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Feeding

RVP 18

Starving Niger: a nation in need

Article and photography by Ken Horn

Editor's note: Managing Editor Ken Horn recently traveled to Niger with Don Tucker, director of Africa Special Ministries for AGWM, and Kenton Moody, director of International Outreach for Convoy of Hope.



It held the dubious distinction of being the world's second-poorest country even before last year's famine and locust attack plunged Niger into a too-familiar cycle of malnutrition and starvation.

Across West Africa, countries were staggered by the lack of rain and the locust invasions — but none worse than Niger. Death by starvation has become a daily tragedy. Estimates differ radically. According to the United Nations, there are perhaps 3.6 million people in need of food aid and 150,000 severely malnourished children in Niger's worst food crisis since 1984-85.

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Starving Niger



Niger is primarily a subsistence-based society, perched precariously at the edge of the scorching Sahara Desert. Water is critical in this dry, dusty climate; Niger is one of the world's hottest countries. With no modern irrigation systems, people depend on the 2½-month rainy season to provide liquid life for their crops. Recurring droughts regularly interfere with agriculture on the country's mere 3.5 percent of land suitable for farming.

The harsh conditions contribute to a life expectancy of only 42 years. More than one out of every 10 infants perishes.

When it does rain, other problems materialize. As our team arrives, a recent series of storms has knocked out most power in the already weak Niger power grid. Niger purchases power from bordering Nigeria. Today, electricity is scarce and there is a container of food stranded at the border with Benin; a washed-out bridge has severed the road.

Relief efforts to this country are routinely hampered; it can take a month or more to get a container here. Kenton Moody, who is here to do famine assessment for Convoy of Hope, makes a call to redirect Convoy containers that are inbound for Niger so they avoid this most recent closure.

Niamey, the capital city, had rain the night before we arrived. The rain, though desperately needed, is a mixed blessing. Standing water near homes and businesses becomes a breeding ground for mosquitoes that bring malaria.

Malaria should not be fatal, but the disease is the number one killer in the nation, chiefly because it strikes so many who are malnourished — mostly children. Niger also endures one of the highest rates of meningitis. Recently, the disease nearly wiped out an entire Fulani village.

Missionary Brent Teague meets us in Niamey. Teague, who survived a gunman's attack last year, still walks with a noticeable limp.* We are housed at the AG Bible college, the Institut Pastoral des Assemblées de Dieu du Niger. The complex is also home to an AG church and ICI/Global University headquarters for the nation.

Goulbawa

The following day — accompanied by Pastors Batchiri and Abdoukader, Niamey leaders of the government-recognized AG compassion ministry — we board a light plane for Maradi. We are

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Left page:
Villagers await grain
distribution. Right
page, from top: Grain
sacks, a mother with
ill child, villagers.

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grateful for the Sudan Inland Mission flight. Overland it would have been nine rugged hours of taxing travel.

As we soar above the surface of the vast nation, it is not difficult to see why life is so hard. The arid, sub-Saharan landscape is uninviting and much of the water sources are dry even during the rainy season. Even the visible water is the color of the sand, since the water is saturated with suspended sediment.

Veteran missionary Dan Ligon meets us in Maradi, and we immediately begin our journey to distribute food in a remote, needy area. The government sought the help of the AG and its registered compassion ministry. They have chosen to set up a relief site at Goulbawa village, named for the nearby Goulbi River.

During the more than nine dry months each year, men can be seen walking to the riverbed with a hoe instead of a fishing rod. They scan the mud for telltale air holes, then dig out the lungfish that hide there. Lungfish are an important supplement to the local diet.

The drive to the village is a jarring ride in a Speed the Light vehicle. We rumble down narrow sandy trails, barely wide enough for a vehicle, pressed on both sides by fields brimming with rich, healthy-looking millet. The harvest will be good if the rain continues and if locusts do not devastate the crops as they did last year.

At the village, a generator and speaker system are quickly set up as villagers gather in preparation for the announced distribution. Ligon gives a brief, clear presentation of Jesus Christ, then leads a prayer for the villagers before the distribution begins.

Conditions are stressful and some tempers are short; the situation could quickly become chaos. But order prevails, augmented by the presence and oversight of government officials and the village Mai Gari, or chief.

Precious grain is dispensed in orderly fashion to a grateful people, each weighty sack carried by one strong villager to a waiting cart and from there to the appropriate huts, where each sack will be equally divided between two families.

The distribution seems small in light of the numbers. However, it will be enough to stave off hunger from this village ... if this year's harvest succeeds.

Millions hungry

The need throughout Niger is massive.

One of the teachers at the AG elementary school in



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From top: Unsanitary food practices increase disease; malnourished child; Dan Ligon shares the gospel; a welcome burden; national Niger AG leaders and missionaries: Don Tucker, Brent Teague, Kenton Moody and Jean Kaboré are pictured second, sixth, seventh and eighth from the left.

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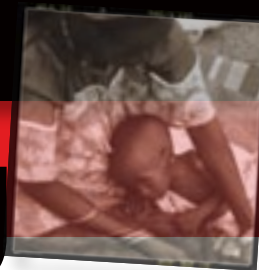


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Starving Niger



Maradi returned to her Fulani village and found that there was no food for the 600 families. She bought food for her family there. Many villages, especially in the more remote parts of inhabited Niger, suffer similar conditions with no one to help them.

Unscrupulous lenders compound the problem, lending to villagers when their crops are meager and exacting harsh interest and penalties, thus perpetuating the poverty cycle.

In a Fulani village near the desert, a man recently was forced to kill the last of his cattle to feed his family. With nothing left and no prospects, he threw himself into the churning waters of a local river and drowned. Suicide is not uncommon.

But there is also good news. This year, for the first time, many village Mai Garis have been attending Assemblies of God churches and sitting through entire services before asking for help with food.



Children at risk

The numerous AG ministries in the country address, in some degree, the hunger problem. The many schools and other children's ministries include feeding programs.

Children in this culture share a common plate with other children. Because polygamy is widespread and there are so many children, the stronger often edge out the weak. Earlene Ligon tells of a little boy who, when fed in an AG ministry, said, "I've got my own plate of food here. I never had my own plate before."

At an Assemblies of God group home for children at risk, the director, a missionary from the Assemblies of God in Ivory Coast, expresses appreciation to Don Tucker for help they have received from Africa's Children. The director tells us that three of these children have parents in prison and one has a mother in a psychiatric unit.

Christians go regularly to the prison, and the parents of some of these children have accepted Christ as their Savior. That means some of these children will eventually return to a Christian home. The government knows that this is a Christian organization; still they place children here readily.

Dan Ligon leads us on a tour of some of the AG