



## Niger

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# Niger famine crisis 'at 11th hour'

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**James Sturcke**

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Western countries were today accused of failing to deliver on aid promises as famine in [Niger](#) put the lives of 2.5 million people, including 800,000 children, at risk.

Food supplies, already low after a drought and locust plague swept through the west African country last year, had reached critical level, aid agencies said. The world's second least developed country was suffering "an acute humanitarian crisis", the United Nations said.

Amid a surge in the number of children dying from malnutrition and people arriving at food centres, aid organisations warned there was a gulf between the pledges of political leaders and the amount of support arriving on the ground.

"We have been trying to raise the profile of a developing crisis in west Africa since last October," said Oxfam's regional humanitarian co-ordinator, Nick Ireland. "It's

been clear since then that there would be a food shortage this summer but it has been painfully slow.

"We have been hearing promises from the G8 leaders at Gleneagles about making the fight against poverty more important and at the same time there is a famine across the Sahel. People are very slow to respond."

Mr Ireland said some aid was starting to arrive and Oxfam had had teams in the worst-hit areas since the end of June.

"In all frankness, the money should have been there four or five months ago to give aid agencies the chance to do this properly. We are really at the 11th hour."

The UN first appealed for assistance for Niger in November and got almost no response. Another appeal for \$16m (£9.2m) in March got about \$1m. The latest appeal on May 25 for \$30m has received about \$10m but "it's still too little", the UN humanitarian chief, Jan Egeland, said.

"We are having now an acute humanitarian crisis in Niger in which children are dying as we speak," he said. "We could have prevented this and the world community didn't."

He said there were no figures on the number of deaths in Niger, but he cited a report from one feeding centre where 14 of the 61 severely malnourished children that were being treated last week died.

"In nowhere in the world is the gap between our capacity to act and the number of lives at risk as great as Niger today," he said. "I hope that within weeks, we will have been able to close that gap."

Last year's invasion of desert locusts and lack of rainfall plunged nomadic herders and farming families in Niger, where life expectancy is 46 years, into crisis, along with neighbouring countries. Late last year Oxfam said there were signs of hardship and distress at what should have been the peak harvest period.

"In Niger, several years of economic hardship or decline have also lowered people's capacity to deal with such shocks," said Henri Josserand, the chief of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) global information and early warning system.

"People in affected areas are in critical need of seeds and enough food to carry them through until late October," he added, appealing for an urgent international response.

The FAO said severe child malnutrition was increasing rapidly and the number of children supported by feeding centres was rising. Out of 63 districts surveyed, 11 had some populations in an 'extremely critical' situation, and in 16 districts the situation was considered 'critical', according to national estimates. Pastoralists, in particular,

were having difficulty accessing main food staples. Oxfam reported a six-fold increase in the price of millet.

The FAO said it had only received \$650,000, donated by Sweden, in response to a \$4m appeal for Niger in May. Canada pledged \$1m last week for food aid to Niger, although other members of the G8 industrialised countries have generally done little to prevent the crisis.

Last week, the UN World Food Programme almost tripled the number of people it plans to feed through its emergency operation to 1.2 million. Most immediately at risk are young children. Feeding centres run by Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) are reporting admission rates nearly three times those during the same period last year.

"Children are dying and adults are going hungry," said WFP Niger country director, Gian Carlo Cirri. "We have said this before and we are saying it again - Niger needs help today, not tomorrow."

WFP's initial response had been severely hampered by late funding and difficulties buying food within the region, he said. Supplies were now being sourced at ports in west Africa and on other international markets.

The WFP said the bulk of its \$4.2m appeal for 465,000 people was received in the last six weeks. However, WFP now needed another \$12m to cover the rapidly rising costs of the expanding operation.

Even in a good year, malnutrition rates amongst young children in Niger are extremely high. Some 82% of the population rely on subsistence farming and cattle rearing while only 15% of the land is suitable for arable farming. There is little irrigation, leaving most farmers at the mercy of the rains.

"The international community cannot allow Niger to live as if cursed by poverty - we have the means to make a change and we need to mobilise them urgently," said Mr Cirri.

Average annual earnings in Niger are £115 and the country ranks 176 out of 177 countries listed on the UN's human development index.

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