



Niger Zinder, March - August 2023



2009 – 2023 / 14 years

My last stay in Niger was in March and April.

This has been the longest I've stayed in Switzerland in almost 15 years. It is also the first time that I've spent a full summer and autumn in our beautiful and peaceful country since 2009. Because of the difficult political situation in Niger, I simply haven't been able to go back.

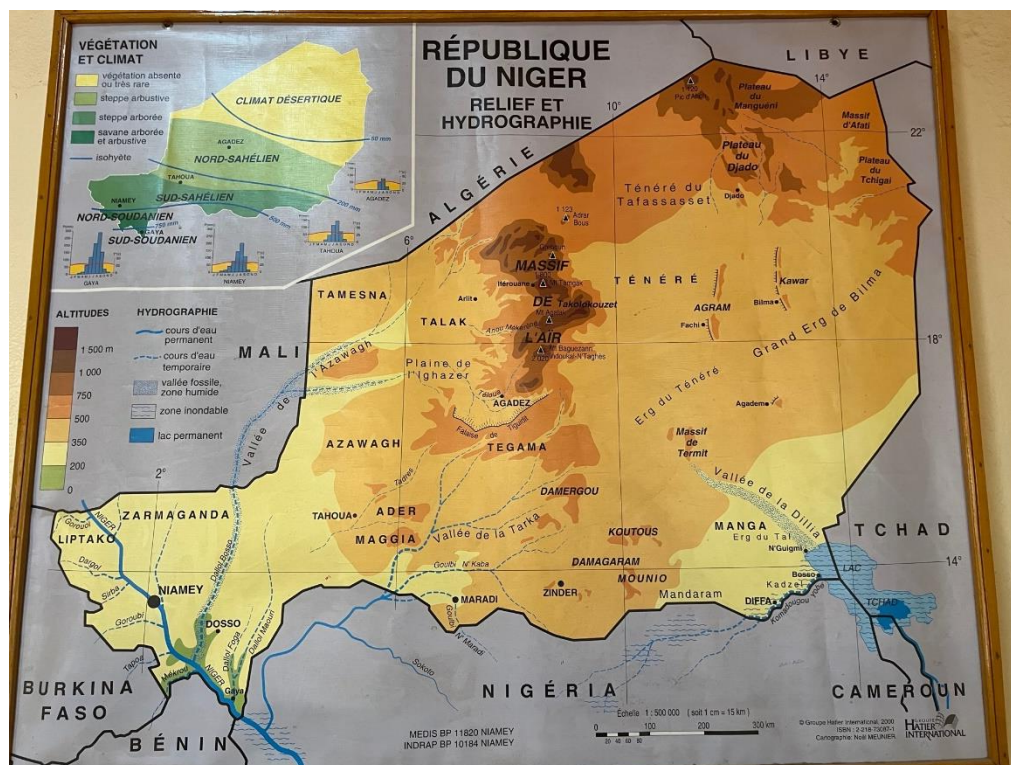
Before last April, I never thought anything like this would happen, so we were surprised. There were no visible social signs to suggest that such a situation was going to arise. In a country that is already in the grip of a great deal of insecurity and which, moreover, was the only country to have escaped terrorist control, the crisis is political.

We can only hope that discussions will continue to seek a peaceful diplomatic solution for the good of the people of Niger, the Niger nation and, by extension, the entire region.

I miss the children at the centre very much.

Fortunately, the Internet means we can talk and see each other every day, despite the 5,000 km distance! There's one good thing about technology.

The local team cope very well with the daily life of over 300 orphaned children, albinos and young child-mothers, who receive schooling, education and training in the best possible conditions, thanks to the immense support and generosity from all over Switzerland and beyond.



Niger: the capital Niamey lies to the south-west and Zinder to the south, near the country's border with Nigeria.

My recent stay was intense, with a lot of different things going on. To my great satisfaction and that of the Niger staff, who form an effective, united team, we hired an HR accounting administrator and a supervisor to take on the substantial task of looking after the children and young girls at the centre, with whom we've signed the first Junior work contracts!

In this Sahelian region of Niger, continues to be an issue!

As soon as I moved into the house, generously made available by the authorities during my stays in Zinder, a slew of technical faults began to pile up, starting with water pressure that wouldn't reach the first floor. The technical manager came to install a new, more efficient device. That helped the water reach the first floor, but it was brown. Back to the drawing board we went, but this time the water started spurting out of a pipe. If you don't succeed, try, try again! This time, the water no longer reached the sink, but rather was running from the water heater. There are things in life that simply don't want to be fixed. Move on.

That evening, a little grey mouse crept in from who knows where and scurried under my bed - perhaps to welcome me to *his* house? I'll be seeing his eyes and slim silhouette for the rest of my stay. I'm sure there are plenty of wings and legs under and over my bed, too!

Over the past few weeks, a mouse, lizards, locusts and spiders have shared this very exotic Zindérois holiday!



View from the plane before landing in Zinder.

After a sparkling and enchanting welcome from the children and local staff, this new mission was about to be filled with meetings, visits, trips, sessions, supervision and cuddles with the children - and especially little Abdoul!

Official visits

The 'hunters' of His Highness the Sultan of Damagaram are traditional chiefs who have handed down their traditions from generation to generation. They came to the centre to wish me a very happy arrival in Zinder and a pleasant stay among this peaceful population. They still hunt rabbits, guinea fowl, snakes and birds using very old, long rifles that date back to colonisation. The Zindérois won the battle against the French colonisers in May 1898.



With the Sultan of Damagaram's hunters

In the Sultanate, with His Highness the Sultan of Damagaram and the centre's HR accountant

Food distribution

As on each of my visits to the centre, a food distribution was organised to relieve our children's families.

As a result of the war in Ukraine, food supplies were already hard to come by in Niger and surrounding countries, as the price of cereals and other consumables soared. When a coup d'état caused the closure of Niger's borders last July, prices rose even further, making the daily lives of millions even more precarious.

Preparing for a food distribution is always euphoric for the staff and children, knowing that they will soon have food security for several weeks or months, depending on the number of mouths to feed in the family. After two days of preparation, bagging 25 and 50 kg of rice and maize, and preparing the sachets of onions, soap and salt, we were able to send out the official invitations and summon the families.

During each distribution, we take the opportunity to raise awareness among the children's families and entourage about the very delicate subjects of education, work, discipline and punctuality!

Once again, we were able to benefit from the presence of the Governor of the Province of Zinder, who came along with his wife Zazia, the High Authorities of Zinder and the media, for the launch of this distribution.



With the honourable participation of the Governor of the Province of Zinder (4.5 million inhabitants)



The food distribution took place under a scorching 43° - March 2023

4th container with school supplies

A container - the 4th since 2010 - left Switzerland in March 2023, bound for the centre in Zinder. The OC de la Glâne in Romont had generously donated hundreds of tables, chairs and desks for the children attending school at the au Coeur du Niger centre. The container arrived safely at Zinder customs in May, having landed in Cotonou, Benin, on schedule.



The container was transported to the centre in June. It took a great deal of ingenuity to find a crane to get it off the lorry and set it up in an ideal place, where it wouldn't disturb the pupils during their breaks and sports lessons. The plan was to begin distribution during my next visit to Zinder, which was scheduled for September. However, I have to wait a little longer before I can return in complete safety and invite the authorities to the official opening of the container, which contains treasures for the children's further education!

Jörg Stämpfli, our very dynamic and tireless technical manager for the committee in Switzerland, planned, calculated, filled, weighed and organised the freight alongside his helpers and family for this 4th container, filled with various materials and generous donations.

Jörg had also sent around twenty boxes filled with gifts from sponsors, donors and sports clubs, which were distributed to delighted children, who spent time writing letters and drawing pictures to say thank you!

Mattresses for the children at the centre



Abdoul poses joyfully in front of some of the hundred or so new mattresses bought at the local market. They come from neighbouring Nigeria.

These mattresses will enable the children to sleep comfortably in the centre's three dormitories.

The number of little boarders increases with each of my visits, during which time I take the opportunity to welcome any new orphans and albino children that turn up at the centre's gates, often in a sorry state of malnutrition and hygiene.



A young widowed mother with three of her five orphaned children

Saadou, 17 - Albino

Saadou arrived at the centre when he was 12, accompanied by his little sister Farida, also an albino. His skin was covered in spots from the sun, which we were able to reduce thanks to the very effective Avène suncare products that we received (free of charge) from the Pierre Fabre Foundation, via a medical delegate. The Foundation extended its activity to include dermatology programmes in tropical environments. The Pierre Fabre Foundation had been made aware of the seriousness and scale of the health problems associated with albinism in Africa by a number of associations.

Saadou has since grown up and recently left the centre to work in a small carpentry workshop. Unfortunately, he wasn't careful enough with the sun and neglected his skin care programme. We welcomed him back to the centre, and after several months of medical monitoring and tests, Saadou was operated at Zinder hospital in July.

A highly-professional Nigerian dermatologist with extensive knowledge of albinism was able to remove the large cancerous mass on his forehead. Saadou is now being monitored by the dermatologist and receives daily care. We hope for a full recovery.



Saadou, operated on by the dermatologist at Zinder hospital

This genetic disease, characterised by a deficiency in skin, hair and eye pigmentation, causes extreme sensitivity to the sun. The risks of developing skin cancer and skin disorders are very high, and studies estimate that most people with albinism die of skin cancer between the ages of 30 and 40 (report by I. Ero independent expert to the United Nations, 2015). In sub-Saharan Africa, this genetic condition is four to five times higher (partly linked to endogamy) than in the rest of the world, with a prevalence of up to 1 in 1,500 people in some regions. The lack of information on the connection between albinism and skin cancer only exacerbates this situation. Yet these dramatic consequences are largely avoidable: simple measures, such as using total sun protection cream and wearing appropriate clothing, can prevent cancer. Lastly, people with albinism have great difficulty integrating into society because of ancient beliefs that attribute supposed magical powers to them. In some countries, superstition leads to mutilation, dismemberment, organ removal and murder. Since 2007, organisations have reported hundreds of attacks in over 25 countries linked to witchcraft beliefs and practices (Pierre Fabre Foundation - Cancer Prevention).

Soap-making at the centre

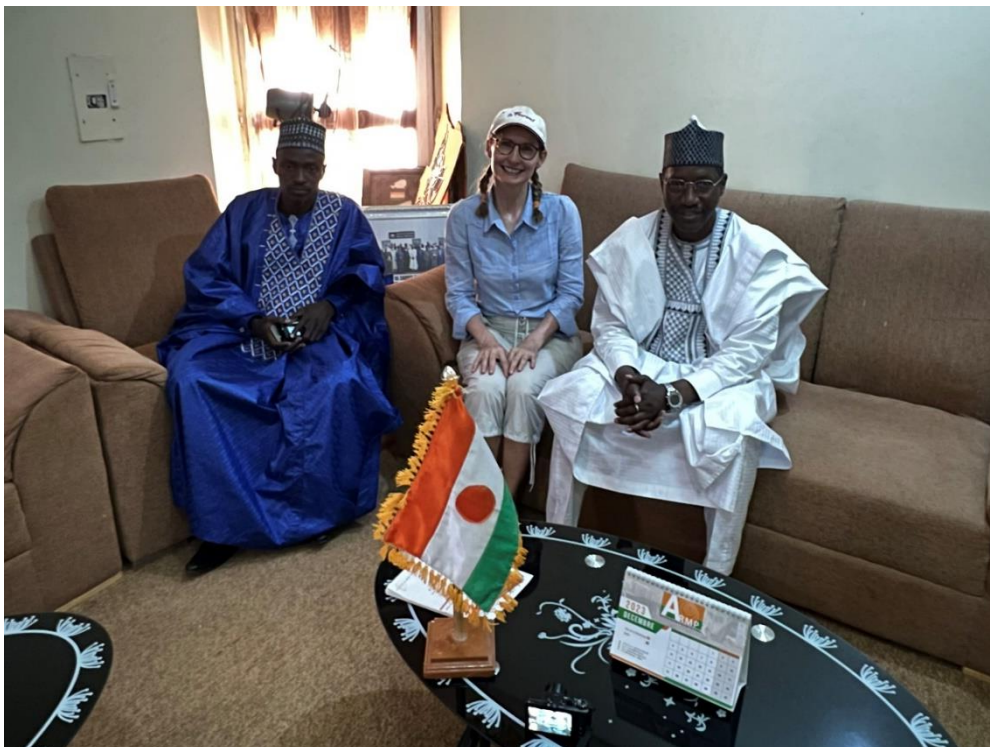
Given the great success of our heart-shaped soaps, made with goat's milk, shea butter and oil and produced by young married girls and young mothers in the centre's sewing room, we decided to try our hand at perfume. The wife of the Governor of Zinder was our *guinea pig* and best ambassador!



Maâmoura, Saade and Batoula making soap at the centre's sewing room

Meeting at the Governorate of Zinder

Last March, the Governor of Zinder was kind enough to organise a meeting at the Governor's Office with the Mayor of Maradi, Niger's second largest city, some 450 km from Zinder. The aim of the meeting was to replicate the centre in another underprivileged region of Niger. The Mayor of Maradi accompanied me to the centre to visit the buildings and the activities with the children. He was very touched and convinced of the need to replicate this concept for the most disadvantaged children in Niger. He assured us of his full support and is keen to help set up such a centre in his town.



Recruiting new orphans in a bush village

On the sound advice of His Highness the Sultan and the Governor of the Zinder region, I travelled, under police and private escort and with some of the centre's staff, to a small village in the bush where many orphaned children live.



An escort is now required to travel outside Zinder



As soon as they arrive at the centre, the little orphan girls and boys from the bush village are looked after by our supervisors and the other children, who have also been through this reception phase. They take them by the hand right from the start, leading them to the slides and swings, and showing them the latrines, the water borehole, the kitchen and what they're used to at the centre. Relaxed and serene after just a few days, surrounded by their new playmates and schoolmates, these new boarders soon have wonderful smiles on their faces, and prospects for the future!

Towards the end of my stay in Zinder, a local girl, aged 16, took her own life because she was being forced into marriage. She ran away from home and hanged herself from a tree in the bush with her veil.

On my birthday, as I have done every year for more than 15 years, I was at the centre with the children. What better place to celebrate this new year of life and achievements! That day, a journalist from Radio Liberté came for an interview. The questions focused on the needs of the local population, the demographic problem, children and young people not attending school and early marriages.



Fatma Zara, with her daughter Kadija and her newborn twins!

Little girls quickly turn into little mothers. As if innate, they quickly learn to take care of those smaller than themselves. With infinite patience and gentleness, they take turns carrying the babies, pampering them, talking to them, humming little lullabies.

A sandstorm over Zinder...



A real sandstorm hit Zinder last July. It caused major damage and a number of deaths in the town of Zinder. Fortunately, the centre is very well built and maintained. The small shed for bikes and motorbikes outside the centre, however, did not survive. One of the trees providing shade at the entrance was uprooted by the force of the wind and collapsed onto the tin shed. The foundation was quickly flooded and three goats drowned with the speed and power of the rising water.

The return journey

At the end of my stay, getting back to the capital Niamey to catch my international flight was once again a bit of a challenge. There are almost 1,000 km to cover and for security reasons, I can't do it as freely as I used to, overland, hidden away in the back seat of a vehicle. As the humanitarian plane couldn't land in Zinder that day (there aren't humanitarian flights every day), it was decided at the last minute to drive under escort to the nearest town, where the humanitarian plane was authorised to land.



A small souvenir of my departure

The Association Committee

At our 13th Annual General Meeting on 26 April 2023, Chairman Grégoire Piller warmly thanked Anita and Cédric, members of the outgoing committee, and congratulated Ludivine Jordan and Dany Dumas, two new members who have joined the committee on a voluntary basis!

Cédric Margueron has managed the association's accounts with great professionalism and availability over the last five years.

Anita Clerc has taken part in the association's many events, including Christmas markets, support evenings, presentations and sales, all of which have benefited from her enthusiasm and smile!



New 2023-2024 Committee

From left to right: Jörg Stämpfli, Technical Manager - Ludivine Jordan, Events - Grégoire Piller, Chairman - Isabelle Macheret, Founding Director - Jean-Marc Egger, Vice-Chairman - Daniel Dumas, Cashier



Incumbent 2022-2023 Committee

From left to right: Jörg Stämpfli, Technical Manager - Grégoire Piller, Chairman - Isabelle Macheret, Founding Director - Cédric Margueron, Cashier - Anita Clerc, Events - Jean-Marc Egger, Vice-Chairman

Upcoming events 2023:

Saturday 18 November	10am - 8pm	Christmas Market in the Sports Hall in Villaz-St-Pierre
Sunday 19 November	10am - 5pm	Christmas market in the intercommunal sports hall in Villaz-St-Pierre
Saturday 2 December	10am - 5pm Semsales	Christmas market in the multi-purpose hall in
Sunday 3 December	10am - 5pm Semsales	Christmas market in the multi-purpose hall in
Friday 29 November 2024	8pm	Charity event to celebrate the 15-year anniversary of the Association CO2 La Tour-de-Trême Reservations and programme to follow

Sale of handicrafts from the centre and Niger. Thank you for your visit!

If you're interested in products from Niger and Central Africa and can't make it to one of our markets, all handicrafts are available from Isabelle, by phone or e-mail. They are also listed on the www.aucoeurduniger.ch website under the heading "Boutique".



**"True generosity towards the future
consists in giving everything to the present...."**

Albert Camus



Bonheur au centre, avec Ibrahim et Abdoul – Mars 2023

THANK YOU for helping us to help these children in the Zinder region! May their smiles and bright faces testify to how happy they are to be educated, schooled, trained and loved at the au Cœur du Niger centre!

The association's committee joins me in wishing you all a very peaceful autumn and the very best in all your activities!

With our warm and grateful wishes, and the pleasure of hopefully meeting you at our upcoming Christmas Markets in Villaz-St-Pierre in November or in Semsales at the beginning of December.

Isabelle Macheret

Founder and Director of the Association au Cœur du Niger
Zinder Niger, September 2023

www.aucoeurduniger.ch