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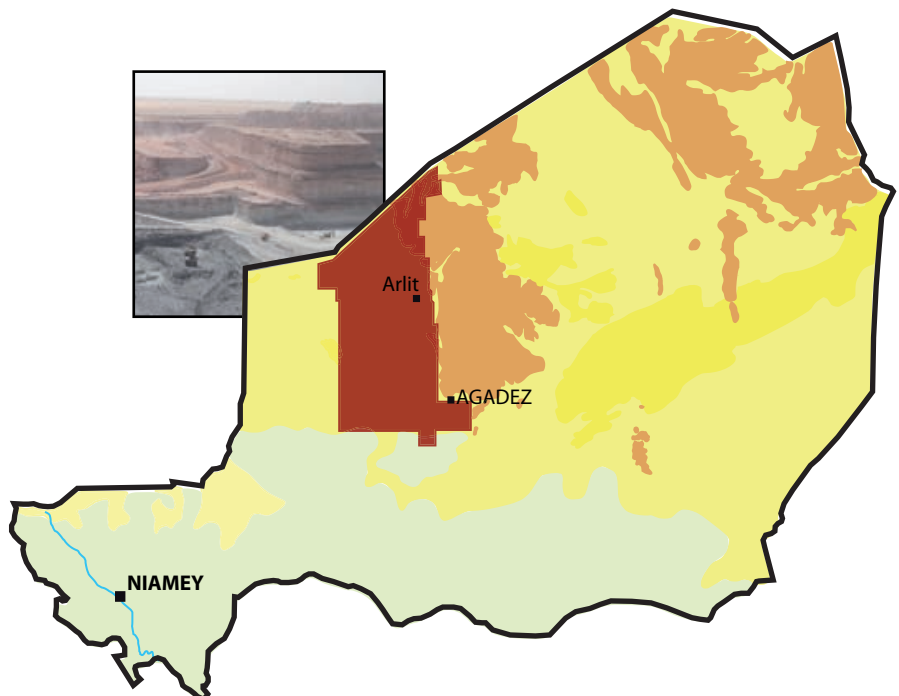


NEWS FILE

The uranium curse

The Northern Niger's suffering from its wealth

" Our society has it got a right to ignore the destruction of a whole people the original crime of which would be to live in a once waste but turned immensely rich Sahara ?"



News file

The uranium curse
-
The Northern Niger's suffering from its wealth

"Our society has it got a right to ignore the destruction of a whole people the original crime of which would be to live in a once waste but turned immensely rich Sahara?"

Issouf ag Maha

**Thanks to Annie and Luisa for their translation of the original french document :
"La malédiction de l'uranium, le Nord-Niger victime de ses richesses"**

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LONG DISTANCE NOMADISM SPACES ARE FADING



Northern Niger was an integral part of the Sahelian-Saharan region which was co-inhabited by several autochthonous nomadic groups (sedentary or otherwise) who lived according to traditional, ancestral rules, such as the Arabs, Chawis, Kountas, Moors, Woodaabe Fulani, Tuaregs, Tubus, and so on.

The European colonizers, newly-independent governments and nation states who have been appearing, have definitively been transforming the region's uniqueness into a mosaic of territories which were already outlined during the Conference of Berlin (1884-1885) and definitively confirmed by the African unity Organisation Charter in its preamble and articles II and III (Addis- Abeba 1965).

Today, Northern Niger and its populations live in a mutation, indeed in an exponential economic revolution. The exploitation of different underground resources increasingly reduces the possibilities of traditional life and pastoral economy.

In Niger, autochthonous communities are in danger

Tuaregs of Northern Niger, at least some of them, seriously recognize the danger that looms in their otherness. For some, it is already dying. Historically, the Tuaregs- who are Berbers- have been dispersed among a vast territory which spans across the present-day borders of Algeria, Burkina, Libya, Mali and Niger. The first migrants originated from the gulf of Syrte, from the oasis of Aoudjila. Between the eleventh century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, in successive waves, the different confederations of Tuaregs and the tribes which constituted them came to occupy new territories. After having conquered new areas, they established that which could be considered to have been their zone of influence: the Kel Ahaggar in Algeria, the Oudalan in Burkina-Faso, the Kel Ajjer in Libya, the Kel Adghagh, the Iullemeden and the Kel Ataram in Mali, the Kel Ayr, the Iullemeden, the Kel Dinnik, the Tuaregs from Damergou, the Kel Gress, the Tuaregs from the Niger river and from Gourma in Niger.

The apprehension and the appreciation for the land to the detriment of marked territorial property, the Tamajeq language identifying and unifying, the handwriting of the Tifinagh, the power games and opposition, the socio-economic structures with their pronounced hierarchical organization and the affirmed role of women, the pastoral traditions and the caravan commerce, the acts of bravery and the sense of honour were for centuries the intangible bonds of a large human community, which now, for Niger, resists with difficulty the contemporary factors of destabilization and marginalization.



The factors of destabilization and marginalization

Five factors of destabilization which ultimately resulted in the marginalization of the Tuareg people can be identified as: French colonization, the emergence of independent nation states, droughts, exodus and expatriation and the modern economy.

The Tuareg people's process of mutation is part of the modern history of Africa in general and of Niger in particular. From 1906 until 1917, the French Colonial Army have been "bringing peace" into Western Africa. By this very fact, they broke up hostilities between the various Tuareg tribes and, consequently, insidiously began to sap their economic system which was mainly based on a pastoral way of life, caravan trade and raids. By way of military barrack buildings, trading posts and missionary stations, the colonizers have covered the country and have changed the course of time. By providing the populations with French schooling to the detriment of Arabic schooling, they have favoured different ways of thinking and have induced new values which are incompatible with those of the Tuareg tradition, based on a very distinctive and complex honour code that no Tuareg can ignore.

The land that Tuareg groupings and tribes considered to be theirs was divided into five independent states- Algeria, Burkina-Faso, Libya, Mali and Niger-and, from the sixties, Tuareg people found themselves confined within borders which they did not recognize. Thus, new legal frameworks with new laws were imposed upon them. The displacement of various herds of camels, cows, flocks of goat and sheep which was once governed by long distance nomadism was no longer determined by climatic factors and plant quality, but dictated by the boundaries of the new territorial administrative divisions which were neither understood nor accepted by Tuareg people.

The running of the whole land called the " Tuareg country", by means of a traditional and well thought-out pastoral way of life and the necessity for solidarity, was the best ecological, social and economic answer to face up to the more or less endemic droughts.

Now the colonizers as well as the new states often were powerless in the face of the droughts. In the same time shepherds used to clash with national public services which sometimes turned them back. In some cases there has even been denial regarding such natural and economic disasters and the lethal consequences they bring. So the social fabric began to fall apart and the solidarity operations which enabled survival became less and less effective. Herds and flocks became to die. So did nomads, unless they took the road to exodus and expatriation.

Heavy migration to large towns in Niger and expatriation to border countries were possible means to survive.

After the years that followed the 1973 drought, movement began to intensify. Young people, not being able to find work in Niger, had no other option but to leave for Algeria, Libya or anywhere else. Little known prospects until then began to open up. All the jobs in high demand of workers, even for mercenaries, became possible. It is in this context that the beginnings of a movement of social protest and cultural revolt- the Teshumara (an adaptation of the French word "chômeur", meaning "one who is unemployed") - took form. The whole society was on the brink of revolution.

The Tuaregs in Niger, as well as those in Mali, thought that the central government never took them into account and felt more and more marginalized; so they rose up in arms after some of them had been slaughtered. From 1990 to 1995 a rebellion in arms called into question the previous situation. Then, after an armistice had been agreed, the negotiated clauses were signed on April 24th 1995 in order to bring peace back, which were known as the Ouagadougou Agreement.

Since governments have become independent, the economy has been evolving. Having at first functioned exclusively to serve the desires of the former colonizing powers, it remains extremely difficult to get the economy to meet national needs. The Tuaregs' traditional pastoral or oasis economies are being coopted, among other things, by the economy of Niger. Thus they no longer function by themselves because they no longer correspond to the former structure of the autarchic system.

However, Niger's economy, like every national African economy, is more and more subject to the fluctuations of globalization. The world-wide geostrategic stakes (the mining resources in the North make Niger the world's third largest exporter of uranium) and international competition make new countries, like China, India and still others, join the new partners of Niger to the detriment of the former colonizing power.

French colonization, birth of the African nation states just after independence, droughts, exodus and expatriation and, now, globalization are factors which increasingly reduce the Tuaregs' ability and power to make decisions concerning the management of their territory, the most dramatic example being the prospecting and exploitation of the underground resources in the North of Niger.



139 uranium research licences allowed

Nowadays a large part of the Tuareg people is threatened with death because of world-wide geostrategic and political stakes. In fact, in Niger, natural resources are a huge part of the Tuaregs' territory which is abundant in uranium. For 40 years AREVA has been working a mine near Arlit, in outrageous sanitary and environmental conditions.

Since 2007, 139 uranium research licences were approved by the government of Niger for European, Asiatic, Northern American and Australian companies, in the heart of the natives' area of moving flocks. Those licences were allowed without consulting in any way the local populations, and obviously consequences were felt by everyone: loss of land, pastures and wells, in other words their means of living; the region itself as well is threatened with heavy pollution not to mention the effects already caused in Arlit.

Near Assouas, the CNUC (a Chinese uranium mining company) has already pushed populations out of its mines and forbidden the breeders to take their camels and goats to the wells.

For decades, the Northern Niger populations have been economically and politically left aside and have been suffering from recurring famines; in addition they now have the "unfortunate luck" of being born on rich mining grounds and it is this wealth that forces them to leave.

The Tuaregs, like the Bushmen in Kalahari, the Ijaws in the Niger delta and so many others, lost control of their ancestral lands and are fighting to get them back, which is in accordance with the United Nations Declaration regarding autochthonous populations' rights, ratified on last September 10th.

"The autochthonous populations can't be forced to leave their lands or territories. No fresh settling can take place without the concerned autochthonous peoples' previous consent- freely given and with full knowledge of the facts-, and without their agreement about a right and fair indemnification and, each time it's possible, the option of coming back again."

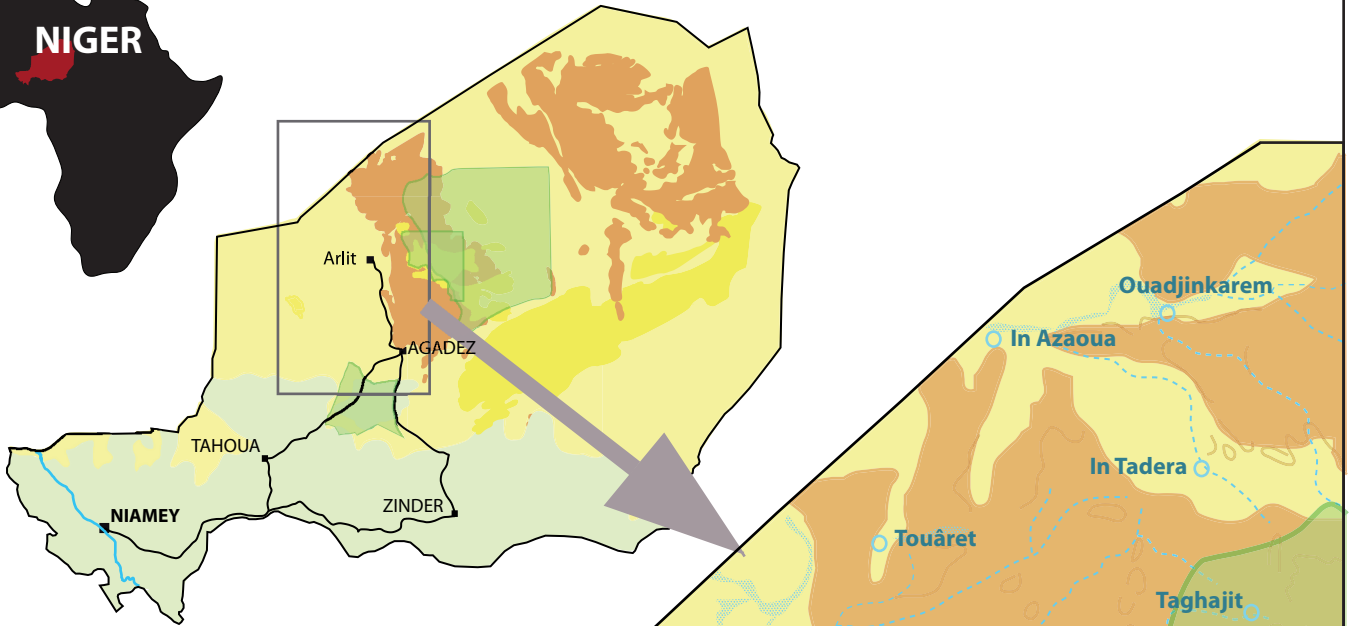
Article 10 in the United Nations Declaration of the autochthonous peoples rights.



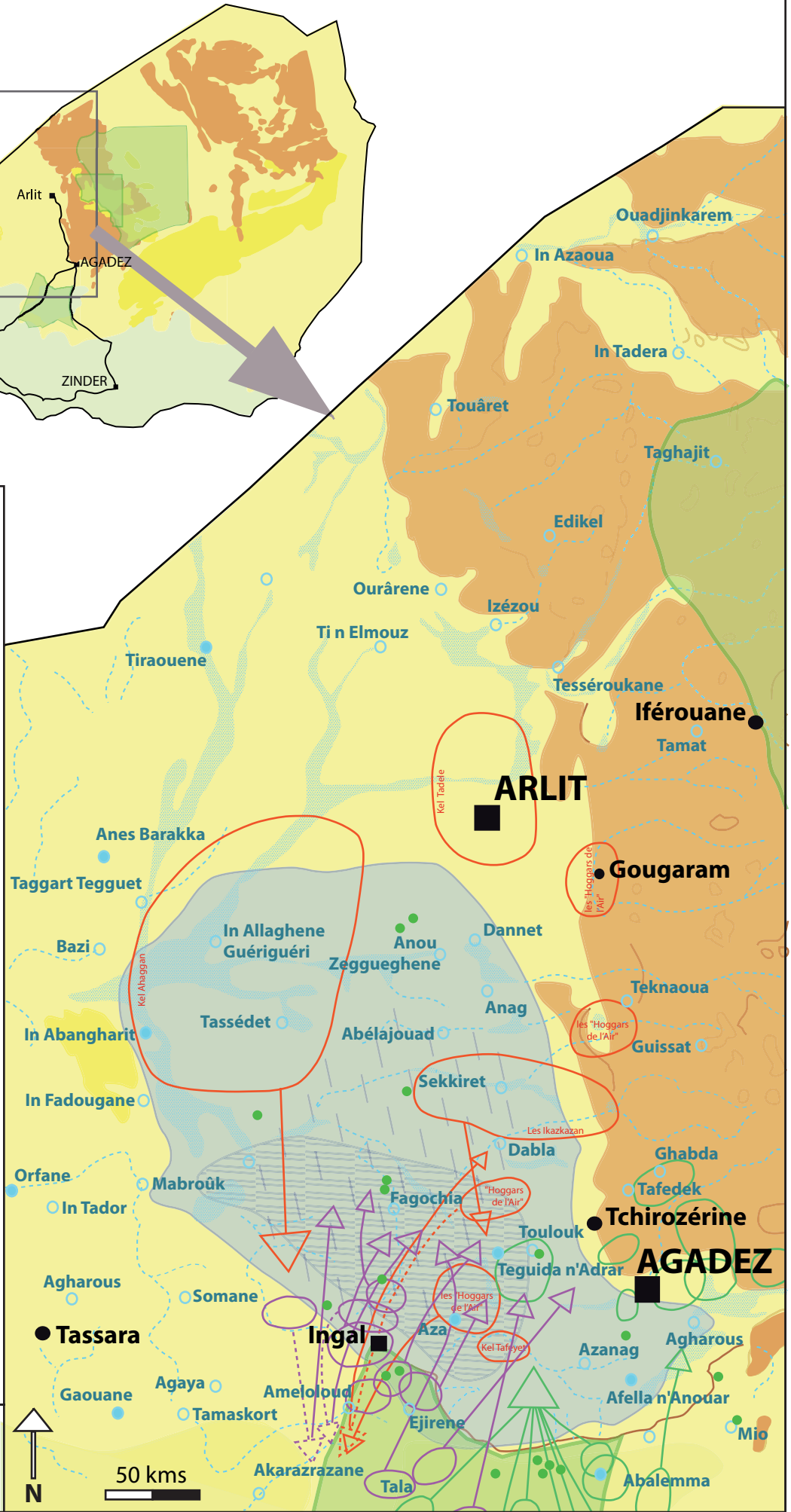
The Tuareg way of life : a precious balance



NIGER



- Town – village
- Watering hole – Well
- Archeological site
- Reliefs
- Sand
- Wetlands
- Secondary stream
- Groundwater: Agadez sandstone – Springing Groundwater
- Nature reserve
- Dry season areas of transhumance of permanent nomadic
- Dry season areas of transhumance of Kel Ferwan tribes
- Dry season areas of transhumance of Kel Fadey tribes
- Rainy season (end of July- September) transhumance
- Successive movements of certain tribes at the beginning of and during the rainy season
- Area of the "Salt cure" (July, August, September)

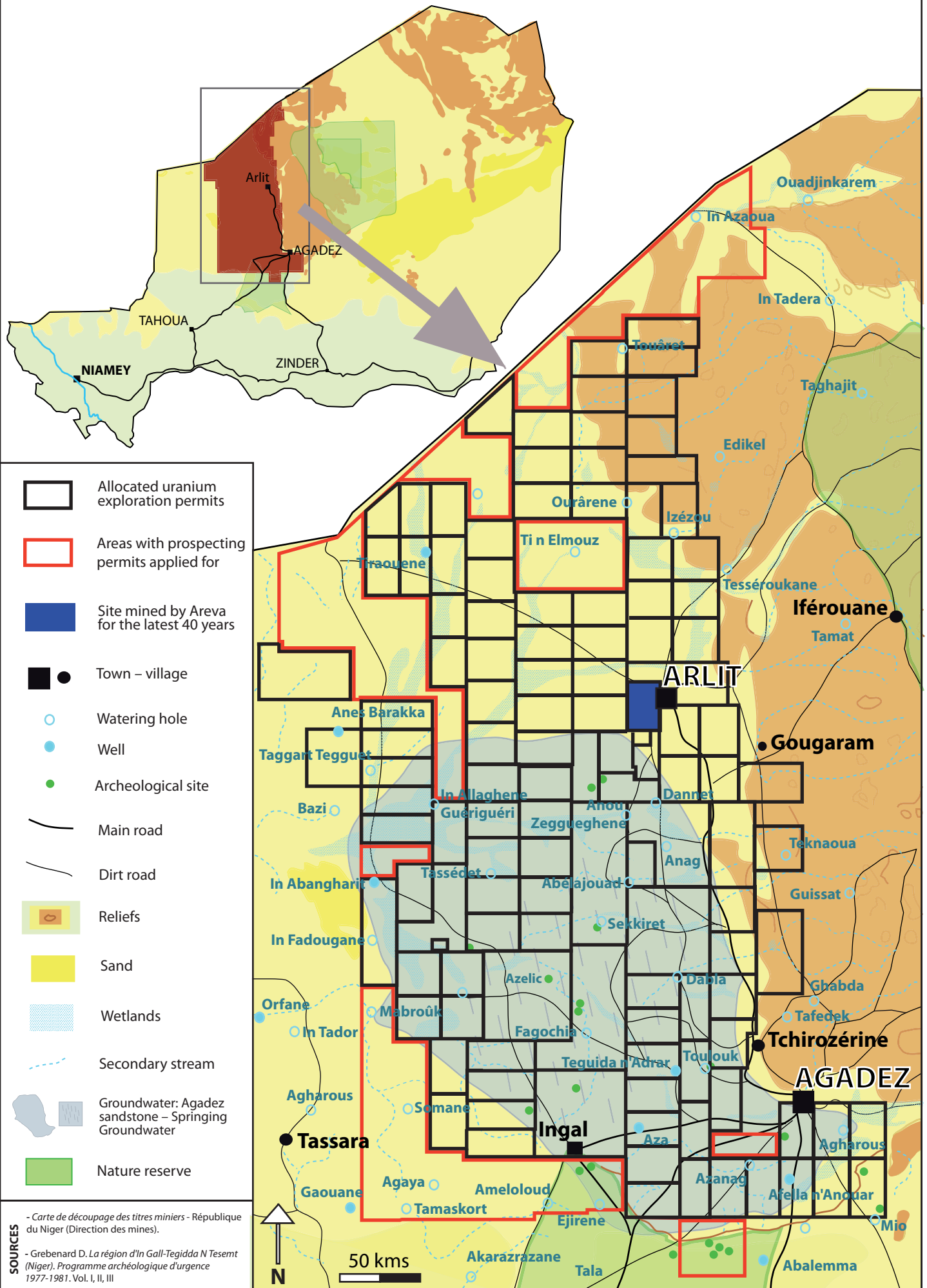


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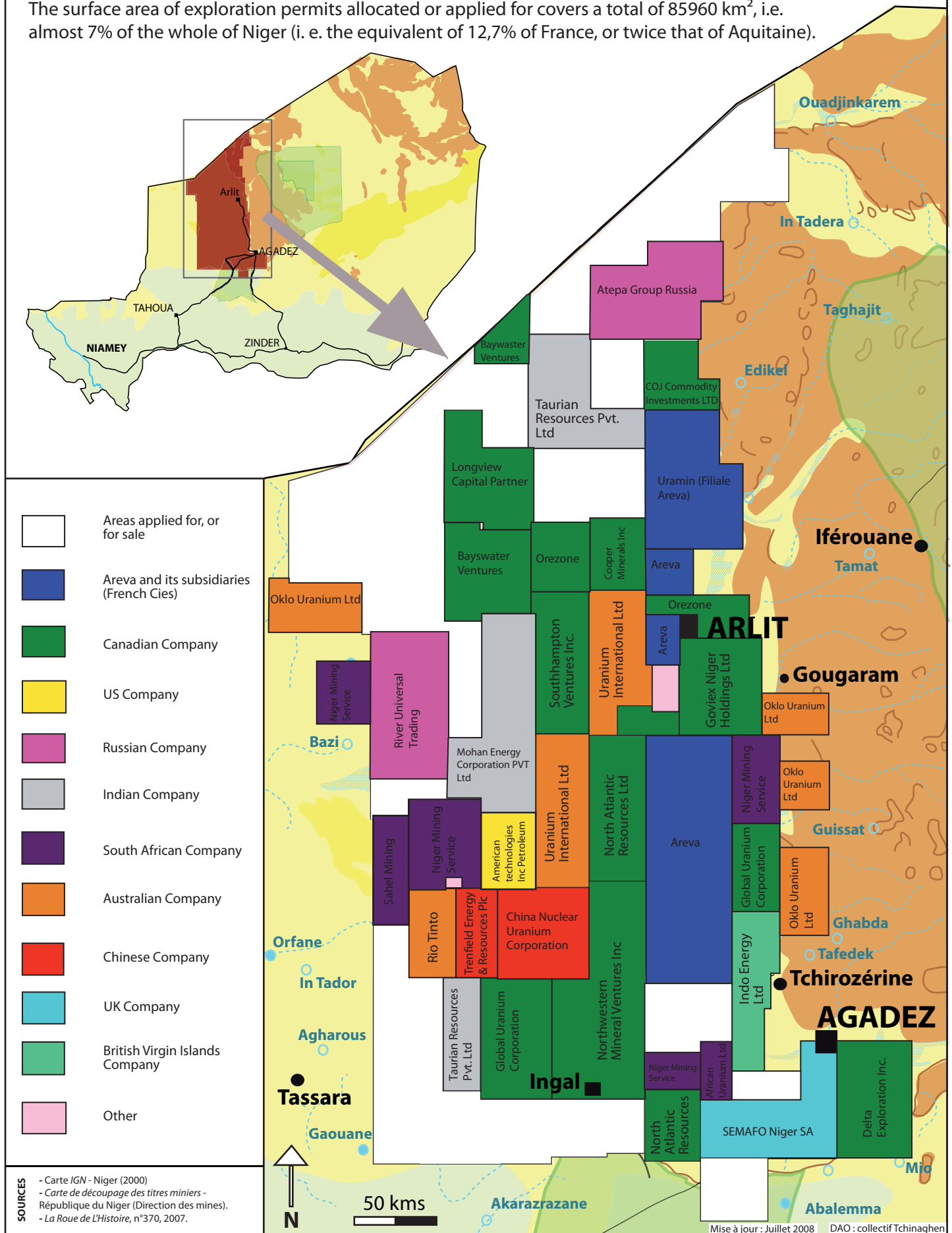


Indigenous populations threatened by uranium mining



Nuclear colonialism and agro-pastoral land despoilation by mining Companies

The surface area of exploration permits allocated or applied for covers a total of 85960 km², i.e. almost 7% of the whole of Niger (i. e. the equivalent of 12,7% of France, or twice that of Aquitaine).





REPORT ON A PREDICTED DESERT : IRHAZER PLAIN NEAR AGADEZ, NIGER

For thousand years, the Neolithic wandering population used to go to the huge Irhazer plain where they used to take their flocks to graze along the laid out by wells and springs paths. After the Garamantes, it's the Tuaregs, the Peulhs and, later, the Arabian Kounta tribes that have wandered in that boundlessness where they used to traditionally manage the means required by pastoral economy. Still nowadays, their herds and flocks use to be watered by the wells and the springs which pipe the ***Agadez sandstones water-bearing stratum***. This area is very important for animals in whole Niger. Every year, after the wintering, they walk several thousand kilometres, from South, to come and graze the new grass and to drink the heavily water. This diet and trip are quite salutary to the health and fattening of the animals.

The cultural exchanges and festivals used to last two or three months every year and get together 2/3 of the Nigerian live-stock: it's called the salt cure.

Compulsions by the surroundings:

The Agadez sandstones water-bearing stratum, is the only water resource in this area, it is fossil. The carbon 14 of its waters shows that the last time it was recharged was during the last rainy Neolithic period, about 3000 years ago, at the end of the paleo-climatic age in this part of Africa. Since, the water-level has been becoming inexorably empty, and especially more quickly as the resource, that's calculated to be about 1000 million m³, is getting more and more extracted.

Up to now, Agadez used to pipe the water it needed from the oued Teloua water- level which, was yearly filled up with the monsoon rains. This choice met an ethical hydro geological proceeding: to use fossil water only at the last moment.

But demographic increasing (150 000 inhabitants) and above all climatic alteration made the renewable resource too low. Since 2006, the town had to move its piping 35 km west and pipe 8000 m³ a day from the Agadez sandstones water-bearing stratum.

More and more wasting

In the age of president Kountché, in the early seventies, a pastoral hydrological project was planned in Irhazer plain: supposedly some twenty pumping into the Artesian belt of the water-bearing stratum. But carelessness, a lack of watching and maintenance of the sub-structures induced the decay of the outfits and a yearly leak of more than 1.5 million m³ of water which are evaporating away.



Unfortunately, this area is abounding in uranium and later the mines managers settled down; their behaviour can be summed up by "take and leave". Moreover the anomic waste of the mining resources (coal and uranium) is accompanied by the one of the water resources to the detriment of sustainable development, especially the tourist and pastoral occupations, because the resources aren't renewable.

For instance:

- 10 000 m³ a day have been piped at Arharous, since 1980, into the coal mines and Tchirozérine town,
- 20 000 m³ a day have been planned on by the COGEMA for AREVA's new uranium mine in Imouraren,
- 4000 m³ a day are being piped into Azelik uranium mine that's now beginning to be worked by Chinese company.

Moreover, the COMINAK and the SOMAIR, respectively in Akokan and Arlit towns, have already used 70% of the carboniferous water-bearing stratum Norther in the Tarat, by piping 22 000 m³ a day for 38 years. Now they're lacking of water resources and they're planning to use a 30 km long pipeline and to move and pipe west, that's to say... from the Agadez sandstones water-level !

17 research licences have recently been allowed by the Niamey ministry of Energy and Mines and these new activities are also going to contribute to irreversibly drain the water.

Waste risks becoming more pronounced. At the end of the seventies, a BDPA research reckoned it was possible to water 38 000 hectares in Irhazer plain. This fresh gold mine increased the supreme guide M. Kadafi's lust for geopolitical wealth; he recently proposed to pay for the plain to be developed as cereal growing, with the help of a huge amount of water that would naturally be piped from the Agadez sandstones underground water-level. But the thing is it doesn't take any notice of the peculiarity of the country and its pedological and climatic factors: soils are high-natroned (sodium bicarbonate), water contains a lot of sodium bicarbonate and, moreover, evaporation is very strong. All that may lead to an increase in salinity and degradation of the soils.

A surprising management

However, for a long time, one could have worried about the future of that area. In its 1990 report "Forward-looking study for an exploitation of the Agadez sandstones water-level through a Mathematical model", the NER/86/001 project by the PNUD and the Nigerian

ministry of Hydraulics and Environment was becoming alarmed about the irreversible consequences, for the water-level, of the short or rather short-dated planned pumpings.

Nigerian companies and public authorities don't really care about water quantitative management. In a scarce water area, an ethical behaviour would be to save it for the future generations. Now, by giving the mining towns inhabitants free water, the heads of mines have induced a needless and irresponsible overconsumption. Such is the waste that an inhabitant uses 500 litres a day on average, that is to say 5 times a European's consumption.

But those companies don't care either about the quality of water. In Arlit and Akokan as at Tchirozérine, the so-called drinking water is probably contaminated with nitrates from the mines fires that use nitroglycerin and ammonium nitrate as an explosive. Besides, for the sake of economy, waste water is straight used for watering and typhoid fever has become endemic around.

Which future ?

As 25 million m³ are currently yearly piped (and that's not exhaustive if account is taken of the speeding up of the delivery of uranium mining licences, of the prospective project of salinas at Tédikelt and of the watering huge projects...), it's easy to work out that the Agadez sandstones water-level will be totally empty within 40 years from now.

But mining companies don't worry about this predicted disaster because uranium deposits will have been exhausted too and the area won't be of any more interest for them and their shareholders.

Their leaving will sound the knell of development, the end of pastoral economy (which is the second in the country, that's to say 11% of the GDP) and that of tourism. If the Nigerian authorities don't quickly react, in 2050 Agadez town, the Air main town and sultanate, will be deserted by lack of water and any form of human and tourist development will be given up.





BACKWARDS COUNTING OF A GIVEN NOTICE DESASTER: AREVA IN ARLIT FOR 40 YEARS

By allowing 139 uranium research licences, the Nigerian government is opening the doors to a sanitary, humanitarian and environmental disaster.

The consequences already seen by that of the Arlit mine (250 km North of Agadez), depicts what the Northern Niger is destined to see on a 85960 km² area.

AREVA has been using Nigerian uranium for 40 years in Arlit, by means of 2 sub-companies:

- the SOMAIR (AIR Mining SOciety, set up in 1968) which works uranium mining in open quarries (lodes with a 3 to 3,5 kg uranium content for 1000 kg), at about 7 km Northern West of Arlit. It now produces 1277000 kg of uranium every year. Loads are 35 to 80 metres deep.
- the COMINAK (AKouta MINing COmpany, set up in 1974) which works uranium mining in underground galleries (load with a 4,5 to 5 kg uranium content for 1000 kg), at about 6km Southern West of Arlit. The company admits to produce nearly 2000000 kg of uranium every year. The mine is 250 metres deep, and it would be, according to AREVA, the biggest underground uranium mine in the world (250 kilometres of galleries).

Arlit and Akokan towns (which have more than 86000 inhabitants) have been built up ex-nihilo right in the desert to cope with the mines workers. Drinking water is supplied by the mining companies by sinking into fossil underground water-levels.

A coal mine has been opened up at about 190 km South of Arlit to feed a steam generating station, organized by the SONICHAIR in order to supply the 2 uranium works and supply the Arlit and Akokan towns with the required electricity.

As a result of a request of the Non Governmental Organization AGHIR IN'MAN chairman, Mr Almoustapha Alhacen, a mission joining up CRIIRAD (Independent Research and Information on Radio-activity Commission) and SHERPA association (connecting up jurists defending workers' and populations' rights in any country face to world-wide companies) has been placed in position to draw up a sanitary statement as well as to also analyse the environment in a radiological manner.





Workmen's safety outfits have been non-existent for a long time and are still inadequate.

The below is according to the different evidence collected, which have been corroborated by the SOMAIR workers' trade-union representatives:

- The first individual safety outfits such masks were placed at the workers' disposal in the middle of the eighties - nearly 15 years after the beginning of the mining.
- During the first years of the uranium lodes that were being excavated, the miners used to work with their plain clothes. So they used to come back home with the clothes they had worn to work, which were covered with ore dust.

The problem of the sub-contractors' workers also claims our attention. As a matter of fact, their direct employer should give them safety outfits. Those employers are not carrying out their duties in supplying the necessary uniform, and it is the mining companies that supply masks and gloves. Now these safety uniforms are not yet placed to the sub-contractors disposal.

Following a visit by the factory inspector in 2003, a letter has been sent to the COMINAK manager about supplying sub-contractors with safety outfits. The inspector wrote: *"I'll ask you to watch and see to it that the sub-contractors' employees working down below the mine get the same safety conditions than your own employees. I'm caring about the principle of equality in protecting indiscriminately all the workers from the same risk in common surroundings"*.

That revelation is rather upsetting: it means that, till very lately, some drillers working down below in those mines were not properly protected.

A fresh outbreak of phthisis and lung cancer has been noticed amongst the SOMAIR and COMINAK workers; some of them have been "forced to leave" without any compensation.

In Arlit hospital, which was first financed by AREVA for the expatriated workers, then opened to the natives, the secret was kept. The sick are never informed of the illnesses they are suffering from. There was never any notification of occupational diseases, not a cancer.

Under the cover of anonymity, an ex-hospital agent asserts that the secret has been arranged and plotted by AREVA; when a sick person has been attacked by a cancer, he is said having caught SIDA or paludism.



The workers and the inhabitants of the mining-district are exposed to ionizer radiations through water.

Water is drawn from the mine subsoil. It is a fossil underground water-level, and therefore unrenueable. It is used in the mines, but also freely shared out to 70000 inhabitants.

"Chemical, bacteriological and radiological analyses, carried out at regular intervals, reveal no contamination."(Official statement by AREVA-COGEMA, on December 23rd 2003).

There are now numerous inhabitants who suffer from diarrhoea after having drunk that water. But it is the analysis of that water carried out by the CRIIRAD which is the most upsetting:

- A first analysis carried out on December 2003 shows that the water contains an alpha activity index 10 (urban area) to 110 (industrial area) times superior to the threshold laid by the World Health Organization (WHO).
- A second analysis on November 2004 shows values of 7 to 78 times superior to the threshold laid by the WHO.

The contamination of the waters is known by AREVA: as a matter of fact a print of the analysis carried out by the ALGADE laboratory, an AREVA sub-contractor, has been committed to TV reporters. Here is what is appearing:

"We must notice that the two taken by high pressure 2 and ZI samples don't comply with the potability tests of the waters, say the total alpha index < 0, 1 Bq in a litre and the total beta index < 1 Bq in a litre. The first taken by high pressure sample is slightly exceeding the total alpha index". "The analysis on the second half of the year corroborates the results on the first half of the year". February 2004.

Those results and the preceding statement do not correspond with the fact that AREVA pretends to make no secret.





Environmental pollution

Arlit town is suffering from another pollution, the contaminated old iron which is sold at the iron market is then used in the shanty-towns. The radiation level of that old iron can reach more than 40 times the threshold of the normal. Populations are running a risk of external irradiation, but also of inhalation and ingestion of the dusts.

On December 2003, AREVA was asked by the CRIIRAD, SHERPA and the Non Governmental Organization AGHIR IN'MAN to detect and to buy back the contaminated old iron. It is more than one year later that AREVA took the necessary steps.

Further more, the working of the two mines undoubtedly induces the amount of radio- active gas and dust in the atmosphere.

The radio-active dust which is caused by storing the residues can be spread by the wind. These radio-active residues are long physical period refuses and some of them have got a very heavy toxicity.

All around Arlit there is neither fauna nor flora, and the knock on effect of this is no more grazing.

A tell-tale accident: carriage of uranium at high concentration on January 2004

Uranium is dispatched by lorries to Cotonou harbour (Benin) which is then transported to Marseille (France).

On January 23rd 2004, one of these lorries fell over on a road near Dosso (in Southern Niger), 17 uranium barrels spread over the scene of the accident.

A month later, samples were taken and analysed by the CRIIRAD, they showed figures of over 2000 times superior to the normal contamination, entailing unacceptable risks of cancer by contact and inhalation.

On February 2005, French TV Canal + reporters collected large amounts of evidence which bespoke of children having played with that soil and therefore those toxic substances.

In spite of the revelation of the Niamey Radioprotection National Center, Areva took more than a month to decontaminate the area.



NORTHERN NIGER ACTUALITY



A rising in arms

On February 7th 2007, a group of men in arms assailed the military post at Iferouane, a place in the heart of the Air Mountains, North of Agadez. The first attack was followed by many others and, especially, some weeks later, the one of Tezarzeit where, this time, several hundred rebels took control over a whole company of the regular Nigerian forces.

Ever since then the MNJ (Nigerian Movement for Justice), though with a large Tuareg majority, proclaimed itself a pluriethnic movement, with a national dimension. It called for the present president Mamadou Tandja not only for a complete real application of the signed in 1995 peace treaty, but also and above all for a more levelling redistribution of the resources generated by the under-ground revenues.

As the President refused to negotiate with those he is regarding as common traffickers and gangsters in arms, the MNJ has put up a resistance which, for more than a year, has been upsetting the attempts at a military settlement, the only option that the government have proposed.

Alone, president Tandja sets up from Niamey many disinformation and intimidation campaigns to bring discredit on a movement which defends a political legitimacy that State still refuses to give it.

As long ago as Summer 2007, a lot of Nigerian and foreign people of consequence unsuccessfully declared for a speedy settlement of the conflict, pleading to early negotiations between the two parties.

Settlement by taking up arms was, Aghali Lambo, the MNJ president, saying, the last apt settlement to induce State to reconsider the social policy that has been applied for decades in a Northern Niger which is eaten by the bitterest poverty in the world.

The more or less long-dated disappearance of the wandering in Western Sahara peoples, the lack of admission of their particularisms, their assertion of their right to live free on their ancestral land, are facts which the MNJ wants to bring to knowledge of international opinion.



FLOUTED HUMAN RIGHTS

Since August 24, 2007, the Agadez region has been declared under a state of alert (*“mise en garde”*) by a presidential decree which has been constantly renewed¹ and has allowed authorities to take exceptional measures on the grounds of vague and unprecise legislation². Defense and security forces have thereby received unlimited powers to respond to the insecurity caused by the opposition movement called *Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice* (hereafter “MNJ”), since February 2007.

In addition to the violation of the Government’s engagements in the framework of the Peace Agreements of 1995³, these measures are responsible each day for causing restrictions and serious and unjustified violations of fundamental human rights guaranteed by international instruments to which Niger is a state party. Furthermore, the situation contributes to the accelerated aggravation of the living conditions of local populations caused by the political, economic and environmental consequences of the booming exploitation of uranium in Niger.

As a state party to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights⁴, which reaffirms the indivisibility and effectiveness of these rights, Niger is bound to respect economic, social and cultural rights at the same level as civil and political rights. Therefore, the state of Niger cannot justify taking regressive measures ignoring its’ populations’ minimum means of subsistence⁵, and must, on the contrary, fulfill its specific obligations to respect, protect and enforce the rights which have been recognised.

Respect for social justice and human rights are conditions for durable peace and the continuing deterioration of the living conditions of the region’s populations has contributed to their marginalization and exacerbated the tensions, pushing portions of these populations to involvement in the conflict. In this sense, the current situation is linked to the shortcomings of a real democratic setting and to the failure of post conflict management in its military, economic, social and political aspects.

Attacks against civilian populations: a violation of international humanitarian law

Extrajudicial executions, rape, destruction of vital livestock necessary for the survival of civilian populations, among others... These actions, whether intentional or not, allegedly committed by the Armed Forces of Niger (hereafter FAN), constitute war crimes.

¹ On May 23, 2008, the President of Niger, Mamadou Tandja, signed the Decree renewing the ‘mise en garde’ in the Agadez region for three months.

² See Statute no. 2002-30 of December 12, 2002, concerning the general organisation of National Defense.

³ See the final Peace Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Niger et and the Organisation of the Armes Resistance (*Organisation de la Résistance Armée*), of Ouagadougou, April 15th, 1995.

⁴ See articles 5 to 18 of the African Charter; Decision 155/96 of the African Commission, 30th session, Banjul, October 2001.

⁵ See article 2 of the ICESCR ; also see the Limburg Principles and the Maastricht Guidelines.

Moreover, access to the region has been blocked by the authorities, preventing civilian populations from receiving any aid or humanitarian assistance from the outside.

International humanitarian law, however, protects civilian populations against all inhuman treatment and against all deliberate or indiscriminate attacks, or the destruction of their livelihoods. In particular, the parties to a conflict have the obligation to respect common article 3 of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, the Second Additional Protocol of 1977, and international humanitarian customary law.

Violation of non-derogable human rights

The measures taken by the authorities, in response to the conflict with the MNJ, should not serve as a means to violate the rights which, under international law, can in no circumstances be derogated. According to the two International Covenants of 1966, and to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights⁷, all persons are entitled to the right to life and the right not to be subjected to torture or to other cruel treatment, the right not to be subjected to arbitrary arrest, the right not to be deprived of liberty and the right to be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person. Niger, as a state party to the three instruments has the obligation to respect these non-derogable rights, even when a state of emergency has been declared, and cannot take disproportionate, unlimited or unjustified measures which could infringe these rights⁸.

Violent acts committed by members of the Niger military forces

Violent acts, implicating members of the Niger military forces have been inflicted upon local civilian populations, in the form of collective punishments, compromising the lives of thousands of civilians already affected by poverty and by the lack of access to basic necessities. Since the '*mise en garde*' fear and despair have taken over these populations which have been forced to hide or flee.

Moreover, these populations, and in particular the Tuareg peoples, have been, and continue to be, victims of discrimination. A denigration campaign is also led by the authorities, for the attention of the rest of the population of Niger which ignores, due of the imposed blockade, the reality of the violence.

Yet, all forms of discrimination or distinction, on any grounds such as ethnic origins, political or other opinions, national or social origins, are prohibited under international law. Likewise, any advocacy of hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence is and should be prohibited by law⁹.

Extrajudicial executions and acts of torture committed by members of the army

Since the beginning of the conflict, and according to testimonies by civil society, in particular Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and the Niger Association for Human Rights (*Association Nigérienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme - ANDDH*), members of the Niger army have summarily executed many innocent civilians in reprisal to

⁶ International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) of December 16, 1966 and International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) also of December 16, 1966.

⁷ The African Charter was adopted on June 28, 1981, in Nairobi and ratified by Niger on July 21, 1986. Niger is also a state party to the ICCPR since 1986, with entry into force on June 7, 1986; to its First Optional Protocol, since March 7, 1986 ; and to the ICESCR since March 7, 1986.

⁸ Pursuant to article 4 (2) of the ICCPR no derogation from articles 6, 7, 8(§ 1 and 2) and articles 11, 15, 16 may be made.

⁹ Article 2 of the African Charter, the ICCPR and the ICESCR ; also see article 20 of the ICCPR.

the attacks of the MNJ. These extrajudicial executions, frequent in the bushes, are deliberate and aimed, with no distinction, both at civilians and combatants.

Moreover, several civilians, mainly arbitrarily detained Tuaregs, have been tortured: cigarette burns, beatings with belts, humiliations and other physical abuses...

As a result, since the beginning of the conflict, elements of the Niger army have violated the non-derogable right to life, integrity and dignity, despite the fact that Niger, as a State party to the African Charter and to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, has recognised that every human being has the inherent right to life, that this right should be protected by law, that no one may be arbitrarily deprived of his life, and that no one may be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment¹⁰, and despite the fact that Niger has therefore recognised that human beings are inviolable¹¹.

Arbitrary detention: a current practice

Arbitrary arrests and detentions have caused a true psychosis for the population of the Agadez region. At least a hundred civilians of the region have been detained arbitrarily and without charge; arrested by illegal intrusion in their homes, at any time, day or night, and regardless of the presumption of innocence and defense rights. They are not presented before a judge and are taken far away from their families.

These practices haunt the daily life of the entire population of the region, whilst the State of Niger has recognised that everyone has the right to liberty and security of person, that no one may be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention and that no one may be deprived of his liberty except on such grounds and in accordance with such procedure as are established by law¹².

The reign of impunity: absence of fair trials and independent investigations

The populations of the region are denied access to justice and to an impartial and independent tribunal. In the present context, impunity is the key word¹³. An example in this sense is a report of the army mentioning the involvement of soldiers in the 'accidental' assassination of seven civilians in the course of a military operation carried out in the East of the Agadez region on September 9th, 2007. The authorities have taken no action to clarify the circumstances of these violations, nor to find and punish the persons responsible for them.

Under international law, however, authorities have the duty to take all the necessary measures to guarantee effective remedies for all victims of a violation – even when committed by persons acting in the exercise of their official duties – and to undertake independent and immediate investigations and proper prosecutions.

We also recall that in 1993, the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations declared it was extremely preoccupied with the cases of extrajudicial executions, torture and arbitrary arrests of Tuaregs, implicating the armed forces, during the unrest that ruled at the time.

¹⁰ Article 5 of the ICCPR ; Niger is a state party to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment of December 10, 1984.

¹¹ See article 6 of the ICCPR and article 4 of the African Charter.

¹² See article 6 of the African Charter and articles 9 and 10 of the ICCPR.

¹³ See article 2 of the ICCPR ; also see articles 7 and 26 of the African Charter and article 14 of the ICCPR.

The Committee deplored the fact that these cases had not been the object of investigations on behalf of the authorities or had led to a form of remedy, and that the responsible public agents had neither been judged nor punished for their acts¹⁴.

Violation of freedom of expression



A climate of suspicion, unjustified and excessive mistrust, rules over the media wishing to inform on the situation of the Agadez region. Before the 'mise en garde', the authorities threatened journalists and suspended the circulation of newspapers as well as radio broadcasts, in particular of Radio France International (R.F.I.).

These facts have been aggravated since the beginning of the conflict in the Agadez region :

- On August 8, 2007, the Superior Council of Communication (*Conseil Supérieur de la Communication*, hereafter CSC) decided to forbid all debates on the radio concerning the situation in the Agadez region;
- On April 22, 2008, the CSC ordered the closing down of Sahara FM, the main private radio of Agadez, on the grounds that it would be dangerous in "*broadcasting calls for ethnic hatred*" and "*information draining the spirits of the military*", and would lead to "*the same propaganda against Arevá*" that the MNJ uses to accuse the corporation of exploiting Niger uranium for 40 years and without profiting the local tuareg populations. In reality, Sahara FM had broadcasted accounts given by gardeners stating that they had been beaten and mistreated by the military near Agadez, and a local newspaper article on the radioactive effects of uranium on the groundwater;
- On June 30, 2008, the Minister of Communication announced the closing down of the house of press (*maison de la presse*), on the grounds that the site served as a "*bastion for the western powers*" and supported a "*collusion of French and American interests*". Member organisations strongly condemned this decision and denounced the Government's interference in the management of associations, in violation of the Laws of the Republic.

Furthermore, journalists cannot carry out their functions without risking arbitrary detention and groundless charges for simply having contact with the different parties to the conflict. Mr. Kaka, director of the private Radio 'Saraouniya', and correspondent for RFI and RSF, and et Mr. Manzo Diallo, publishing director of the fortnightly Air Info – sole independent newspaper of Northern Niger were arbitrarily detained and charged respectively with "*complicity to undermine the authority of the State*" ("*complicité d'atteinte à l'autorité de l'Etat*") and "criminal conspiracy". M. Diallo was "provisionnally" set free on February 6, 2008. M. Kaka was released, also "provisionnally", on October 7, 2008.

According to international human rights law, the right to information, freedom of expression and opinion cannot be flouted or unfairly restricted, even in the context of a state of emergency or an exceptional regime. In this sens, the state of Niger must comply with its international commitments on the grounds of which it has recognised that: "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in

¹⁴ See Final Observations of the Human Rights Committee : Niger, April 29, 1993 (Doc. CCPR/C/79/Add.17).

print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice” and that “Everyone shall have the right to hold opinions without interference”¹⁵.

Denial of peoples’ rights

Beyond the fact that they cannot freely dispose over their natural resources, the populations of the region have no access whatsoever to the profit the authorities and private companies make from these resources, and are left, helplessly, to watch the destruction of their patrimony and their land.

Since the signature of the Peace Agreements of 1995, decentralisation has remained unfinished. Likewise, the transfer of 15% of the State’s mining income to the villages as decided in 2006 has not been implemented yet. Even worse, new mining licences have been granted without consultation and without any compensation for the local populations (at least 30 000 persons, mainly Tuareg), although their ancestral territories have been conceded to these companies, with the heavy consequences that have followed.

International law has expressly recognised the right of all peoples to equality, to existence, as well as the unquestionable and inalienable right to self-determination and to freely dispose of their wealth and natural resources¹⁶. In addition, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples¹⁷ has established a universal framework of minimum norms for survival, dignity, well-being and the rights of indigenous peoples.

Consequently, it is within the local populations’ right to demand, at a minimum, that the mining policy of the country takes into account the essential character of these territories for their lives and subsistence.

Systematic destruction of means of subsistence: violation of the right to food...



Destruction de bétail par l’armée – Août 2007

The populations of the region have always found difficulties to ensure their survival. The situation has worsened due to the blockade forbidding all humanitarian aid and all vital control of indicators, of the insecurity and of the irregularities in the supply of essential products which are unaffordable.

Members of the army have committed actions of systematic destruction of large quantities of livestock pertaining to the nomads and which

have been arbitrarily targetted on the grounds of a ‘presumed’ support given to the MNJ.

For these populations (Tuaregs in majority and Peuls Walabe), livestock farming is the main means of subsistence and income source.

We recall that Niger has recognised that “*in no case may a people be deprived of its own means of subsistence*”¹⁸, as well as the fundamental right of everyone to adequate food¹⁹.

¹⁵ See article 9 of the African Charter and article 19 of the ICCPR.

¹⁶ See articles 19 to 24 of the African Charter ; also see article 1 of the ICCPR.

¹⁷ General Assembly Resolution A/61/L.67, adopted on September 13, 2007 ; by a majority of 144 states, against 4 (Australia, Canada, United States of America, New Zealand), and 11 abstainees (eg. Colombia, Burundi, Nigeria...). Niger voted in favour of the adoption of the Resolution.

¹⁸ This is one of the first requirements set out by article 1 §2 of the ICESCR.

Consequently, the authorities have the duty, at all times, to respect the right to food by adopting the necessary measures to improve methods of production, conservation and equitable distribution of food resources. They have the minimum obligation not to destroy, contaminate food resources, or allow anyone to commit these violations.

In spite of its commitments, it appears that Niger does not respect or protect the right to food and is even responsible for its violation.

Regular violations of the right to water and, consequently, of other rights

Access to water of the populations of the Agadez region is limited, or even impossible, due to pollution and forced displacement, both in times of conflict and peace. In the presence of mining companies, these populations see their access to certain watering places prohibited. Moreover, the companies that draw water from non renewable water-tables distribute polluted water, after having used it, to the inhabitants and market gardeners, provoking hydric illnesses, without even hiding it.

It is however incumbent upon Niger, in accordance with the right to water, to guarantee the availability, physical and economic access, as well as the good quality of distributed water. Failing to do so, authorities have the obligation to guarantee the right to obtain reparation before the tribunals²⁰.

Lack of access to healthcare

The populations of the region have always suffered from lack of access to healthcare. Even though the hospital of Arlit, which is financed by Areva, is destined, in principle, to respond to the sanitary needs of local populations, its services are dominated by opacity and false diagnosis that cover the true consequences of uranium exploitation.

With the conflict, the sanitary situation, in particular the situation of the displaced populations, has worsened due to the blockade forbidding access of NGOs to the region. The populations are isolated and deprived of all aid, care and medical supplies, whereas Niger recognises for all individuals the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The State of Niger must now take the necessary steps to protect the health of its population and to ensure medical assistance²¹.

Forced evictions and lack of access to housing

The populations of the region, both nomads and sedentary, have not only been chased by the effects of the mining exploitation and become victims of forced evictions, carried out with no fair compensation. They are also the victims of massive and forced displacement caused by the violence of the conflict and harassment by elements of the armed forces.

Currently, many villages are deserted. Their residents have fled, are strayed in the bushes, have become tramps,



¹⁹ Article 2, (2) of the ICCPR; also see article 11 of the ICESCR.

²⁰ According to the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' General Observation no. 15 (2002), the right to water is implicitly recognised by article 11 of the ICESCR.

²¹ See in particular article 12 of the ICESCR and article 16 of the African Charter.

left to live precariously in the slums – for example Arlit, which is overpopulated and a source of hydric illnesses and epidemics – or have become refugees in neighbouring countries. Near Assouas, the Chinese uranium exploitation company CNUC has pushed populations out of its concession site. Today, most of the population of Iférouane has fled, partly towards the region of Agadez or Arlit, but mostly, and especially the women, children and elderly are roaming in the surrounding areas of Tchintellous and Timia. On June 26, 2008, the village called Route-Tawa-Arlit (R.T.A.) was totally deserted after its inhabitants received threats directed to them and after harassment by members of the armed forces... Over 150 families were displaced, their homes and gardens being completely destroyed, and have been provided with no shelter.

The authorities nevertheless have the minimum obligation to respect, protect and implement the right to adequate housing, by refraining from destroying houses or shelters and preventing all violations committed by third parties²². They also have the duty to guarantee legal protection against harassment and forced evictions which are responsible for creating despair, poverty and loss of means of subsistence. The term 'forced evictions' is defined as the "*permanent or temporary removal against their will of individuals, families and/or communities from the homes and/or land which they occupy, without the provision of, and access to, appropriate forms of legal or other protection*"²³. It should also be noted that the right to shelter includes the right to live in a peaceful environment, whether under a roof or not.

Denial of cultural life

The populations of the North of the country, which are living on the margin of all social, economic or cultural development, have been confronted with the impossibility to enjoy their right to cultural life, as a result of the forced evictions and the violence of the conflict. Likewise, many gatherings or traditional festivities cannot take place because of the mining activities.

The State of Niger has however recognised the right for all peoples to be equal, the right to cultural life and to the protection of traditional community values. Therefore, the State has the duty to respect and protect these rights, in particular from third parties²⁴. Nevertheless, the authorities have contributed to and facilitated violations of these rights by authorizing mining companies to carry out their activities notwithstanding the considerable damages affecting the well-being and the cultural rights of the populations in the region.

Violation of the right to a healthy environment

The populations of the Agadez region, and particularly the populations of Arlit, are living in a polluted and radioactive environment, whilst no previous impact study has been carried out and no assistance or fair compensation have been offered. The situation is close to affecting 300 000 persons living on the territory which has been the object of uranium research licences.

²² According to the Commission this right is implicitly recognised by virtue of combined articles 14, 16 and 18(1) of the Charter.

²³ Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' General Observation no. 7 (1997) on the right to adequate housing. The same definition is used by the African Commission.

²⁴ See Communication 74/92, *Union des Jeunes avocats*, Tchad. Also see article 17 of the African Charter.

However, Niger recognises that all peoples have the right to “a *general satisfactory environment favourable to their development*”²⁵. This right, which forbids any direct threat on the health and the environment of its populations, requires the authorities to “*take reasonable and other measures to prevent pollution and ecological degradation, to promote conservation, and to secure an ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources*”²⁶. According to the African Commission, compliance with this right “*includes ordering or at least permitting independent scientific monitoring of threatened environments, requiring and publicising environmental and social impact studies prior to any major industrial development, undertaking appropriate monitoring and providing information to those communities exposed to hazardous materials and activities and providing meaningful opportunities for individuals to be heard and to participate in the development decisions affecting their communities*”.

The State of Niger is thus required to refrain from undertaking, sponsoring or tolerating any action, policy or legal measure which would violate an individual’s right to its integrity and its environment.



²⁵ See article 24 of the African Charter and the Decision on Communication 155/96 of the African Commission. Also see article 12 of the ICESCR.

²⁶ *Idem*. In addition, see General Observation no. 14 (2000) of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

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NIGER: NGOs in north calling for peace



Photo: [Nicholas Reader/IRIN](#)

Nigeriens regularly strike over the cost of basics, like mobile phone calls

NIAMEY, 29 August 2007 (IRIN) - A mayor in northern Niger has warned that civilians are increasingly being caught up in insecurity caused by fighting between the Nigerien army and armed militias, and has called for an end to hostilities.

"The goal is to limit the humanitarian crisis which is emerging, and to appeal to the warring parties for a halt in hostilities in the interest of everyone," Issouf Ag Maha, the mayor of Tchirozerine and the head of a local association of non-government organisations (NGOs), told IRIN.

Despite Maha's call, analysts warn that insecurity in the region may be escalating, and possibly spilling into neighbouring countries. In two separate incidents in the last week the army in Mali has been attacked by armed fighters, although both the Malian authorities and the main militia group operating in Niger – the Nigerien Movement for Justice (MNJ) – have denied the attacks were related to the situation in Niger.

Nigerien President Mamadou Tanja has imposed a three-month state of emergency on the Agadez region of northern Niger.

"The state of emergency gives powers to the police, and defence and security forces to assure the defence and the security of citizens on the territory. The measure is made necessary by the insecurity which is increasing in the north. It is necessary to control the movements of people and goods in this region," Communications Minister Mohamed Ben Omar told IRIN.

Human rights groups have reacted cautiously. "The state of emergency is legal, even if it does curtail some of our freedoms," said Badje Hima, spokesperson for the Nigerien Association for Human Rights (ANDDH). "Our hope is that it will not become a source of frustration."

In the absence of peace, Maha has formed a collective of local NGOs working to provide local people with food, shelter and medical assistance. The region is believed to have been hard hit by flooding in August, but international aid agencies have not been able to reach many parts of the north because of landmines laid by the army and militias.

"The objective is to unite our energies, centralise aid and act rapidly and efficiently, in the interest of the civilian population," Maha said of the NGO collective, which is called TCHINAGHEN.

Agadez was used as a stronghold by rebels from the Touareg ethnic group who waged a civil war against the Nigerien government from 1990 until 1995. ANDDH's Hima blames the current rebellion on the government's failure to keep to the terms of a 1995 agreement with Touaregs. However, the government accuses the MNJ of being a front for bandits and drug smugglers profiting from the instability.

Report can be found online at:

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=74009>



NIGER: Dozens arrested in north as critics targeted

DAKAR, 18 September 2007 (IRIN) - Civilians in northern Niger are being arrested without charge after the government declared a state of emergency there last month, according to the governor of Agadez.



Photo: IRIN/ G. Cranston

Under a state of alert, the Niger government is arresting people in the north and holding them indefinitely, activists and local government officials say

"We are in a situation of insecurity," said Malam Boukar Abba, who confirmed 10 people had been arrested there since a state of alert was declared by the president on 24 August. "We have to ensure public security. This isn't exceptional. It's not unique to Niger."

Activists in Niger said the government is targeting dissenters who criticise its refusal to negotiate with a rebel group, the Nigerien Movement for Justice (MNJ), which has claimed responsibility for dozens of attacks on the army in northern Niger this year - and the killing of at least 45 Nigerien soldiers.

"Asking for dialogue is to go against what the government wants," said one member of the Association of Youth for Sustainable Development (AJDD), whose president, Agali Aboubacar, has been held in a military camp since 26 August when his association organised a peace march in Agadez.

Niger's media has been complaining of harassment when it reports on the region.

"They can arrest anyone at any time," warned Oumarou Keïta, editor-in-chief of *Le Républicain* newspaper and secretary-general of the Union of Private Nigerien Journalists (UJPN), who compared the current state of affairs to pre-1991, when Niger was run by the military. "Giving your opinion on the conflict is enough to get you arrested."

Critics targeted

Northern Niger has been in an official state of alert since 24 August which gives the army powers to arrest people indefinitely without charge for the duration of the three month state of alert.

The Nigerien Association for the Defence of Human Rights (ANDDH) said over 100 people were arrested without charge in the Agadez region in the weeks leading up to the state of alert, but were released within 48 hours, as the law requires.

Agadez governor Abba told IRIN that 10 other civilians had since been arrested since the state of alert and were still being held. Some of the detainees appeared briefly in court in Agadez on 17 September but it was not clear if they have been charged and if so with what.

Mano Aghali, member of parliament for the Agadez region representing the ruling party, the National Movement for a Developing Society, told IRIN: "These people who are being held without trial in a situation which is not normal - that's my fundamental worry in the north today."

He said people in northern Niger are "caught between the rebellion on one side and the

army on the other”, and “many people are scared sick when they go out.”

Those arrested - from the northern towns of Agadez and Arlit - are accused of complicity with the rebels, but “their arrests aren’t based on real facts,” Aghali said. “The majority are innocent.”

Press freedom

Media rights group the Committee to Protect Journalists (CDJ) said press freedom in Niger had deteriorated as the conflict with the MNJ had intensified in the last few months.

Niger’s High Council on Communications in July suspended Radio France Internationale (RFI) for one month for broadcasting “false information”. In June, the Council suspended the bi-monthly Agadez-based newspaper Air Info for three months for “undermining troop morale” and “apologising” for the rebels, according to the Council’s president, Daouda Diallo.

“You cannot apologise for violence. We cannot permit newspapers to say it’s OK to take up arms and shoot people,” Diallo told IRIN. “It affects the security of the country.”

Tom Rhodes, Africa program director for the New-York based CPJ, accused the government of “trying to sweep [the existence of a true rebellion] under the rug”.

“The rebels were getting a lot more airtime than anyone expected... [The government] panicked,” Rhodes said.

Foreign journalists have been refused access to the northern region of Agadez and local journalists have been pressured not to cover the rebellion. Last month, the High Council also banned the broadcast of any live debates on the rebellion.

“We will not be intimidated,” said Le Républicain’s Keïta, who was arrested for four months in 2006 for an article exposing a scam about government ministers stealing millions of dollars from donor-funded education projects.

“We are convinced of what we are saying. We know we live in a fragile country that does not have the means, and does not need, to continue this war.”

ha/nr/cb

Report can be found online at:

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=74352>



NIGER: Uranium - blessing or curse?



Photo: [International Atomic Energy Agency](#)

DAKAR, 10 October 2007 (IRIN) - As the global demand for nuclear energy rises, analysts say the large amount of uranium in Niger is not a benefit to the country's people but adds to the serious problems facing the region.

Niger, an impoverished country on the southern fringe of the Sahara desert, has one of the world's largest reserves of uranium, the main source of nuclear fuel - but virtually nothing to show for it.

Truck hauling ore to the Ranger uranium ore processing facility, Northern Territory, Australia

Instead, say local and international organisations, uranium mining by foreign-dominated companies has caused environmental damage and health problems in the far north of the country.

The mining operations are also causing domestic political tensions: one of the main demands of an armed militia that has been fighting Niger's army since February, the Niger Movement for Justice (MNJ), is a more equitable distribution of the revenues from uranium mining.

"The fact that [the uranium] is there is more negative than positive at the moment," said Jeremy Keenan, fellow at the University of Bristol in the UK, and a recognised authority on the Sahara. "It's a curse on the region and the people of the region... It is potentially a very volatile situation."

Few benefits

Civil society organisations in Niger and academics in the USA and UK agree that the people of Niger have not benefited from the 100,000 tonnes of uranium extracted over the past 36 years.

Niger is the world's third to fifth-ranking producer of uranium, producing over 3,000 tonnes of uranium a year. However, the UN Development Programme's 2006 Human Development Index considers Niger the poorest country in the world, where life expectancy is 45 years old, 71 percent of adults cannot read, and 60 percent of the population lives on less than \$1 a day.

"The Nigerien people aren't benefiting from the revenues," said Ali Idrissa, coordinator of the Niger branch of Publish What You Pay, a worldwide coalition of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) calling on oil, gas and mining companies to disclose their payments to governments for the extraction of natural resources.

The government of Niger's share of the uranium revenue is small: foreign companies have a majority stake in the two uranium production companies, SOMAÏR and COMINAK, which are operated and mostly owned by Areva, a French multinational company and global mining giant.

In July, the government renegotiated the price of its uranium, increasing the per kilogramme royalty to 40,000 CFA francs (US\$86) for 2007. Still, under the terms of a decades-old agreement, the two production companies are only required to pay 5.5

percent of revenues to the government. In 2006, that totalled just 10 billion CFA francs (US\$22 million), according to the Ministry of Mining and Energy.

Robert Charlick, professor at Cleveland State University and author on Niger, said uranium revenue nonetheless means the government does not need to depend as heavily on taxes, and thus needs less public support, especially from the vast majority of the country's isolated, rural population.

"It destroyed the prospect of a political system that would be more attentive to rural interests," Charlick told IRIN.

The mining industry has led to some development, he said, but in ways that benefit uranium production and not the average Nigerien. A road was built through the mining town of Tahoua to Arlit for the transport of uranium, and coal mining was developed to run the uranium facilities. "Those areas have electricity but few other rural areas in the country do," he said.

Health, environmental concerns

Resentment is also growing among the thousands of mine workers and people living near the mining sites in the northern region of Agadez, who complain about unsafe working conditions and exposure to radioactive poisoning in the community.

In August a movement of civil society organisations reportedly demanded that the Areva pay 300 billion CFA francs (US\$647 million) in damages for years of exploration in "unfair and iniquitous conditions".



Photo: [IRIN / OCHA](#)

An expert records radiation readings at Shinkolobwe uranium mine in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The mine collapsed in July 2004 killing 9 people

A 2005 investigation by Sherpa, an international network of lawyers who promote corporate social responsibility, found that workers in Niger's uranium mines were not informed of health risks; were not given the most basic protection measures; and were not always treated if they developed lung cancer. Long-term inhalation exposure to radon, a gas formed by the breakdown of uranium, has been linked to the onset of lung cancer.

“...the US and everyone else with a developing or industrialised economy is going to be looking to Africa as a source of uranium...”

Another French NGO, CRIIRAD, found that water, soil and metal scrap from the area where Niger's two mines are exploited were contaminated with dangerously high radioactivity levels.

According to Mamane Sani Adamou of the civil society organisation Alternative Espaces Citoyens, uranium extraction has significantly damaged the environment, reducing forests and pastures.

Further investigation to scientifically validate claims of contamination and ill-health has been blocked by the multinational company, the University of Bristol's Keenan said.

Areva has consistently denied the allegations, and has attributed the high number of illnesses to the harsh desert climate. In a written statement sent in reply to IRIN questions, Areva said it regularly conducts external audits dealing with health, environment and safety, including an audit by the French Institute for Nuclear Safety and Radiation Hygiene (IRSN) which found the company to be operating within international

standards. Areva has also said it will open a health centre around its sites.

"The accusations of negligence and lack of transparency brought against [Areva] are in total contradiction with the real facts," the document said.

Potential source of conflict

As the general competition over resources in Africa increases - independent Washington-based researcher Daniel Volman calls it a "global competition between the US and China for access to energy supplies" - some analysts fear that uranium in Niger could also become a source of tension.

According to the International Atomic Energy Agency, the overall world demand for energy will increase by at least 50 percent in the next 25 years and will have to be met mostly by non-fossil fuels, particularly nuclear energy.

"The US and everyone else with a developing or industrialised economy is going to be looking to Africa as a source of uranium," said Volman, who has been studying US policy towards Africa and its energy supplies. "That's already beginning to happen and it's only going to expand and increase."

Niger is home to Africa's biggest uranium reserves, which had been dominated by Areva for years. The government is now trying to diversify its partners and has distributed more than 100 exploration permits to Canadian, US, Chinese, Indian and other companies in the last year alone.

"You've got this sort of desperation going on from many countries around the world to get their hands on uranium," said University of Bristol's Keenan, adding: "The world is looking at progressively more and more resource-based conflicts."

Uranium wars?

Historically, instability in the Sahel region has been due to factors other than resource exploitation. But in Niger, uranium is part of a potentially volatile mixture of factors, including the US war on terror, the rebellion in the north and the government's policy of non-negotiation with the rebels.

Independent researcher Volman warned that the presence of natural resources leads foreign governments to provide military and financial support to resource-rich countries in order to ensure maintained access to those resources. The US is already providing military training to Nigerien officers, he said, and Niger has participated in other military equipment programs offered by the US in the past.

Volman said increased militarization leads governments to become more aggressive towards their own citizens and their neighbours. "It encourages internal repression. It also encourages countries to invade their neighbours," he said. "It encourages those countries to resort to force both to solve their problems and to take advantage of opportunities - one of those being to invade neighbouring countries and loot them."



Photo: [IRIN](#)

Uranium waste dumps around the southern Mailuu-Suu town impact on local population's health

"It's hard to point to an example in Africa where [the existence of resources] hasn't been a complete curse," Volman added. "I would expect [Niger] to reproduce the same kind of cycle we've seen in other places, because it's already following the same trajectory."

Since February, the MNJ rebel group has been attacking military outposts and some foreign mining companies, killing at least 45 soldiers and kidnapping one Chinese uranium worker before releasing him unharmed. In July the MNJ advised all foreign nationals working in the mining of natural resources to leave conflict zones "for their own safety".

Still, some say projections of violent conflict over uranium are exaggerated. "I really don't expect us to see uranium wars," said Cleveland State University's Charlick. "It will be an increasing economic issue... [but] I don't expect that that will come to a battle."

When asked if the existence of uranium could lead to a regional war, Publish What You Pay's Idrissa said: "With the interest in uranium that certain powers have, everything is to be feared."


Report can be found online at:

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=74738>



NIGER: Humanitarian crisis feared in north



Photo: [Nicholas Reader/IRIN](#) 

A man using a basic, traditional well in the Tahoua region of central Niger. Some 60 percent of Nigeriens do not have regular access to clean, modern water sources

DAKAR, 22 October 2007 (IRIN) - In an atmosphere void of information and full of insecurity, some aid workers fear a humanitarian crisis is emerging in the troubled northern region of Niger, where thousands of people are thought to be cut off, with limited access to food, healthcare and humanitarian assistance.

"We don't have hard facts at present that a crisis is ongoing but we do fear that the risk is there that a crisis may emerge," said Niger-based Frank Smit, West Africa humanitarian planning representative for Oxfam Novib, the Dutch arm of the aid organisation Oxfam International.

Since February, attacks led by ethnic Touareg in the northern Agadez region have killed at least 45 government soldiers. Both the government and the Nigerien Movement for Justice (MNJ) militia group have laid landmines. Bandits have profited from the lack of safety by attacking convoys travelling in the vast desert region of the Air mountain chain.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that 23,000 people in 11 localities north of the regional capital Agadez are inaccessible by normal routes. With the help of local organisations, UNICEF has sent convoys of food and medicine to those areas, but in all but one, "we have no reliable information that the items have reached the people," said Guido Borghese, UNICEF's deputy representative in Niger.

According to SOS Iférouane, one of the local organisations delivering the items, a six-truck convoy of goods destined for the remote northern town of Iférouane has been blocked at the village of Timia for three weeks.

"People in northern Niger are in a very difficult situation," Idrissa Bahari, president of the SOS Iférouane Initiative, told IRIN. "Frankly, it's worrying."

Food crisis

Local and international organisations say the combined insecurity has deterred merchants from travelling to the north and brought commerce to a halt. The northern Agadez region depends on trade to buy grain and other products, like fuel – which farmers need for pumps to water their fields. Their income depends on the sale of their products in other towns, but such movement has ceased.

In what the UN considers the poorest country in the world, where 60 percent of the population lives on less than US\$1 a day, prices for some commodities have doubled or tripled. A package of milk that cost 1000 CFA francs (US\$2) more than a month ago now costs up to 2000 CFA francs, said priest Doamba Mathias, head of the Catholic Church in Agadez.

Floods this rainy season aggravated the economic situation for many families, washing away their fields and animals.

"A food crisis is occurring in many villages of the Air," said Ahmed Amani, mayor of the Dabaga commune, some 50 km north of Agadez. "The majority of the population is vulnerable."

The town of Iférouane has been without food for weeks, Bahari said, because the route there is littered with mines.

"We haven't really had any contact with them," he said. "But during our last contact three weeks ago, people said there was nothing left to buy in Iférouane."

In some cases, residents have fled their towns in search of food and security, travelling less-known routes by camel and leaving some villages completely empty, humanitarian actors say. In other cases, people are too scared of landmines to move.

"My main worry is people who are trapped in the area because they are poor people and they have nowhere to go," Oxfam's Smit said.

Access to health care

"...Every day, the malnutrition rate is rising..."

Reliable information is hard to come by, but aid agencies suspect the situation has had a negative impact on health in the region. In Iférouane, higher than normal rates of malaria and diarrhoea are emerging, said Bahari, who is also coordinator of Agadez activities for Cadev, the national branch of the aid organisation Caritas.

In the Agadez hospital, which normally admits between five and 10 cases of malnourished children a week, 54 children arrived in the last two weeks, he added. "Every day, the rate of malnutrition is rising."

Results of a UNICEF survey released at the end of July found that acute malnutrition levels in the Agadez region had risen sharply in previous months to 17.5 percent of children – the second highest rate in the country.

Aid agencies say the insecurity has made access to healthcare more difficult. Three of the northern region's 44 health centres have closed, according to UNICEF's Borghese, and for the rest, "we don't know if they can function properly and if medicines are arriving."

The organisation Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) suspects the current situation has reduced people's movement and the supply of medicine. It has opened a program in Dabaga to supply medicine, medical care and logistical support to the commune's health centre and says it hopes to better assess the impact of the region's insecurity on the health of its people over the coming months.

Culture of uncertainty

Little information is available about the condition of people living in the region because foreign journalists have been prevented from entering the north and local journalists discouraged from reporting on it. The few aid agencies working in the region are hesitant to say anything that might upset the government and hamper their relief operations.

Many agencies have reduced their operations or pulled out of the region altogether. But SOS Iférouane's Bahari said the insecurity should not scare aid agencies away.

"It's one more reason to help the people who are in a very serious situation," he said. "We've been ringing the alarm bell for a long time... Every day, the situation risks getting worse."

Report can be found online at:

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=74905>



NIGER: Humanitarian access cut to north

NIAMEY, 10 December 2007 (IRIN) - Indiscriminately laid landmines, a sceptical government and a rebel group that has attacked aid workers are obstacles that will have to be overcome before relief efforts can start for an estimated 20,000 people affected by flooding and fighting in the country's remote north.

The most substantive aid that has been sent for displaced people so far was meant to be delivered by a coalition of local NGOs called SOS Iferouane and the French medical NGO Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF).

However MSF was banned from operating in the north in October "for its own protection" by the government after several of its vehicles were hijacked by the rebel Nigerien Movement for Justice (MNJ).

All six of the convoys SOS Iferouane has sent since September have also been stopped by the MNJ, which apparently does not want the supplies to fall into the army's hands, according to sources.

Fears

Niger's army has deployed in the region but its presence has raised not allayed fears among aid workers, who say the soldiers only present another level of insecurity on top of the rebels as well as armed bandits and drug smugglers who are also believed to operate there.

"There are uncontrolled troops and a high level of banditry and drug trafficking still happening," a humanitarian official said. "Everyone does whatever they want there, the army is harassing people. It's a highly insecure situation."

Landmines that the MNJ has laid throughout the region are another problem. Explosions have become an almost daily occurrence on roads and tracks.

In early December two explosions occurred south of the regional capital Agadez on the main roads to the capital Niamey and the eastern town of Zinder – the first time the conflict has spilled over to areas south of Agadez.

Human rights groups with contacts in the region say the MNJ is paying civilians up to US\$600 to lay mines on roads and so has little oversight as to where the mines end up being laid.

Civilian cars and buses, and in one case in early December a military convoy escorting a vehicle owned by the United Nations Development Programme, have so far been hit. All UN and NGO missions to Agadez are supposed to be escorted by the military.

No authorisation

Further complicating possible relief work, Niger's government has denied that there are humanitarian problems in the remote desert and mountain region.

"Officially, there are no displaced people and no one has left their home – everything is as usual," a Nigerien NGO official said. "It's a very complicated situation because it's definitely not like that."

When floods hit in August the government pledged to transport its own aid to people affected by what government officials admitted at the time was a “very serious” situation.

“The government is not giving any aid itself so why don’t they just give authorisation to international aid agencies to do it? The only conclusion appears to be that they don’t want these people to be assisted,” a well-placed humanitarian official in Niger told IRIN.

Nigerien government spokesperson Mohamed Ben Omar declined a request by IRIN to discuss whether or not humanitarian programmes will be started in the north.

Tensions and solutions

Humanitarian access in Niger has been severely strained since publicity in 2005 about humanitarian relief programmes for severely malnourished children generated animosity between Niger’s government and international NGOs and some UN agencies in the country.

Agencies are currently considering the possibility of setting up a humanitarian air service to link Niamey to Agadez and possibly Zinder and Maradi in the remote south-east.

Even with an air service, though, problems of operating on the ground would persist, unless a deal could be reached for either a humanitarian corridor to reach displaced people or for camps to be set up inside or close to Agadez.

Report can be found online at: <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=75795>



NIGER: Food needs grow as conflict continues



Photo: [Phuong Tran/IRIN](#)

Desert rebels group in Air Mountains. [Photo taken 13 Dec 2007]

AGADEZ, 2 September 2008 (IRIN) - An on-going desert conflict continues to ground agricultural activities in the mountainous desert, where more than 10,000 people have been displaced by sporadic fighting and landmine explosions.

Surrounded by dying gardens, residents in the Air Mountains must sometimes travel more than 100 kilometres to market towns to buy food, but when they do, many face mine explosions, military patrols and fighting.

Since rebels re-launched a decades-old desert conflict in February 2007, demanding more community investment and mining revenue from

resource-rich pockets of the desert, food has become a rare commodity in the mountains.

Conflict rocks food security

IRIN spoke to a former leader from Iferouane displaced by fighting last August, who continues living in the Air Mountains. He says he does not want to reveal his name because he fears backlash from the military or rebels.

"There used to be at least 300 gardens, primarily in Iferouane, Tin Teloost and Ebourkoum. Since the conflict began, it is almost impossible to get gasoline to keep the gardens' motor pumps operating. There are only a few working gardens left in Tin Teloost. This is our second year of not producing a harvest in the mountains."

The mayor of Agadez, Abdoulaye Hama, said the military has rationed petroleum sales since the conflict broke out to prevent fuel from falling into the hands of rebels or bandits. He told IRIN, as a result, onions making it out of the mountains are rare.

The sale of onions, one of the major exports from this region, has plummeted.

A 50kg bag of onions used to cost up to US \$29. Now it sells for about US\$3. "Not enough to even cover the farmers' costs," laments Hama.

The displaced Iferouane resident says even though it is hard for him to find food where he is, he feels safer in the mountains than in the city. "Nomads share. We will make food last. It is not easy, but I prefer this to being in the city."

About 2,000 people displaced by the fighting have come to the desert hub towns of Agadez and Arlit, according to the Committee to Help Iferouane, known by its French acronym, CAPI.

Red Zones

Sporadic rebel attacks, mine explosions, and a spike in banditry have sealed off the Air Mountains from non-military access.

Any international humanitarian assistance, or deliveries of government food assistance from the national food bank, must go through the regional Agadez government, which then sends the military-escorted delivery to the mountains through a network of elected mayors, tribal chiefs and religious leaders.

One year after the conflict surged, the UN-backed World Food Programme (WFP) sent this past March more than 550 tons of food to the northern communes.

The second in command in the Agadez governor's office, Laouali Damazoumi, says despite the insecurity, shipments can make it into the mountains.

"If needed, for red zones, or high-risk zones, we will work with someone from the local population who knows the rebels and mine situation well, and who will navigate the delivery safely."

The governor's coordinator of humanitarian deliveries, Harouna Oumanou Bayero, says rebels have not attempted to block any food deliveries. "This food is going to help their population, their families. There may be some bandits who try to take advantage of the conflict to carry out petty crime near the cities, but they do not dare to attack in the bush, knowing that they will then have to face the rebels."

This past July, the governor's office said bandits stole a truck transporting government food stock headed to the mountains on the paved road 70 km from Agadez.

WFP's office in Niamey says it expects to send out an additional 922 tons of food stuff, intended for 53,000 people. The delivery is expected to include daily rations of 500 grams of rice, 50 grams of beans and 25 grams of cooking oil per person, enough to last one month.



Photo: [Phuong Tran/ IRIN](#)

Nigerien desert rebels start re-launching sporadic attacks against government in February 2007

Report can be found online at:

<http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=80124>

Niger: Warring Sides Must End Abuses of Civilians ***Combatants Engaged in Executions, Rape, and Theft***



(Dakar, December 19, 2007) – Niger’s armed forces and the rebel Nigerien Movement for Justice should end abuses against civilians in the conflict in the northern Agadez region of Niger, Human Rights Watch said today. The rebels took up arms in February 2007 over the perceived economic marginalization of Tuaregs. The conflict threatens the livelihoods of tens of thousands in Niger’s vast northern desert areas.

Human Rights Watch has documented violations of the laws of war by soldiers of the Niger armed forces, including extrajudicial killing, rape, and the destruction of livestock. Laws of war violations by the ethnic Tuareg Nigerien Movement for Justice (MNJ) include the indiscriminate use of anti-vehicular landmines and the taking of personal property from non-Tuareg civilians. In November and December, Human Rights Watch conducted interviews with victims and eyewitnesses in the Nigerien capital, Niamey, and the Senegalese capital, Dakar.

Human Rights Watch called on both sides to cease deliberate and indiscriminate attacks against civilians, to take concrete steps to minimize civilian casualties, and to hold perpetrators of violations accountable.

“The Niger armed forces and the rebels have a duty to respect the lives and property of civilians in Agadez,” said Peter Takirambudde, Africa director at Human Rights Watch. “Both government officials and rebel leaders should send a clear message to their troops that attacks on civilians won’t be tolerated.”

The rebels claim they are fighting for a larger share of the region’s abundant mineral wealth – mostly uranium – for Tuaregs and other ethnic groups. The government dismisses the MNJ as “bandits and drug traffickers” and insists they should address grievances through nonviolent means. The MNJ movement follows a previous Tuareg rebellion, which began in 1990 and ended in 1995 with a peace agreement designed to increase Tuareg access to the region’s resource wealth, develop the north and incorporate thousands of former Tuareg fighters into the government and security forces. MNJ leaders maintain that the government has failed to fully implement the 1995 accords.

Niger, which suffers from regular droughts and food shortages, is one of the world’s poorest countries. The conflict has severely undermined the lives of tens of thousands of people already living precariously close to the edge. Tuareg civilians from the Agadez region have been particularly hard hit. They described to Human Rights Watch living in a situation of fear and economic hardship brought mainly by the combatants’ persistent use of landmines and the irregular supply of food, medicines, fuel and other essentials. They described being forced to sell their goats, camels, and jewelry to be able to afford soaring commodity prices or to pay to bring sick family members to the capital for treatment. Landmine use has forced several international aid agencies to temporarily suspend or restrict operations, including vital monitoring of humanitarian indicators such as food security and malnutrition, which is reported to be on the rise.

“The people of Agadez are living in the margins in one of Africa’s poorest countries, and what little they have is now threatened by the actions of both soldiers and rebels,” said Takirambudde.

All parties to the armed conflict in Niger are obliged to respect Common Article 3 of the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, the Second Additional Protocol of 1977 to the Geneva Conventions (Protocol II), and customary international humanitarian law. This law requires the humane treatment of all persons taking no active part in hostilities, prohibits deliberate or indiscriminate attacks on civilians, and prohibits the destruction of property indispensable to the survival of the civilian population. Serious violations of the laws of war carried out intentionally or recklessly are war crimes.

Abuses Involving the Niger Armed Forces

Extrajudicial Killings and Deliberate or Indiscriminate Attacks on Civilians

Human Rights Watch documented several extrajudicial killings and incidents of indiscriminate and possibly deliberate attacks on civilians by members of the Niger army. Most of these incidents occurred in the immediate aftermath of landmine explosions against military vehicles and personnel. Eyewitnesses described how soldiers, enraged by the casualties they had suffered, summarily executed individuals, apparently at random, present near the scene of the explosion.

One such incident, in late November, involved the summary execution by soldiers of an elderly man and his nephew near the village of Tzintabarac, some 30 kilometers east of Agadez. A Tuareg trader related what he saw:

“When the news came, I traveled by motorcycle to see what had happened. When I got there, I saw a military vehicle, which was mangled from the blast, and the bodies of the two villagers there. I didn’t see the bodies of any soldiers, but by the look of the vehicle, I’d bet there had been casualties. I spoke to a herdsboy who had been near the old man and his nephew. He told me he and the others were bringing their camels in from grazing when they heard a huge explosion. They rushed to where the sound came from to see what happened, but when they got there he saw the military grab the old man and his nephew. The herdsboy ran and informed the villagers of what had happened.”

Several other eyewitnesses described landmine explosions being followed by soldiers firing deliberately or indiscriminately at or near groups of civilians – when no rebel forces were visibly present – causing a number of civilian casualties. A young woman who fled the town of Iferouane in mid-November described one such incident:

“It has been an exhausting few months. We are from Iferouane but left on November 11 because we were afraid and tired because we could not get enough food for our family, afraid of the mines, afraid of the military occupying our village and shooting at us. One day I was getting water in one of the wells in town when, just down the road, a military vehicle ran over a landmine. After this, the soldiers went crazy and started shooting everywhere in the air – here, there and all over the village. They went into people’s houses looking for the ones who planted it and beat people they came across. People ran everywhere and several of the villagers were injured as they ran. This was just one of the many difficult and frightening things that happened to us.”

Human Rights Watch also learned of several other incidents of alleged unlawful killing of Tuaregs and other northerners by Niger soldiers, but was unable to obtain eyewitness accounts. The incidents in question include: the alleged summary execution of three elderly men on June 2 in Tezirzayt; the alleged killing of seven individuals on the Iferouane-Gougaram road on August 26; and the alleged killing of some 10 civilians north of Iferouane on September 27.

Human Rights Watch urges the government to promptly investigate these incidents and prosecute any individuals found responsible in compliance with international fair-trial standards. In addition, an army report that soldiers accidentally shot seven civilians, including two prominent businessmen, during a military operation east of Agadez on December 9 should be independently investigated, especially in light of accounts by family members that the men were summarily executed.

Killing of Livestock

Three eyewitnesses interviewed by Human Rights Watch described the killing by Niger army units of large numbers of livestock owned by Tuareg nomads, including camels, goats, sheep and cows. These animals play a central role in feeding and sustaining Tuareg families, who suffer extreme hardship from the loss of their herds. Several local and foreign sources told Human Rights Watch they believed the destruction of animals was a form of collective punishment by the armed forces against the Tuaregs for their perceived support for the rebel movement.

One individual who traveled north of Iferouane in late November described seeing groups of dead animals in at least four places, including a herd of 20 camels and 30 goats some 15 kilometers

from Iferouane, which appeared to have been sprayed with bullets. An elderly Tuareg man described seeing groups of dead livestock further south, near Agadez:

“The soldiers have been killing our livestock – camels, goats, sheep, and cows. I’ve seen so many of them dead. For example, in mid-November I saw five dead camels with my own eyes – it was on the road out of Agadez to the west – between Azel and Elmeki. By the look of their bodies, it seemed they had been dead for two or three days. They were in a small oasis – the Tuaregs from Gougaram always take their camels there. Closeby I also saw a mother and baby cow. I saw bullets in their heads and bellies. A few days later, while grazing with my camels I found five sheep and seven goats – all dead. I know it was the military. This thing never happened until the war came. The Tuaregs love their animals; not only that, we live by them – we would never kill a camel or a cow or goat. Never. They give us milk and cheese. We use them like a car and use them for commerce. The soldiers just killed them in order to make us suffer.”

The laws of war prohibit the destruction of objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, crops, and livestock. Collective punishments – punishing individuals for the alleged crimes of another – are also prohibited.

Rape

Human Rights Watch documented two cases of rape by soldiers from the Niger army. One case involved the gang-rape of a young woman near Gougaram in November. A villager described what he saw:

“The day I arrived in Gougaram I was told that the night before soldiers had raped a girl of about 16 or 17 named S. Her father is a friend of mine. When I went into their house, I saw the girl lying on the bed. I would never ask her what happened, but I asked the girl’s mother to tell me. She described how the night before three soldiers had come into their house saying they were searching for arms. When they didn’t find any, she said they took her daughter into a hut at the back of the house. The mother was so sad as she described having to listen to the screams of her daughter with those men. She said it went on for about 40 minutes and only after the soldiers left could she go to her daughter. Her husband – the girl’s father – was not around that day. Since there was no doctor in Gougaram, I told them to bring their daughter to my village where there was a local woman who knows how to treat female problems. We left by camel because there was no other transportation. As we went, I saw the girl was bleeding a lot from below – like she had given birth. Everyone I spoke to said it was the military that was there those days. Even when I was there I saw soldiers passing by.”

Rape is a war crime under the laws of war.

Arbitrary Detention

Human Rights Watch is concerned about the detention without charge or trial of some 35 men in connection with their alleged support for the MNJ. The majority of arrests has occurred since a *mise en garde*, or state of alert, was issued by presidential decree on August 24. The decree gives the security forces in the northern Agadez region extended powers of arrest and detention. The decree was extended for an additional three months on November 24.

Nigerien law defines a *mise en garde* as “those measures appropriate to ensure the government’s freedom to act, reduce the vulnerability of populations or important infrastructure and guarantee the security of armed forces mobilizations and operations.” However, journalists, lawyers, members of the Nigerien security services and diplomats interviewed by Human Rights Watch noted a general lack of clarity regarding the specific additional powers the “state of alert” granted. Human Rights Watch therefore urges the government to specify the powers granted to the security forces and to repeal those powers that violate international human rights standards.

While the government may arrest and prosecute those it suspects of involvement in armed rebellion and other criminal acts, it must nevertheless respect due process rights guaranteed by the Nigerien constitution and international instruments to which Niger is a state party. Even during a properly declared state of emergency, these rights include the presumption of innocence, to be brought promptly before a judge and informed of the basis for detention, and to have access to counsel and family members. Human Rights Watch is concerned that the 35 or so individuals held in detention centers in Agadez, Niamey, Kollo, Koutokale and Say for weeks and even months,

have been denied some of these basic rights. Human Rights Watch therefore urges the government of Niger to publish the names of those held in detention and the charges against them, and ensure their right to due process is fully respected.

Abuses Involving the Nigerien Movement for Justice

Indiscriminate Use of Anti-Vehicular Landmines

Since the armed conflict began, there have been more than 25 incidents involving anti-vehicular landmines in the Agadez region, resulting in at least 80 casualties. The majority of these involved military personnel. However, since October there has been a steady increase in the placement of anti-vehicular landmines on the principle axes to and from the northern towns of Agadez, Ifrouane and Arlit, resulting in a growing number of civilian vehicles detonating these landmines. Civilian casualties, including numerous deaths, have occurred when public buses, motorcycles, trucks and private vehicles have detonated anti-vehicular landmines, most often placed in potholes or along the soft shoulders of major roads.

Numerous military, civilian, and foreign diplomatic sources interviewed by Human Rights Watch expressed the view that the majority of landmines detonated along the major axes had been placed by MNJ rebels. In November, the MNJ warned civilians to avoid traveling, particularly on all major roads going into and out of the regional capital, Agadez, and vowed a renewed offensive against government forces in the north. Several rebels interviewed by Human Rights Watch admitted to using, and in one case placing, landmines along these major axes, but claimed they were aiming to target military vehicles, including those used to escort civilian convoys.

In October, following a spate of attacks by armed bandits, the military began requiring all civilian vehicles going to the north to be accompanied by a military escort. However, since its implementation, several civilian vehicles in these convoys have detonated landmines, causing civilian casualties. A 20-year-old Tuareg trader described one such incident, which occurred on the road between Arlit and Agadez in late November:

“I’m a petty trader and travel a lot all over. That day I left Arlit at 8 a.m. in a convoy of about 20 cars and three buses. It was escorted by three military cars in front and in back. I was in a bus which was towards the back when all of a sudden I heard a huge blast. The convoy stopped and we all got out. I walked up to the front and noticed that the bus that hit the mine was the first vehicle of the convoy – after the military cars. The road is paved but the mine had been placed in a pothole. The driver was saying that he’d managed to avoid the front tires from going into the potholes, but couldn’t manage to control the back of the bus. And that was where the bus was hit. I saw six wounded – I think they were two women and four men. There was a lot of blood. From what I could see, they were wounded in their arms and legs. I later heard one died in the hospital. I cried when I saw this. Really, I’m terrified every time I travel.”

Foreign military analysts interviewed by Human Rights Watch have suggested that landmine use by the rebels has recently transformed from being defensive in nature – designed to deter entry of the military into rebel bases or areas of control – to being more offensive, and intended to inflict military losses. This change in their deployment, and the subsequent increase in civilian casualties, has generated considerable fear and hardship for the civilian population.

Anti-vehicular landmines are not banned under the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty on anti-personnel mines, to which Niger is party. However, their use is still governed by the general laws of war, which prohibit the use of weapons that cannot discriminate between civilians and military targets. Placing anti-vehicular weapons on roads commonly used by both military and civilian vehicles is such an indiscriminate use. Where their use is not prohibited, particular care must be taken to minimize their indiscriminate effects.

Banditry Against Civilians from Southern Ethnic Groups

Three Tuareg civilians described incidents in which alleged MNJ rebels stopped a public transport vehicle and singled out the non-Tuareg civilians for theft. While the MNJ has denied being involved in any kind of banditry, the eyewitnesses strongly believed the perpetrators to be members of the rebel group. The three incidents documented by Human Rights Watch occurred in October and November as traders were bringing their goods from Agadez to smaller towns throughout the

region. A trader from Agadez described one such incident:

“About two months ago, I and about eight other people – five Hausas and three other Tuaregs – were in a Land Rover. The MNJ stopped us, told everyone to get down. They instructed the Tuaregs to raise our arms up and the Hausa to put their arms down. Then they put the Tuaregs to one side, the Hausas to the other and they proceeded to rob the Hausa of their cell phones, money, jackets and other goods, and beat them. They didn’t do anything to us Tuaregs. I know it was the MNJ because of how they dressed and also because they identified themselves as being with that group. I’ve also heard the rebels talking about this having happened. They explained that if we are Tuaregs, we should not be nervous. Some of us Tuaregs, including a local Tuareg chief [leader] protested and told them not to do this – that it was wrong because we are all Nigerien. But the MNJ commander said that we are not all the same and that if he, the local chief, wasn’t careful, he would be treated like the Hausas were being treated.”

Key international partners, including The Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS), France, the United States and the United Nations, should urge the Niger government and the MNJ rebels to guarantee free and safe access for all humanitarian actors assisting the vulnerable population in the north. Both warring parties should end attacks against civilians, investigate reports of violations, and hold accountable those responsible for these crimes.

From: <http://hrw.org/english/docs/2007/12/19/niger17623.htm>

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Niger: Executions and forced disappearances follow army reprisals

3 April 2008

Amnesty International is very concerned at the new wave of extrajudicial executions committed by the Niger army in the Agadez region, which for more than a year has been shaken by a rebellion led by an armed opposition group, the Mouvement des Nigériens pour la justice (MNJ), Niger People's Movement for Justice.

"We launch an urgent appeal to the Niger authorities to immediately order the security forces to stop extrajudicial executions and forced disappearances of civilians in the north of the country. The government should investigate the events, bring those responsible for these actions to justice and pay reparations to the families of the victims", Véronique Aubert, Deputy Director of the Africa Program said today.

At least eight civilians were arbitrarily executed between 22 and 25 March 2008 after clashes between the MNJ and the Niger army. A number of soldiers were killed in the clashes and several army vehicles were blown up by antipersonnel mines. After sustaining these casualties and material damage, the army launched reprisals against the population, executing and arresting civilians and destroying property.

Amnesty International has learned that on one occasion, on 26 March 2008, on the Dabaga-El Meki Road, the army forced a civilian to drive in front of a military convoy to protect it against mines. However, a military vehicle drove over a mine and was damaged. The soldiers accused the civilian driver and his two passengers of leading them into a trap and beat them. The convoy carried on along the road and a little later, the civilian vehicle was blown up by a mine. The soldiers then gave treatment to the injured and took them to a health centre.

Hada Baregha, a herder aged 67, was returning from his fields with his donkeys, on 25 March 2008, when he was killed extrajudicially by the military, in the town of Dabaga, in the Agadez region.

Another civilian was tortured before being killed. A tradesman, Aboubakar Attoulèle, with the surname of Kouzaba, was arrested by the military on 26 March 2008. According to information received by Amnesty International, this man had his ears cut off and his head and hair set on fire before being stabbed.

Another civilian was severely beaten up before being killed. Mohamed El Moctar, a gardener aged 66, was arrested at his camp, in Tabouhait, on 24 March. The soldiers struck him with the butts of their guns before killing him. At least three other people were shot dead, including two on 22 March 2008, in the village of Tamazalak.

"Although the security forces have the right to respond with legitimate and proportionate force to armed attacks, they may not carry out indiscriminate attacks against defenceless populations", Véronique Aubert, Deputy Director of the Africa Program said today.

In addition, these extrajudicial executions violate article 6 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which says that: "Every human being has the inherent right to life. This right shall be protected by law. No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his life". Human beings cannot be deprived of this right in any circumstances, even in the state of emergency currently in force in the Agadez region.

Amnesty International has also learned of several cases of forced disappearances and arrests. Four people, including Al Wali, village chief of Tourayat, were abducted by soldiers on 30 March. Their families have so far been unable to obtain any news about their whereabouts.

Soldiers also attacked property, burning houses and camps, for example, in Dabaga and Tamazalak. The inhabitants of these two villages sought shelter in Agadez. Other villagers escaped into the mountains in order to avoid the main roads, where soldiers might question them.

Amnesty International has also learned that the military has threatened the elected representatives of the Dabaga region for allegedly communicating information about atrocities committed by the army.

The organisation is also concerned about the use of mines in this conflict, which has opposed the Niger security forces and armed elements of the MNJ since February 2007. Each side says the other is responsible for laying these mines, which have already claimed many civilian and military victims. Amnesty International calls on both parties to the conflict to immediately stop the use of antipersonnel mines, which are a constant danger to all those in the area, including civilians, who risk the loss of life and limb by stepping on them.

Source : <http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/niger-executions-and-forced-disappearances-follow-army-reprisals-2008040>

Niger: Extrajudicial executions and population displacement in the north of the country

19 December 2007

Amnesty International is alarmed at the increasing number of extrajudicial executions of civilians by the army in the Agadez region and is asking the Niger authorities to put an immediate stop to them.

Over the past four weeks, at least thirteen civilians have been unlawfully killed by the Niger security forces in the north of the country. Some, if not all, of them were apparently killed by the army in reprisal for attacks carried out by the Tuareg armed opposition group, the Mouvement des Nigériens pour la justice (MNJ), Niger Movement for Justice, which took up arms against the government in February 2007.

Amnesty International has received reports indicating that the armed forces were directly responsible for these extrajudicial executions. According to the reports, on 22 November 2007, four people, Bachir Mouhamad and Mariko Kané, both gardeners, and Oukhoudane Algha and Hamad Ibrahim, both cattle farmers, were arrested by gendarmes in Tchintébizguint (30 km west of Agadez) after a mine exploded. Whereas the gendarmes wanted to interrogate the suspects, members of the armed forces seized the four and their bodies were found five days later in a common grave. According to witnesses who saw the bodies, they showed signs of bullet wounds to the heart, forehead and ear.

On 9 December 2007, seven other people, including two Arab tradesmen -- Ibrahim Sidi Amar and Osmane Sidi Rali -- a cook, a mechanic and two drivers, all either Tuareg or Hausa, who were travelling back to Agadez by car were arrested on the road by the Niger security forces.

A close relative of one of the dead told Amnesty International: "We were waiting for our relatives in Agadez when we saw their vehicles arrive driven by soldiers. We asked them where our relatives were. They refused to answer and then, as we insisted, they agreed to drive us to the place where the seven were buried."

The people who identified the bodies said that they saw numerous signs of cigarette burns and whipping on the victims' bodies, as well as many bullet wounds to the face and chest. The relatives of some of the victims have asked the Niger authorities for an explanation and were promised that light would be shed on the killings.

"Amnesty International is calling on the Niger authorities to open investigations into these unlawful killings, to bring those responsible to justice, and to provide reparations to the relatives of the victims. The authorities should also make it clear to the security forces that such unlawful killings and other human rights violations will not be tolerated and that those responsible will have to answer for their actions before the courts," said Erwin van der Borght, Director of Amnesty International's Africa Programme.

The organization is also calling on the Niger authorities and the MNJ to publicly commit to respect Common Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions at all times and to take concrete measures to ensure the protection of civilians in conflict zones. In addition, Amnesty International is calling on the Niger authorities to respect human rights standards.

These extrajudicial executions, as well as fear of fighting between the Niger Army and members of the MNJ, have led to the displacement of both the settled and nomadic population. For example, the entire population fled the village of Iférouane (350 km north of Agadez) and sought refuge in Agadez and Arlit (200 km north of Agadez).

"Some of these displaced people will have been taken in by their families or the local population. However, they will find it hard to find provisions at a difficult time when basic food prices have gone up considerably. If this state of affairs goes on for long, the displaced will find themselves in an increasingly precarious situation", said Erwin van der Borght.

Source : <http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/niger-extrajudicial-executions-and-population-displacement-north-country>

Areva in deal to open uranium mine in Niger

By Matthew Green in Nairobi - Published: January 15 2008 02:00

Areva, the French nuclear company, has secured a key source of uranium needed to supply its global expansion plans with a deal to open a new mine in Niger.

The agreement will normalise Areva's increasingly strained relationships with the former French colony, which has sought to erode the company's 30-year monopoly. Under the accord, Areva has won the right to invest more than €1bn (\$1.5bn) in opening another uranium mine in the west African country.

In return, the company will pay about 50 per cent more to Niger's government for the metal it mines, to reflect surging prices. The agreement will soothe concerns about Areva's ability to source uranium to grow its nuclear reactor business by reinforcing its dominance in Niger, which supplies about 40 per cent of its uranium needs.

Areva, the world's largest nuclear group, has faced increasing competition in the past year after Niger's government awarded dozens of uranium exploration permits to Chinese, South African, Canadian, Indian and other competitors.

Growing global demand for nuclear power pushed uranium prices to record highs last year, driving renewed exploration in Niger, the world's sixth-largest exporter.

The price rises have coincided with a year-old uprising by the rebels of the Niger Movement for Justice, which says it is seeking a greater share of wealth and political power for the nomadic Tuaregs in the desert north. The MNJ rebels attacked the proposed site of Areva's mine at Imouraren in April, but have generally avoided direct attacks on mining companies.

Aghaly ag Alambo, MNJ commander, said they hoped Areva would grant a greater share of profits and jobs to Tuareg communities.

"The company has already worked here for 30 years but the local population hasn't even benefited from 1 per cent of this wealth," Mr Alambo said.

Areva has pledged to continue funding development projects in Niger, saying the new site will create 1,400 permanent jobs.

The deal, signed by Mamadou Tandja, the president, and Anne Lauvergeon, Areva's chief executive, in the capital Niamey on Sunday, marks a big improvement in relations. Niger's government accused Areva of supporting the rebels last year and barred a top executive. Areva and the rebels denied the accusations.

Areva said the mine at Imouraren would add about 5,000 tonnes a year of uranium exports to an existing production of more than 3,000 tonnes.

Niger clashes endanger civilians

By Matthew Green in Lagos

Published: December 20 2007 22:32

Human Rights Watch on Thursday warned that an escalating conflict between Niger's army and Tuareg rebels seeking a greater share of the country's uranium wealth is endangering growing numbers of civilians.

The Niger Movement for Justice launched an uprising in February, accusing the government of excluding their nomadic community from the benefits of booming foreign investment in the uranium sector. Human Rights Watch said it had gathered testimony of soldiers firing at civilians or shooting suspected rebel sympathisers, as well as raping women and destroying livestock during an offensive to crush the revolt.

The New-York based group also said rebels had stepped up since September their use of landmines to target vehicles travelling on desert highways, resulting in growing numbers of civilian casualties. "There appears to be an escalation in hostilities," said Corinne Dufka, senior West Africa researcher for Human Rights Watch, who recently returned from Niger.

"Increasing numbers of civilians are being targeted by both sides, in summary executions by the army on one hand, and by the irresponsible use of anti-tank mines by the rebels," she told the FT.

Mining companies from Australia, Canada, South Africa and China have flocked to Niger following a surge in uranium prices, driven partly by growing Chinese demand for the metal for its nuclear reactor programme. Areva, the French nuclear company, had until recently enjoyed an almost four-decade monopoly on uranium mining in the former French colony.

The MNJ says it wants a bigger stake in the income and jobs generated by the industry for its people, who consider mining exploration zones covering vast swathes of the Sahara desert their rightful territory.

Niger's government dismisses the rebels as bandits and drug traffickers, but has struggled to prevent them launching hit-and-run raids from their mountain bases.

Security officials say the rebels have recently begun to extend their campaign to landmine attacks in towns. Both the MNJ's Paris-based spokesman and the Niger government spokesman were not immediately available for comment.

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AGADEZ, Niger

Most Americans have heard of Niger only because that's where the CIA dispatched former ambassador Joseph C. Wilson IV to find out whether Saddam Hussein had tried to buy yellowcake uranium. But Niger's precious resource, just a footnote to the Iraq war, is the cause of monumental suffering here.

In the dusty town of Agadez, at the gateway to the Sahara in northern Niger, Mohamed Abdou used to sell ornate jewelry made by nomadic Tuareg silversmiths squatting over tiny fires. His mud-brick shop, across the road from a 16th-century mosque, once employed 18 jewelers and brought in enough money for the tall, turbaned merchant to support his wife and baby, mother, nine younger siblings, aunt, two uncles and six cousins -- an excellent living in the world's fourth-poorest country. But that was before the fight over Niger's vast deposits of uranium crippled commerce in Agadez and turned the surrounding desert into a combat zone.

Mining operations in Niger threaten the existence of the Tuareg people, who have inhabited Niger's uranium-rich northern desert since the 10th century, and who are now fighting to preserve their nomadic lifestyle and to share in the new wealth.

This battle has erupted in a dangerous neighborhood. To the north, Libya and Algeria continue to act as breeding grounds for al-Qaeda and other extremist groups. Ethnic violence has wracked Chad and Sudan to the east.

U.S. military officials say that stabilizing impoverished Muslim countries such as Niger is the best way to prevent them from becoming havens for terrorists. And if there is a lesson to be learned from recent experience in Afghanistan, it is that war and poverty create opportunities for terrorists to take hold.

Two-thirds desert and 99 percent Muslim, Niger has long suffered the effects of grinding poverty, ethnic tension and regional rivalry, but soaring demand for uranium lit the powder keg. The price of uranium, which is used to fuel nuclear power plants, has skyrocketed from \$9 to \$75 per pound during the past decade, briefly hitting \$135 last June. Niger plans to more than double its output over the next several years, and companies from Australia, Canada, China, India and France are scrambling to stake claims to the deposits, which are considered among the world's largest.

Like gold, diamonds, rubber and oil elsewhere in Africa, uranium has triggered chaos and violence, with young Tuaregs taking up arms and forming the Niger Movement for Justice in February 2007 to demand some control over uranium mining and the riches that come from it. They are challenging the government's position that nomads have no legal right to the land they have occupied for centuries -- or to the resources found on it. And they are demanding the health care, education and economic opportunities that the Niger government promised in a 1995 peace accord that ended an earlier Tuareg rebellion.

Last summer, Niger's government dispatched 4,000 troops to quash the latest Tuareg uprising in the country's vast northern expanses. Since then, any vestige of prosperity there has vanished. "My shop is closed now. I cannot sell a single ring. I live at the bottom of the economy," 31-year-old Abdou wrote in an e-mail from Agadez, which until a year ago was a commercial hub for nomads trading camels for grain and tourists flying in from Europe for desert sightseeing expeditions. "I live the life of a caged pigeon," Abdou continued. "Everything is blocked off, and the military do not let us leave our houses after 7 p.m. There are no cars or motorcycles here anymore. The children no longer go to school because they are so frightened."

During the past year, Tuareg rebels have killed more than 50 soldiers in the Niger army, which has retaliated by killing at least as many Tuareg rebel fighters and civilians.

Dozens more have been imprisoned without trial, raped or terrorized, and herds of Tuareg livestock have been slaughtered, according to a report released by Human Rights Watch in December.

And the situation is getting worse. Incensed by Tuareg guerrilla attacks, soldiers last month launched a new wave of violence, according to Amnesty International. In one case, they cut off a man's ears and set his head on fire before stabbing him to death.

The Tuareg, known as the "Blue Men of the Desert" because of the indigo dye in their veils and turbans that rubs off on their skin, are an insular people who practice a moderate form of Islam and speak their own language, based on an ancient Libyan alphabet. For centuries, these nomads prospered from their trans-Saharan caravan trade. But now most of them struggle to survive -- herding camels and livestock and moving camp as often as once a week in search of pasture made scarce by drought and desertification.

They are scattered across five North African countries and number about 1.6 million in Niger, or 11 percent of the country's population. After summer rains, hundreds of thousands of Tuaregs and other nomads travel to Niger's salt fields, a few hundred miles from Agadez, to celebrate and to fatten their livestock on mineral-rich grass.

But these ceremonial grounds are now dotted with red flags marking uranium deposits to be mined. Thousands of flags have been planted "without any of the peoples of northern Niger being consulted or even informed," said Issouf Ag Maha, a spokesman for the Niger Movement for Justice.

Ag Maha says that the Tuareg "have no choice but to fight or disappear." The rebels have ambushed government convoys accompanying foreign mining personnel and have taken soldiers and a Chinese mining official hostage. Niger's president, Mamadou Tandja, has repeatedly denounced the rebels as bandits and drug traffickers and has refused to negotiate with them. He declared a state of emergency in August, banned foreign correspondents from visiting northern Niger and muzzled the country's radio and print reporters. A Radio France International reporter accused of collaborating with the rebels has been imprisoned for seven months and faces the death penalty.

U.S. foreign aid to Niger is minimal, but we do support Niger's military by equipping and training their soldiers as part of the State Department's Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership. Ag Maha says that the United States should instead use its leverage to pressure Niger's government to "negotiate . . . and acknowledge the existence of democratic movements and bring peace in the region."

That hasn't happened yet. The rebels say that they want peace talks, but if the United States does not help arrange them, the Tuareg will probably look elsewhere for assistance. And as we should know by now, desperate people sometimes find help in the most unsavory places.

Meanwhile, Abdou is barely getting by. In February, he managed to make a trip to the capital more than 500 miles away to sell his jewelry, but landmines have since made the journey too dangerous. "Please pass our tears onto the world," he wrote. "Please help us get out of this misery."

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Claire Spiegel, a freelance writer, has done humanitarian work with nomadic communities in northern Niger.



Niger's nomads fight for rights

By Alex Sehmer and May Welsh

ALJAZEERA.NET

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Kamil Kamel is angry enough with the government of Niger to take up arms and fight. He and other Tuareg's see their cause as just, but those in power have branded them "terrorists".

"We were forced to take up arms because we have no future," the 28-year-old told Al Jazeera.

"We are not even considered citizens in our own country. We have no means to develop at all ... we live in misery. We live in ignorance and disease."

Kamel is a member of the Movement of Niger People for Justice (MNJ), a group that is demanding greater investment and development in Niger's northern territories, the desert area leading up into the Sahara.



The MNJ want a greater share of uranium mining profits ploughed back into the region

They want the revenues from Niger's uranium mining - which is focused in the north and makes up over 70 per cent of Niger's exports - to be ploughed back into the region.

International companies are vying for access to Niger's uranium deposits, but though it forms the backbone of Niger's industry, the region remains poor, with little in the way of infrastructure, schools or health care.

"It is the uranium found in our Tuareg areas that is feeding this entire country," Kamel said.

Low-level war

The MNJ first came to the attention of the authorities in February 2007, when the group's fighters raided a regional army base. Since then they have killed at least 70 soldiers.

In July 2007, the group kidnapped a Chinese nuclear engineer working for China Nuclear Engineering and Construction Corps, holding him for 10 days. The move prompted the company to pull their operations out of Teguidan Tessoumt, where they had been prospecting for uranium.

More recently, in June 2008, the MNJ took hostage four French nationals working for Areva, the French energy company which has substantial interests in Niger's uranium mines.

The government calls the MNJ a group of "bandits" and "drug-dealers", though despite this in May 2007 it earmarked \$60m to fight them. Although some in the government have advocated reaching a negotiated settlement with the fighters, Mamadou Tandja, Niger's president, has refused to talk to the group.

Subsequently northern Niger has been the scene of a low-level war for 18 months, with much of the region under military law and off limits to foreign visitors and journalists.

But the government has struggled to put down the rebellion and in reality the government has little control of this desert region in Niger's north and rebel patrols are able to move freely.

Rights groups have accused Niger's security forces of committing human rights abuses and in April, an Amnesty International report said Niger's army shot dead, tortured and abducted civilians in retaliation top attacks.



Mamadou approached Al Jazeera at the foot of Mount Tamgak

Mamadou, a young Tuareg boy, approached Al Jazeera at the foot Mount Tamgak. He brought with him a toy gun.

He said his father was killed in Tazerzeit by the army on suspicion of helping the MNJ and his school, built by a non-governmental organisation, was taken over by the army and used as a base to fight the rebels.

Joining forces

The MNJ is made up mostly of Tuaregs, a nomadic Berber people who make up Niger's third largest ethnic group.

Some fought the government in the first Tuareg rebellion, a five-year insurgency that came to an end in 1995 when the main groups signed a peace deal with the government, brokered by France, Burkina Faso and Algeria.

The MNJ say the 1995 agreement was never properly implemented. They want greater political representation, with more Tuareg recruited into the army and the police.

But other ethnic groups have also joined the MNJ, including Fulani nomads, traditionally cattle-herding people who have found themselves increasingly in competition for land with Niger's sedentary farming population.

With desertification eating away at six kilometres of Niger's usable land every year, conflict between farmers and herdsman has intensified.

"The government always gives the priority to the farmers over the herders and this is what we're seeing today," Major Lee, a Fulani who fights with the rebels, told Al Jazeera.

"I joined MNJ because of the injustice. The Fulani in this country are suffering a lot ... Every day because of conflicts between farmers and herdsman people are being killed."

The Fulani had formed their own armed groups, battling farmers in areas such as Diffa, which borders Chad in Niger's far east, and Tillaberry, which borders Mali in the north-west, before joining the MNJ.

Some members of the Toubou ethnic group, another nomadic group found mainly in Chad, have also joined the movement.

"In MNJ you have all the nomadic communities here together," says Boubakar Mohamed Sogoma, himself ethnically Toubou and a commander with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of the Sahara (FARS).

All the groups feel discriminated against and marginalised by the authorities.

"When a Toubou goes to the city people say he's from Chad - that he's not a Nigerien," said Sogoma.

"In terms of education we are the most backwards people in the entire country. This is a policy of the state, not because people don't want to go to school."

'No discrimination'

But the government rejects the rebels' charges and points at that although the Tuareg form Niger's third largest ethnic group, they only make up under 10 per cent of the country's population.

By far the largest ethnic groups are Hausa and Djerma-Songhai, both traditionally groups that subsist on farming.

"No one is being discriminated against," Grema Boucar, Niger member of parliament for Diffa, told Al Jazeera.

"In reality there is no ethnic group in Niger the state doesn't care about. We are sitting in the parliament, we have all the ethnicities of Niger present in the parliament - even the most reclusive areas are given special constituencies so they don't have to compete like in urban areas.

"Now if you want to talk about what's going on in the north, those men have made a choice to take up arms in order to air their point of view - they are free to make this choice but today in a democracy like Niger I have to found a political party and air my point of view."

President Tandja refused Al Jazeera's request to discuss the rebellion, but government sources have said revenues from Niger's natural resources are allotted fairly and accused the MNJ fighters of making the north too unsafe to permit development work.

"It's true the north of our country is a source of instability because of the behavior of certain individuals whose identity is not completely known but they present themselves as the MNJ," Nouhou Arzika, the co-ordinator of the Citizen's Movement for Peace, Democracy and the Republic, an non-governmental organisation, told Al Jazeera.

"We have to straighten something out here - this is not a rebellion. It is bandit operations and terrorism."

With neither side willing to give ground, the conflict in Niger's north looks set to continue.

In their base high in Niger's Air Mountains, the fighters train for combat and vow they will continue to fight until the government meets their demands.

"We have nothing to lose," Kamel said. "We can keep fighting another ten years no problem, because if we put down our arms we'll gain nothing."

Source: Al Jazeera

Country profile: Niger



The UN ranks Niger as the fourth poorest country in the world.

Two thirds of its population live below the poverty line, according to the IMF.

One in four children are said to die before their fifth birthday and adult literacy is under 29 per cent.

Population: 13.3 million

Ethnic groups (per cent, 2001 census): Hausa (55.4), Djerma Songhai (21), Tuareg (9.3), Peuhl (8.5), Kanouri Manga (4.7), other (1.2)

GDP: \$4.17bn

Major exports: uranium ore, livestock, agricultural produce

Source: CIA factbook



Foreigners vie for Niger's riches

By Alex Sehmer and May Welsh

ALJAZEERA.NET

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SUNDAY, AUGUST 31, 2008



The harsh conditions of northern Niger add to the hardships of the Tuareg population

Niger's nomadic herders have struggled to raise their animals in the country's inhospitable north for centuries, but now they are being pushed off their land by international mining companies.

Critics warn the new competition is threatening an ecological and human catastrophe.

"Before we had all kinds of animals - we had donkeys and goats and sheep - but now we have nothing," one Tuareg woman whose family members have seen their livelihood all but destroyed, told Al Jazeera.

Her friend agreed.

"When I was a young girl, the situation was completely different. There was complete freedom of movement, there were games and social relations between the families and there were lots and lots of animals," she said.

"People were happy, nothing to make them feel fear - now there are many sources of anxiety: we lost all our belongings and we're poor, I feel sad in front of people who have animals and I'm constantly worried and afraid because of the security situation."

Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world.

The UN ranks it as the fourth poorest country on earth, with over 40 per cent of its children suffering from malnutrition and well over half of its population existing on less than a dollar a day.

But Niger is rich in uranium, which accounts for nearly 70 per cent of its exports.

Niger is the world's third largest uranium producer and exploiting that natural resource is the cornerstone of Niger's efforts to pull itself out of poverty.

Environmental cost

The uranium mines are clustered in the north, where the population is largely Tuareg and where the Movement of Niger People for Justice (MNJ), currently waging a low-level armed campaign against the government, is based.

The MNJ, who are dismissed by the government as simply "bandits", is demanding a greater share of the uranium revenues be invested in the region.

But the mining is also disrupting the traditional Tuareg way of life and many fear there will also be an environmental cost to pay.

One family that Al Jazeera met in Arlit, an industrial town in Niger's Agadez region, were ill - suffering from a condition that had left sores around their mouths.

There was no way of knowing if the problem was caused by pollution but with no access to health care there was also no way of finding out or any way of knowing how to cure it.

The only clinic in the area is the uranium company hospital, which is off-limits to regular citizens.

Butali Chiverain, who worked at that hospital for 25 years and now runs al-Haknakal, a NGO that safeguards indigenous rights, told Al Jazeera the situation was serious and was affecting those living around the mines and well as those who worked there.

"There are illnesses which people hadn't seen before. There are also skin diseases with bumps breaking out especially on the feet, which touch the soil," he said.

"In the company there are also respiratory illnesses [and] high blood pressure - people are suffering from hypertension.

"After a person works 10 years in the company they start suffering from heart problems, coma and these kinds of illnesses. Many people have died."

He also said the water supplies around the mine had become polluted.

"Around Arlit for a distance of 160km ... one cannot find potable water at all because it's all contaminated and it's been contaminated for a long time.

"We took some samples to send them abroad to do some tests the water was not suitable for human consumption or even for animals. This water people have been drinking for ten years and now they've finally acknowledged that this water is unsuitable and they closed the wells."

He said the water had been found to be radioactive ten times above the level considered safe.

Foreign companies

Niger's poverty - nearly half of the government's budget comes from foreign aid - and uranium mining's importance to its economy has made the government wary of interfering too much in the industry.

This has meant the government has effectively abdicated responsibility for the environmental impact of the industry to the companies behind the mining.

"The government is responsible for the health of the people, the government is responsible for the rights of the people, but the government ... must work according to its means and its policy," Mohamed Akotey, Niger's minister for the environment, told Al Jazeera.



Under the sands of Arlit lie rich deposits of uranium which could lift Niger out of poverty

He acknowledged that environmental studies suggested that uranium mining was having severe effects on the environment, but said it was up to the mining companies to act on them.

"Today these companies have environmental teams at the mines. At the same time the government does not have the means to make studies at the different locations and companies," he said.

"The government trusts its partner to know if the studies [are] done properly or not in the environment."

The mine at Arlit is run by Areva, the publicly listed French energy company that specialises in nuclear power.

France has been one of Europe's foremost advocates for nuclear power, investing considerable funds in the industry after the 1978 global oil shortage and helping to lessen France's dependency on foreign energy.

Today, thanks to its nuclear plants which provide over 80 per cent of the country's power, France is a net exporter of electricity.

Areva told Al Jazeera it believed its environmental controls were sufficient and that it had conducted tests to ensure it conformed to international standards.

"Three years ago, local communities started to worry about pollution possibly reaching their region. Their worries were legitimate and we took them into consideration," Yves Dufour, external affairs director at Areva's mining business unit, told Al Jazeera from his office in Paris.

"Areva undertook systematic ecological tests and verification measures, under the supervision of the Nigerian ministerial bodies.

"We [also] check the water quality because it is the water we drink - I mean our workers as well," he said.

"We have always been implementing these measures."

Dufour said that Areva, knowing its own tests were unlikely to be considered independent, had asked France's institute for radioprotection and nuclear safety (IRSN), a public body that falls under the authority of several of France's ministries, including the ministries of environment and defence, to verify the results.

"We went further and asked the IRSN, which publishes its results under its own name and with its own publicity, to audit the ecological tests carried out by Areva."

In 2005, the IRSN announced that Areva's ecological management of its sites in Niger conformed to international standards.

Critics, though, have questioned whether the IRSN can be considered truly independent, given the importance of nuclear energy to France's economy.

Local anger

Areva runs both of Niger's two main mines through its subsidiaries Somair and Cominak - has put forward plans to begin producing 4,000 tonnes of uranium a year by 2011.

But Niger activists criticise the company for enjoying the benefits without developing the region.

"Areva has done nothing for Niamey [Niger's capital], never mind the fact they've done nothing for Agadez and the north," Chiverain said.

"France has [a] responsibility but has done nothing positive. As for Niger's government - they look the other way."



The MNJ has condemned mining firms for not investing in the region

The benefits for Areva are large - Niger accounts for about half of the company's global uranium production.

"It is with our uranium from Niger - it is with this that they move every single conveyor belt in France," Nouhou Arzika, the co-ordinator of the Citizen's Movement for Peace, Democracy and the Republic, an non-governmental organisation, told Al Jazeera.

"For more than 40 years - it's shocking - the French company known as Areva has extracted from our country 100,000 metric tones of uranium," he said.

"The electricity which [it produces] is not only consumed by France, but also by all the neighbouring countries that France sells electricity to."

France, Niger's former colonial ruler, has been accused of giving Niger a raw deal, exploiting the country's natural resources and paying far less than the market price for the uranium mined.

Badie Hima, a lawyer and the vice-president of the Nigerien Association for the Defense of Human Rights, told Al Jazeera: "France has been exploiting the uranium for more than 40 years and yet the north of Niger is still undeveloped - that means the contract between Niger and Areva is pure stealing."

Only in 2007 did Areva's monopoly came under pressure. The government's move to start tendering prospecting licences to Chinese and Canadian companies prompted a standoff with the French company, and in August that year the government negotiated a new deal with Areva, which still accorded France a discounted rate on uranium.

For many activists, at least part of the blame for the "raw deal" on Niger's resources and the lack of investment in the north lies with the government.

"There is the responsibility of those who are selling it and of those who are managing the revenues," Badie said.

"So France and Areva have a huge responsibility and the leadership of Niger [also] has a big responsibility."

Since the new deal with Areva, the government of Mamadou Tandja, Niger's president, has also granted about 100 licences to foreign companies, many of them new firms looking to strike it rich and if mineral deposits are found, the government takes a 40 per cent stake.

Source: Al Jazeera

Bravo for France, congratulatory for Areva, it's a pity for Tuaregs

30 November 2007



► Version Française [Bravo pour la France, félicitation pour Areva, dommage pour les Touaregs](#)

France rightly prides itself for his new victory, a performance which allowed France to sign a very tempting contract with China for the provision of two EPR nuclear reactors . In September it was with Libya that the nuclear giant Areva windy prowess by promising substantial profits for the benefit of France. But for us, Tuaregs in northern Niger, on every turn of this implacable turmoil, it's more cold sweat.

A few months ago I said this:

"Today, the Tuareg are concerned about an all-out distribution of uranium search and exploitation permits in their territories without being seen any compensatory measure aimed at mitigating the consequences. The involved tribes must leave the area in search of hypothetical territories for settlement and nomadisation. The exploited resources are used by the state in order to overcome them, control and reduce them to the status of refugees in their own country. This unfortunately fatal routing, because of the geopolitical logic and interests of each other, will cut humanity of a single element of its wealth, the Tuareg culture, a culture based on a moral code of conduct imposed on everyone with the prospect of facing the conditions of an austere and rudimentary Saharan life . _The situation is even more complicated when operating permits were allocated to countries like China which, unfortunately, has no policy of respect for local communities and the environment even less constituting their living environment. Their methods "the smell of money" works great with the rulers of this world. It is in this infernal logic that an armed conflict broke out in northern Niger with the creation of a movement of Nigerians for Justice. From the depths of their desert its leaders are struggling to be heard, alerting the world and try to denounce this situation to save what can be.

Facing them, a Niger state who decides to destroy them, creates the conditions for an unprecedented confrontation and refuses any suggestion of dialogue. The individual liberties are confiscated, the debate is forbidden, international radio stations are suspended, the independent newspapers were threatened and some closed. The Touareg region is declared in a state of emergency and the army arrogates itself the right to imprison, torture and kill if necessary without any form of trial. ***The international community is silent about this situation contrary to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.*** The scheme who emerge becomes very disturbing and extremely serious. Indeed, the northern part of Niger is full of impressive mineral resources, including oil and uranium. People scattered in the desert are now perceived as a real obstacle in the context of the massive exploitation of this manna.

Nuclear energy in his meteoric ascent as clean energy becomes more than ever a global challenge. In the same way, the gradual rise in the price of oil per barrel make Niger economically interesting. What could represents a handful of nomads totally absent of the world economic system to such challenges? The great powers of this planet will let the dictator "clean the place" so that they can work on a "clean energy in a clean environment (cleared of all these populations)." The game is played, the government of Niger and foreign powers saved their ass "

Three months later it is an inexorably confirmed scenario. We know perfectly the back consequences arising from both operating licenses granted forty years ago to France for the extraction of uranium in Arlit and Akokan (see review Criraad and Sherpa). The nomad population in this space was forced to leave in other lands. Wildlife has completely disappeared. The aquifers are polluted. The population is facing serious public health problems.

This year, the state of Niger has distributed 122 uranium operating licenses. By superimposing the map of northern Niger and the geographic limits of the concessions, we realize the coming catastrophe: Groundwater Pollution, destruction of pasture air, farmers land dispossession, water wells destructions, disruption of the pastoralists management.

- ▶ What about the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples adopted in September at the UN? Do our world has the right to silence the destruction of an entire people whose original crime would be to inhabit a once wasteland Sahara but becoming immensely rich?
- ▶ Do you really want the Tuareg people to disappear forever if that allowed your economy to still be doing well?
- ▶ Do you accept to participate in the policy of your country in the death of innocent people under the pretext that it allows you to illuminate your houses and cook on hotplates.

The Tuaregs have no choice but to fight or disappear. A very painful choices that led them to take up arms and risk their lives. The Nigerian army, which has material support from France, China and the United States, has launched an offensive on the Air to reduce us to silence. Our men try to contain them with much less equipment. The army has managed to resupply the barracks of Iferouane placed under embargo by the MNJ's troops since last August 25, but it would not change the facts. We are determined to defend our land because it is a question of existence. Determined and together, we will be able to prevent all those companies to set up here without our consent.

Once again material wealth and human value are blatantly challenged.

The reality is there, no need to hide it.

Issouf Ag MAHA Mayor of Tchirozérine, Agadez, Niger

Translat to English by Jugurten U Raver for north-of-africa.com NOA

VOICE OF THE TUAREG RESISTANCE

Issouf ag-Maha on Music, Culture and the Guerilla Struggle in Niger

by Bill Weinberg

Issouf ag-Maha is a political leader of the Tuareg people of Niger, and a social activist involved in numerous humanitarian efforts in Niger and elsewhere in West Africa. Born into the traditional nomadic way of life, he was as a goat and camel herder and stockbreeder before going on to become a trained agronomist specializing in development and environmental issues. He participated in the armed Tuareg rebellion in the 1990s, and after the 1995 peace accords he was elected mayor of the town of Tchirozerine.

Ag-Maha now serves as a spokesman for the Nigerian Justice Movement (Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice-MNJ), a new rebel organization that took up arms earlier this year, charging the Niger government with failing to live up to the accords, especially provisions on regional autonomy and control of natural resources. In recent weeks, army attacks have forced the entire population of villages in northern Niger to flee across the desert to Algerian territory, where ag-Maha is now helping to organize an emergency relief effort. MNJ representatives also report Niger government forces are systematically attacking the camel herds which sustain the nomadic Tuareg tribes—with army troops killing up to 100 camels in one day in November.

On Nov. 13, Issouf ag-Maha, spoke with Bill Weinberg over the airwaves of WBAI Radio in New York City. He discussed the threats to Tuareg way of life from climate change, uranium mining and militarism; the role of music and culture in the Tuareg struggle, and the roots of the new guerilla movement. Geoffroy de Laforcade of Wesleyan University, who helped organize ag-Maha's trip to the United States, translated from the French.

Bill Weinberg: Issouf, how long are you in the United States for? What brings you to New York City?

Issouf ag-Maha: I am in the United States on a three-week tour, visiting universities to discuss the current situation of the Tuareg people and the political crisis in Niger.

BW: Which has been heating up quite dramatically in recent weeks...

IM: It's true, it is getting worse by the day. It something we find very worrisome, especially since we've always hoped that peace could prevail, that a reasonable solution could be found. And we're still working as well as we can towards that goal.

BW: Tell us something about your life, and how you came to be a representative of your people's struggle.

IM: Well, I was born in the nomadic camps. I attended school by chance, and was able to work my way all the way up through higher education. I've had personal, professional and social activities that have given me some authority in Niger and have led me to the situation where I'm qualified to be a spokesperson for my people.

I've had a very unique life. I'm very familiar with the nomadic lifestyle and the traditions of the Tuareg, but also of the unemployed young people who have to migrate to the

shanty-towns. I talk about it in a memoir that I wrote that was published recently in France, called *Touareg du XXIème siècle* [Tuareg of the 21st Century], which we're working on getting translated in English. so we can bring that testimony to the people here in the United States. The book tells my life story as a means to understand some of the fundamental issues that have faced the Tuareg, such as devastating droughts, ongoing political difficulties, and of course the Tuareg rebellion that broke out in Niger and the surrounding regions between 1991 and 1995 and culminated in peace accords. I've used all of that experience, personal and political, to try to allow young generations and the future leaders of the Tuareg people to understand their history as well.

BW: During that period, the world was very closely watching what was happening in Bosnia and Rwanda and other terrible conflicts around the world, but what was happening to the Tuareg was largely invisible. I only became aware of it after the fact, when since the peace accords there has been a tremendous renaissance of Tuareg language, music and culture, and some of the wonderful music began to reach me here at WBAI.

IM: You're right, music plays an important role in the political and social struggle of the Tuareg. Culture has a lot importance in Tuareg society traditionally. We have a traditional musical instrument called the *imzad*, which actually embodies our culture and our code of ethics, since historically the Tuareg don't have a written law. But we have a code we call the *hasheq*, a customary law that is actually enshrined in the instrument, and we look to ceremonies in which the instrument is played for guidance.

BW: A stringed instrument?

IM: It is a one-stringed violin. It is a very simple instrument, but one that has a lot of symbolism and depth in our culture. And the modern music which is very new and interesting and important is still rooted in the traditional role of culture and music in our society, where everything started.

People should know that we're a nomadic people with a long history. We occupy the largest desert in the world, the Sahara. We're a pastoralist people, we practice extensive herding and stock-breeding. And the most important aspect of our society is that the land is absolutely communally owned. It belongs to no-one, and we don't recognize the modern concept of property.

The most important part of the desert, the sacred place, for these pastoralist peoples is the well. Our saying is "Water is life."

The need to belong to a community and have strong traditions is really necessary. This feeling of solidarity is not just an ideal, its a matter of survival in a very hostile and difficult environment. And that's why the *imzad* is so important. Because when we play it, it invokes solidarity and brings people together and gives them a feeling of belonging to something durable that can survive.

Because of the phenomenon of global warming, the Tuareg and West Africa in general have suffered tremendous droughts, catastrophic droughts that have been disastrous for our very existence. As a result of that, a lot of Tuareg youth—massive numbers—have been forced to migrate into urban shanty-towns as unemployed. A whole generation of people who were deprived of their traditional means of subsistence found themselves uprooted and cut off from their traditional lifestyle. Other Tuareg who stayed behind had to make a conversion to some level of semi-nomadism or sedentary farming.

BW: This process began when...?

IM: It began around three decades ago.

BW: What exactly was that traditional way of life, and to what extent does it continue to exist today in spite of everything?

IM: Well, the first thing is nomadism. The Tuareg people are never idle. They never stop moving around in search of rain, in search of water, or in search of pasture. And there's no sense of property; all the land is shared, it's wide open and everyone can wander. In order to live that lifestyle, people need to have herds. We have herds of camels, goats, sheep, cows. So when the herds die massively because of climatic conditions and disasters, the means of subsistence fades. People are forced into displacement, and it creates a culture shock.

Entire generations have found themselves completely lost and without direction. Because the Tuareg have never received a modern education. They weren't prepared for the demands of an urban economy. So not only did the traditional culture suffer, but there was a need to find a means of survival in the new circumstances.

A lot of young people raised in these circumstances felt quite rebellious and dissatisfied with their situation, and they left. Waves of them went to other countries in the region, to seek work abroad. Through exile and migration, they were exposed to other lifestyles and other idioms. This generation actually gave themselves a colloquial name, which is *ishoumar*, from the French term for the unemployed, *chômeur*.

So they created a new trend in music that was called *ishoumar* music, which is much more militant, much more of a social commentary, than the traditional music that we were used to hearing in the camps. This music is a call for resistance. It is a call for raising consciousness among the Tuareg people. It seeks to explain the tradition of the Tuareg people today, their dispersal, their victimization by phenomenon such as the arbitrary drawing of boundaries by colonial powers.

BW: Is this when the electric guitar entered Tuareg music? When did this genre begin to emerge?

IM: These young people were the children of the displaced migrants from the 1970s who suffered from the droughts. In the 1980s, they grew up in a situation of distress and despair, with an acute sense of awareness that something was seriously wrong with the society at large. And in exile, they met with young people from other cultures and movements, and developed a sort of criticism from the outside. And this developed into a brand new style of music, a brand new idiom, and a brand new outlook on the very critical situation that the Tuareg in both Mali and Niger are undergoing.

BW: Where did this exile experience take place, for the most part?

IM: The two main countries where young Tuareg went were Algeria and Libya. And the young people who came from Mali and Niger met up with other young people from elsewhere in Africa, and it was a kind of coming-together of a whole generation that was becoming aware that it had become fractured by forces of history, such as the drawing of boundaries and colonization.

One of the strengths of the Tuareg movement is the very strong sense of belonging to a culture that transcends state borders, that has a coherence that's much more ancient and meaningful than the abstract and artificial administrative boundaries and the empty shells of nation states that have been created over the years.

BW: Tuareg country is largely divided between Niger and Mali, and in the early '90s Tuareg guerilla resistance emerged in both those countries. Tell us how that went down.

IM: To understand the situation, you have to go all the way back to the 1885 Conference of Berlin and the colonial partition, where European states that were unlikely to take the socio-economic realities on the ground into consideration—because they were completely

ignorant of them—divided up this region into various zones of influence. We're talking about France, England, Germany, Spain, Italy—they all argued, and they partitioned Africa. As a result, the Tuareg people, who had been around for thousands of years, were arbitrarily divided between five main states. You have Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria and Libya. From being a people with a territory, we became ethnic minorities—roughly one-fifth of the Tuareg people live in each of those countries, and as ethnic minorities, of course, we became discriminated against and oppressed.

It is well-known that at the time of independence after World War II, new countries emerged with names like Niger, Upper Volta, Ivory Coast—all of these countries had flags, national anthems, constitutions, bureaucracies that were all forged by the colonial powers and that remained. And in the new context of independence, the Tuareg people were told "Now, whatever confederation you belong to, whatever your culture is, whatever language you speak, you're now Nigerien, or Malian—and that's it. You're just going to have to live with it, and you don't have a choice."

In Africa historically there has been some degree of co-existence between a wide variety of people. When the modern notions developed in Europe of republican democracy appeared, people began competing for pieces of power and resources. So there was more and more ethnic conflict. And we rapidly realized that this talk of democracy can also be a form of dictatorship, if large groups end up dominating and excluding smaller groups from power.

The Tuareg haven't had an intense consciousness of this because they weren't directly colonized, or they were weakly colonized. They were completely cut off from the world economy and world politics, because they had a subsistence lifestyle based on ancestral nomadic traditions. So they didn't have the education, awareness or even the language to understand what was going on at a national level, or even to demand their inclusion in politics.

So with the droughts and displacement and the pain caused by that, people came into contact with the world around them. And this gave them an acute awareness of not only of the causes of the crisis that was affecting them, but a consciousness of their existence as a people and of the need to engage in some kind of cultural resistance. That's why this youth movement that we call *ishoumar* has been so critical in structuring our identity in the contemporary world.

Unfortunately, the national states reacted brutally. So many of these young people found that the only way to make themselves heard was to take up arms. And this was the beginning of the conflict, in the early 1990s. In the first half of the 1990s, in those five years, the entire traditional territory of the Tuareg was kind of a no-man's-land, where there was brutal repression, torture and suffering. We have a very forceful memory of what we had to go just to be able to continue to exist.

But the result of this rebellion was, at the time, quite satisfactory for all parties involved. We obtained a new policy of administrative decentralization, and the promise of at least local elections in which the Tuareg people could have representatives that they could choose themselves.

So we obtained in principle equal rights, we managed to get the state to recognize its obligation to fairly distribute wealth and resources, and to provide us with education, access to jobs, and some influence in the policies of the entire country.

BW: This was the 1995 peace accord. And what was the name of the organization that had taken up arms?

IM: First there was an organization called the FLAA—the Liberation Front of the Air and Azawad, which over the course of the conflict splintered into several groups and which reunited in a broad organization called the ORA, the Organization of Armed Resistance. And that was the organization that signed the peace accords on the 24th of April, 1995.

BW: What are the Air and Azawad?

IM: These are the names of large territories that span over several national boundaries. The Air is a massif that separates the deserts of the Azawad and the Tenere—vast, barren stretches of desert.

BW: As I understand it, the Tuaregs have traditionally maintained semi-permanent settlements in the massif, and then would bring their herds and caravans into the desert in a seasonal migration.

IM: Exactly. And you must remember that the main economic activity in this region was the trans-Saharan caravan trade which united the peoples of North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. So the Tuareg have a very long experience and an expertise in cross-cultural communication between the peoples of Africa.

BW: Now, at the same time there was a Tuareg guerilla struggle underway in Mali. So what was the relationship between the guerilla organizations in Niger and Mali?

IM: Well, throughout these years the Tuareg people had become very scattered. An entire generation had lost the custom of crossing paths. So each region where Tuareg confederations live has its own specific characteristics. The Tuareg were united in the struggle, they shared a common ground and a common cultural discourse. But in practice, each movement regionally had a different enemy, a different state, a different government, with its own characteristics, its own blindness or administrative flexibility or lack thereof. So we led a struggle that had several centers.

The movement in Mali was very fractured. The organization that was best known was the MPA, the Popular Movement for Azawad. But the Malian government was more inclined to obtain a durable peace with the various Tuareg organizations. Whereas in Niger, we may have been more unified, but we had a more reluctant state.

BW: Yet there was terrible repression in the Adrar des Ifoghas, the massif in Mali which was the Tuareg stronghold.

IM: There was rebellion in the region you are talking about in 1963, early in the independence era, where the government of Modibo Keita, who had the support of the Soviet Union, led a fierce struggle against the Tuareg, a repression that we sometimes call "the genocide." So there is a long history there, and a lot of bitterness.

In the 1990s, there was a real civil war in Mali, a struggle for land, with other ethnic groups seizing Tuareg lands as property and the government playing divide-and-conquer. This was possible because the Tuareg were traditionally very isolated in Mali.

In Niger, there was more interaction between the Tuareg. Military governments have tried, but it is impossible to completely isolate the Tuareg from the rest of the population in Niger. So our struggle had more national resonance, and it was less of a civil war environment.

BW: The peace deal in Mali was in 1996, one year after the peace deal in Niger. In both cases, the dialogue was brokered by Algeria. But by then, many thousands had been forced to flee. Have most been repatriated at this point?

IM: There were several waves of emigration. First, due to the poverty and droughts and loss of means of subsistence. Then there were huge waves of political flight as a result of the repression and persecution. Thousands of people went into exile. And then when peace returned in 1995, the UN High Commission on Refugees organized the repatriation.

So people came back to Mali and Niger. But they came back to the realization that there was no infrastructure there to greet them, that things hadn't really changed. There was absolutely no work, no means of subsistence, no way to survive.

BW: I understand there are still Tuareg refugees in Burkina Faso and Mauritania.

IM: Yes, there are still people there who haven't returned. Because they understand that in order to return, you need capital. You need to come back with the means to re-establish the traditional lifestyle. Concretely, that capital means herds. We are stock-breeders. We need camels. And if they know they don't have the capital needed to resume the lifestyle, the alternative is to end up impoverished or in urban shanty-towns. We need water, we need medicine, we need access to the land. Those things weren't guaranteed, and the word gets around.

BW: Which brings us to the current situation. Just in the past year, there's a been a sense of history repeating itself, and Tuareg leaders both in Niger and in Mali have returned to armed resistance.

IM: About eight months ago, a group of Tuareg in Niger decided to alert the population and the government to the deterioration of the situation and the non-respect of the agreements that had been signed in 1995. The country is currently run by an elected president named Tandja Mamadou who was a colonel in the army and one of the men primarily responsible for the historic Tchintabaraden massacre in May of 1990 that actually started the first war. It was a classic case of a brutal military official becoming all of a sudden a friendly politician in a formal democracy, and achieving international recognition as such.

So Tandja responded to this new uprising eight months ago with absolutely brutal and decisive violence. His government has made a decision that once and for all this situation must end, and the Tuareg and opposition must be completely annihilated. He seeks to eliminate Tuareg expression in politics and society entirely. So the situation has been made much worse in a very short time.

He brought back old habits. Anybody identified as a Tuareg is automatically suspected of supporting or being a part of the rebellion. Tuareg community leaders and intellectuals are being singled out and forced into exile as a result of the repression.

BW: So there's been a new wave of displacement just in the last few months...

IM: Exactly. And these months have also seen a spectacular rise in the popularity of the MNJ, the movement that was created to express the discontent of the Tuareg people at the beginning of this year.

BW: That's the Justice Movement of the People of Niger.

IM: Yes, and it called that because it is not just a Tuareg movement. It is a movement that has rallied people from across the country. It is a resistance movement of all the peoples of Niger. There are representatives from the majority as well as minority peoples. It has turned into a popular rejection of corruption and arbitrariness

BW: And it has been engaging in low-level harassment of army patrols and so on in the north of the country. What are the MNJ's demands?

IM: The main demand is a very basic one—fairness and rights. Also, the sharing of wealth, a better understanding of regional needs in Niger. But the most important new phenomenon in this particular conflict is the widespread and arbitrary sale by the

national government of huge tracts of land in the desert to foreign uranium companies that are acquiring legal rights to our ancestral lands, without any of the peoples of northern Niger being consulted or even informed.

We fully understand that one of the poorest countries in the world can't afford to not take advantage of the existence of a significant resource that's in demand. We're not saying that uranium shouldn't be touched. But the very survival of a whole people is at stake here. What we say, is that the conditions for the exploitation of this resource, the system which is put in place to extract it, how the whole economy of this resource is regulated, the accountability of the firms—all of these things have to be discussed by the population.

And what about the consequences on the environment, which is already in a bad state. We're dealing with a radioactive resource here. It's not too much to ask that there be some consultation, that we be involved. We're being dispossessed arbitrarily of lands and resources for the survival of our way of life, without any kind of democratic deliberation.

BW: I thought one of the things to come out of the 1995 peace accords was precisely provisions for consultation of the Tuareg people on local development and a return of the profits from resources exploited on their lands. Are you saying that the government has failed to live up to this?

IM: Yes, that was the main factor that led the people to rebel—the understanding that none of the accords were being implemented, at a time when many foreign countries were becoming eager to enter Niger. The largest one is China—which has a gigantic appetite for energy and resources, but very little consideration for basic things such as the environment, social conditions, culture. It is this basic disconnect of the foreign companies from local realities that caused the Tuareg to take up arms again.

BW: And I understand the government of Niger is calling the MNJ "bandits" and is refusing to negotiate at all.

IM: Yes, we are called bandits, drug-traffickers, terrorists. They have completely excluded negotiations. They say we are just a selfish movement that wants to take all of the uranium wealth for the Tuareg. But nothing could be further from the truth. Not only is this a rapidly expanding movement all over Niger, but its sole demand, the main purpose of this show of force, is to achieve the right to simply exist, to be equal partners in discussions on the future of the country.

BW: What rationale is the government using to justify failing to comply with the 1995 accords?

IM: They say the peace accords were brokered by France and Algeria, yet neither France nor Algeria gave the government the resources to carry them out. So it's the fault of the foreign powers. And they accuse the Tuareg of bad faith and of refusing to apply their own accords.

BW: I understand there were just meetings, once again in Algiers, to try to mediate the conflict which has broken out again both in Niger and Mali. But it was just a meeting attended by Tuareg leaders to try to establish some kind of groundwork for dialogue, and representatives of the governments of Mali and Niger did not attend.

IM: Yes, it was an initiative by Algeria based on previous experience. But the problem is that the Tuareg need to get the attention of the government of Niger. And with the Algerians unable to meet that goal, the steps towards negotiations were really a futile exercise.

The government was perfectly aware of the invitation from Algeria, but they basically stated that their position is never, ever will they negotiate with, or even recognize the existence of this rebellion.

BW: And the position of the government of Mali is the same?

IM: They did not attend the Algiers meeting, but they have established contacts with the rebels in Mali for negotiations.

BW: The new rebel movement in Mali is calling itself the Democratic Alliance for Change. So, once again, what is the relation between the MNJ in Niger and the Democratic Alliance for Change in Mali? Are you formally allied, or just informally support each other?

IM: There's no formal alliance. There's mutual recognition and dialogue, but they're dealing with the Malian government and we're dealing with the Nigerien government

BW: The United States has been directly drawn into the fighting in Mali recently. A US military supply plane was bringing in supplies for Malian military forces in the north of country in September, and Tuareg guerillas apparently opened fire on it. The US has Green Berets stationed in both Niger and Mali now under the Trans-Sahara Counter-Terrorist Initiative, allegedly in response to the presence of al-Qaeda in the region. How do you view this situation?

IM: It is a service that the United States has rendered to both governments, in Mali and Niger, to go around claiming and trying to persuade people that al-Qaeda is involved in any way, shape or form in the region. They are certainly not with the Tuareg. But the government has been able to say that they have no choice but to collaborate with American anti-terrorism. When you talk about al-Qaeda, George Bush gets all excited and gets involved personally. So this has been propaganda that has justified government policies, and the Tuareg see it as a gigantic mystification.

BW: What is your message to people in New York City and the United States?

IM: The US government has a lot of leverage it could use—rather than engaging in military and anti-terrorist operations—to pressure the governments to negotiate and dialogue and acknowledge the existence of democratic movements and bring peace in the region.

Another thing I'd like to mention is that some of the young Tuareg have left the country have come to the United States. All of them are trying to make a future for themselves and their people. A lot of them are becoming students and going to school. And the government of Niger is never going to provide aid or scholarships to these people. So maybe something could be done to make people aware of the need to support youth in the diaspora as well.

RESOURCES

Mouvement des Nigériens pour la Justice-MNJ : <http://m-n-j.blogspot.com/> [1]

Rebellion in the Sahara, Radio Netherlands, Nov. 19, 2007
<http://www.radionetherlands.nl/currentaffairs/071119-sahara-rebellion> [2]

From our weblog: Ethnic cleansing in Niger, WW4 REPORT, Nov. 30, 2007
<http://ww4report.com/node/4721> [3]