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Spotlight on Abdou Maigandi (Niger-USTN)

Unions in Niger mobilise to fight the famine

Brussels, August 25, 2005 (ICFTU OnLine): 3.5 million people are currently suffering from the famine in Niger. The ICFTU affiliate USTN (Union des syndicats des travailleurs du Niger) is keen to play an active role in promoting sustainable development during this difficult situation. It has already started to help some of the starving population and is now hoping to raise funds to implement larger-scale anti-poverty measures. We spoke with Abdou Maigandi, the General Secretary of the USTN.

What is the current state of the famine in Niger?

Of the 11 million inhabitants of Niger, 3.5 million are suffering from famine, including at least 300,000 children. Famine is endemic in Niger: each year sections of the country have inadequate food stocks but this year things are more drastic. Such a serious situation only occurs roughly every ten years in the Sahel region. This year there are famine-stricken areas throughout the country since Niger has not managed to harvest enough millet for our needs: we had a 300,000 ton cereal shortfall in the last harvest in 2004. We already warned the international community in November 2004, but the response was inadequate.

Bad harvests affect the whole country: 95 % of the population of Niger is rural. People's income comes from agriculture, sheep-farming and other small farming activities. The famine has affected all of these: cereal shortages lead to shortages of fodder, so animal feed has also become scarce. Large numbers of animals are dying and people say that butchers are actually following them around in order to buy them more cheaply as they drop to the ground from starvation.

What was the cause of the bad harvest in 2004?

First and foremost there was a water shortage: water fell unevenly last year, both in time and geographically, and was particularly irregular in the northern region, so the harvest was not good. We only have one rainy season in Niger, from May/June to September. If that season is bad the whole year is ruined. The situation was worsened by attacks on farmland by crickets, caterpillars and grain-eating birds.

So Nigerians have to survive the whole year with a single harvest?

Yes. After this harvest people started going abroad to earn some money to compensate for the shortage of cereals. But there is an employment crisis throughout the Sahel. Even Côte d'Ivoire, the country in the region that accepts the most migrant workers, has not been able to provide work since the crisis is hitting them too.

The President of Niger says the scale of the famine is being exaggerated by the opposition parties and the United Nations... is that right?

The President and the Prime Minister do not agree on this. The 300,000 ton deficit was officially announced by the government in November. It is true that the opposition has been exploiting the situation for its own ends and that the current situation has enabled them to tell the media that the famine in Niger is being badly handled. But whatever the President says this is a real famine and ordinary people know that all too well.

Is the famine causing a rural exodus?

In the capital, Niamey, huge numbers of people are arriving who have lost their flocks and harvests. They are begging at all the traffic lights and markets. It is mostly women, the elderly and children who do the begging. They hope to receive a little something from people with steady jobs, whether in the civil service, the semi-public service or the private sector. But there are barely 70,000 people officially employed in Niger and they already have to make a lot of sacrifices in order to send some of their wages to family members still living in the rural regions.

How is the USTN helping to combat the famine?

Our aim is for the unions to become leading players in the drive for development. On 22 July 2005, three confederations that are members of the cooperation body ETN ("Entente des travailleurs du Niger"), called on all workers in Niger to provide help to the people suffering from the famine. So far the USTN has supported two villages in the north of the country, providing 200,000 CFA francs (about 305 euros) to each. These are symbolic gifts, however, and we are well aware that the money is not enough to support the people throughout the key period from May to September (between the first rains and the harvest).

We also sent an urgent appeal to the ICFTU and its partner organisations to help us support sixteen villages across the country through international trade union solidarity (1). The immediate aim is to provide them with emergency food and medicine during the crisis period. In the longer term we would like to set up a little local savings and credit facility to help people reconstitute the herds

of animals they have lost and build up food stocks to live on for the rest of the year. These long-term support measures are vital, since this year's famine will continue to affect people for a year or two. The USTN will send the aid directly to these villages, to make sure that it is not diverted. We have USTN representatives in each region who will be able to manage things locally. That way, we could show people that the workers of the world are in solidarity with the famine victims and providing food, medical and micro-funding aid.

This action by the USTN would also indirectly help our members in the formal economy since they will not have to work so hard to help their families in rural regions. These are preventive measures aimed at limiting the worst effects on workers' wages.

At the same time you have had to fight to restrict increases in the cost of basic foodstuffs ...

Just after the elections the government tried to pass a law regarding the 2005 budget, bringing in taxes that would raise the price of essential products. It would have raised the taxes on rice, oil, flour, sugar and all the basic foodstuffs, and so would have affected even the poorest Nigerians. We had to join forces with other civil society organisations in opposing these changes since we knew that the famine would make life impossible after May. The coalition was called "Equity/Quality against the cost of living" ('Equité/Qualité contre la vie chère') and comprised over 20 trade unions, NGOs, human rights associations, etc. The authorities tried to suppress us with force and leaders of the coalition were arrested, but each time there was an arrest more people joined our movement. So the leaders were released and the government gave in to the will of civil society. At one stage we even threatened to ask everyone to use the Friday prayers to pray that God provide justice to our leaders. The government is very sensitive to such threats! The law was sent back to the Parliament. Civil society proposed alternative tax measures, focusing on general taxation.

Will the cooperation between the 3 confederations in the ETN in combating the famine lead to trade union unity in Niger?

The USTN is a member of the ICFTU, whilst one of the others is affiliated to the WCL. All three are coordinating their policy and their stance on the ICFTU-WCL merger.

Interview by Samuel Grumiau

(1) Mamounata Cisse, ICFTU Assistant General Secretary, will be going to Niger next week to present the USTN with a contribution from the ICFTU Solidarity Fund in response to their emergency appeal.

The ICFTU represents 145 million workers in 234 affiliated organisations in 154 countries and territories. The ICFTU is also a member of Global Unions: <http://www.global-unions.org>

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