



Niger, Zinder, September 2014

Eight young Association girls started College in Zinder this Fall!



Aïchatou, Balkissa, Ouma, Aïchatou, Chamsiya, Fassouma, Biba, and Mariama are the eight young girls that passed entrance exams to Collège in Zinder! They began on October 1, 2014. At the far left, Binta passed her exams last year and started her second year in school this Fall with a 5.5 average grade!

Some of the girls would like to be nurses at the Centre one day, others hope to continue their studies for a teaching career, and Mariam would like to become a 'founder', like 'Auntie Isabelle'!

On August 11, all the children, child-mothers and local staff went 'back to school' to prepare the upcoming year, which began on October 1 in Niger. Review courses were given in the mornings, while the afternoons were spent doing art, puzzles, table games, playing on the swings, jumping rope, and watching cartoons and films about education in Niger.



The older girls care for our 83 goats. I was forced to let our shepherd go for not fulfilling his contract requirements. For some time I'd been noticing the sheep coming back hungry from their long journeys into Zinder's bush region. And one day I found him sitting in front of his house while his children cared for the sheep behind his banko hut, instead of taking them out to graze in the bush.

The girls are very skilled at working with goats, and they know how to milk, feed, and care for their pens and the chicken coops! Every Friday they receive a small salary for their work with the goats and our 35 chickens, and they use it to purchase the small things they need, in addition to a half bag of rice or millet needed at home.

Their weekly salary is CHF 10, which makes all the difference at the end of the month. Many men in Zinder don't even earn that much because of a lack of work!

The girls that received the goats from their Swiss sponsors have been watching their little herd grow over the years. The 'red goat of Maradi' is known for producing good and abundant milk, and up to two deliveries per year! There were twins, but few survive, unfortunately. Living conditions are difficult in Zinder, even for animals.

During the rainy season this summer, the goat pen flooded several times as a result of a slow-moving drain and too much runoff. Not yet strong enough to stand on their own legs, three kids perished before the staff could save them. It was too late. Such is life and death in the Sahel!



Our first solar cooker has attracted a lot of curiosity and scepticism. The girls laugh at the long grey tube; anything to get a full, hot meal on time!

The local staff remains hesitant. It's new to them, and it upsets their daily routine. A lot of encouragement and patience is needed to entice our two cooks to use it, to realize that the millet, rice, couscous, meat, and vegetables come out naturally cooked with all their nutrients intact! We hired a teacher to follow the process day after day. There will be many events this Fall in Switzerland that I hope will bring in enough funds to purchase four additional solar cookers, which would allow us to feed the 142 children and 23 local staff members at the Association!

Our well-kept garden, watered with rainwater by a Centre employee, produced its first beans ten days ago! The natural quality and size of these beans are amazing, and allows us to fill many stomachs.

Day to Day in Zinder

Upon my return to Niger, after Ramadan and summer vacation, I was greeted by children suffering from neurological malaria and dehydration, and infectious diarrhoea. They were totally anaemic from the disease. Our nurse and nanny brought warmth and humanity to the sick children and adults during their visits to Zinder's 'hospital', where they witnessed a stench of dirty tile, excreta and filthy bodies. Two of the nanny's children were afflicted with a violent bout of malaria, and hospitalized with a drip.

One fine morning in September, a truck arrived at the *Après-demain* Centre to deliver the laterite used to impede water flow after the last two months of rainy season. After having unloaded his cargo, he backed up, not paying attention, and drove straight into the main

entrance. There was an immediate reaction from those standing around the truck; the damage was substantial. One of the two doors of the Centre came clean off, and the wall was cracked from the ground up. In total bewilderment and denying any responsibility, the driver drove away unaffected with his massive vehicle. Zinder's Sultan and Mayor were immediately contacted and asked to resolve the sensitive issue! I am still waiting for an answer. The cracked wall and gate had to be quickly rebuilt for safety reasons, and I hope that the driver will be forced to reimburse me for at least part of the costs.

As the saying goes, 'bad things come in threes', and little did I know that another hit was coming my way.

We were having serious issues with getting our car to start, and often had to take it to the garage in town. The mechanic finally lent me a car for a few days while he tried to figure out which electronic or electric problem was keeping the car from running without stalling out every time I slowed down or came to a stop. One morning (let's stay positive) as I was driving to the local bank, I flipped on my left-turn blinker like any smart driver would do, and veered slowly to the left, carefully looking in front, behind and to the sides. I must have slumped into an African pace because I wasn't fast enough and failed to see a young man on a motorcycle appear out of nowhere and pull up on the left just as I was supposed to turn in that direction. Bam head-on, and I saw the young man ejected onto the sand with his bike. The sand is an excellent buffer! A motorized policeman was parked on the side of the street and witnessed everything. Stopping my car, I approached the policeman and asked him to help me detain the young man, who was getting ready to run off. He didn't bat an eye, and stood watching as the young man left with his bike. *Keep calm, Isabelle, in every situation!* With disarming composure, the policeman looked away and told me to report it to the station, but that there was little chance they could do anything without the young man. Finally, at the Mayor's office, they explained that the current situation with young people in Zinder and Niger in general is somewhat explosive since a young man was killed at a street protest. Policemen are present, but they only observe without reacting. And for the hood of the car I was borrowing, who is going to react?

It is so discouraging, disheartening. Sometimes I sing; and sometimes I cry.

After all the beautiful mornings of September, (gracious! and the month even isn't finished yet... what's next?) one morning I didn't get out of bed. My back hurt so badly that I was unable to do anything. I was reminded that the Universe uses extraordinary means to bring magical solutions our way through particular circumstances. Arriving at the Centre, the nurse called the Sisters to attend to me, and take me home. No position was comfortable. Sitting, lying down, standing, nothing works when nerves and muscles are suffering. I had to take anti-inflammatory and pain medication that helped me two days later. Feeling pity for their director, the staff began looking for a solution! An expatriate with the same problem as I had told me about a very efficient, blind kinesiologist. With nothing to lose, I called him and asked for an appointment at the Centre infirmary. I immediately felt an improvement as he worked on me, offered advice and exercises at the end of every appointment. During the appointments he would talk to me about his hopes and dreams for this little corner of the Sahel. He had gone blind at the age of 20, and is 27 years old today. He can only make out the slightest change in light, night time, when he is in front of traffic lights. He had begun his education in kinesiology, but was forced to drop the courses in the capital city for a lack of funds. Neither the State nor anyone else had responded favourably to his request for a grant to

pursue his studies in professional kinesiology. He was at the top of his class, and demonstrated exceptional sensibility and feeling at the tip of his fingers, an advantage of not being able to see! I like reminding him that his eyes are now at the tip of his fingers to help others. I thought of Bachir, for whom I was able to provide healing thanks to the generous donations that paid for a skin graft to his head in Benin, the younger Mariama who underwent an operation for her clubfoot in the capital, and the older Mariama who walks today, thanks to the equipment, expert advice, and special donations from Switzerland! Could it be Allassane's turn to have a chance to pursue his studies in professional kinesiology in Niamey? With renewed motivation, I hurried to write an email to Switzerland presenting my newest request. The next day, lying flat on my back with ice to numb my back, I told Allassane that he was going to be able to register for medical school in November. My most sincere gratitude to the generous donors in Switzerland and beyond who make miracles possible!

When I step back and consider the last few months of my life here, it is easier for me to accept so many trials in Zinder (even being bed-ridden), knowing that they lead to meeting just the right people who need my help!

Finally, I am standing on my own two feet again. I look forward to meeting you on a street corner, at one of our event booths in Switzerland. That is, if Air France allows me to come home. My return flight was just cancelled...

Thank you for having taken the time to read this newsletter, for laughing or crying with me and the children of the Association, in our small corner of Niger where crickets sing and mosquitos swarm.

The girls and boys at the Association school wish you a very colourful and beautiful Fall season, wherever you are!

With my warm thoughts at 42°C, between water and power outages, and Wi-Fi fails that add to the charm of our beloved Sahel!

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Zinder Niger, September 2014-11-25
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Thank you, Switzerland! September 2014