



Niger Zinder, April 2021

Food Distribution, April 7, 2021



One of the mothers with Aïchatou, our nanny at the Centre – April 2021

At the beginning of April, a state of euphoria permeated the Centre! The children were excited to learn that their mother, grandmother, aunt or big sister would be coming to the Centre for our food distribution.

This is always an opportunity for our staff and the attending authorities to raise awareness among parents, to provide them with advice and encourage educational and supervisory diligence. One example of this is by making parents aware of the necessity of hygiene at home. Despite very basic living conditions, we ask families, month after month, year after year, to be even more vigilant about the fact that their children regularly return to the Centre with lice after weekends spent at home (mostly in traditional banko huts). It is a nightmare for our nurse, who never stops delousing these little children.

Some mothers will leave the Centre with only half the distribution or only a bag of onions; let me explain. Children or young people who have been misbehaving over the past months are penalised in order to teach them to behave. I am glad to report that such incidents are few and far between, however, one does not throw one's school chair at one's classmate, even if he or she tapped it when passing by. Fortunately for us, the chair in question just missed a classmate as it crashed into the blackboard; and since it is made of quality, Swiss-made materials, it did not break into pieces.

Another example is that of a little reckless boy who went to steal an axe from the kitchen in order to play Robin Hood, and see just how well he could throw it.

There's never a dull moment around here, and anything is possible with more than 300 students, from babies to young adults! These anecdotes alone would make a thick book!

We had bought a few hundred masks, which they call "bibs" in their local jargon, in order to make them available to parents who had forgotten theirs. Despite the low number of Covid-19 infections in Niger and Zinder (thankfully) we continue to carry out checks at the entrance to the Centre. Outsiders must undergo hand washing and temperature taking in the presence of the nurse and nanny.

Once there was a fire in the kitchen, which was a good test for the local staff and the following of procedures in case of a fire in the school complex! The Zinder fire brigade had already come to the Centre for fire drills with involving pupils and staff. We are going to repeat the drills in the near future, since many new children have joined the Centre since then, and there has been a lot of coming and going among the staff. The Director and HR Accountant were very responsive to this small fire, quickly getting to the kitchen and preventing any damage.

We recently welcomed a five-year-old boy to the Centre. He was being abused and beaten by his mother, who has a mental disability. She cannot control herself when she has fits and she attacks her youngest son, throwing him against the walls and strangling him. The father died last year and no one was there to protect the child from his mother. The neighbours were concerned about the situation and appealed to the mayor of the village to remove the child from his mother's care before a tragedy happened. The boy's uncle brought him to the 'Après-demain' Centre, where he was welcomed with open arms and made new friends and schoolmates. He now smiles again in the care of our nanny, who is a real Mum at heart for all these little ones so damaged by the hard life in Niger.



Breakfast at the *Après-demain* Centre

The children start the day with a hearty breakfast of bread and milk at 7am! The queue to the kitchen and their shining smiles speak to their appreciation for this first meal of the day!

Ramadan started on April 13, and will last until May 13.

It is a very demanding Lent, in which they abstain from eating and drinking from sunrise to sunset. Temperatures sit at 45° to 48° - with peaks of up to 50° - as water shortages and electricity blackouts intensify. This is especially true in the evening and at night, when the whole population has been able to eat again and they are trying to cool down with water and electric fans.

The fasting started a few days ago, but my local team is already tired. I discover them every morning with eyes full of fatigue and torpor. The nights are difficult and demanding because of the intense heat, interspersed with Ramadan prayers.

Situation in Niger - Presidential Election and Security

Backstory...

A tense Presidential election....

Despite the insecurity that has reigned in Niger for months, following attacks by jihadist groups or bandits in the west and Nigerian jihadists from Boko Haram in the south-east, the second round of the presidential election was able to take place under increased surveillance.

Out of 22 million Nigerians, most of whom are too young to vote, only some 7.4 million were called to vote in the second round of the presidential election of March 21. This is the first time that two elected presidents have succeeded each other in Niger, whose history has been peppered with coups d'état since its independence in 1960.

The Court validated the election of Mr. Bazoum as President of Niger. He took office on April 2, 2021. Throughout his campaign, Mr. Bazoum placed a high priority on improving education and schooling throughout Niger and developing skills and jobs for young people. But prosperity flourishes best in peace, and jihadists are likely to do all they can to disrupt it. Recent attacks have targeted and killed both government soldiers and civilians (with no apparent kidnapping or looting).

That the Boko Haram group was able to move fighters across Niger without being intercepted and arrested is clearly bad news for everyone. Most recently, two vehicles that had left Libya for Niger were intercepted by security forces after having crossed a very large part of Niger unchecked. In the two vehicles seized, rockets, weapons and ammunition of all categories were seized. The question begs as to the motivation of these recent attacks: banditry (kidnapping, looting); rivalry for the control of smuggling routes; jihadist militancy (fundamentalist religious attacks against secular governance)? Or is it a mixture of all three?

President-elect Bazoum has pledged to significantly improve education for young people (including girls, orphans and albino children) and to develop and create more jobs for young people.

One of the world's largest underground uranium mines has closed in Niger. The company, which had been mining uranium since 1978 in the province of Agadez in northern Niger, ceased production on March 31, 2021. The closure was carried out under conditions that were deemed unsatisfactory by NGOs, which denounce not only the social cost but also lasting consequences to public health and the environment. In addition, the outgoing President of Niger has granted concessions to the Turks for oil exploitation, as well as to the Chinese for gas exploitation.

In 2019, we had the honour of welcoming Mr. Bazoum, who was on an official visit to Zinder at the time, to our 'Après-demain' Centre in Zinder. He took the time to visit our facilities and the children studying there, who are encouraged by their teachers.

Mr. Bazoum noted the need to expand programmes such as 'Au Coeur du Niger' and to develop high-quality vocational training centres.



Visit to the Centre in March 2019 by Mr. Mohamed Bazoum (in white on my left), the new President of Niger.

According to various studies and analyses conducted by the WFP (World Food Programme), Niger is subject to economic, political and security turbulence in the region, with significant consequences to its political stability and security. Faced with a deteriorating situation, the government is forced to make financial compromises in favour of security spending at the expense of social sectors that are already largely under-funded. These trade-offs are detrimental to social services.

According to these studies, the population (80% in rural areas, living from agriculture or pastoral activities), is particularly vulnerable to climate change because of its dependence on natural resources, its high exposure to climate variability and its low adaptive capacity. Projected climate risks over the coming decades include recurrent droughts and heavy rains followed by floods, affecting between 100,000 and 150,000 people each year (206,000 in 2017), locust invasions, scarcity of drinking water and variations in the flow of the Niger River. Current data suggest "a definite population explosion" in Niger, with worrying consequences at the short and medium term.

Niger has the highest birth rate in the world. Its annual growth rate of 3.9% implies a rapid increase in population (United Nations, 2017). This 'explosive' growth, which is 80% rural even though only a small part of the territory is fit for agricultural production with a potential to feed the population, shows a spectre of Malthusian catastrophe for famines. The result is a demographic pressure that will become unsustainable for this poor country, despite its natural wealth, particularly in uranium.

These nationwide tensions generate stress for the population, the personnel and Niger's youth. There is unrest, jealousy, sensitivities, slander, threats, all which we have to manage on a daily basis.

*"Hard times create strong men,
Strong men create easy times,
Easy times create weak men,
Weak men create hard times."
Quote from Ibn Khaldun*

Visions du Réel Festival in Nyon - Documentary Films - "Zinder"

The Director and Activist Aïcha Macky, born in Zinder, returned to tell the story of a youth left behind.

"In the city of Zinder, in the heart of the Sahel, young Nigeriens organise themselves into gangs, in the face of a lack of prospects. These groups, called "Palais", come from the Kara-Kara district, historically home to lepers and outcasts."

The link to the documentary film "Zinder" is available from April 17 – 20 on *Visions du Réel's* online platform. [www. online.visionsdureel.ch](http://www.online.visionsdureel.ch)

Upcoming events:

Thursday, May 27, 2021 at 20.00

11th General Assembly of the Association

The Great Hall at Romont's City Hall

Under the new President, Mr. Grégoire Piller - Everyone is welcome!

The meeting will take place in keeping with health measures in force at that time. Another date is scheduled for October 2021, in the event that the May 27th date is cancelled, due to the pandemic.

T-shirts by the young students Nicolas and Jonathan from the Gruyère region are still for sale to support the *Au Cœur du Niger* Association. Students from the CO de la Gruyère and the Collège du Sud took part in a drawing competition with the theme, "The right to education for all and respect for human beings". The winner's drawing is printed on the back of the T-Shirts, which are sold by the students, and on the website below.

Thank you for giving them a warm welcome if you happen to meet them!

www.aideenfantniger.rw-solidarite.ch



Thanks to your generous and precious support, today and tomorrow are far better for all the children at the *Au Coeur du Niger, 2ème chance* school!
Thank you so much!

Special thoughts and prayers to all those who have lost a loved one, and for all the people close to and supporting the Association, sponsors, donors and supporters who have gone in peace at the beginning of this year 2021.

I wish you all a very sweet and peaceful spring, take care of yourself, enjoy every moment and stay healthy!

With my warmest and most grateful greetings!

And the cheerful and hopeful smiles of the 340 children and young women at the Centre!

Isabelle Macheret

Founder and Director of the Association
Au Cœur du Niger

Zinder Niger, April 2021

www.aucoeurduniger.ch