

Worst famine and flooding in Niger's history

Trevor Johnson
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Niger in Western Africa has been hit by double disaster. According to the United Nations, more than 110,000 people have been affected by the severe rains in the second week of August, and the flooding that followed. In the capital, Niamey, the River Niger has reached its highest level for 80 years. The rain came too late for this year's crops, which have already failed and it has washed away reserves of grain.

Usually in Niger, if the primary crop fails the secondary crops survive, lessening food shortages. At the time of the growing season this year, rainfall was so minimal that not only did the millet crop fail but the crop of secondary greens for animal fodder also failed. Not only are many villagers going hungry, but their livestock, often their only asset, have died of hunger.

Some eight million people, half the population, face starvation, according to the UN's World Food Programme (WFP). The famine was already the worst such crisis in the country's history and the situation is rapidly worsening.

The WFP says 17 percent of children, or nearly one in five, are acutely malnourished. This is well above the 15 percent threshold triggering a declaration of an emergency. The crisis is worse than that of 2005, when thousands died of hunger.

Many people in Niger are eating at most once a day. Malek Triki, West Africa spokesman for the WFP, quoted a woman who said, "We're in a constant state of fasting. If we eat lunch, we cannot eat dinner. If we eat dinner, we cannot eat lunch."

In Bagga, a village of 5,000 people, only 100 of the children in need of help have received any rations. "In the end, we had to do a draw to select them," said the village chief.

Many mothers in Niger are unable to breastfeed their babies because they are malnourished. Even before the famine and floods, one in seven mothers died in childbirth, and the neonatal mortality rate was more

than one in five. One in every four children dies before reaching the age of five. A major concern is that the flooding will increase cases of malaria and diarrhoea, particularly among young children already weakened by severe malnutrition.

Around 300,000 children younger than five years old die of malnutrition every year in the Sahel countries, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The Sahel is a belt between the Sahara desert in the North and the Sudanian savannas in the south. It covers parts of the countries of Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Niger, Nigeria, Chad, Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Niger's lack of decent roads has compounded the problems. Drivers need a whole day to travel just over 100 kilometres and often get stuck. Heavy flooding across the country has washed away many roads and has made distribution of aid much more difficult.

Niger is rated the poorest country in the world. It ranks last in the Human Development Index. Over 60 percent of the population lives on less than \$1 per day.

The famine is caused not just by the failure of Niger's crops. Food prices are being pushed higher by speculation in commodities, which increased after Russia announced poor wheat harvests. Wheat prices are currently 50 percent higher than they were six weeks ago. Food that could be alleviating the hunger of Niger's population is priced too high for many to afford.

"Derivatives packaging products such as wheat and maize have created massive profits for speculators with no interest whatsoever in the underlying physical commodities," BBC reporter Afua Hirsch said. "The number of derivative contracts in commodities increased by more than 500 percent between 2002 and 2008, a process that accelerated at the end of the last decade."

Investment bank Goldman Sachs made more than \$5

billion in profits from commodity trading last year. Hirsch says that Niger is not actually short of food and cites mounds of cereals for sale in markets.

Niger's people are starving in the midst of global plenty. The European Union and the United States maintain huge stocks of grain. Although the stocks are currently lower than usual for the time of year, there was still around 444 million tons of grain in storage at the beginning of August, according to the US Department of Agriculture. This is enough to meet 72 days of world consumption, with harvests still being reaped. Only a small proportion of these stocks would put an end to the famine in Niger.

The advent of global production, mechanized agriculture and low cost international transport, which could provide the means to prevent such famines, are used instead as a source of huge profits by transnational financial corporations.

With the flooding in Pakistan, the looming disaster in Niger and its neighbors has been relegated away from the front pages. One feature the two crises share is the complete failure of the major powers to provide the necessary funding. Only 57 percent of the US\$190 million emergency appeal by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) for Niger has been found. The WFP has stated that it will be able to help feed only 40 percent of those facing hunger in Niger, unless more money is received from donors.



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