



Niger Zinder, February 2015

And so begins the heat



Temperatures have hovered at around 52° in Zinder for the past three weeks!

Old and tired carts pushed about by young children and women in the city's sandy streets are all heading in the direction of a water source. The queue is long to fill yellow bottles and it can take days before water emerges from the pump. Even the dogs lose their patience, and abandon post for a few hours at a time.

The population has been increasing over the past few years in Niger, and the demand for water is often bigger than the supply. And it's been that way for a while now.

In Niger, 49.8 percent of the population is under the age of 15 (statistics from 2014). The soil in certain areas of Niger is rocky, which makes it challenging to drill deep for water. Zinder is one of those areas.

With too many nitrates, wells nine-meters deep fail to provide quality drinking water. The population relieves itself directly on the ground since no latrines or water recovery system exists, polluting the water table. I am often truly grateful for our donors, and for the Swiss Cooperation for having financed a water borehole in our Welcome and Education Centre!

The Sisters of the Assumption have gone.

Early in January, attacks were launched against the Christians and against French buildings and businesses in Zinder, just like in other countries.

After Friday's great prayer, the people stormed the church and living quarters of the Sisters of the Assumption, urged by local unrest. Some young people brought gasoline with their motorbikes and began burning the church, the Sisters' dwelling, and the school of more than 600 students from middle class families in Zinder. Their school was considered the best in Zinder.

The Sisters found refuge with other Christians in a small outdoor latrine. Forty-two people were captive, threatened by young, angry locals in the mood to destroy everything in their path. Many young onlookers from a poor neighbourhood in Zinder took advantage of the demonstration against Charly Hebdo to plunder and destroy. The Sisters and Christians in hiding were able to escape when their car exploded nearby, causing those trying to burn down their hiding place to flee. A number of priests living in an adjoining building tried to escape by climbing over walls that had been made with pieces of broken glass built into them to keep hostiles out. As a result, they cut their hands and fingers in their attempt to save themselves. The military finally arrived and delivered everyone from a living hell.

Ironic as it may sound, the Sisters were assaulted by the very local young people they had been helping, in an area where the congregation had opened a dispensary over 70 years ago.

Disappointed, discouraged, and saddened, the Sisters were placed in a secure location in the military camp while their congregation decided what to do about their future work in Zinder. Everything has to be rebuilt, and their safety can no longer be guaranteed. The four Sisters left for Burkina Faso and Togo a few days later. I am going to miss them terribly.

It is so important to take charge of these wandering young people from the poor neighbourhoods who have no education or schooling of any kind, and who lack a vocation or job. The government has a lot of work to do!

The 'Après-demain' Welcome and Education Centre

After more than a year of administrative efforts, the Association has proudly obtained authorisation to open a school and teach! The 'Après-demain' Welcome and Education Centre has been operating for the past 17 months. We were cleared to open school in the fall of 2013 and to follow Niger's national curriculum while we waited for the official document from the authorities.



The next step for the Association is to achieve educational recognition. I am in the process of establishing contacts in Zinder and in the capital of Niamey to obtain authorisation from the Minister of Vocational Training of Niger. With that in hand, the Association will be authorized to officially educate young girls and to grant apprenticeship diplomas to those working at the Centre as teacher assistants and nanny assistants caring for both the offspring of the child-mothers and the preschool!

Fatma Zara was a young, 16-year-old mother with two children when she arrived in 2010. It was a difficult time for her with a two-year-old boy and the newly born Mariama. She bravely endured moments of crisis and peace with a vision of hope for the future of her children!

Today, Fatma Zara is an example of perseverance and the will to make a better life in a country of chaos. She works every morning with the nanny teaching pre-schoolers, among whom her own Mariama, to draw, recite the alphabet, work with numbers, sing, and play!

In the afternoons she attends one of the six classrooms at the Centre as the teacher's supervisor and assistant. Fatma Zara is part of the first wave of motivated young woman to receive, after five years of schooling, an assistant diploma, be officially recognised, and earn a decent salary that matches her potential. Other young women wish to be secretaries and take computer courses at the Centre. We are training the future secretaries, assistant nannies, and teachers at the 'Après-demain' Centre!

A financial and organisational audit was conducted early in February onsite. The Swiss Cooperation in Niamey generously financed the audit, which was undertaken by an office in Burkina Faso. It lasted a week in all, and I was very satisfied with their comments and suggestions. A report was drawn up, and we presented it at the 5th General Assembly of the Association on March 26 in Romont.

Day-to-day in Zinder

I am very happy to have a nice infirmary and available nurse! We have needed the infirmary over the past few weeks more than ever before, what with an outbreak of chicken pox!

The first week, some 50 girls, boys, and young sewing students (out of 163) were quarantined after having been diagnosed. The next week, a worker and teacher covered in spots returned home to their own quarantine after receiving basic care. After it was all over, a few sick children remained but the situation was in control. Almost everyone came down with it! Very few complications were noted, which is the most important thing!

We missed the Sisters' dispensary tremendously during that time, and will surely miss it again in the future. Sister Josée kindly offered advice on how to treat our dear sick children, and gave us information on which infusions to make from plants, bark, and roots. She had all the recipes in her head!

Just before December, one of the girls who had started College in Zinder died. Biba was the daughter of the Centre's nanny, and she had two younger brothers. The nanny had been infected with HIV by her husband prior to pregnancy. Her husband died years ago. Biba was very fragile health-wise and we helped her as best we could. Her Swiss sponsor always made her so happy, knowing that someone was taking care of her from far away. She was given triple therapy, but had also contracted Hepatitis B, which made her even more susceptible to germs and infections. And since the wind often blows strongly in Zinder during the sand storms, there was more than enough dust and germs in the air! Biba is the second girl at the Centre to succumb to HIV in the past five years.

Back home at the Centre

Balkissa enrolled at the College in the fall of 2014. She was both proud and grateful to have passed her exams and be eligible to study like the big kids!

From one day to the next this winter, Balkissa stopped attending College and didn't tell her classmates why. One of the Centre teachers went to visit her home where her aunt had taken care of her since her parents died. The aunt informed the teacher that Balkissa had been married recently into a marriage that had been arranged months earlier. She would no longer be attending the Centre or the College to pursue her studies.

The teacher sought out Balkissa's husband, who was living in Niamey, where she had been taken. When I returned from Switzerland at the end of 2014, I asked to meet Balkissa and her husband in the capital city. The gentleman, 50, had white hair and beard, and stood beside a Balkissa completely devoid of her earlier joie de vivre and sunny disposition. I spoke calmly with her husband in an effort to understand why he had taken a young girl from Zinder to the capital, far from her family and native environment. Sometimes things happen that just can't be explained. This man had already been married and had four grown boys from his first marriage. He promised me that Balkissa could pursue her studies in the capital, and from what I could tell Balkissa seemed content with that.

Two weeks ago I received confirmation that my efforts in favour of the children and young women in Zinder are truly worthwhile! With time, patience, and perseverance, and without expecting anything in return, everything is possible. Balkissa showed up at the gate one morning, asking for me. She was thin and her expression had changed considerably. She looked at me with a somewhat empty expression, a bit lost, but full of hope!

I took her in my arms and she told me that her 'old' husband had lied, that she could no longer pursue her studies in the capital, where she had been locked up to care for his four grown boys. I was grateful for the strong character she had obtained by being schooled and supported over the past five years. She had had the courage to stand up to her husband and express her disagreement! Her husband, who couldn't live with her audacity, sent her away. Balkissa found a way to borrow the bus fare to Zinder, 960 km from the capital.

Finally, she was home again at the Centre, in the place where she knew she would always be welcomed with open arms, no matter what she did or experienced. She returned to the College in Zinder with her classmates and loves sleeping at the Centre from Monday to Friday, in a beautiful dormitory with mattresses and blankets!

I think that Balkissa's story will have an impact on many other young women at the Centre, who think and hear others talk about marriage...



Herniated disc and Boko Haram

I should have known that surprises were still in store for me.

On my return to Zinder in January, Boko Haram group attacks were growing closer to Niger, happening as close as Diffa just six hours east of Zinder. Thousands of people fled to Zinder, Maradi, or Niamey. Members of the Boko Haram group infiltrated the local population, so it became difficult to know who was who, and what were their intentions.

At the same time, as the two auditors were wrapping up their time at the Centre, I began to feel pain in my lower back, buttocks, and right leg, all the way down to my foot. I had already experienced back pain, and I assumed it was reoccurring.

Two days later, I still couldn't sleep and the pain in my leg gave me no respite. I cried so hard one night out of pain and desperation that the guard, Ali, came in to check on me. He looked pallid behind the screen door of my house, eyes shining with worry and tears. There was nothing he could do for me.

The following nights I knew that Ali, 20 metres away, was not sleeping. He was listening for the smallest noise coming from my house, aware of the slightest groan, a light turned on.

I finally decided to go for a check-up at the 'hospital' in Zinder with the nurse and director of the Centre school, to reassure everyone. It was evident that my local personnel were more worried for my welfare than I was.

It was 52° outside. After waiting for hours in a foul hallway with people much worse off than I was, lying on top of one another on old mats soiled with urine or vomit, I finally saw a doctor. I still don't know how I was able to wait so long under such conditions, in so much pain that I was unable to find a position to sooth it. Perhaps it was because I was able to concentrate on an older man, a little farther down the corridor who suffered from a dislocated jaw and was barely able to breathe. A diagnosis was swiftly given: herniated disc, and he wanted to operate tomorrow!

Naturally, I declined his offer of an operation as well as for an injection to alleviate the pain. My instinct is to say no and endure pain a little while longer rather than taking that risk in Zinder.

It was impossible to find anti-inflammatory pain medication in Zinder at that time, especially with the uprisings. I had received a message saying that Boko Haram was approaching Zinder, and my health was not improving. I wrote to my contacts in Switzerland to book an urgent flight and appointment with my doctor. It took three more days on-site to organise this last-minute departure, and to get things ready for my two-month absence from the Centre.

Upon my arrival in Switzerland, after 1.5 days of travel, three different planes, and 10 nights without sleeping normally, I was in a terrible state. But from that moment forward I was cared for by attentive people who took me quickly to the hospital where I underwent surgery for the disc that had slipped and was set laterally in my spine. I am feeling much better now, and appreciate being able to sleep a few hours every night.

Article in the magazine 'L'Illustré' on February 18, 2015, announcing the charity evening "Voix du Coeur" (Voice of the Heart) at the Beausobre Theatre in Morges!

<http://www.illustre.ch/people/National/fil-de-linfo/sept-romandes-unies-pour-une-association-d'aide-aux-enfants-du-niger>



With the leaders and actresses Anne Carrard (Association Ambassador), Carine Delfini, Carole Dechantre, Nathalie Sbaï, Valérie Bovard, and the comedian Brigitte Rosset. Also, the presence of Jean-Philippe Rapp, with images from his 2nd film, 'Le rêve accompli d'Isabelle'.

Come listen and discover the backstories of young women from the streets of Zinder!

Thank you for having taken the time to read this newsletter, for having laughed or cried a little with me and the children of the Association, in this small corner of the bustling Sahel. The girls and boys of the Association school send their greetings and wishes for a beautiful spring!

With my warmest thoughts, and hopes to see you at one of the Association events!

Isabelle Macheret

Zinder Niger, February 2015

www.aucoeurduniger.ch