

Friends of Niger
P.O. Box 5823
Washington, DC 20016-9998

November 4, 2005

The Honorable Andrew S. Natsios
Administrator, Agency for International Development
Ronald Reagan Building
Washington, DC 20523

Re: Reopening of the USAID Mission in Niger, West Africa

Dear Mr. Natsios:

I am writing on behalf of the Friends of Niger, an organization composed of returned Peace Corps Volunteers and others who have lived in Niger, to strongly urge the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to re-open its mission office in Niamey, Niger in 2006.

Since the USAID mission office in Niger closed, the agricultural, health, and economic sectors in Niger have not fared well. This year, the United Nations ranked the Republic of Niger as the poorest country in the world. Most of its citizens continue to face difficult obstacles in obtaining a steady supply of food and water, and access to health care; even maintaining a subsistence standard of living has become out of the reach of many Nigeriens over the past two years. The people of Niger need and merit the constant presence and assistance of a USAID country office and staff.

- ❖ The Niger Republic is one of a limited number of countries in Africa which has merited designation for forgiveness of its international debt.
- ❖ Niger is amongst those countries which have accepted U.S. military assistance to resist the infiltration of terrorists and is cooperating with the U.S. led war on terrorism.
- ❖ The Peace Corps has had a continuous presence in Niger since its first mission in the early 1960s; the Peace Corps continues to enjoy good relations with the national and local governments and the people of Niger.
- ❖ Niger's return to a democratic government removed any legal obstacle to the re-establishment of a USAID mission in Niger.

The absence of a local USAID mission prevents the United States from responding quickly and appropriately to crises like the food crisis experienced this past summer. The way in which this most recent food crisis unfolded – with disagreements as to both its severity and its causes – demonstrated that collaboration with the world's poorest country from a regional Sahelian office proved inadequate, inefficient and unwise. USAID's own public reports on

the latest food crisis in Niger appear to have concluded that poverty and entrenched cultural practices are the root problems of food security and require a committed long-term development strategy to resolve. Without a national, on-site presence, USAID will not be appropriately positioned to respond rapidly, to accurately assess the issues and problems in the early stages, or to put in place measures to prevent these chronic problems from persisting.

The absence of a national USAID mission office in Niger also limits the ability of the US to assist the government and people of Niger in their establishment of a long term program of sustainable economic growth. The decline in Niger's economic growth parallels the USAID Niger mission office closure. While there are many players on the scene in Niger – the Government of Niger, The World Food Program, and non-governmental organizations, they are not a substitute for USAID, its mission or its expertise.

We urge you to expedite the return to Niger of a nationally based USAID mission. The reopening of such an office to undertake a renewed US commitment to agricultural, health and economic development in Niger could most appropriately be timed to be concurrent with the planned deployment of the US Marines who are being sent to Niger to address the issue of terrorism.

I look forward to hearing of your plans for Niger and would appreciate knowing the timetable you have established for reopening the USAID mission office in Niger.

Sincerely,

John W. Soloninka,
President
Friends of Niger

Cc: Desk Officer, USAID