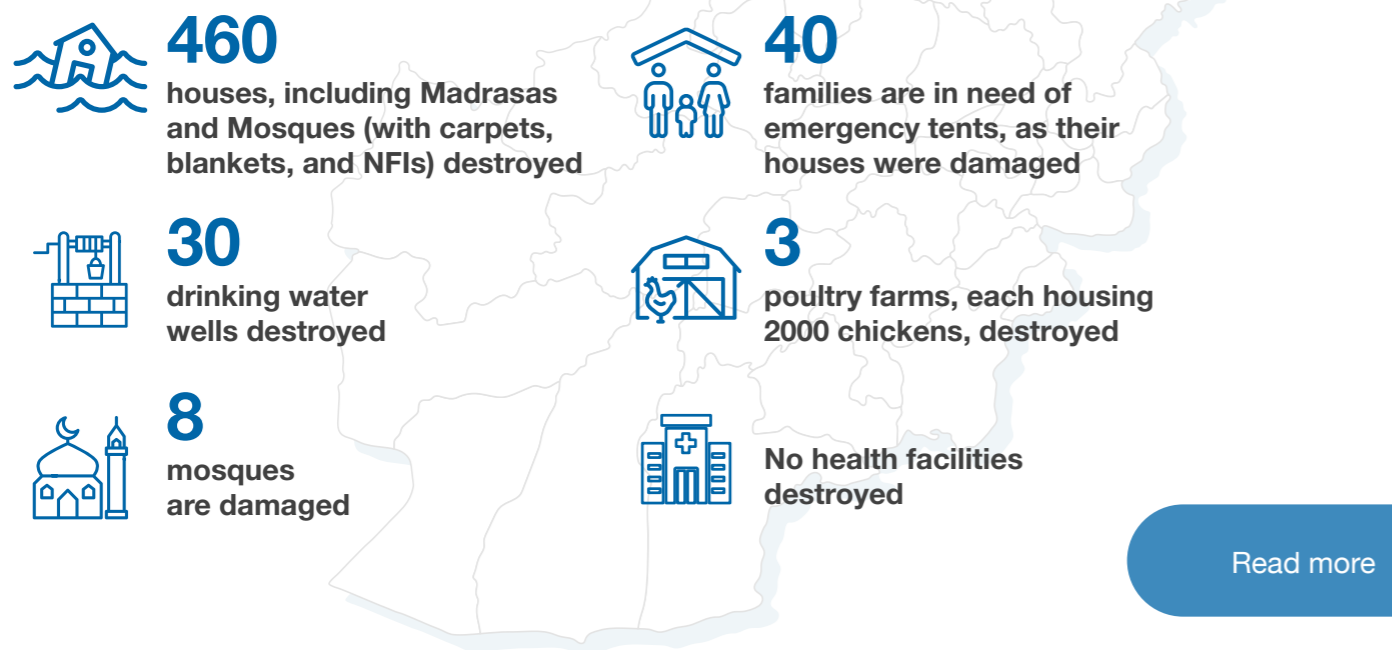


As Lebanon enters a temporary ceasefire phase, the priority should be to strengthen the health infrastructure, preparing it for any potential future emergencies.

[Read more](#)

## Flash Floods in Afghanistan

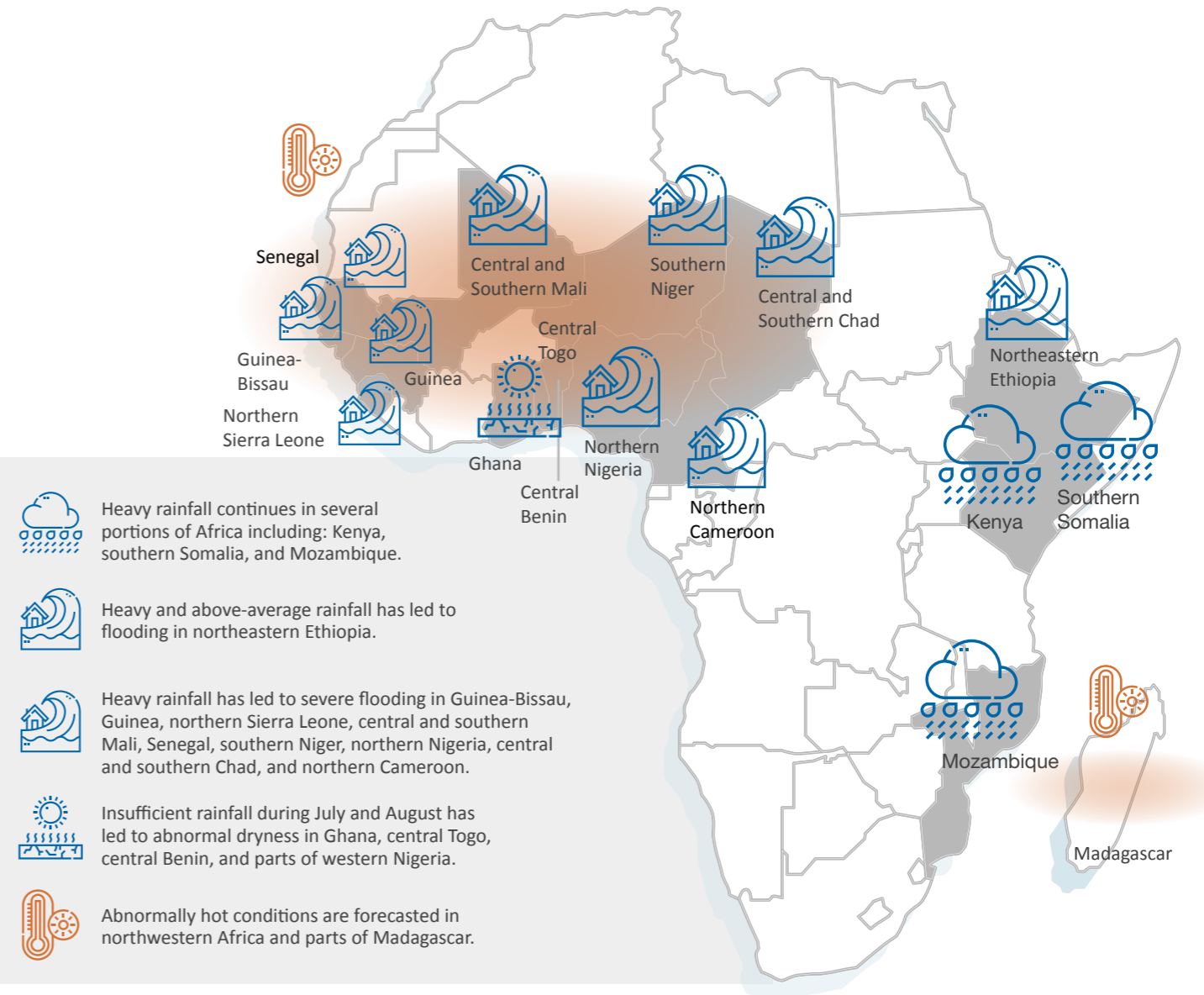
On November 23, 2024, heavy rainfall and subsequent flash floods severely impacted several districts in Kunduz, Baghlan, and Balkh provinces in Afghanistan.



[Read more](#)

## The November Summary of Natural Disasters Leading to Natural Emergencies in Africa | November 23, 2024

More efforts are needed to early warn and prepare for climate-driven disaster in the EMR. Many regions around the world witnessed severe conditions in the last month.



## Get Involved: Inspiring Action and Sharing Knowledge

EMPHNET continues to support Gaza's health sector, providing critical assistance amid ongoing challenges. Our efforts focus on establishing Community Health Promoters (CHP), and on engaging in health awareness, community mobilization, immunization, and nutrition, among others.

