



I watched helplessly as the children lay prostrate, too weak to move. It's difficult to describe what it feels like to watch a child starving to death. It no longer has the instinct to cry, it bleats. It no longer has the strength to open its eyelids. Once the child's body has exhausted every last resource available to it, all functions begin to close down and the child expires in silence. I wish I could write, "I cried for the lives hardly begun," but I didn't, I cried for the living.

Niger is a country where, for many, medical treatment is only a dream. For others, such as 18-year-old Aisha, it means spending several days in labour then seeing her family obliged to take out a loan to pay for the petrol the ambulance requires to take her the 72 kilometres to

the nearest hospital. She later died in childbirth. Her sister relied on the generosity of the hospital staff for the bus fare for herself and the newly born twins to go home.

In May of last year, Jan Egeland, UN under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs, appealed for US\$16.2million (£9.3million) in emergency food aid for 3.6 million people facing starvation, including 800,000 children under five in this sub-Saharan nation. Two weeks later, Egeland added, "We urgently appealed for help, but we still have zero commitments." Never far from famine, elders can remember four or five failed harvests that led to tens of thousands of early deaths.

Among the living are some of the most destitute people I've ever met, such as

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**Below and right: fifteen-year-old Abbas has worked in the gold mines at Koma Bangou in Niger for three years. There are no safety measures in the mine and accidents are common**



# MINING DESPAIR

A vast country larger than Britain, France and Germany combined, Niger is also one of the world's poorest. As part of a special commission for World Vision, award-winning photojournalist **Nick Danziger** travelled to Niger – along with seven other poverty-stricken countries – to document the lives of some of its most deprived people



15-year-old Abbas and 20-year-old Rakia, both forced from home to work in squalor and danger. They are survivors, just, sent by relatives on one-way tickets to the gold-mining village of Koma Bangou.

I met Abbas and his four co-workers perched on the rim of a dark abyss, a 22-metre hand-dug shaft that leads to a gallery with no structural support. For the past three years, Abbas has been working in this hell hole 11 hours a day, seven days a week, 363 days a year – his two days off being *Eid el Fitr*, the last day of Ramadan, and *Tabaski*, New Year's day. Sometimes Abbas returns to the mine in the evening for a further three hours.

Having never been to school, he can

neither read nor write, but he is well aware of the danger associated with working in the mine. Last year, his boss lost his footing as he descended the shaft and plunged to his death. "I was afraid to go down the hole after that happened," he says. "But I have to earn money, so I must."

There are no safety measures, no ropes, no harnesses. Entry and exit is effected by planting your hands and feet at 180° across the shaft into holes excavated in the vertical wall. The only illumination is provided by a primitive Chinese torch strapped to the miner's head.

The cool air in the shaft offers a respite from the furnace above, but you soon learn that here, all good things are simply a mirage, they never last. Once you crawl into the warren of tunnels, you enter a terrifying world of suffocation, sweat and fear. As work begins, a cloud of dust fogs

the atmosphere and settles on bodies dripping with perspiration.

If there is any subsidence in the surrounding soil, the shafts can cave in, burying all alive. During the rainy season, the mines are supposed to be closed due to the increased risk, but most remain open all year round. Should they be injured, the penniless miners could visit the one doctor who administers to Koma Bangou's 20,000 inhabitants; however, most injuries are treated using traditional medicine. Water is scarce and very expensive, arriving from hand-dug wells aboard donkey carts; it's muddy and almost undrinkable.

"My feet and my back hurt constantly," explains Abbas. "After work, I'd like to go to the video club, but I don't have enough money to eat, let alone to buy a ticket to see a movie. I've seen movies about karate and some others. I like Jimmy Balwan, Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan. I'm not as strong as Jackie Chan. He's well fed. People here fight over nothing. They have nothing to eat, so they have quick tempers."

One way in which Abbas and his



**Above: entry and exit to the mine is effected by climbing the 22-metre shaft's vertical walls; Below: Abbas and his workmates sit at the entrance to the mine**





**Above: Rakia and her two-year-old daughter, Nafissa. "I've been a sex worker since I was a child," she says. "A client got me pregnant. After I had my daughter, my relatives chased me from their home. We ended up here."; Below: a group of Tuareg whose livestock was stolen by bandits**

friends manage, temporarily, to obliterate the memories of the back-breaking work of smashing the rocks that are brought to the surface, the bends from going up and down the mine shaft, the dust that chokes their lungs, the fear, the pain, is by swallowing Epicap, a narcotic pill. One happy side-effect of the drug is that alleviates hunger. However, the young miners rarely have enough money to purchase the pills.

Abbas longs for his family; he has seen his father once in the past three years. "Misery brought me here, my family needs the little money I can send home," he says. But he has been unable to save a farthing. What little he earns mostly goes on food, which is trucked in from Tera, the nearest town, located about 50 kilometres away. It's expensive, and prices are increasing due to the drought. "We eat rice, *niebe* (cowpeas) and beans," Abbas says. "The last time we had meat was about two weeks ago." I ask if he has ever eaten ice cream and he laughs. "I've never seen ice cream."

Before I left Koma Bangou, almost as an afterthought, I asked Abbas if he knows



what gold is used for. He doesn't, he just knows that people value it.

Across town, Rakia and Nafissa, her two-year-old daughter, live in a small wattle-and-reed hut. Her only source of income is her body. "We do not eat every day," she says. "We did not eat yesterday." Nafissa picks up a plastic bowl containing millet and ants; some stray sheep are licking at it. "Mommy, the sheep are

eating," she says. Rakia rescues the bowl, adds a little water, and Nafissa hungrily eats what little the sheep have left.

Many young girls in Koma Bangou are involved in 'informal' prostitution. During the day, they circulate in the market, balancing on their heads platters of items to sell: little plastic bags of nuts, water, cigarettes. At night, they meet men in the video clubs. Like many of the girls, Rakia →



**Above: men enter a *shabeen*, the equivalent of a local pub; Below: two men guard their mine after evening prayers. One holds the sum total of his belongings in a plastic bag. During the day, the mat on which they're sitting is stretched between the poles to protect them from the sun**

has nowhere to take her clients – she will lie down with them next to her daughter. “I can’t leave Nafissa home alone and I can’t take her with me,” she says. “I sit outside my hut and the men come to me.”

For Abbas and Rakia, last year’s promises by the G-8 leaders “to combat world poverty and save and improve human life” are hollow. Even if the goals of good governance, reducing agricultural subsidies and open markets were to be achieved, life is unlikely to improve for the majority of the people of Koma Bangou, or indeed the rest of Niger.

Last October, after thousands of preventable deaths, food aid began to arrive, but only after this year’s harvest will it be possible to tell if it has arrived too late or, indeed, whether it will cause a new catastrophe. Following recent rains, farmers are looking forward to a good crop of millet, but if the newly harvested grain reaches the market at the same time as the imported food aid, it will drive down prices and the incomes of Niger’s farmers, potentially precipitating a new crisis of hunger and poverty. 



International aid and development agency World Vision has been working in Niger since 1973. Local projects are designed to help communities help themselves. HIV/AIDS awareness is a crucial part of this work, as is raising the overall levels of education – in particular, for women and young girls. Micro-enterprise initiatives funded by World Vision in Niger enable communities to find a way out of the food-dependency cycle that continues to affect this country.

To find out more or to make a donation to World Vision’s work in Niger or elsewhere, please visit [www.worldvision.org.uk](http://www.worldvision.org.uk) or call 0800 50 10 10.

