

## World Niger emergency

# Save our people from famine, begs nation surviving on weeds

Niger  
Jim McLean Niamey

The Government of Niger has appealed to the international community for help, saying that the country's food emergency is escalating and that it is short of funds to feed its people.

After two years of drought and failed crops, millions of villagers have been reduced to eating weeds to survive.

The official in charge of the relief effort said that the Government had been discussing its requirements with the World Food Programme and that five million to six million people were in need of immediate assistance. "I would like to launch an emergency call for help to the inter-



national community," Colonel Abdul Karim Goukoye told *The Times*.

He added that \$50 million (£32 million) was urgently required to plug a funding shortfall in the relief operation this month. Hunger and malnutrition have rendered many communities economically inactive. Cottage industries have collapsed, food reserves have been exhausted, savings have been spent on food and possessions sold to buy staples.

Millions are surviving by boiling wild plants or eating tree leaves. The crisis is patchy but widespread, with parts of normally more productive areas in the south, close to the border with Nigeria, badly affected.

Some farmers are too weak to till their fields. The carcasses of hundreds of cattle and goats are visible along roads 250km (155 miles) north of Niamey, the capital.

"This is a very serious emergency and my message to the international community is to provide us with help and all assistance it can," Colonel Goukoye said.

He added that prices of staple foods in one of the world's poorest countries were expected to continue to rise before this year's harvest in the autumn, exacerbating the crisis. People have begun moving to the towns and cities, although migration has slowed down since the late arrival of rain last month.

The Disasters Emergency Committee, which co-ordinates British charities and their responses to international disasters, is considering a national appeal. Christian Aid, Oxfam and Save the Children have already started campaigns.

"The country is on the brink of the worst food crisis that many Nigeriens have seen in their lifetimes. Unless urgent assistance is received, millions of people face starvation," Emma Pomfret, Africa editor of Christian Aid, said.

Unlike the previous administration, the ruling junta in Niger, which came to power in a coup in February, has adopted a more open approach to food problems. Elections are expected to take place in April.

## Children cry from hunger, fathers are too weak to work – and time is running out

Desperate villagers are forced to sell emaciated cattle at knock-down prices to keep families alive until the autumn harvest, reports **Jim McLean**



Basira Garda, 17, cradles her three-month-old daughter, Bourja, at a

For six days they have eaten nothing but weeds. It is not enough for Ramot Ali, left, let alone sufficient to produce the milk she needs to feed her baby boy. Mrs Ali's two naked daughters cry from hunger and her six-month-old son sucks joylessly at her empty breast.

The weeds they will eat again tonight simmer in a pot propped over a twig fire. They must cook for an hour or they will result in stomach cramps and diarrhoea. A fist-sized portion each of this gritty mulch sprinkled with the grinds of one or two peanuts will be all that sustains this family today. It has little nutritional value but will stave off hunger pangs.

Mrs Ali, 20, and her daughters Fatimu, 22 months, Zenab, 3, and son Yousifer are on the precipice. Their survival hangs on whether the weeds can sustain them until the autumn harvest as they have no money to buy food.

Whether this fits the technical definition of famine is an irrelevance for her and the 3,000 others in this village who are hungry, malnourished or starving.

In the red-dust alleys of Zantaram, many of the men shuffle listlessly, the outline of their shoulder bones





feeding station in Guidan Ider. Two portions a day of porridge are given to children

visible through their robes. Many are too weak to properly tend their fields.

Before dawn, Mrs Ali's husband, Idrissa, began walking to neighbouring villages seeking work. He returned emptyhanded but has set off again on an hour's journey to collect more weeds. "If you blow at him he will fall over," Mrs Ali said outside the family's one-room mud house. The adobe grain stores that dot the village should be full to help the village through times such as these. Instead they are empty, depleted by two years of drought and failed crops.

No outside help has arrived. The recently toppled Government suppressed news of their plight. In Niamey, the capital, few are aware of the suffering.

"Yes we are starving. We have been going this way for two years. To me this is a famine," said Moussa Agirhan, 80, the village headman. The rains that arrived last month produced green fields of millet that veil the severity of this crisis — the harvest is still months away.

At the market a few miles away in Guidan Ider, Harouna Mohammed is loading his camel with two sacks of cereal. To buy it he sold one of his last two goats and a ewe at knock-down prices. The food he has bought will sustain him, his two wives and eight children for about ten days.

Many of the African longhorn cattle are

little more than hide and bones. One herdsman said that he bought six at the market and four died on the journey home. Farmers in town to beg say that farther north whole villages have been abandoned. In Guidan Ider two months ago, a local charity started giving 1,200 children emergency rations — two portions a day of vitamin-enriched porridge.

● **Christian Aid has started its West Africa Food Crisis Appeal to assist HEKS, its partner in Niger. Donors should call 020-7523 2141 or visit [christianaid.org.uk/westafrika](http://christianaid.org.uk/westafrika)**

Ayi Mohammed has brought her three-month-old granddaughter, Bourja Garda, who hangs limply in her arms. Abou Idrissa, 45, has brought a four-month-old boy whose mother died when he was 37 days old. Also waiting is Sahio Zakari, 13, who has an eight-day-old son but no milk. The village midwife has been helping her use a pipette to put goat's milk into the baby's mouth but the animal is not producing enough. Later, the feeding programme's administrator explains the girl's plight to her village chief — and £30 is found to buy a milking goat.

## Cursed by poverty in a mineral-rich land

Analysis Jim McLean

**I**ts governments are dysfunctional, its people illiterate and all but a tiny elite live in grinding poverty. Few in Britain know where this country is, or how to pronounce its name (neegere).

Disparity and poverty on a scale that forces people to eat weeds to survive creates a social and ideological vacuum

that fundamentalism and instability will fill.

Al-Qaeda's local franchise, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, has extended into Niger. Michel Germaneau, 78, a French aid worker murdered last week by al-Qaeda in Mali, was kidnapped in Niger in April.

Until independence in 1960, France treated the country as a backwater.

However, Niger's vast uranium mines near Arlit in the north supply the raw material for French nuclear power stations — keeping the lights on in Paris.

Very little, if any, of this mineral wealth trickles down to the needy.

Niger holds or vies for a number of unenviable world records — the least developed country,

the highest infant mortality rate, the highest population growth, the lowest literacy rate. It need not be this way. Oil, iron ore, coal, gold and diamonds also lie under Niger's deserts and red-earth plains, and the Chinese are here in force for these raw materials. If properly managed, this mineral wealth could be a blessing.