



Niger Zinder, September 2015

Back to school!

The 173 orphans, child-mothers, and young married woman went back to school at the beginning of August, along with 25 local Association employees!

The official school year in Niger starts end of September, which gave us time for revisions, games, songs, awareness sessions, and lots of sports! Even with temperatures reaching above 43°, the children seemed unaffected by the overwhelming heat, which made their new physical education and sports teacher happier than ever. She organised running games on sand that was still burning after 4 pm! The supervisors at the Centre are excited about the new sport programme, which they feel gives the children sufficient opportunity to use their energy before bedtime. They're tireless!

Every nook and cranny of the Centre needed to be cleaned and disinfected before the first day. During the summer break, serpents and salamanders like to find a cool place to sleep during the heat waves under tin verandas and well-irrigated bushes. We had to call the local marabouts- who master the traditional rituals that lead serpents and other belly-crawlers to other, equally dubitable hiding places.

And what of the lizards and geckos that double in number and weight during the hot season, overtaking homes and sandy streets? All efforts to approach them have been unsuccessful. They are timid and cautious, and go about their merry business. I realized that we could just live together, under the same roof, without either understanding or trapping one another! My cats, however, have a different approach: a great big happy meal!

In addition to the PE teacher, the generous donations collected in Switzerland have provided us with an IT professional who offers three hours of courses per week for the older students on good-quality computers jointly donated by a bank and a company in Lausanne! Before that, the director was the one who gave a few hours of IT classes per week.

The Minister of Public Education has provided the Centre with a psychologist from the State of Niger for the price of his commute costs. He organises and leads excellent awareness meetings for students, teachers, and the young sewing women.



Some of the 173 orphans and child-mothers, as well as the 25 local Association employees at the *Après-demain* Welcome Centre! August 2015.
(Young married women and child-mothers from the sewing centre were absent for the picture.)

Gearing up for the next school session for 17 scholars, an educator will be hired to monitor homework. The girls studying now at Zinder's public College, about 400 metres from the Association Centre will continue to receive support from the Association, thanks to their sponsors. They sleep at the Centre, participate in College courses from 8:00 to 13:00, and then return to the Centre for meals and homework with the new supervising educator. After school, they care for goats and chickens, the laundry, and light sweeping, which provides them with a small salary at the end of each week. They go home feeling quite proud on the weekends! These small salaries keep them out of the local markets, where they used to sell goods, and where men with other intentions would approach them with their own pieces of silver....

New children at the '*Après-demain*' Centre!

After I visited and requested aid for a young albino boy, Amadou, last June, I grew increasingly interested in albino children, who seem more numerous in Zinder than I had thought.

The director of the school did some asking around, and made contact with the parents of albino children, who are generally hidden away at home instead of going to school and playing with other children.



The first albino children to receive an education at the Centre! August 2015.

Albino children are born with a heavy burden to bear. These ‘magic children’, as they’re often called, are hunted for their organs and limbs to be used in ancient rituals based on old beliefs. In certain parts of Africa, they’re even devoured or used as talismans and gris-gris in black magic.

This is a real motivator for me to work harder to educate, train, and encourage these calm and respectful young children who have such an enormous potential! I paid a visit to the Sultan, the Governor, the director of public and primary education, and the Secretary General of the Mayor’s office in Zinder to inform them of the Association’s new goals. They strongly encouraged us to pursue our activities with these underprivileged children, for whom nothing is done in the entire Zinder area.

The State psychologist has already begun working with the children so that they can welcome and accept the albino students, who are just like them but with a bit more fragility and sensitivity to the sun. The albino children will have eye examinations at the Zinder hospital and will most certainly need to wear glasses; as it is now, they can hardly see the blackboard from their seats. They’ve already received sunglasses, hats, caps, and long sleeves!

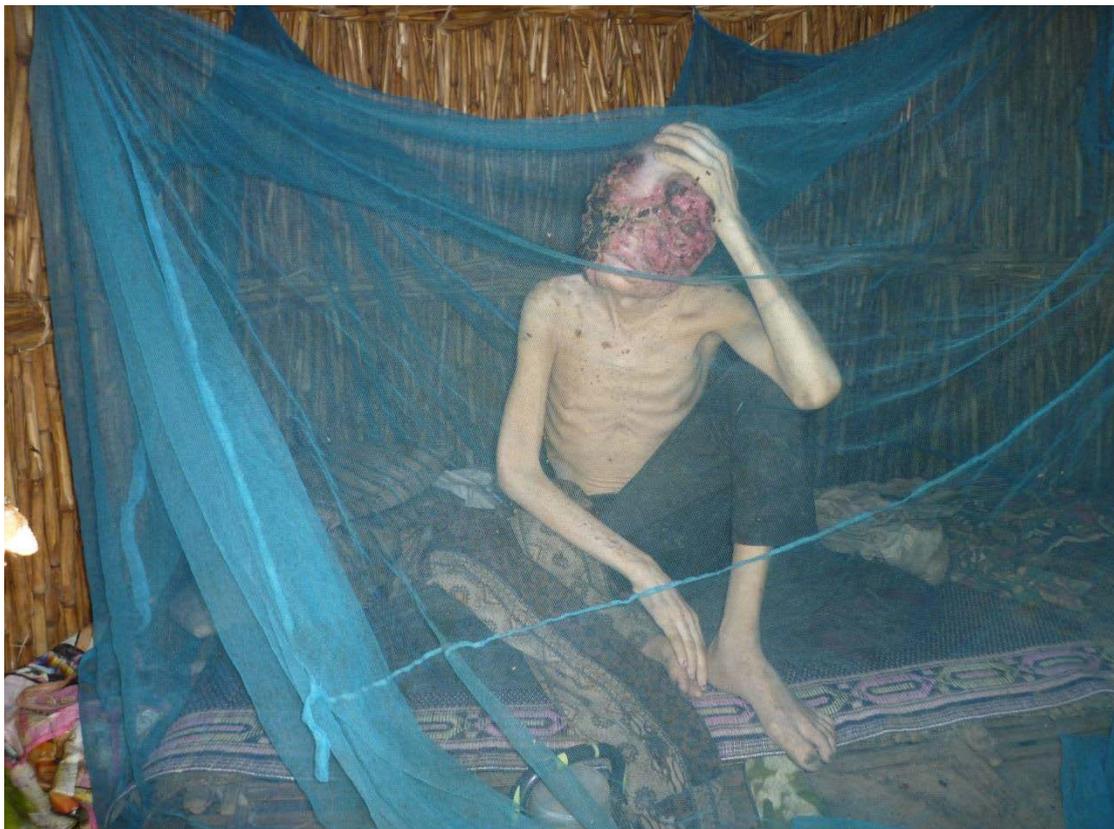
By the end of the year, new albino children will have joined us at the Centre, and I’m so excited about that!

Amadou, 15 years old

I went to visit the young albino boy, Amadou, who had been taken to his bush village 112 km from Zinder after having come to the Centre asking for help last June. The Swiss Cooperation Office in Niger, impacted and moved by my last newsletter, much like the people in Switzerland have been, allowed me to take Amadou under my wing. Transportation to his father's village was arranged in the summer, bringing the food that would allow his father to take good care of him, his only child left at home. None of his other children are albinos, so they were able to wed and remain in good health. Others are already dead.

Forgive me for including this horrific photograph. Amadou appears to be letting himself die; he refuses to eat, claiming it hurts too much. The tumour has extended down below his face, and the metastases have spread. For the visit, I was accompanied by social services from the Zinder hospital, who had accompanied Amadou to his village two months earlier. They'd gone out of their way by more than 70 km to locate his hometown. I got lucky. I only had to survive the 112 km of bumpy, ill-kept roads, both ways. The following days we all had aching bodies!

Amadou asked social services if he could return with us and stay at the hospital for treatment. He asked, in so much as he could move his lips, for a facial injection for the pain, to numb the constant pain in and on his skin, which is so fragile and sensitive.



The young Amadou in his straw hut, 112 km from Zinder.

I gave him some pain medication and a homemade cream made of plants, and instructed him to apply it as soon as possible to help ease the pain. But at more than 45°, how can it possibly work?

Since he couldn't and wouldn't eat anything, I gave broth to his father and asked him to encourage Amadou to eat the vegetable soup with some warm water.

I wanted to take him in my arms, I wanted to kiss him and tell him to go and find the peace and tranquillity he longed for, a body free of pain.

Instead, a string of big blue flies, noisy insects dancing around his head, defying anyone to come near. He returned quickly to his mosquito netting, on his little straw refuge that was so hot and stifling. And the four of us, silent and humbled, returned to the car that would take us back to our daily life in Zinder, so much less terrifying.

Day to day at the *Après-demain* Education and Welcome Centre

Balkissa, a young girl at the Association who married a 60-year-old man last winter before returning to the Centre on her own to study and learn, is pregnant. The child is expected any day now! Young and enthusiastic, our nurse is excited to see the Centre's second baby arrive! I would love to be awakened during the night to witness the birth of this young mother's child!

Due to the arranged marriage, Balkissa was absent from her studies at the College for a long time, her grades too low to continue on into the 2nd year this fall. Where babies are concerned, the public College rules are clear: she may not pursue her studies. The two activities are not compatible. The school director, nanny, and I talked with Balkissa for a long time about her future and her hopes. She didn't want to return home and abandon her studies. Perhaps the father of the child would want to take him away, especially since she'd given birth to a son. She had no other choice than to bring his son to him in Niamey, 1,000 km from Zinder. It appears that Balkissa is preparing herself for it. She has grown and matured over the course of this difficult stage in her life. She wants to work, to earn a living, to help her child if she can keep him. At the outset of 2016, when the baby has been weaned, we are going to sign Balkissa up for IT training in Zinder, and she will work afternoons in the Centre office, learning how to be a secretary. And when the Association receives its training license from the Minister of Professional Training in Niger, we will be able to issue her diploma!

One young soul comes while another beautiful one takes its leave...

The young 34-year-old Swedish woman, with whom I took long and wonderful walks and rides in the bush, died in a car accident one month ago. She was returning from a stay in Sweden and was so excited to be back in Zinder, with its people and animals!

She never did arrive in Zinder. Her rental car veered off the road about 27 km out from Zinder and crashed into a ditch. The seatbelt burst her spleen. Earlier this year, a French volunteer working at a school in Zinder died of an improbable heart attack. I've been meditating on a phrase I heard, full of common sense, every time my own hardships start to loom, remembering that the hardships of others are much more difficult to overcome: "Anything that doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Two weeks ago, Ousseina, one of two local cooks at the Association Centre, was the victim of a grave injustice and act of vengeance. Her tiny, traditional banco hut was set fire at two o'clock in the morning. Fortunately, her little six-year-old boy was sleeping in our dormitory. A widow and Nigerian Catholic, she has three other children, all of whom were able to escape when the fire began. She lost everything. Everything was burned to the ground. A neighbour boy (15 years old) set the fire to avenge his mother. Back up a few days. One morning, the young neighbour ran over a one of the cook's children with his scooter, mere meters from their house. He neither stopped nor apologized. The child sustained a few bruises and scratches. The next day, Ousseina told the boy's mother that he might have stopped to ask whether the child was okay or not. "We don't even treat animals that way," she said. The young driver overheard the discussion and, as soon as Ousseina was gone, hurried to tell his mother that he would avenge her when the opportunity arose. Charges were pressed, and we're waiting for a settlement or some kind of means with which to rebuild.

Unfortunately, several days before returning to Switzerland I also spent a few hours at Zinder Police Station, with the prosecutor! It's not as if I feel the irresistible need to experience every kind of situation in my life, but it would seem that there are things I just can't avoid. I lodged a complaint at the police station for having been threatened and treated aggressively by one of the two Centre workers. He had received his third warning, and didn't handle it very well. He was verbally aggressive with me in front of the school director, the secretary and the nanny, who also got a dose of his aggression. He threw his mobile phone violently down, which is what drove me to contact the police.

The police were both reactive and responsible, four of them showing up at the Centre in a 4x4 open van to carry away the offender as an example. The next day, in order to reassure the students, we explained that one must behave appropriately in life, otherwise the police takes charge! We also explained that now the director has the police on speed dial, and that they'll arrest anyone who makes trouble at the Centre or at home. The worker spent three days in jail, without washing or any form of assistance, after which time we were all called before the prosecutor to either close the case or pursue the complaint. I opted to close the case, knowing that it could be reopened at any time, providing that the worker respected his immediate dismissal and agreed to stay away from the Centre or from any contact with the personnel. The staff responded responsibly, and learned new ways of reacting to daily problems in a society that is undereducated, and in a country that is underdeveloped. Niger has been ranked 186th out of 186 in terms of education and development on the Human Development Report. There's a lot still to do, and I'm fully committed to getting the job done!

Aside from that, everything is going fine, truly. Just look at the faces of these four boys! These are the future of the country! By educating, training, supporting, and leading the way, everything is possible for and with them!



These children make ordinary moments extraordinary.

Upcoming Events:

Sunday, 25 October:

Veveyse à Châtel-St-Denis Fair, 11:00 – 20:00

The Association will be selling Nigerian products at the RADIO FRIBOURG booth.

Monday, 26 October to 31 October:

Organised by the Bayly School of Reflexology in Lausanne, Noëlle and Charles Weyeneth:

Proceeds from **Reflexology sessions**, offered by Bayly Reflexology Club members, will be donated to the Association.

Place: Portes St-François in Lausanne

Fr. 20 for a 25-minute revitalizing session!

Saturday, 5 December: St. Nicolas Market booth in Romont, Castle courtyard.

THANK YOU for having taken the time to read about my latest adventures in Niger!
THANK YOU for your precious and friendly support, from far or near.

I wish each and every one of you a beautiful autumn, and look forward to seeing you at one of our events or out and about in town!

Isabelle Macheret

Zinder Niger, September 2015

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