

Devastating Niger famine: warnings ignored for nine months

Barry Mason
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Only weeks after the leaders of the G8 countries met in Scotland pledging to make poverty a thing of the past, the news media began to reveal that a catastrophic famine was unfolding in Niger.

For weeks, Prime Minister Tony Blair and Chancellor Gordon Brown had been posturing as the saviours of the impoverished African masses by virtue of their proposals for debt relief. Their humanitarian pretensions had been backed by the organisers of the Live 8 events during the G8 summit, as part of the “Make Poverty History” campaign.

But according to BBC News, the unfolding Niger famine was not even mentioned at the summit. Only after horrific pictures of starving children featured on television, causing a public outcry, did any response at government level begin.

Emergency food supplies are now being flown into Niger, with other supplies coming in overland. According to the development charity Oxfam, more than 3 million people are facing starvation in Niger out of a population of 11 million. Of these, 800,000 are children.

The charity Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), which has operated in Niger for the last 15 years, has described the famine as “the biggest nutritional operation in MSF history.”

The threat of disease is now adding to the danger faced by the most vulnerable. Speaking to the Reuters news agency, Johanne Sekkenes, mission head for MSF in Niger, explained: “These children are very, very vulnerable. If they’re already malnourished and they get malaria they need expert medical and nutritional help straight away.”

This famine has not happened overnight. The Famine Early Warning Systems Network (FEWS Net) issued an urgent-action-required notice in its December 8,

2004, briefing. In this, it noted that in “agro-pastoral areas hit by locusts, dryness and early end of season, household food deficits are emerging.”

In its March 9, 2005, briefing the FEWS Net further noted that, “According to a government [of Niger] estimate, 3.2 million people were affected by locusts and poor rains last year...the most food insecure...will need relief until August.”

Last August in Niger, the expected rains failed. This was followed by locusts consuming much of the crops that survived, leading to one of the poorest recorded harvests in October.

In November 2004, the United Nations issued its first appeal for aid, but there was no response from Western governments. In February, the UN World Food Programme (WFP) began an emergency operation to feed 400,000 people. As a result of the deteriorating situation, the UN again appealed for aid, asking for \$16 million in May. By June, there had been no response at all to the appeal. It was only in July that the West donated \$10 million after the UN appealed for \$30 million.

By the end of July, Jan Egeland, the UN’s emergency relief coordinator, reported, “We have received more pledges in the past week than we have in six months but it is too late for some of these children.”

Whilst there was undoubtedly a natural disaster in Niger, the crucial issue is the extreme poverty facing most of the population. MSF’s Sekkenes pointed out, “This is not a famine, in the Somalian way. The harvest was bad in 2004 and the millet granaries are empty. Yet there is food on the markets. The trouble is that the price of food is beyond anyone’s reach.” A *New York Times* story made the same point about food being available at markets.

It should be noted that until the media publicity, the

UN had hardly made its appeals with any urgency. Sekkenes continued, “Given this situation, it was criminal of the UN this year to tackle the emergency in a gingerly way, putting ‘moderately priced’ cereals on the market. The UN should have immediately organised free food distribution.”

This is not simply a matter of a serious natural disaster that was ignored by Western governments, although there is that element. Directly responsible for increasing poverty and economic decline in Niger are International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustment policies.

After he was elected to a second term last December, President Mamadou Tandja imposed a 19 percent VAT on basic foodstuffs at the behest of the IMF. Part of the same economic package involved the abolition of emergency grain reserves. The tax was imposed despite the fact that the price of basic foods has risen between 75 and 89 percent over the last five years. At the same time, the sale price of livestock—the main income of the country’s nomadic herders—has fallen by 25 percent.

In Niger’s main towns, Niamey, Maradi and Tahoua, the population organised a general strike and demonstrations in March against food price increases. The response of the regime was to imprison the leaders of the opposition movement and to press on with the IMF measures. It has consistently played down the scale of the crisis, claiming that it was being “politicised.” At the beginning of July, the government official in charge of food aid, Seydou Bakary, told AFP: “We should be cautious not to exaggerate the situation—there is chronic malnutrition throughout the country, even during the most productive harvests.”

But Niger’s regime is highly regarded by the great powers, as it presides over a country with strategic importance as a major exporter of uranium. President Tandja met with President George W. Bush in June to discuss security issues—and there was apparently no mention of the famine.

Niger, along with eight other African countries in the region, is having troops trained by the US military for “extended desert and border operations” to supposedly head off infiltration by international terrorist groups. In addition to military training, a recently announced initiative, costing \$500 million over the next seven years, will also assign more military officers to US embassies, pick out landing strips for use in

emergencies, and secure new bilateral agreements giving “greater access and legal protection for US troops.”

Niger is not the only country that is facing famine in the region. Chad, Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Sierra Leone and Togo are also at risk. According to the WFP, a total of nearly 20 million people are undernourished throughout this region. Many countries in this region have been affected by one of the worst invasions of locusts in years together with frequent droughts. The resulting crises have been exacerbated by the extreme poverty existing in the area and the application of IMF measures.

The WFP points out that many of these West African countries feature at the bottom of the United Nations Human Development Indices. Around half the population of this region exist on less than \$1 a day. The region has the lowest life expectancy at birth, and of the 34 countries with a life expectancy of 49 or below, 10 are in West Africa.



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