

The Camel Express



Newsletter of the Friends of Niger

Volume 26 Issue 3



December 2011

FON Celebrates the 50th Anniversary of Peace Corps

By Gabriella Maertens, FON Vice-President



FON President John Soloninka at the Niger Embassy meeting. Seated behind John is FON Secretary Penni St. Hilaire.

The highlights for Friends of Niger at the celebration of the 50th Anniversary of Peace Corps were the meeting of the board and Niger RPCVs, former staff and two former Ambassadors at the Niger Embassy, the dinner gathering at the home of FON Board Secretary, Penni St. Hilaire, on Friday, the dinner at the Bukom Café on Saturday evening, and the Parade of Flags on Sunday. Board members communicate by emails and quarterly conference calls, so several were meeting in person for the first time. The Niger Embassy's Counselor, Bouboucar Rilla, along with FON President, John Soloninka, welcomed the 37 people who attended. After a FON project report by Vice-President, Gabriella Maertens, the budget report by Treasurer, Larry Koff and John Baird's membership report (310 people on the FON mailing list), the main order of business was the discussion of the potential for future reinstatement of Peace Corps in Niger.



Mr. Rilla, Niger Embassy Counselor in Washington, DC, opens the FON meeting in honor of the 50th Anniversary. Seated behind Mr. Rilla is Ambassador James Bullington, (PC Director in Niger '00-'06).

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Niger Through the Eyes of One of the Last PCVs

by Khue Nguyen



RPCV Khue Nguyen at the market.

I served as a community health agent in the Tahoua and Maradi regions of Niger from July 2008 to December 2010. My first post was a medium-sized farming and herding community located 25 km from Madaoua called Gandassamou. I was the second volunteer to be posted there and the community had a hard time warming to me because they loved the previous volunteer so much. Integration was difficult and I did not speak Hausa well enough during the first year to effectively communicate. *Continued on page 5*



**Peace
Corps**

Niger

Letter from the President

December 2011

Dear Friends of Niger,

I want to thank so many of you for turning out at the Niger Embassy in September and supporting our FON efforts to continue our cordial working relations with the Niger Embassy staff. Our meeting was very productive and clearly sent the message that our friendship and concern for Niger and the Nigerien people remains strong. Your presence was very much appreciated. The 50th anniversary of Peace Corps events and FON dinner were well attended, and we know that many of you who participated in these activities enjoyed catching up with old friends and making new ones. Again, I want to thank many of you who have agreed to work together with us on a plan of action for the reinstatement of Peace Corps in Niger. The comments from our FON members to continue to advocate for the reinstatement of Peace Corps in Niger along with the comments and concerns of other members regarding the security issues in Niger, strengthen our resolve to work in collaboration with as many people and groups over the long term so that when the time is right, PCVs will again walk the streets of Nigerien villages and towns, and maybe even ride a camel or a horse on market day. It is apparent that the reinstatement of the Peace Corps Program in Niger will not happen soon, but it will happen. In the meantime, FON will continue to support our Nigerien partner groups, and other groups and organizations working in Niger. To all our members and friends, we wish you a happy holiday season and Peace Filled New Year!

-John

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www.friendsofniger.org.



Maman Sidikou Appointed Nigerien Ambassador to the U.S.

Maman Sidikou has been appointed the new Ambassador of the Republic of Niger to the United States. Mr. Sidikou received his Ph.D in adult and nonformal education from Florida State University in 1994, with former Peace Corps volunteer Peter Easton as his advisor. He also has an M.A. from the University of Texas at Austin in Communication, a D.S. in journalism from the Universite de Dakar and an A.A. from the Universidad de Madrid.

His most recent position (2010, 2011) was in the Democratic Republic of Congo as country director for Save the Children, UK, coordinating integrated programming for health, protection and integration. From 2007 to 2010 he was Chief, Education for UNICEF in Nigeria. He was also UN Cluster Coordinator for Education and Culture for the UNICEF Programme Irak in Amman, Jordan and worked for the World Bank in Washington, DC from 2002 to 2005 as a Senior Education Specialist. He has held other UNICEF and USAID positions in Afghanistan, Nigeria and Niger. In the late 90's, as well as the early 80's he worked for the government of Niger. In 1999 he was the Minister, Director of Cabinet, Presidency, where he coordinated relations between the Presidency and the Office of Prime Minister.

We (the Friends of Niger) are looking forward to meeting Mr. Sidikou soon.

Former Niger President Ali Saibou Has Died

Ali Saibou, who was president of Niger from 1987 to 1993 died Monday, October 31, 2011 in Niamey at the age of 71. Three days of national mourning were declared to honor Saibou who was buried in his native village of Dingajibanda, near Ouallam, in western Niger.

In 1987 Saibou was appointed to succeed president Seini Kountche who had died of cancer. In 1989, under a new constitution, Saibou ran and won as the only candidate for President. Two years later he authorized a national conference that led to the dawn of multi-party politics.

Friends of Niger signed the Niger Embassy book of condolences.

Kathleen K. Bishop, Engineer, Diplomat's Wife

Kathleen K Bishop, 64, a mechanical engineer who accompanied her husband on diplomatic tours to Niger, Liberia and Somalia, died September 29, 2011, at her home in Washington, DC. She had brain cancer according to her husband, retired Ambassador James K. Bishop.

As the wife of an ambassador, Mrs. Bishop met with local African officials, helped organize community events and aided health organizations and women's groups. She received a certificate of appreciation from the State Department for her services to the American communities in Monrovia and Mogadishu during the conflicts in Liberia and Somalia.

FON Thanks the Students of Lake Area Schools in Illinois

FON received a donation of \$200 from the Village Elementary School in Round Lake, Illinois. Sheila Miller, a Social Worker at the school and the mother of a Boston University student (Kelley Miller) who was in the BU program in Niger in 1999 and later served as a PCV in Mali ('00-'02), proposed the Young Girls Scholarship Program as a service project and the students agreed it was a great idea to send a young girl to school in Niger. The class of Learning Disabled children raised the money during the 2010-2011 school year. Although the Young Girls Scholarship Program supported by FON is suspended, the funds were donated to an FON partner, AAWEL (Alliance for African Women's Education & Leadership) to ensure a young girl's education.

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FON Celebrates the 50th Anniversary of Peace Corps

By Gabriella Maertens, FON Vice-President



LEFT TO RIGHT: Ambassador Bullington, Bana Moussa, Financial Attaché, and Boubacar Moussa Rilla, Niger Embassy Counselor.

Meeting attendees included Niger RPCVs from every decade since inception, as well as former Niger PCDs and Ambassadors. Peace Corps Desk Officer for Niger, Daryn Warner, provided detailed information on the background and details of the suspension of PC in Niger. Ambassador Bullington (Niger PCD, '00-'06) emphasized the role of the current Ambassador in the decision and stressed the importance of security. RAIN Director Bess Palmisciano described the history and current activities of the NGO in Niger. John Baird suggested the formation of a committee for advocating for the reinstatement of PC in Niger and many of those present signed up. If you are interested, please email him at: JBairdRPT@cs.com.

After a brief reception at the Embassy, the discussions continued at the home of Penni St. Hilaire and Tommy Tomlinson in NW Washington. Thanks to Penni and Tommy's generous hospitality, the 40 guests, FON members and others interested in Niger, enjoyed sharing a wonderful array of food, fellowship and reminiscences, forming new relationships and rekindling old ones.

The FON dinner at the Bukom Café, which serves delicious West African food, was held the following evening. So many people attended that both the upper and lower dining areas of the restaurant were made available to our group. The conversation and fellowship continued with people who had attended the other events as well as new people who were able to join us.

On Sunday, many Niger RPCVs attended the closing ceremony at Arlington National Cemetery to commemorate the 180 volunteers who died in service, followed by the Parade of Flags, arranged alphabetically. We gathered excitedly around the Niger flag and walked across the Memorial Bridge to the Lincoln Memorial, where we disbanded. No one seemed to mind that there were no parade watchers – the spirit and energy was from us and for us, and for those being honored. It was a fitting end to our celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Peace Corps.

BELOW LEFT: Left to right - FON Board members Gabriella Maertens, Penni St. Hilaire, John Soloninka, Steve Bushell, Larry Koff, John Baird, Jude Andreasen. BELOW RIGHT: Forefront—Former PCD Niger Lyn Gray, Ambassador Bullington, Niger RPCV Dorothy Delaney.



Continued from page 1

I loved my host family but, as time wore on, I became more frustrated with the lack of infra-structure, the crowded and bone rattling bush taxi rides to market, the abject poverty, and the cultural barriers. But there was a sense of community in rural Niger, where everyone knew everyone else and every birth, death, marriage, and baptism in the village was common knowledge. When hunger season rolled around every year, everyone shared the little they had and no one let their friends fall through the safety net. By far, the best thing about Gandassamou was my host father, El Hadji Issa, a sprightly man in his sixties. He insisted that I accompany him to the fields to see the emerald shoots of millet and sorghum emerge, fixed my mud house when it leaked, told his family to set aside *tuwo* for me every night, and gave me fresh carrots, lettuce, and tomatoes from his gardens.

The security situation in Niger got more and more precarious as my service continued in Gandassamou. It started with the kidnapping and killing of foreigners near the Nigerien-Malian border earlier in 2009 by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Later in December 2009, I was evacuated from Gandassamou because of a security threat in Tahoua, our regional capital—there was an attempted kidnapping of staffers who were working for the American embassy. Peace Corps evacuated the Tahoua region in its entirety, and I was moved to another village near Gidan Rumji called Dan Turke. There I renovated the local primary school, organized women's literacy classes, made fast friends with the village chief and his family, established a farmer field school to experiment with different bean varieties, made the young men laugh with insulting rejections of their marriage proposals, and caught malaria. It was the most productive and joyous time in my entire service.

I officially closed service on December 10, 2011. A few weeks after I left, two French nationals were kidnapped at Toulousain's (aka Ebenezer's), a favorite bar haunt of Peace Corps volunteers—which also happened to be located right near our hostel. Thankfully, no volunteers were present there at the time of the kidnapping. Peace Corps decided it was time to suspend the program and evacuate the volunteers—it seemed Al-Qaeda was on our doorstep. The evacuation was devastating for the volunteers and staffers who lived and worked throughout Niger; everyone had formed strong bonds with their host families, their coworkers, and the Nigerien staff.

My friends who were evacuated from Niger were unhappy with how Peace Corps handled the process. Volunteers were given four days to close their service, which usually takes 2 weeks—1 week of career and readjustment training, which takes place 3 months before service ends and 1 week of paperwork and medical exams at the close of service. The transition conference was rushed and stressful. Many volunteers expressed interest in continuing to serve in another country, but only a third were given the

opportunity to do so., seemingly selected arbitrarily. As for me, I went back to the States and found a professional job working full time for the government—my first real job. I will always look upon my service in Niger with nostalgia and wistfulness.



PCV Khue Nguyen with host father (El Hadji Issa) in yellow, riding Hama's horse.

Even though my service was not always easy, I have never regretted the time I spent in Niger—it has changed my worldview and it will always be an important part of my life. The best and most enduring friendships I've ever had were forged with other volunteers during my time in the Peace Corps. My quick readjustment and subsequent employment with the government could not have happened without the support of the RPCV community and the connections I made while in the Peace Corps. Peace Corps was and will always be the most important and the best thing I've ever done.

PHOTO GALLERY OF FON MEMBERS & OTHERS ATTENDING THE SEPTEMBER 2011 EVENTS IN DC



Reinstatement of Peace Corps in Niger

As reported elsewhere, the primary issue related to the return of Peace Corps to Niger is the concern of safety. Even before the program suspension there were incidents in several places with Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Mahgreb and other organizations causing Peace Corps to bring volunteers closer to Niamey. We do not believe that the concerns about safety are gone. Critical also is getting the U.S. Ambassador's endorsement. We have been in contact with Ambassador Williams and hope to meet with her when she is in town before Christmas. She assures FON that she is 100% in favor of a resumed Peace Corps presence in Niger and will support efforts leading to that outcome. She also strongly suggests that FON start at the Peace Corps Agency, which we will do.

Ten people signed up to participate on a committee to develop strategies for the return of Peace Corps. Even after it is deemed safe in Niger, we could run into budget problems if Peace Corps decided they do not have adequate funding for a program in Niger. For those of us that think Peace Corps Niger is a vital program we will likely need to lobby of our Representatives and Senators. We hope you will join us. We will be contacting those who volunteered to be on the committee after the first of the year to discuss, by email or conference call, actions we can take for the return of Peace Corps.



FON PHOTO GALLERY CONTINUED



Reinstatement of Peace Corps Niger Supported by Ambassadors

Both the American Ambassador to Niger, Bisa Williams, and the new Nigerien Ambassador to the U.S., Maman Sidikou, have expressed their support for efforts to eventually reinstate Peace Corps in Niger. FON's well-attended meeting at the Niger Embassy in honor of the 50th Anniversary went a long way to drawing attention to the issue and to mobilizing the grass roots support those of us who love Niger. Much remains to be done to ensure the security of volunteers, but it is heartening to know that both Ambassadors see it as a priority. Indeed, Ambassador Sidikou has been at his post in Washington, DC less than two weeks and has already set up a meeting with Peace Corps Washington. In addition, he will meet with FON Secretary Penni St. Hilaire on December 12. Ambassador Williams offered to be available to FON and stated she is "100% in favor of a resumed PC presence in Niger and will support efforts leading to that outcome."

Update on Galmi Hospital

from Dr. Christopher D. Zoolkoski, MD, RPCV Tahoua '88-90

Our international medical team in Galmi is working hard to provide accessible and quality healthcare to the poorest of Niger. We're treating 300 patients per day through our outpatient department. The majority of our 110 beds are usually full. The number of malaria cases is thankfully starting to decline and we are seeing more of the cold season illnesses such as pneumonia and flu-like illnesses. Our surgeons are performing 20 cases daily for obstetrical emergencies, intestinal typhoid perforations, urinary obstruction, skin grafting for burns, and fractures from trauma. We are currently seeking funding for replacement of our antiquated x-ray unit. There are currently 18 children receiving care in our CREN (our malnutrition rehabilitation center) and we are prepared to admit more as needed. One CREN patient is a 1 year old HIV positive boy who came as a skeleton with no strength to drink.



Maimouna, our CREN nurse, giving Plumpy Nut to one of our patients.

Following careful nasogastric feeding and initiation of antiretroviral therapy he can now hold up his head but we still have a ways to go to improve his nutritional status. We are thankful to the Nigerien Ministry of Health and the DRSP of Tahoua for their support and collaboration in helping us with many of our needs related to malnutrition, malaria, HIV, TB, and family planning. Thank you, also, to Friends Of Niger for the generous donations of children's chewable multivitamins which are helping many undernourished children. The container with your last donation of vitamins has arrived and the vitamins are being put to good use!

Christopher D. Zoolkoski, MD, RPCV Tahoua '88-90

P.S.
If you are looking for a worthy project to help fund, I invite you to consider giving towards our need for an x-ray unit which we badly need to better treat the many fractures that are referred to us from around the region. Any gifts towards that need can be sent to:

SIM, P.O. Box 7900, Charlotte, NC 28241

Specify "Galmi Hospital, Project NE84400"

Niger Needs Us Now More than Ever! PLEASE JOIN US!

FON membership is only \$20 -- please see page 11

Contact Information Appeal: We ask our newsletter readers to help us reach other Niger RPCVs with whom you are in touch. If you have an email address or phone number, please send it to John Baird at JBairdRPT@cs.com (217-429-5651) so he can contact them, or ask them to contact John. We are looking for the information on the Membership Form (page 11) including Dates in Niger, Location, and Program. Folks, we are part of a very small and unique group of Americans who has a connection with Niger, and if we can only pull together, we can make a big difference for the people and country we love.

Projects Currently Supported by FON

Even though PC Niger has been suspended, FON continues to partner with local organizations to fund worthwhile, sustainable projects. In addition to Galmi Hospital, featured on page 8, these are current projects. Partner funding organizations include RAIN for the Sahel and the Sahara and The Jane Huser Maxwell Memorial Fund, Boston University, and Northeastern University.

ODI: The Organisation pour un Développement Inclusif (ODI) is a Nigerien NGO comprised of a small cadre of dedicated individuals assisting Niger's disabled population, helping those suffering from blindness, schizophrenia and other mental illness, polio, epilepsy, cerebral palsy, birth defects, and Downs syndrome, among others.

ONEN: ONEN (Nigerien Organization of Innovative Educators) and its partner AAWEL (Alliance for African Women's Education & Leadership) provide academic and vocational education to young Nigeriens who have been unable to complete school.

AAWEL: Second-Chance School program focuses on academic empowerment (language and math literacy) and the integration of vocational/life skills and leadership skills, preparing students for a productive life.

Amadou Hampaté Bâ School: Collège Amadou Hampaté Bâ is a private, coeducational, non-denominational secondary school in a popular neighborhood in Niamey called Dar-es-Salam.

Rencontre et Action: A local microcredit NGO staffed entirely by volunteers, R & A includes a wood burning stove project marketing stoves that use 50% less fuel.

Children's Chewable Vitamins: Purchased in the U.S. by FON staff, these vitamins are hand carried to hospitals in Niger by FON members or Boston University students.

Project Play Africa: A 100% volunteer organization that is dedicated to improving the lives of rural children through the sport of soccer in Sub-Sahara Africa.

Le Pelican School: A school for mentally and physically challenged children in Baleyara.

Danja Hospital and Leprosarium: The Danja facility, which partners with the Worldwide Fistula Fund, provides surgical procedures for women with obstetric injuries

Other Partners & Projects: Plumpy'nut Project, Saabu Dey Well Project, Project ABC Schools, and Estrogenius Festival's Voices of Africa.

The Parade of Flags

Arlington National Cemetery to the Lincoln Memorial, September 25, 2011



Board Member John Baird (blue shirt & badge) helps lead the Niger contingent. RPCV Paula Crawford (above) sports a Nigerian shirt and a flag in her hair and RPCV Karla Barbieri (right) carries the flag. The amphitheater at Arlington Cemetery was full of RPCVs.



ABOVE: FON Treasurer Larry Koff and his wife are decked out for the march.

FRIENDS OF NIGER

2011 - 2012 MEMBERSHIP & ORDER FORM

Name(s) _____ Date _____

Address _____

City/ State _____ Phone(h) _____

Zip _____ Phone (w) _____

E-Mail Address _____

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 the FON Chewable Vitamin Campaign with a Contribution of _____

☐ 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 _____

Make Check or Money Order Payable to Friends of Niger and mail with this form to:
P. O. Box 5823, Washington, D. C. 20016-9998

PRIVACY POLICY

Your contact information is requested and maintained by FON so that we can contact you in the future. FON does not share your contact information with any third party other than with the National Peace Corps Association with whom we have a reciprocity agreement.