

The Camel Express

Volume 26 Issue 1



Newsletter of the Friends of Niger



April 2011

Peace Corps and Boston University Suspend Programs in Niger

FON Will Continue to Work with Local Partners

It was only a few months ago we were planning the celebration of 50 years of continuous Peace Corps Volunteer service in Niger, and then we heard that news that Peace Corps was suspending its activities in Niger for security reasons, and all in-country volunteers were evacuated. At the same time we heard similar action was taken to suspend the Boston University Niger exchange program.

Since 1962 the Peace Corps health, education, agriculture and other development programs, its volunteers, and staff have served the people in Niger. Peace Corps Volunteers have become lifelong friends and in some instances even extended members of their Nigerien host families. Similar friendships have been developed by others living, working, studying and serving in other functions in Niger including NGO staff, missionaries, students and government workers from ambassadors to secretaries. The personal ties and commitments developed between people are not to be broken by the suspension of a program.

For almost 48 years, countless lives have been changed and positively impacted by the unique exchange between countries, between cultures, between people that the Peace Corps Niger program has offered. How many times have we heard RPCVs tell us that "I went to Niger to make a difference in someone's life – not knowing that they would make a big difference in my life and help shape my world view." Boston University students seeking an educational exchange with Nigeriens have also returned to the states with the same personal reflection and self-discovery.

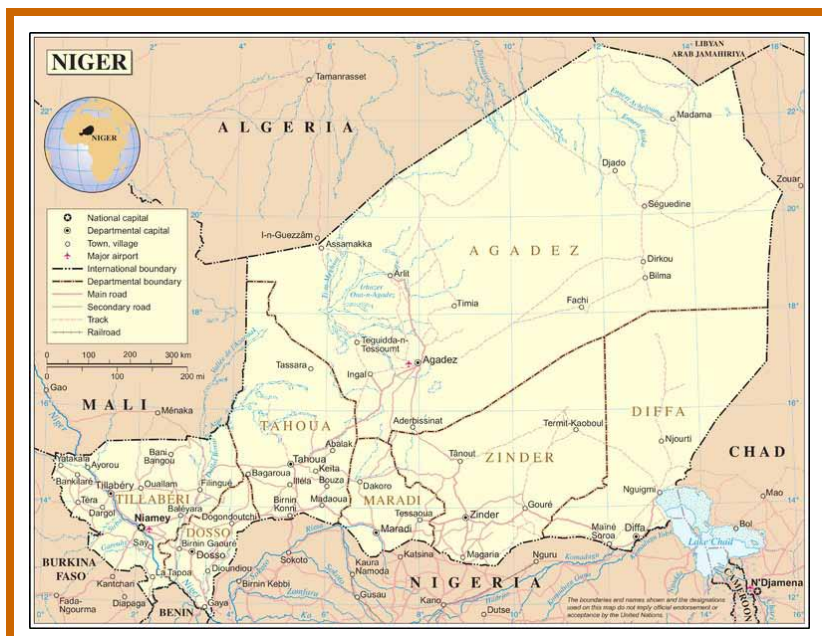
Meanwhile from Tapoa and Tillaberi to Zinder, Diffa, and Nguigmi – from Gaya and Konni to Tahoua, Agadez and Iferouane, Nigeriens sitting at home around their TV, campfire, or three cups of tea are still fondly remembering that one American who came and lived with them, for only a little while, helped them see their potential, and lit that one spark that then took them on an individual or village path to where they are today. A path that took them successfully to a place not measured by dollars or CFAs, by number of demi-lunes, wells or clinic beds, or a CEG test score but through the development of problem solving skills, skills that included learning to collaborate so people could work together with other families, other villages and even other ethnic groups to reach a common goal; and equally important, they're remembering that new world outlook that American gave them – no one is alone regardless if they're relaxing under a neem tree, standing on top of a sand dune, or sitting in their canoe on the Niger River, - we're all in this together. This Peace Corps Volunteer gave them the gift of a vision of a world community of belonging to the human family, - and in return we were given a greater appreciation of life's fragility and simple pleasures – what counts in life. During our time in Niger, the important things in life came more into focus for us and for that gift we owe a great debt to the people of Niger.

These gifts we received were meant to be cherished and to be shared. So we remember today that Nigeriens continue to celebrate and share their stories with their children about that awkward American; their stories are only paralleled by the stories we tell our children and friends about these strong, resilient and grounded in faith Nigeriens.

Therefore with great purpose and personal commitment, we the Board of Directors for Friends of Niger along with our members while regretting the suspension of the Peace Corps Niger program and the Boston University-Niger exchange program commit ourselves and our Friends of Niger organization to tirelessly advocate on behalf of the people of Niger to have both the Peace Corps and Boston University programs reopened at the earliest and safest time feasible. We also commit ourselves and our Friends of Niger organization to continue to support and work with our Nigerien and international partners remaining in Niger to fulfill our mission "to improve the lives, health, and well-being of the people of Niger." Please join us.

Respectfully, on behalf of Board of Directors and Members of Friends of Niger,
John W. Soloninka, President

March 30, 2011



FON Partner Boston University Holds Fund Raiser Events

Boston University's Niger Alumni Network's benefit concert, Rhythm of Reform: Empowering Niger's Women Through Microfinance, was held April 17 at the University. Proceeds from the concert will benefit Aiki Yanke Talauci, a Nigerien NGO founded and run by Yazi Dogo's wife, Madame Aminata Djima. This group runs weekly microcredit sessions and also conducts job training programs for its members, who live in the Route Filingue quartier of Niamey.

The Boston University Niger Alumni Network will be showing **Niger '66** on Tuesday May 3rd at 5 pm in the African Studies Center at Boston University, 232 Bay State Rd. in the conference room on the fifth floor, room 505. Professor John Hutchison will introduce the film and coffee will be provided. **Niger '66** is a 75-minute documentary made by five 1966 Niger RPCVs when they returned in 2008 to revisit their posts and old friends. A \$5 donation is suggested.

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www.friendsofniger.org.

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Please send address changes and corrections, as well as any queries to The Camel Express at the address above.



NIGER ELECTIONS TO RETURN NIGER TO CIVILIAN RULE



On March 14, 2011, BBC News reported that Niger opposition leader Mahamadou Issoufou won the presidential run-off with nearly 58% of the vote. Mr Issoufou had been defeated in two previous polls by former President Mamadou Tandja, who was ousted by the military a year ago. Mr. Issoufou was inaugurated on April 7. The presidential candidate for Mr Tandja's MNSD party, ex-premier Seini Oumarou, received about 42% of ballots. Turnout was about 48%.

Social Democratic Party leader Mr Issoufou, 59, was the favorite going into the run-off, having led the first round of voting in January. The army, which has pledged to step down by April, said before the ballot that it was not backing either candidate.

Mr Tandja spent 10 years in power before being overthrown in a military coup in February last year when he tried to overstay his legal term limit. The former president is currently in prison facing charges of corruption. General Salou Djibo, who has led the junta since its largely popular coup, hailed Saturday's peaceful vote as an example to the rest of Africa.

Peace Corps' 50th Anniversary Is Here

Although Peace Corps' presence in Niger is on hold at the moment, 2011 still marks 50 years of promoting peace and friendship around the world by volunteers in dozens of countries.

The 50th Anniversary Dinner for FON members will be held **Saturday 9/24** at Bukom Bar & Restaurant, 2442 18th St., NW in Adams Morgan, Washington, DC. Buffet starts at **7 PM, \$20 per person**, drinks not included. There will be a meeting of Niger RPCVs on Saturday afternoon 9/24, time and place TBD. Please let us know if you plan to attend—for additional info contact Penni St. Hilaire at tommyt@erols.com or 202 966 4087.

FON Will Continue to Support Viable Local Institutions in Niger

John Baird traveled to Niger in December to visit old friends and his host family, the family of Mourtallah Idy Gondah (see Camel Express of April 2009). John presented an FON contribution to the Danja Hospital and Leprosarium south of Maradi. The hospital is staffed and funded by a faith-based organization, Serving in Mission (SIM), which also supports Galmi Hospital and several other projects in Niger. Although the Danja facility is huge and growing (and has been there since the 50s), it is not technically called a hospital since they do not have a full time resident physician. Doctors and surgeons come and stay for months at a time. However, within the next year they expect to have at least one resident physician.

The Danja facility has a new physiotherapy building and new eye clinic, and they are in the process of constructing a 42-bed ward for women with obstetric fistula injuries. These injuries occur when a woman is giving birth and isn't able to deliver the baby normally, often because she is too young. In such cases, a woman can be in labor for 4 or 5 days and ultimately needs to have a Caesarean section. When fistula occurs, the resultant injury is an opening between the vagina and the bladder or rectum, causing incontinence. An estimated 100,000 women in that area of Niger and Nigeria have this injury. Danja is partnering with the Worldwide Fistula Fund (WFF) for this work. They've had 4 surgical visits by WFF teams who have operated on 34 women to make the surgical repairs. The Galmi Hospital does these surgeries as well.



Below: A 41-year old Peace Corps friendship continues -- John Baird and Idy Gondah (Mourtallah's dad) reaffirm their brother-like friendship.



Above: Board Member John Baird presents \$200 check from Friends of Niger to Dr. Mark Griffiths of the SIM Danja CSL (Centre de Santé et Léprologie) hospital during his visit there in December 2010.

Below right: Mourtallah back among family and friends.

Below left: Arriving at Mourtallah's home and greeting his mother.



**Friends of Niger
T-Shirts**

SEE ORDER FORM PAGE 7

FON Provides \$1,200 to Le Pelican School

Le Pelican is a school for mentally and physically challenged children in Baleyara. FON recently provided three months rent for Le Pelican, and the director, Amadou Oueta, sent his heartfelt thanks. Boston University (BU) students working in Niger for a semester included helping at Le Pelican among their duties. A BU student submitted the following:

Santu (Casey Fox) and I (Yakawa) have been volunteering at Le Pelican (the school for disabled kids) in Niamey this semester. It's been a really great experience- there are about 20 kids there on a daily basis, many of whom have Down's Syndrome. It's been so interesting to see the lessons and how much these kids are learning every day. The best part of the whole center though is just how happy the kids seem to be to be in an environment with other kids like them and how cute they are playing and interacting together. Unfortunately, the director, Amadou, came to us the other day and told us that it is looking like they are going to get evicted because they are 7 months behind in rent (not to mention 3 months behind on paying teacher salaries). They used to be supported by a Belgian organization which disbanded last year due to internal discord. Since then, Le Pelican has really been struggling to make ends meet because the kids pay different amounts in tuition based on what their family can afford, and the tuition money does not nearly cover expenses. We are looking for different ways to find money to pay the back rent and hopefully, in the future, be able to help them build a building of their own which would be more cost effective in the long run.



*BU students
Cassandra Fox (both
photos) and Ashley
Dronsfield (right) at
the Pelican Center in
December 2010.*



Peace Corps 50th Anniversary to be Celebrated at Smithsonian Folklife Festival

Each summer, the Smithsonian Folklife Festival celebrates the idea of living traditions: concepts or institutions that affect society on an ongoing basis. This year's festival features the legacy of the Peace Corps and its efforts to promote peace. The festival also includes features on the food and culture of Colombia and the history of American rhythm and blues music. The festival is from June 30 to July 11, divided into two five-day segments, with a break for Independence Day. It will be on the National Mall in Washington, between the U.S. Capitol and the Lincoln Memorial. More information can be found at www.festival.si.edu.

Despite Peace Corps Niger Program Suspension Friends of Niger Continues Local Support

FON continues to work with and support worthwhile grassroots projects in Niger. These include Rencontre et Action, with its microcredit wood burning stove project, and the Organisation pour un Developpement Inclusif (ODI), a small NGO working with handicapped individuals. Most recently, FON provided funds raised through the Jane Huser Maxwell memorial fund to purchase a computer for ODI. Pam White, one of the Sahara Sisters (see Camel Express September 2010 issue) who started the fund, traveled to Niger at her own expense to visit ODI in 2006 and 2008 and has only good things to say about its dynamic director, Harouna Alidou. Harouna has been working with physically and mentally handicapped Nigeriens for 15 years.

Another new FON partner is Project Play Africa (www.projectplayafrica.org), an organization dedicated to improving the lives of children through the sport of soccer. Their focus is West Africa and they were in Niger last month to distribute soccer balls and work with the community of Libore to establish a youth soccer league and a system of clubs. They collaborate with Pencils for Kids, Tobin Mednick, and also partner with Gaston Kaba (Niger Rotary) and Hamani Djibo (Libore) to accomplish their objectives. Dave Stahl and Mike Mitchell, co-founders of Project Play Africa, were in Niamey from March 29 through April 10, staying at the Hotel Terminus. We will have an update of their activities in the next Camel Express.

Other FON partners include the Centre de Santé et Léprologie (see story on page 4) and Galmi Hospital, where Chris Zoolkoski remains our contact. FON is seeking new partners, such as The American Women's Club in Niamey, to fill the significant gaps left by departing volunteers.

DVDs of *Brother From Niger* Now Available Free of Charge

During this year of the 50th Anniversary of Peace Corps the Board of Friends of Niger would like to encourage **Friends of Niger** members to distribute copies of the DVD of *Brother from Niger*, which follows former **Friends of Niger** president Jim Schneider in 2002 as he returns to Niger, a country he once called home, a country that is still as poor as when he left it in 1966. In a 'Brother from Niger', award-winning journalist Andrew Younger brings a story of courage, hope, and struggle from one of the world's poorest countries.

This DVD would be very helpful for teachers of an African Studies Unit in elementary school or Global Studies teachers in high school, for Multicultural Studies Programs, or for Returned Peace Corps Speakers Bureau Programs. **Friends of Niger** will ship the desired number of copies **free of charge** to encourage members to bring the third goal of the Peace Corps: bringing knowledge of our country of service back to the people of the United States. Copies are also available in VHS format.

To request copies, send an email to current president John Soloninka at president@friendsofniger.org. For questions or more details, please contact FON Vice President Gabriella Maertens at gmaertens@earthlink.net

FRIENDS OF NIGER 2011 MEMBERSHIP & ORDER FORM

Name(s) _____

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Connection to Niger (RPCV, etc.) _____

Dates in Niger _____ Location in Niger _____

Program or Involvement in Niger _____

*Membership Dues & Contributions Help Fund **FON** Activities - including **The Camel Express**,
the **FON website**, the **FON Archives**, and **Projects** such as Those Listed Below.*

The Friends of Niger is a tax-exempt organization under section 501(c)(3).

Membership and contributions to Friends of Niger are fully tax deductible.

Please Check Appropriate Boxes

☐ Enclosed is \$20 for an Individual Membership in FON☐ \$55 to cover Individual Membership in both FON & NPCA☐ Enclosed is \$35 for a FON Family Membership (2 Members at One Address)☐ I am a current Niger PCV, entitled to Free Membership☐ I am a New RPCV, entitled to a 1-Year Free Membership☐ In Addition to my Membership, I have enclosed

a General Contribution of _____

☐ Instead of Joining FON at this time, I have enclosed

a General Contribution of _____

☐ I want to support FON's Young Girls' Scholarship Program (YGSP) activities with

a Contribution of _____

☐ I want to support FON's Microcredit in Niger activities with

a Contribution of _____

☐ I want to support FON's Youth Education activities through a NEW PARTNER, AAWEL

with a Contribution of _____

☐ I want to support the FON Chewable Vitamin Campaign

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☐ Please send _____ Friends of Niger T-Shirts

at \$15 each (Shipping Included) _____

T-Shirt Sizes: S _____ M _____ L _____ XL _____ T-Shirt Color: _____ brown _____ beige

TOTAL AMOUNT ENCLOSED _____

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Your contact information is requested and maintained by FON so that we can contact you in the future. FON will not share your contact information with any third party unless you indicate on this form to that you would also like membership in the National Peace Corps Association (NPCA).