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## **The crisis in Niger** ~ Special Report by Peter Carter

On the heels of July's G8 meeting, at which wealthy national governments yet again procrastinated and prevaricated on debt cancellation for the poorest of the world's poor, aid agencies and the UN at last managed to focus the attention of the world on the plight of starving people in Niger.

Speaking at the Live 8 concert in Johannesburg in July, Nelson Mandela challenged the world to 'wipe poverty from the Earth' and sent a message to the G8 leaders to act now on Africa—or be responsible for genocide.

The previous month the UN chief of humanitarian aid, reporting on 2.5 million people in desperate need of food (including 800,000 malnourished children), said that Niger was suffering an acute humanitarian crisis in which children are dying because the world community has ignored UN appeals for urgent aid.

Aid agencies, such as World Vision, had been warning of the crisis for months and complaining that governments had left aid too late.

The first international warning about Niger's nutritional situation was sounded in October 2004. However, by late June of this year, the international aid system was still unable to deliver appropriate assistance to those at greatest risk. In simple terms, this means a death sentence for the children of Niger's poorest families.

Niger is a democratic nation. It is not war torn. There are no problems of access. There is no good reason for food not being made available to the starving there. Why are the people starving and the children dying?

There is nothing new about Niger's story. The people of Niger have faced food shortages each time the rains fail—every few years. There was a drought last year, followed by an invasion of locusts, and another drought again this year. Niger is one of the very poorest nations of the world where life expectancy is only 47 years and infant mortality is more than one in ten.

In a 'normal' year in Niger there are a large numbers of deaths of children. One in four does not live to see his or her fifth birthday. In the past few months cholera has surfaced. Aid agencies have been reporting children dying in emergency feeding camps every day.

There is nothing new in the oppressive economic exploitation of Africa. A BBC report revealed that the government of Niger, under orders from the International

Monetary Fund, had abandoned stockpiling of emergency rations. And, also to meet IMF economic rules, the government kept grain prices too high for the starving population to buy.

An assessment of the slow response to the nutritional crisis in Niger was made by Dr Isabelle Defourny of Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). She found that free government food distribution, urged by MSF for the worst hit regions, had been avoided in order not to upset 'free market' conditions.

Niger now spends more on debt payments than it does on health and education combined. Altogether sub-Saharan Africa spends four times as much on debt repayment as it does on health care. The enormous debt payments on 'foreign loans' are made to private commercial banks and the US based World Bank and the IMF.

In 1999, a British TV documentary, 'The Face of Debt', examined the horrible impact of debt on the people and economy of Niger. The documentary chose Niger as a graphic example of the indebtedness inflicted on former colonial countries, which make up 'half the planet.' The program described the situation then as 'man-made agony,' explaining how World Bank loans to Niger were strangling the country with an ever-increasing burden of debt.

The 'face' referred to in the title is the terrifying disease called noma, which only strikes children. Noma is caused by common oral bacteria that can be treated with a simple mouthwash. It's a horrible disease, last seen in Europe in the Nazi concentration camps.

The documentary examined the consequences of indebtedness on the general state of the hospital and patients. Hospitals in Niger are hopelessly understaffed and under supplied. They operate on the principle of 'no money, no medicine,' introduced as part of the so-called 'debt relief' package. Many enter for treatable illnesses and end up dying. Mothers beg outside hospitals for a little money to pay for simple rehydration fluid for their dehydrated children in the hospital.

The 1999 documentary also reported Niger's children were dying faster than anywhere else in the world, even though it is a democratic member of the world economy and a war-free country.

Three-quarters of all tax revenue was being spent repaying its foreign debt. The 16% income-tax rate in Niger applied at

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roughly \$200 a year and the top rate of 52% at about \$600 per year. Niger's Value-Added Tax of 17% on top of these confiscatory rates on income, was increased to 19% in the midst of the starvation crisis.

Most of Niger's money is owed to the IMF and World Bank. They take over when countries cannot meet their debt payments to the commercial banks. In doing so they protect both the image and profitability of the private banks, and prevent nations from defaulting on the debts.

An article in *The Guardian* newspaper in 1999 explained, 'Countries have to abide by IMF programmes for six years without any back-sliding in order to secure debt relief. Countries that fall off the straight and narrow, even if for just one year, go back to square one. Even those countries that do stick it out have found that the debt relief is not enough to make much difference to over-stretched budgets.'

Niger need not be such a poor country in the first place. It has natural resources—uranium, gold, oil, coal, iron, tin and phosphates. Its agricultural products are millet, sorghum, cowpeas, peanuts, cotton, rice. Niger exports uranium, livestock, cowpeas, and onions.

As the World Bank and the IMF dictate the terms of Niger's governance and economy, corporations such as Hunt Oil of Texas and Elf of France are poised to exploit Niger's oil fields and the cash desperate Niger's government is inviting foreign investors to exploit its gold deposits.

Connecting the dots, that makes these bank creditors look more like predators, who deal in children's agony for oil and gold. Nothing new there for Africa.

Here is the record of Niger's starvation crisis:

- 1999 Debt—1.4 billion dollars
- 2001 Debt—1.6 billion dollars
- 2002 Debt—1.8 billion dollars
- April 2004—Niger's international creditors announce agreement to cancel \$1.2 billion of its debt over time under a controversial debt relief scheme, rewarding the country for its 'pro-free market economic restructuring plan.' The banks congratulate Niger on its ambitious programme to privatize 12 state-owned companies, including the water (yes, water in sub-

Saharan Africa!) and telephone utilities. Incredibly their news release notes that Niger has 'a very narrow national resource base and is highly vulnerable to external shocks—such as droughts.'

- November 2004—The United Nations appeals for aid but receives hardly any pledges from the world's wealthy nations and major donors.

- May 2005—The United Nations again appeals for food aid for Niger, this time for \$16m.

- June 2005—Not a single pledge is received. Some 2,000 people march through the streets of Niamey, Niger's capital, demanding free food. The government refuses their demands, saying this would be 'foolish,' even though some 150,000 children are severely malnourished.

- July 2005—Niger is one of the countries whose debts the G8 announced would be cancelled. But its food crisis is not mentioned at the G8 summit in Gleneagles.

- August 2005—Already the Jubilee Debt Campaign and the World Development Movement have found indications of renegeing on the July promise of help by the wealthy nations of the G8. Complaining of shortage of money the G8 has only promised enough money to meet the debt repayments of 18 developing countries for three years. And once again that cancellation contains onerous conditions, including privatization of government-run services and industries, increased trade liberalization, and budgetary spending restrictions.

### Commentary

The poorest of the world's nations have been stripped of all economic independence in order to have the debt noose loosened for a little while.

As with the recent tsunami, it is the charitable non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and a multitude of individuals (giving a few dollars) who care and who come up with real money. Don't count on banks or governments to help the dying and desperate in Niger.

So send those few dollars, and say to the private banks and the G8—Shame on you! Make poverty history. Cancel all these odious debts. Now. Unconditionally. ☺