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Transcript

Food Shortage Crisis in Niger Continues

Craig Timberg

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The food crisis in Niger continues as the death toll mounts despite attempts to bring in foreign aid. While nearly \$20 million has been contributed by foreign donors, tangible assistance often arrives after many in an area have died. Some say the U.N. underestimated the depth of the crisis early on, making timely aid difficult at this stage in the crisis.




On the edge of the Sahara desert in Western Africa, international aid workers try to help hundreds of thousands of children facing malnutrition because of food shortages created by drought and high prices.

Washington Post foreign correspondent **Craig Timberg** will be online **Wednesday, Aug. 17 at 2 p.m. ET** to discuss Niger's continuing food shortage crisis.

Read the latest: [Global Aid System Stalled as Niger's Crisis Deepened.](#)

See today's [Niger Photo Gallery.](#)

The transcript follows.

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Craig Timberg: Hello from Lagos, Nigeria, where I have relocated on my way home from Niger. I'm happy to take any questions about the hunger crisis there, or for that matter, anything else in my part of Africa, which includes the southern part of the continent and a bit of the west. Fire away.

Ashburn, Va.: It breaks my heart to see pictures of little ones suffer of hunger and disease. I have two questions. How can I help? I'm a small business owner and I want to donate a percentage of my profit to assist the needy in Niger. This crisis certainly deserves more media attention. And what is Bush administration doing about this? I pray that the God gives comfort and relief to those who are in need...

Craig Timberg: It is truly awful, as bad as anything I've seen in Africa. There are quite a few groups working here: The U.N. World Food Program, Islamic Relief, CARE, UNICEF. The most visible aid group, at least so far, has been Doctors Without Borders (also know by the French acronym MSF), which reacted earlier and more aggressively than the others to get to the sickest kids and draw them into feeding centers and clinics.

Alexandria, Va.: What is the name of the local church mentioned awhile back accepting donations for aid to Niger?

Craig Timberg: I'm sorry I don't know the answer to that. I'm based in Africa and have trouble keeping my finger on local responses to crises here. Perhaps somebody in cyberworld can get us an answer to that, and we'll post it here.

New York, N.Y. : Do you know what surveys have been done regarding levels of malnutrition in Niger? What percentage of under 5 year olds are beyond 2 Standard Deviations from the mean according to height/weight measurements? and what percentage are beyond 3 Standard Deviations in the under 5 year olds? Only those beyond 3 SDs normally are admitted to therapeutic feeding centers. The survey is usual procedure for defining the magnitude and thus defining the needs of the population at risk.

In true famines populations typically migrate great distances in search of food, but my impression is that this is not a famine as traditionally defined.

Craig Timberg: You've got me on some of the more technical aspects of your question. I'm no nutrition expert, though I expect that stuff is pretty Google-able (if that is a word). But I wanted to say at the outset that what is happening in Niger, though incredibly heartbreaking, is not technically regarded as a famine. It is being called a severe, localized food crisis, in

part because there seems to be a fair amount of food still in Niger, it just isn't getting to poor, rural people. For more on that, see my story from last week.

Bethlehem, Pa.: Thank you for doing a discussion on this issue. My sister is serving in the Peace Corps in a small village north of Niamey. Her village hasn't been as severely affected as Maradi and other areas - she says the villagers are able to eat dinner every other night. She asked me a month ago if Niger was in the U.S. media, and I said "no", but now the coverage is increasing, and I have been sending her Post articles. My question is do you think there will ever be a more permanent solution to the situation in Niger (and other countries)? I would think that droughts and locusts are recurring problems, and dealing with these problems while living on \$1 a day is next to impossible.

Craig Timberg: I wish I knew the answer to that one. Countries that pull themselves out of recurrent hunger crises seem to have some combination of enlightened politics and stability mixed with the ability to intensify agriculture with such things as fertilizer, a wider variety of crops and, crucially, irrigation. All expensive. Also, higher education levels and economic activity seem to track with lower birthrates, which can help too.

Your sister probably has a better answer than I do. You should ask her.

Washington, D.C.: Craig, in your article you mention the government of Niger described the malnutrition as the result of chronic poverty. Does the government acknowledge the severity of the situation? Does it have any organizational resources to assist in a strategic distribution of food and aid?

Also, is Medecins sans Frontieres assisting WFP since it seems to have a better sense of the situation on the ground?

Craig Timberg: That's a tough one, since I can't really peer into the brains of Nigerian officials. Their public comments have been a bit discouraging but it's worth remembering that the world seems to care not at all about Niger 9 years, 11 months out of every decade, then pounces when the food runs short. It causes folks to get their backs up a bit.

MSF and WFP are now working fairly closely together, and WFP supplying some of the food that MSF (Doctors Without Borders) is handing out to hungry children and mothers.

Washington, D.C.: Simple question: What can I really do to help?

Craig Timberg: Well, that is the best question and the hardest to answer. I think I've already listed the organizations that are working there. And they do help, not always and not perfectly, but I can tell you there'd be a lot more sick children in Niger if aid groups weren't there.

BUT... if I may be preachy for a moment... the best thing Americans can do if they want to help Africa is to get to know Africa and Africans. As a country, we just don't know anything about how Africans live, what their problems are, or what their achievements are. We don't know how the world looks from their perspective. And neither did I, at all, until I got this job and moved here.

Last week, I ran into a family from Florida that diverted a vacation to help out in Niger. They bought several tons of grain, put it in the back of a truck and handed it out. (Their teenaged son got malaria as well, though he was recovering when I left). That level of commitment is hardly required. But I do believe that the only path to more sophisticated and caring relations with Africa is for more Americans to get on planes and visit (and not just the big animals in game parks). It's a big, wonderful continent, with some of the warmest, most-open people I've ever met. A visit won't save a starving kid, but it will gradually lay the groundwork for a better world in which we understand each other and, over time, can help in the right ways.

Greenbelt, Md.: The world knew this crisis was coming, but did nothing to prepare. I know I'm cynical, but was this a result of payback from the U.S. for the whole yellowcake thing since Niger didn't play along with the memo?

Craig Timberg: Zero evidence of that. I think, if you're in a cynical mood, that you'd instead look at whether we pay much attention to anything about countries that are poor, Muslim, French-speaking and without major exports such as oil. Another major factor was the decline of worldwide news coverage of West Africa in aftermath of 9/11 and all that has followed. Aid decisions, like many things, often follows news coverage.

Cambridge, United Kingdom: Hi Craig: Have you been tracking all the commotion your article "The Rise of a Market Mentality Means Many Go Hungry in Niger" has caused? When writing it did you understand how different groups -whether they be free market economists, libertarians or communists- would respond? Did you see what you were implying about free market policies?

See the popular economics blogs: Owen's Musings, Cafe Hayek, WB PSD Blog, Owen's Musings, Newmark's Door, Market Power, The Globalization Institute, Newmark's Door, One World etc... etc...

How would you respond to all of this discussion and the questions they pose?

Craig Timberg: Sorry I've missed the furor. Have been in Niger and, more recently Nigeria, and don't have a lot of time to hang around in chat rooms. That story grew out of my confusion about what I was seeing: Terribly hungry people living not far from piles of food. That article was an honest, though not doubt flawed, effort to make sense of that. I was not propounding, or attacking, any ideology and certainly lack the knowledge to do so in a comprehensive way. I just wrote what I saw (and heard).

washingtonpost.com: [The Rise of a Market Mentality Means Many Go Hungry in Niger.](#)

Annapolis, Md.: Hi-

Niger has several large uranium mines. What prevents Niger from selling uranium and using that money to buy food for the people starving in its country?

Is there a U.N. mandate that prohibits Niger from selling its uranium? I would imagine that many countries would be interested in buying uranium.

Preventing nuclear proliferation is a fine goal for the rich and well fed, but perhaps it is too much of a luxury to share that goal when you are starving.

Thanks.

Craig Timberg: Good question and again it hits up against the limits of my knowledge on a complex issue, but here goes: Niger's biggest export, by far, is uranium. But it's an industry in decline and not the source of crucial foreign currency that it used to be. I don't know if geopolitical issues affect that or not. sorry.

Maryland : Is there any corruption in the U.N. Food Program?

Craig Timberg: Not that I know of. Like any big group (they are the largest humanitarian organization in the world), there have been occasional scandals. But overall WFP officials are decent people who do important work all over the world. That makes their missteps here more noticeable, and more important.

Washington, D.C.: Niger is predominantly Muslim, how are Muslim countries helping out?

Craig Timberg: I don't have a list of all donations at my fingertips as I sit here in the airport, but both Islamic Relief and the Islamic Red Cross are on the ground in Niger. Libya gave some food, as have areas of northern Nigeria that are Muslim.

Bristow, Va.: How could a fifteen year old girl in the U.S. help the starving in Niger?

Craig Timberg: Do a fund-drive at your school and send your money to one of the groups that I mentioned in an earlier reply. Also, get your parents to plan a vacation to Africa, or do an exchange program there.

Harrisburg, Pa.: I have read that Niger is a peaceful democracy which is trying to establish viable markets, and that it was a political decision to charge money to families for food aid, so as not to undermine those markets. I also read that many families could afford to pay nothing, and thus are still in crisis. Apparently that policy has been re-thought. Can you

speak to that, and to the larger issue of the need to develop self-sustaining markets and how free food aid is seen to interfere with that?

Thank you.

Craig Timberg: I wrote an article last week that attempts to deal with that a bit. Maybe the host can add the link here.

In general terms, yes Niger is a peaceful democracy. Food aid is very controversial because it can disrupt markets. The question becomes, at what point is it worth disrupting markets for a time to save lives? That's for someone else to answer, because every decision has long-term costs.

washingtonpost.com: [The Rise of a Market Mentality Means Many Go Hungry in Niger.](#)

Washington, D.C.: How do you feel about the fact that virtually the only time any country in Africa makes the news is when the story relates to starvation and violent conflict? Do you think that perhaps this gives a very limited, incorrect vision of Africa to, for example, Post-readers? Do you pitch other sorts of stories?

Craig Timberg: Yes. Pitch and write, as does my amazingly talented colleague Emily Wax from Nairobi. There are a lot of very bad things happening here, so perhaps the bulk of world coverage tilts that way. But in the pages of the Washington Post, I hope you will notice a range of types of stories from a range of places. I can't speak for other news organizations.

Reston, Va.: When I went to one of the major donation sites, it shows that they have already reached the required amount for Niger. Is that the case with most of the donation sites or do they still need more money for Niger hunger?

Craig Timberg: The U.N. is still requesting very large amounts of money for Niger and for its neighbors, some of which are in nearly as bad shape.

Anonymous: Did you read that NYTimes article that talked about how and when a crisis become a "crisis" in the eyes of the media? Any thoughts?

Craig Timberg: At the risk of plugging the competition, they are right on that one. Nobody paid any real attention (with the exception of French radio news) until the BBC got there in mid-July. The week after, news coverage tripled. It tripled again the next week as well. Donations went from virtually nothing to \$1 million a day. It's hard to feel good about the world's humanitarian responses so reliant on the judgment of a bunch of news editors.

Washington, D.C.: How can you blame the crisis on market polices? Way to narrow minded. Many more issues at fault: drought, locusts, policies, corruption, coordination failures etc.....

Craig Timberg: It's a lot of things, agreed. Drought, locusts, slow responses by government and world donors, encroaching desert, etc. But I'm only trying to report the fact that in Niger, when you are seeing all those horrible pictures, there are mounds of food in the markets. Something felt a bit out of whack.

Washington, D.C.: Like the business owner from Ashburn, Va. I would like to know what someone like me, a simple government secretary, can do to help these people? You are in Africa - do you have any sense of what a regular American can do to help?

Craig Timberg: Hello to Ashburn. See previous answers about aid groups that are helping and my rant about how we all need to get to know Africa a little better..

Washington, D.C.: Why aren't the editors putting your stories on Niger on the front page where they belong?

Craig Timberg: It's a busy time with the Gaza pullout, etc. I write 'em, they figure out where to put 'em in the paper.

Chapel Hill, N.C.: In following this crisis, several things strike me: first we heard that donors hadn't responded quickly enough. Then we heard that the Niger government was turning away aid. Today I read that WFP underestimated the need in Niger, and was cautious with their emergency funds for fear that they wouldn't be replaced fast enough to respond to another crisis. I've noticed certain similarities here between this flawed response and the U.S. government's own food aid system. For example, the Bill Emerson Humanitarian Trust was, until recently, not drawn on even in a crisis, meaning that most food aid for emergencies was either authorized by supplemental appropriations or was 'borrowed' from non-emergency programs, leaving them less able to prevent such crises from occurring in the first place. So my question: since we in the U.S. have the Bill Emerson trust, and we don't seem to have used it appropriately, what would have to happen in the U.N. to make such an emergency fund as Jim Morris suggests workable? Are there differences in the way the U.N. is proposing to use this emergency fund from how the Bill Emerson Trust is set up? The failure to draw on the Bill Emerson Trust often seems to me to be a matter of bureaucratic delay. Or have I got my facts wrong?

Craig Timberg: You've yet again run past the edge of my expertise on this subject. I'm not sure how the Bill Emerson fund works or doesn't. But it does seem like it would be good if someone, somewhere could respond decisively to hunger crises before they got on television.

New York, N.Y.: I have been finding articles about a new weapon against malnutrition, Doctors Without Borders is using it. Plumpy'nut is a peanut based high value food that comes in a foil pouch. It can be used at home, doesn't require hospitalization, and is more effective and safer than the milk mixes being used. Maybe you know all about it. I knew of a missionary nun in Korea who swore by peanut butter as a miracle drug. Here's one article that explains how publicizing it can be a win/win situation, because the French company that makes it (Nutrisset) "has welcomed the notion of local partners - from charities to women's groups - who might make Plumpy'nut under license or even as franchisees.

One of its virtues is that Plumpy'nut can be made almost anywhere with local materials and a slurry of vitamins and minerals prepared by Nutrisset. "

Food and jobs.

Can you investigate it? I thought you might know who to talk to.

I know it is only a band-aid for the problem, but it seems too simple not to try.

It seems to me that the best way to feed the children is to improve the health of their mothers, and perhaps it could be used as a regular nutritional supplement for them.

I am so angry about so much pain going unnoticed. Thank you for having this discussion. [In Niger, 'Plumpy'nut' becomes a life-saver.](#)

Craig Timberg: Sounds reasonable to me. I saw very tiny, hungry kids eating the plumpy nut, and it seemed to help. Doctors Without Borders using lots of this stuff.

Silver Spring, Md.: Who deserves aid more? Do we divert aid from the Sudan or tsunami victims or hungry people in our own country to aid Niger?

Craig Timberg: I'm not in a position to give a sensible answer to that one, having not been in Sudan or in tsunami region. I can tell you that aid groups generally got way more money than they expected for the tsunami. And I've never seen a child in the U.S. nearly as hungry as the ones I saw in Niger. Not close.

Baltimore, Md.: This questions asks you to generalize. Apart from being hungry and weary, how are Nigerians reacting to this crisis? When I lived in a village in Niger, I experienced a lot of resignation to the hardships of life. Is this what you sense or is there anger? Do people who have not received food aid but need it, believe it is on the way? Are people questioning the government's response or the rapidity of NGO response?

Craig Timberg: It depends where you are. In villages, people are sad and in some cases angry that not more help is arriving. I interviewed a woman who had just buried her seventh and final child after years of losing them to various maladies, hunger among them. So there is some resignation. And there some sheer, dead-eyed horrible devastation as well.

Washington, D.C.: Hi Craig - glad you are out there looking at the situation and reporting back. The pictures are really heartbreaking.

Everything looks so green though. Are people going to be able to harvest their crops soon? It sounds like the World Food Program is only just starting to move a whole heck of a lot of food. I know Niger has had some bad experiences when food aid and harvests collide. Any thoughts on that?

Craig Timberg: Great question. You should be a reporter. The rainy season so far has been kind and the millet in fact looks healthy and tall and green. So if people are able to hang on for a few more weeks, the harvest is likely to come in sometime in September. That doesn't mean that troubles in Niger will go away. It will be a respite until the next time.

Alexandria, Va.: What do you think are some lessons that could be learned by both Niger and other international countries to prevent something so severe from happening to its citizens again?

Craig Timberg: I'm again over my head on this one. But as I said earlier, I think some agency or group or something ought to have the capacity to act before the TV cameras (and print journalists) arrive on the scene.

Washington, D.C.: The food aid commitment by all The Food Aid Convention signatories was approximately 4.9 million metric tons (mmt). The United States pledged to provide 2.5 mmt or 51% of the total commitment. With the FAC now expired, and with the US providing the majority of the total commitment to begin with, isn't time for other countries to start stepping up to the plate to defeat world hunger? Why is it us who looks like cheapskates when we cut back, when we are shouldering the load anyway?

Craig Timberg: The U.S. does provide a disproportionate share of the world's food aid. The downside, some analysts argue, is that U.S. food comes as actual shiploads of food, rather than cash which can be used to buy food locally, thereby stimulating local production and markets. Many other countries prefer to give money. Not sure why they don't, in the aggregate, do more.

Washington, D.C.: Thanks for the excellent reporting. I was wondering- have you talked to the affected populations? What are they saying about this food insecurity?

Craig Timberg: Yes. Spent all last week talking to people in Niger. They are very, very, very hungry and, to a decent extent, upset that help isn't coming faster.

Bethlehem, Pa., again: To add on to your suggestion to get to know Africa, may I put in a plug for the Peace Corps? I was fortunate enough to visit my sis and meet many other PC volunteers in Niger. Several of them have a pen pal correspondence with U.S. school kids. Maybe those interested could contact the PC and see if there are volunteers willing to have a pen pal? These volunteers live in remote villages, know the local languages, know the people, and love getting/writing letters.

Craig Timberg: Consider it plugged. Ran into a peace corps volunteer (a science teacher from Baltimore named Kimberly Riley) in one of the villages I visited.

Washington, D.C.: I can't think of a proper way of phrasing this so here goes: It is horrifying to see all of the children dying from starvation and its effects. You cannot tell people not to have children, but is there any effort to stop reproducing because it seems like a birth will lead to certain death? I'm sure with no food, there is no birth control. And it is easy for me to judge sitting here well-fed in D.C., but I just wondered what is going on with regards to birth control and attempting to reduce the number of mouths to feed.

Craig Timberg: Birth control as a general concept is not very popular in traditional, rural African cultures, which prize child-bearing as incredibly central to life on earth. As I think I mentioned earlier, birth rates seem to drop with the arrival of education, development and women's rights.

Arlington, Va.: I note that many people are asking how they can help in this crisis. I am the director of a program contracted by [USAID](#)'s Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA),

the office responsible for the U.S. government's response to overseas emergencies. Much of my work focuses on educating the public on best they can help disaster victims around the world. The most useful, effective and expedient way to offer assistance is to find an established, recognized relief organization that is operating on-site and make a CASH donation. Donations of used clothing, canned foods, bottled water and other items are difficult to transport, particularly to rural areas. There are cultural and religious requirements as well as environmental factors that professional relief organizations can address. These agencies know EXACTLY what is needed and have the means to transport and distribute what is needed. We have a wealth of information on our Web site at [Center for International Disaster Information](#) ; a list of relief agencies responding in Niger is available at [American Council for Voluntary International Action](#) and detailed information on the U.S. government's response can be found at USAID .

Craig Timberg: Another good plug.

Washington, D.C.: Your story talks about how the world food program delayed in responding to this problem, but what about the NGOs? Aside from Doctors without Borders, why didn't the other non-profit aid groups wait so long to respond to this problem?

Craig Timberg: A lot of the aid groups are fairly dependent on the U.N. and others to get food and funding moving. Oh, almost forgot that Oxfam is there in Niger too. Sorry Oxfam.

I don't have as much detailed feel for what decision making was in various NGOs.

Munich, Germany: I read something about the "Agence des Muselmans" (not sure of the spelling) in one of the pictures, and it's a relief to see that the Islamic community is doing something in Niger, since it wasn't perfectly obvious that the Islamic States were helping the tsunami victims in Malaysia.

I've read that the Bedouin communities in Niger were amongst the hardest hit groups by drought and the locusts. Did you have a chance to get to the more remote areas to see and speak with them?

Craig Timberg: To be candid, I arrived in Niger a bit behind the pack and had to skip the apparently amazing trip to the nomadic areas because it would have taken too much time, putting me even farther behind aforementioned pack. I know from talking to aid workers and journalists that they are amazing, beautiful people who are deeply in need (Oxfam helping there). I regret missing that part of the story.

Steubenville, Ohio: Quite a few years ago, my cousin was a missionary in one of those countries over there which was having a food crisis like Niger. She came home and told us they had beautiful growing conditions, but were not much interested in the growing of crops in any bigger than a postage stamp size plot. I don't know if that is anywhere near anything like Niger natives' attitudes.

The news of the plight there sparked my memory of her remarks. Would more agricultural training help these people in the long term?

Craig Timberg: Only 3 percent of Niger is arable, so that's part of the problem. Another part is that it is a country overwhelmingly of subsistence farmers and herders, meaning there's not a lot of big, mechanized farming that can provide more reliable food sources. So yes, agricultural development would help. if you haven't read Jared Diamond's "Guns, Germs and Steel," then read it. It makes clear how important sophisticated agricultural systems are to civilizations growing and thriving.

washingtonpost.com: ['Guns, Germs, and Steel' Live Online Discussion.](#)

Boston, Mass.: As a simple computer person from Boston I would like to see Africa take care of its own problems. Is there anywhere I can go where Africans prepare themselves for lean times? Or help their own neighbors out instead of begging to the rest of the world?

Craig Timberg: O.K. I am moved to preaching again....

Africa's problems are, to a dramatic extent, the result of very ugly history that the West had the dominant role in creating and that the U.S. in particular fueled during the Cold War when we treated these places like pawns as their rich leaders impoverished their people. So decide

not to help if you want but first read Adam Hoschild's "King Leopold's Ghost" and then decided. it's a very readable, accessible primer on the continent. Or Micheala Wrong's "In the Footsteps of Mr. Kurtz."

Preaching done...

All over Africa, Africans help their relatives to an extent you would find amazing. Every employed African I know is supporting 10 or 20 parents, grandparents, cousins, in-laws, you name it. some of that, as I wrote last week, is weakening with modernization but my impression is that, more often than not, Africans help each other when they are able to.

Washington, D.C.: Craig--

Thanks for doing this chat - it's so sad to see these photos and to read your stories.

I'm curious, though... do you have any idea how much of the "late response" by donors is related to lack of funding? I know that the U.N. and the U.S. both provided strong responses to the tsunami, and I know there are ongoing problems in Darfur and in the Horn of Africa... and the budget available for this kind of response can't be bottomless, especially given how much money we're spending in Iraq. Your thoughts?

Craig Timberg: Funding is the response, so late response means late funding. These distractions were a problem, but far from the only one. And from what I can tell, aid budgets not really hurt by other priorities so much as a feeling (mostly but not entirely wrong) that they don't really help.

Baltimore, Md.: I have a simple story in response to Silver Spring, Md., who asked who deserves aid more.

I lived in a village in Niger (near Maradi) for two years. I asked the head of the household why he hosted and had hosted Peace Corps volunteers for so many years. He said because several years ago he could not feed his family, it was a famine. That was the only time he has ever been in that situation. Grain donated by the U.S. people saved his family. Hosting Peace Corps volunteers was his way to say thank you. People like this deserve our generosity.

Best way to help? Donate money and join the Peace Corps and get informed.

Craig Timberg: Or visit.

Women's rights: Muslim countries don't seem too enthusiastic about women's rights. If women were better educated they could make more progress.

Craig Timberg: I forward that one onto the message board without editorial comment...

Chicago, Ill.: To what extent is this a regional crisis? Do the surrounding countries like Mali, Mauritania, and Burkina Faso also need emergency food aid?

Craig Timberg: Totally it's a regional crisis. Those countries really hurting now, nearly as bad as Niger. Drought, locusts, etc don't respect political borders. (some other contributing problems do, of course).

Who should help: "But it does seem like it would be good if someone, somewhere could respond decisively to hunger crises before they got on television."

But who should monitor the world's crises? Do you really think any one country would volunteer? Hopefully it won't be the U.S. since we're already the world's de facto police force. I volunteer the Chinese.

Craig Timberg: I nominate the U.N.

New York, N.Y.: Dear Craig,

I'm having a little trouble following the U.N. on this one. The U.N. has said they knew there was crisis in November. They waited seven months to ask for help (May, \$16 million). The

next week the UN blamed the world for not responding fast enough. A month and a half later (July) they asked for \$31 million and now, three weeks later, they are asking for \$81 million.

For ten months there were 450,000 people that needed help. Suddenly there are now 2.6 million. Does the U.N. - or anyone - know what is happening? Hope you can help me understand.

Craig Timberg: Now for the self-plug: Today's story (link please, dear host).

Short version: They underestimated and are reacting late and very heavily now that it's a worldwide sensation as a story.

washingtonpost.com: [Global Aid System Stalled as Niger's Crisis Deepened.](#)

Re: Boston, Mass.: Amen to Boston. If they weren't so reliant on foreign AID, maybe they would learn to help themselves. Africa just gets worse and worse. Don't you think it was a much better place 40 years ago?

Craig Timberg: Hmmmm. Let's see. 40 years ago, South Africans and Zimbabweans were treated like sub-humans if they were black, the CIA was propping up Mobutu in Zaire (the quintessential strong man). There was some more prosperity and liberation was new. So some things were better, some worse. I think Africans would tell you (as they have told me) that they'd rather have their freedom and dignity first, come what may on the other stuff. So it's in the eye of the beholder.

New York, N.Y.: Available food, but people starving in Niger and Zimbabwe. Can this pattern be broken? How can African nations support and police each other so that the solution comes from within the continent? Nobody gets a palace, till everyone has a roof over their head. Is it possible to fix the U.N. so that it can become a coordinating force? Any chance that despite some obvious flaws, John Bolton may be able to make a difference?

Craig Timberg: Another toughie. I don't know Bolton, so no thoughts on him.

But you raise a crucial point, which is that politics and governance absolutely matter on all of this stuff. Zimbabwe has the best-educated people in southern African and one of the best infrastructures yet has been getting poorer (and more terrorized and hungrier and sicker) because of a president who would rather be a pariah than share power.

Jupiter, Fla.: Does making a donation to something like Catholic relief services help this problem now?

Craig Timberg: Catholic Relief Services is there and helping (sorry I didn't mention them earlier). A donation would help, I think.

Craig Timberg: We are reaching the end of the session, so let me just thank everybody for tuning in and reading and caring about what's happening around the world. Without you, we couldn't do foreign journalism. Glad people out there are thinking about this stuff.

Washington, D.C.: I'm amazed at the comments by some of the folks writing in... they have obviously never been to Africa. Niger is not exactly a garden spot where if people just work harder, they will be able to feed their families, educate their children, and save for the future. Making ends meet is a constant struggle. A lot of these folks who are writing in with comments about "why can't they just help themselves" wouldn't last a week out there. I really like your suggestion that people visit Africa - but I'm afraid that the people who most need to go would never consider it...

Craig Timberg: I'm not here to judge the writes. This forum is for people to speak their minds and I'm pleased they do. What you say is true though, life here is hard in ways I could never have fathomed growing up middle class in a Maryland suburb with secure, loving parents and no real fear of anything. Africans are the most ingenious, hardest-working people I've ever known. The biggest difference between them and me, so far as I can tell, is opportunity.

Athol, Mass.: Thanks so much for doing this chat. It is great to hear from someone who is watching this situation unfold. You said in your article that this is a market problem and not really just about a lack of food. Since it sounds like this is going to be a good harvest, what about the people who still won't be able to buy food once the harvest comes?

Craig Timberg: Most everybody who is now hungry has access to sources of food through their own plots and those of their relatives in the years when the harvest is good. The problem here, in a nutshell, is that the harvest was bad and the secondary source of food--the markets--doubled or tripled in price. They got in coming and going. With a good harvest, the food comes in from the fields and the food in the market is cheaper, thanks to supply and demand.

Craig Timberg: Thanks again. I've enjoyed chatting with all of you and hope they let me do this again sometime. Keep reading.

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

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