



Niger Zinder, September 2021

**Private audience with the President of Niger, Mr. Mohamed Bazoum - elected in March 2021 - and former Minister of the Interior of Niger.**



As soon as I arrived in Zinder, I had the great honour of obtaining a private audience with the new President of Niger, Mr Mohamed Bazoum, who was returning from a trip near Zinder. I was fortunate and honoured to be received, under escort, just three years after he had come to visit our "Après-demain" Centre in Zinder, when he was Minister of the Interior.

I warmly congratulated him on his brilliant election and wished him all the best in the many important tasks he has and will have to accomplish! During the discussion, he told me that he had honoured his electoral promises, and that now it was my turn to honour mine by building other Centres in Niger, following the model of our Welcome and Training Centre in Zinder. He had greatly appreciated the quality of the infrastructure, the organisation, the discipline and the children who were so happy and fulfilled in their orange-burgundy uniforms! The president asked me to settle in Zinder, under military security protection, and to build new centres for the children and young people in other regions of Niger.

I will therefore refer to my new president and the members of the association committee. I also am convinced, after having set up and experienced this module for more than eight years, that this kind of concept should be further developed in Niger, and why not in others; classrooms, living and learning spaces, professional centres with efficient and assiduous local staff, combined with Swiss discipline and organisation!

During his presidential campaign, Mr. Bazoum noted the need to extend programmes such as "Au Coeur du Niger" and to develop high-quality vocational training centres to support the youth of Niger, who could quickly and dangerously find themselves without prospects for the future. There is a tremendous need, he says, to redouble efforts in the areas that are dear to him: education, schooling, training. He is aware of the urgency to develop structures and facilities for the most underprivileged young people and children.

Half of Niger's population is under 20 years old, and the country has 23.31 million inhabitants (2019). I am therefore going to start writing letters to ask for help and collaboration in Bern, in the name of development aid.

### Visit to His Highness the Sultan of Damagaram



His Highness the Sultan of Damagaram, always quick and willing to welcome me to his magnificent Palace! All along the high and winding corridors leading me to him are men - for the great majority - requesting a traditional interview in the aim of settling a family, couple, neighbourhood or property dispute.

Zinder started out as a small Hausa tribal village, but it was perfectly situated to serve as a hub for trans-Saharan trade. The Sultan brought his capital here in 1736. The empire was on the main trade route between Tripoli (Libya) and the Sultanate of Kano (Nigeria). The empire was thus crucial for the entire economic health of the region.

### **Visit to the Centre by the Governor of the Zinder region and his delegation**



As I was awakened every morning by the bugle call of a military trumpet in one of the presidential residences, I proposed to the President of Niger and the Governor to donate musical instruments from Switzerland to their military band in Zinder. We had received them from a generous sponsor of the association who is a musician, and shipped them in a container three years ago.

"The military blow the trumpets to keep the troops' spirits up after the danger of battle," the journalist reported when this interview was broadcast on the Télé Sahel ORTN television channel.

The Governor had arrived at the Centre with horns blaring, accompanied by a retinue of military personnel and escorts. Our students had prepared beautiful traditional songs for the Governor, whom it is always a great honour to welcome. The national television was present and took the opportunity to do a short interview. I recalled how honoured we were to have the support of all the authorities, including President Bazoum, whom we had met a few days earlier, His Highness the Sultan in his Palace, and the Governor of the Zinder region. These important visits from the authorities raise the morale of our staff and students, and are a great source of pride and appreciation for them.

This short 2-minute interview will be broadcast during our next General Assembly, on Wednesday 13 October, at 8pm at the Hôtel de Ville in Romont.

Being back under the hot sun of Niger, with the smiles and daily hugs of the children, did much to revitalise me after the gloom I had been feeling during the last year of pandemic restrictions and limitations. In hindsight, with 5,000 km and almost two days of travel to get there and two days to get back, I realised, as I have done every time I have been in Niger for the last 15 years, how tempting and easy it is to let ourselves live in well-established patterns of life; how by succumbing to that temptation we miss out on the essentials, on unique experiences that can indeed destabilise and frighten. Lacking but not suffering, being hungry but not dying, being alone but not suffering loneliness. To take the risk of trusting, the risk of loving, the risk of suffering, the risk of living.... what magnificent and unique life experiences!

"Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass,  
It is learning to dance in the rain."  
- Seneca

### **Activities at the Centre and in**

Our faithful nanny Aïchatou has just been appointed "General Supervisor" of the Centre. She started her work in 2010 as a nanny in a room I was renting at that time from the Sisters of the Assumption. She is the only employee who has been faithful since 2010 and on whom I can count and rely.

This spring, following the departure of yet another accountant who preferred to work for a larger NGO with a higher salary, we hired the director of the auditing and accounting firm who had found and recommended the Centre's latest accountants. He is a very professional and hard-working administrator who was quick to enrol his five-year-old daughter in our Centre so that she could follow the full curriculum. From the beginning, he appreciated and noted the discipline, order and organisation that reigned in the Centre, under the general supervision of Aïchatou. Subsequently, other fathers asked to enrol their children privately, in return for payment of school fees and board.

A new 34-year-old nurse was hired during my stay. The previous nurse, Binta, had been dismissed this spring with immediate effect, following the discovery that she had been stealing medicines and forging medical reports. She had indicated that many students, seamstresses and staff were ill and receiving medication. She did not give it to them. Instead, she confiscated and took it with her when she supposedly went out to go to the pharmacy or hospital. I was suspicious, because the orders for medication were frequent and substantial. I was concerned to read in her reports that many of the seamstresses and local staff had recurrent and very painful stomach ulcers.

After investigation, it turned out that the seamstresses and staff were not ill at all. Everything had been invented in order to divert these medicines, to sell them or to give them away to her friends. Binta had a very good salary at the Centre, and was fed and housed. But she was not satisfied with this and was tempted to embezzle, thinking that I would not notice, as I

could no longer come to Zinder as regularly as before. That was a big mistake, since I always check everything, even from a great distance!

The new nurse was efficient as soon as she took up her post on a Monday morning at 7:30am. She came with her two little girls, aged 2 and 5. She wants her daughters to be educated at the Centre, as private pupils, so that they can receive the good education and discipline for which our Centre is known. She will be able to be close to her two children from Mondays to Fridays, and sleep with them in the small room set up for the nursing station. She had started by having the whole infirmary cleaned! I love her just for her high standards of hygiene! Ayouba, 14 years old, a very bright student in the 5th grade, wanted to assist her every day before the school year started again. His wish is to become a doctor and he wants to participate in the life of the infirmary.

Mattresses have been bought to cover the five beds in the infirmary. The beds were occupied within 10 minutes of having been put in place, what with malaria ravaging the population at the end of this very heavy rainy season. Luckily, we received a sizeable donation of medicines to treat malaria, which I was able to bring with me! A suitcase full of these precious tablets! THANK YOU, dear doctor and president in Switzerland, for this magnificent and very generous donation, which is a great and quick relief for the sick!

Other mattresses were bought and sent to the association's most needy students, who no longer have a parent to look after them on the weekends. The solidarity between brothers and sisters is great at this time – a good thing when life has been hard on parents and grandparents. Mariama, 19, and her twelve-month-old daughter Leila, share a small traditional banco hut with her sister Aïchatou, 16, and their younger brother Annass, 7. Their mother died 18 months ago, leaving them little education and no material possessions. All four shared a single small foam mattress and two mats. It is difficult to imagine how they have been able to live with dignity and decency since their home was flooded by the torrential rains of this rainy season. The day after our visit, little Leila was given pretty little pink clothes and three single mattresses were taken with the Centre's minibus to their banco hut, to ensure more comfortable and restful nights on weekends. The holes in the roofs and walls of the banco huts of other children will be filled in and a sense of tranquillity restored. Our very brave and efficient technical leader, Abdourahmane, is repairing them, putting up the banco walls, consolidating, digging or raising them so that water can no longer infiltrate the rooms and destroy everything, including the small food reserves. But until when? So many difficulties still lie in wait for them, so many obstacles, and the most basic uncertainties for young people and families left to their own devices in a country that suffers from not having been able to foresee any rapid and effective development or perspectives until now.

Dozens of stuffed toy animals that arrived in the last container and in the parcels sent from Switzerland were given to the local dispensary called Kara-Kara, which specialises in dermatology. We regularly call on them to check the skin condition of our 28 albino children and young people at the Centre, as well as for other infections, such as ringworm, lice and purulent sores on the heads of pupils. The children return to the Centre on Mondays, after spending the weekend with their families, with memories of grossly poor hygiene. There is still a lot of work to be done in terms of awareness in this area.

We lent our car to the same dispensary so they could look after patients who live far away and can no longer travel because of their health, or to make follow-up and emergency medical visits. The Renault, generously donated in 2013 (first put into circulation in 2002) by the late Dr Rolland-Yves, is still running in Zinder with 19 years of valour!

Mrs. Diba, who has been in charge of the dispensary since the departure of Sisters Dolorès and Josée in 2015 (following the Charly Hebdo affair, which had repercussions and provoked attacks as far away as Zinder), was ecstatic. Their two vehicles had been burnt during the attacks on religious institutions in 2015, following the Charlie Hebdo cartoons. As they have not been out on the field regularly for the last two years due to security and Covid measures, it was evident that this vehicle could have a third life of immense service in the outskirts of Zinder, for the most underprivileged! The handing over of the keys was very symbolic and full of emotion, as we all looked on: patients, children, and my escort, who was always on the lookout and attentive. The Kara-Kara neighbourhood is home to "Palais" gangs, which are young Nigeriens who organise themselves into gangs because of the lack of prospects. These groups originate from the Kara-Kara neighbourhood, historically home to lepers and outcasts. The filmmaker and activist Aïcha Macky, born in Zinder, returned there to tell the story of these young people left behind, where unemployment is at its highest. This environment is a breeding ground for gangs. The magnificent and poignant film "Zinder" was released in 2020.

Our former minibus driver, Moustapha, fell ill four years ago. He developed diabetes, which made his daily life very painful. Little by little, he could no longer move his lower limbs and walking became too painful. Reluctantly, we had to part with this strong and extremely nice man, who is more than 1.90m tall and always remained calm in the face of the shouts, laughter and indiscipline of the children that he carried every day. Every time I went to Zinder, I would visit him with the nanny and bring him some clothes and friendly support. This time, his situation deteriorated further. His wife, on whom he could rely to move him, pull him, feed him, had also suffered a diabetes attack and not recovered the strength to continue helping and accompanying her husband. So, we scoured Zinder for a good wheelchair, and finally found something in a pharmacy that would give Moustapha and his wife some relief.

It was with a smile on his face that he was able to move his wheelchair out onto the terrace and enjoy the warm sun on his battered face and body.



New means of transport for our former driver Moustapha

After the distribution in April, a new food distribution was organised at the Centre in early September for children and young girls. 25 kg of rice and a bag with soap, onions and chilli peppers made the pupils happy, after having been very dedicated to their lessons.

The next day, a small reception to mark the end of the 2020-2021 school year was organised, with temperatures reaching 50°C! Payback came in the afternoon, with a massive rain and hail storm. In Zinder, in the Sahel, tiny balls of hail fell for 15 minutes! The children were screaming as they watched an incredible and rare show of nature, picking up the mini ice cubes to suck. Nothing is lost. The Centre was under water, so we quickly got the goats out of the pen to prevent the little kids from drowning. Fortunately, the Centre had been well designed and built on a slope, in order to facilitate drainage during heavy rains through holes made in the walls. But sometimes the rain falls and flows faster than the holes can be cleared. On that day, temperatures dropped from 50° to 20° within in a mere few hours.

The top five students from each primary and middle school class got to choose a small gift of encouragement and congratulations! Balloons, backpacks, boxes of coloured pencils, blankets and pencil cases were the first to disappear from the displays.

Fifteen boxes prepared and sent by our wonderful technical leader from Switzerland, Jörg, had arrived in Zinder in excellent condition. They were filled with small gifts from the Swiss and French sponsors, medical glasses, basketballs, t-shirts, sunglasses for the albino children, caps, polo shirts and t-shirts from the Golf Club of Payerne, boxes of coloured pencils, soft toys, etc...

The beautiful basketballs from the BBC Montreux and BBC Aigle were pure joy to young girls and boys of the Centre, who never get tired of practising and improving their skills under 46-48° temperatures!



**Food distribution at the Centre, which delights young and old alike!**

For a year, I have been looking for a reliable, stable and credible partner to start a collaboration that would ensure a certain sustainability for the Centre, the local staff and the children. After ten days of incessant and insistent calls and reminders, I was finally able to meet with a Nigerian Red Cross official from the Zinder office. Following the serious flooding that has affected the Zinder region since July, the Red Cross has been busy and on the move in the most affected areas. The person in charge was nevertheless willing to give me a 20-minute appointment at the Centre. A partnership proposal file is being prepared and a new visit to the Centre should take place soon with one of the Nigerian Red Cross officials based in the capital Niamey. We would thus be complementary, one dealing with schooling and education and the other with medical care and emergencies. During this meeting, I learned that the Niger Red Cross had just launched a new schooling programme on a trial basis.

### **Anecdotes from the Centre**

Some of the mothers and grandmothers of our students have a sense of gratitude, but others have some difficulty showing gratitude or contentment, as life has been too hard on them. I have been relieved to have an escort with me over the years, as we have encountered numerous hysterical mothers. Sometimes it doesn't take much for the mind to malfunction, and this will disrupt their entire life and that of their children. One of these women came to the Centre one afternoon to claim, to meet me and demand the return of her young children (three daughters who have, unfortunately, inherited some of their mother's mental illness). I



was relieved by the presence of my escort, who physically protected me from this woman, who had started to scream, threaten and hit the children. This poor, hysterical woman, with a gesture of incredible anger, untied the cloth that bound her last child of 15 months to her back, threw the child violently to the ground, and then threw herself on one of the escorts, attempting to beat him with her fists. Hama, a tall military man of more than 1.80m, had no difficulty in subduing her, but it was such a distressing sight to see this woman then throw herself on the ground and scream, roll around and shout the worst threats against everyone present. I'm grateful that we can keep her three daughters at the Centre, because otherwise their lives would be a living hell on the sandy streets of Zinder, begging and following their mother around. But how long will we be able to look after and secure all these children who are so neglected and left to their own devices, with parents who are unfit to take care of their children and themselves. The child and women's protection services, are of course, overwhelmed in Zinder and are doing an incredible job despite the limited resources available to them.

An uncle of two orphaned boys that had been attending the Centre for a few months, introduced himself quickly on my arrival. I knew of his history as a "smoker" and with my escort we approached him to find out the reason for his visit. The two boys had been expelled from the Centre because this man regularly threatened and blackmailed all the staff. He was never satisfied. He demanded that the two boys go home every night, and then he demanded that the boys stay at the Centre every weekend, asking for food distributions to keep them. We talked with him at length and with great pedagogy and patience, explaining that we could no longer take the two boys back, but that he would be able to enrol them in the public school for the new school year. He seemed to have accepted the decision and left. The next day, however, he returned to the Centre with bloodshot eyes, and the day after that. I am grateful to my efficient escort who acted as an excellent bulwark (more than protection was needed this time!) between these slightly aggressive people who rejected the Centre's decisions and the reality of their situation.

Following the July-August school holidays, several girls from the Centre were married and some girls unfortunately died. Malaria spares no one. Young or old, people suffer from violent fevers, unmanageable tremors (a feeling of immense cold when it is 40°C) and painful vomiting. For the most vulnerable, malaria can turn into neurological malaria, with the risk of death or major after-effects if it is badly treated or if treatment is given too late.

### **Situation in Niger – Security**

For this last mission, an escort was absolutely necessary to ensure my safety throughout the stay. Three Nigerien men accompanied me, one of them a member of the Niger National Guard. He is efficient, reactive, fast, and has eyes in the back of his head! The team leader showed an uncanny resemblance to "Barracuda", from the series "The A-Team"! But no one was there at the end to plug the line: "I love it when an operation goes off without a hitch"! For 14 years, I was used to moving around and organising things myself in Zinder. But I had to change that. It was not so hard to adapt to the new situation because I really enjoy having the car door opened and closed for me! (I would love to get the same attention in

Switzerland). Not having to drive a car in Niger, or be on high alert at all times while changing my route and travel times daily, saved a lot of energy.

Fortunately, Niger does not suffer from Covid-19. There are only a few positive people in the capital, Niamey. We were subjected to body temperature checks on arrival at Niamey airport. At the Centre, temperature checks are carried out daily for local staff, students and visitors. So, I could see that I was in good health: 36° to 36.4° at each check!

On the other hand, and much more seriously, there were cases of cholera in Niamey, Maradi (350 km from Zinder) and in Zinder. Full vigilance with water and food, wherever I am. I did not touch raw food, such as salad, carrots, tomatoes, onions, and everything was carefully boiled and cooked in the Centre's kettles. My immune system, my good mood and the smiles of the children did the rest to keep my body in perfect health during the entire stay.

Once again, it was impossible to finish a mission in Zinder without being confronted with the realities of flying to the capital in complete safety. Long car journeys are now strongly discouraged. Zinder-Niamey was again difficult to negotiate.

The humanitarian flight I was supposed to take to Zinder was cancelled the day prior. It had been rescheduled to another airport, 350 km from Zinder. So, with my escort, and under a sudden downpour, we drove around Zinder all morning to set up a plan B, and then a plan C. Plan B quickly failed: the small national airline, with which I have been flying for years, cancelled the flight for technical reasons. Sometimes, there are situations in which it is wiser not to insist. All that remained was to take the road at dawn, accompanied by a second armed escort. The Governor of Zinder had been contacted and was kind enough to provide us with a military escort over 350km of roads broken by the violent rains of the last few years. Since we were under the prayers of all the children of the Centre, the journey went well; nothing could happen to us!

### **Upcoming events:**

**Wednesday, October 31, 2021 at 8pm 11<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Association**  
City Hall Great Room in Romont

Under the new presidency of Mr. Grégoire Piller - Everyone is welcome!

The assembly will take place with respect to the health measures that came into force on September 13, 2021. **A health certificate will be required at the entrance (negative vaccine or test).** We thank you in advance for your understanding and look forward to seeing you again to share with you the Association's activities with the children!

**Friday, December 3, and Saturday, December 4**  
**Artisan's market in Romont**

Place du Château à 1680 Romont  
Friday, December 3, from 5pm to 9pm  
Saturday, December 4, from 11am to 8:30pm

Sale of handicrafts from Niger, including delicious chilli powder, peanut paste, peanut powder, heart-shaped soaps, jewellery, greeting cards, illustrated colouring books and documentary films by our Ambassador, Jean-Philippe Rapp.



Thanks to your generous and precious support, today and tomorrow are better for all these children at the *Coeur du Niger* Education and Development Centre!  
Thank you very much!

I wish you all a very nice and colourful autumn! Take care of yourselves, your surroundings and stay in good health!

With my warmest and most grateful greetings, and the cheerful and hopeful smiles of the 320 children and young girls at the Centre!

Isabelle Macheret

Founding Director of the Association  
*Au Cœur du Niger*

Zinder Niger, September 2021

[www.aucoeurduniger.ch](http://www.aucoeurduniger.ch)