

# AP



## WEST AFRICA

*By Rukmini Callimachi*



Zali Idy, 12, was married in 2011.

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# WEST AFRICA



## 1. NIGER - HUNGER BRIDES

Sept. 16, 2012: In Niger, child marriage on rise due to hunger

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## 2. MALI - AL-QAIDA'S COUNTRY

Dec. 31, 2012 AP IMPACT: As world hesitates, al-Qaida carves out own country in Mali, prepares to defend it

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## 3. THE LAST CAMEL

Aug. 18, 2012: Sale of Niger nomad's last camel is sign of hunger

---



## 4. MALI - SMALL TOWN SHOOTING

Sept. 22, 2012: Massacre of preachers in Mali sign of broken army

---

## 5. CHAD - A STUNTED NATION

Dec. 15, 2012: Lack of food stunts Chad children, damages minds

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Sept. 16, 2012

## In Niger, child marriage on rise due to hunger

By RUKMINI CALLIMACHI  
Associated Press

HAWKANTAKI, Niger (AP) — Each day before the reaping, the 11-year-old girl walked between the stunted stalks of millet with a sense of mounting dread.

In a normal year, the green shoots vaulted out of the ground and rose as high as 13 feet (4 meters), a wall tall enough to conceal an adult man. This time, they only reached her waist. Even the tallest plant in her family's plot barely grazed her shoulder.

Zali could feel the tug of the invisible thread tying her fate to that of the land. As the world closed in around her, she knew that this time the bad harvest would mean more than just hunger.

In Hawkantaki, it is the rhythm of the land that shapes the cycle of life, including the time of marriage. The size of the harvest determines not only if a father can feed his family, but also if he can afford to keep his daughter under his roof.

Even at the best of times, one out of every three girls in Niger marries before her 15th birthday, a rate of child marriage among the highest in the world, according to a UNICEF survey.

Now this custom is being layered on top of a crisis. At times of severe drought, parents pushed to the wall by poverty and hunger are marrying their daughters at even younger ages.

A girl married off is one less mouth to feed, and the dowry money she brings in goes to feed others.

"Families are using child marriage, as an alternative, as a survival strategy to the food insecurity," says Djanabou Mahonde, UNICEF's chief child protection officer in Niger.

This drought-prone country of 16 million is so short on food that it is ranked dead last by international aid organization Save the Children in the percentage of children receiving a "minimum acceptable diet."

The consequences are dire. A total of



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Young girls stand in a field of millet outside the remote village of Hawkantaki, Niger. In a normal year, the green shoots rose as high as 4 meters (13 feet).

51 percent of children in Niger are stunted, according to a report published in July by Save the Children. The average height of a 2½-year-old girl born here is around 3 inches (8 centimeters) shorter than what it should be for a child that age.

In the tiny village of Hawkantaki, nearly every household has lost at least one child to hunger or the illnesses that come from it. Their miniature graves dot the hamlet.

Nana Abdou’s 1-year-old brother, who died of hunger last year, is buried in a corner of the animal pen. Soon after his death last year, her family accepted the dowry. Twelve-year-old Nana is engaged to be married before the end of the year.

“Our problems started a long time ago, but every year it’s gotten worse,” she says. “The fathers are marrying off their daughters to reduce their overhead... He’s obliged to if he wants to reduce the number of children he has to feed.”

The numbers tell the story in Hawkantaki, population around 200.

Last year, before the start of the harvest, there were 10 girls in Hawkantaki between the ages of about 11 and 15. By spring of this year, seven were married, and another two are engaged.

That’s a rate of 90 percent, three times the national average.

None of these girls had “done her laundry”

yet, the local euphemism for a woman's menstrual period. And every single one says hunger hastened her marriage.

The youngest is Zali, a whisper of a girl, whose waist is so tiny you can almost encircle her with your hands. She has no breasts to speak of. Her voice hasn't broken yet.

**SEEN FROM THE SKY**, the village of Hawkantaki looks like a brown dot on a sheet of neon green.

The houses of hand-patted mud are built around a village square. Zali's faces the northern side. It takes exactly 36 seconds to walk from her door to that of her best friend

Aisha, directly opposite on the southern side. Aisha's cousin Rama lives on an alleyway leading off the square. So do their friends Marliya, Sarey, Shoubalee, Sadiya, Shamseeya, Rakhiya and Nana, all aged between 12 and 15.

"You can't say

Zali's name without saying Aicha in the same breath, or Aicha without Marliya, or Marliya without Sarey," said Aicha's mother, Habsou Daouda. "These girls are inseparable."

There are no calendars on the walls. Instead of months, they count "moons." Years are remembered in terms of harvests. Ages can be calculated by the events that happened at the time of a person's birth.

None of the girls own watches, or cell

phones. They have never seen a computer, surfed the Internet or sent a text message. The village has only one light bulb, and it's strung to a tree, powered by a generator.

There isn't a single television in Hawkantaki. For special occasions, like a wedding, they rent one, and bring it in strapped to a donkey.

Since birth, the lives of these girls have followed a nearly identical trajectory. They first went out into the fields strapped onto their mothers' backs. As girls, they played with sticks, raking their "hoes" in the same rhythm as their moms. By the time most kids are learning to hold a pencil, they have become so adept with a real hoe that the space between their thumb and forefinger is already as hard as leather.

On the day of the reaping last fall, the young girls cut the millet and ripped off the leaves to reveal the husk. They bundled the cattail-shaped husks together with pieces of leaves as twine. Then they carried the bundles back on their heads.

Inside each of their courtyards, they pounded the husks in wooden bowls. But the upbeat, cheerful rhythm of the pounding soon slowed down, as they ran out of millet.

*Pennisetum glaucum*, the variety of millet cultivated in Niger, originated in western Africa and has been grown here since prehistoric times. It's also known as "pearl millet" for its ovoid grains, which are larger than those of many other cereals grown in the region. The plant is hardy, offers some protein and is known to be resistant to drought.

But even pearl millet cannot survive the repetitive droughts that have pummeled the

**None of the girls own watches, or cell phones. They have never seen a computer, surfed the Internet or sent a text message.**

Sahel in recent years. Zali's family's fields failed to produce in 2005, in 2008 and in 2010. Last year marked the fourth drought in the 11-year-old's short life — an occurrence that used to happen once every decade.

In a good year, her stepfather's 10 acres (4 hectares) yielded 150 scoops of millet, the size of soup bowls. At the end of the harvest last year, he counted just 17.

It was the same in all the households. Fields that should have produced 50, 100, even 200 scoops of millet yielded 5, 10 or 20. The land had failed all of them, and not a single family in Hawkantaki had anything left over to put in their granary.

It's like waiting all month for your salary,

and then spending it in a few days. Except they had waited all year. And the next payday was another year away.

"The millet last year only came up to 30 percent of its normal height. There was only one rain. The second one didn't come," says 50-year-old Dadi Djadi, Zali's stepfather.

"It was a catastrophic harvest."

The missing buttons on Djadi's aging safari suit show glimpses of his stomach. It's not just flat. His stomach drops inside of him, as if to mark a hole.

**IT WAS SOON AFTER**, in the emptiness that followed the harvest, that the visitors started to appear.



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Rama, 14, poses in her bedroom in the remote village of Hawkantaki, Niger. Her mother says she is 12. Her husband brought a 100,000 francs (\$200) dowry for her in the fall of 2011.

The groups of older men, wearing skullcaps and robes down to their ankles, came in groups of threes and fours. They said ‘Salaam aleikoum.’ And they asked to see the fathers of the girls.

Sadiya’s father was the first to say yes, accepting around \$100 (50,000 francs) as the dowry. It’s half the amount usually offered, but her desperate family accepted. A crippling hand infection meant her mother could no longer work even as a day laborer in other people’s fields.

Marliya’s father also said yes to the same pitiful amount. So did Sarey’s. Aicha, Zali and Rama’s fathers were offered around \$200. (100,000 francs).

Rama’s father immediately spent half the money intended for his daughter at the market, buying a bag of millet, salt and the vegetables whose taste they had forgotten.

Most of the marriages should be illegal under Niger’s law, which states that the minimum age of marriage is 15. The law, however, only applies for civil ceremonies officiated by the state. Marriages in villages are sealed inside mosques and fall under what is called “traditional law.”

The parents of the girls say they were “ready” and of “marriageable age.” When pushed, some acknowledge they would have liked to wait, and circumstances forced the marriage.



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Sadiya Oumarou, 15, originally from Hawkantaki, poses in her bedroom in the remote village of Tabouka, Niger.

Most of the girls say their older sisters already had their periods before they got married. But no one asked the girls for their opinion.

When the girls walked to the well, they could hear the boys gossiping about them. They made lewd jokes about what was going to happen next.

Around October last year, Zali heard her name and the word “armey,” marriage, and her face felt hot. She came home and started crying. Her mother asked her what was wrong.

“People outside are saying that I’m going to get married,” she said.

Her mother nodded.

**ON THE DAY OF ZALI’S** wedding this January, she wore a new pagne, a wraparound skirt. It was one of the few items bought for her with the \$200 dowry given

to her father. The other item was a veil, the kind worn by married women. She was now 12 years old.

There was barely any food at the wedding.

## The 12-year-old girl was suddenly left alone with a 23-year-old man.

Her family borrowed a bullock cart to take her to her husband’s home. Her girlfriends piled in with her, laughing. At the door, Zali was lifted onto the back of an old woman who carried her across the threshold, in an ancient marriage tradition.

The mud-walled room had been built

by hand by her husband. He is supposed to provide the roof over her head.

The bride in turn is supposed to provide the furnishings, bought with the cash dowry. In the four months since the engagement, however, Zali’s family had spent almost all of it on food. All she found in the room was a yellow-and-orange plastic mat, a mosquito net, and a few bowls.

According to the local custom, the bride’s friends stay with her for a week. The nine girls sat on the mat on the floor with Zali, singing songs, telling stories and giggling. Each time her husband approached, they shooed him away, clapping their hands and throwing things at him. It was like a game.

And then the week was over, and the 12-year-old girl was suddenly left alone with a 23-year-old man.

**WHEN A MARRIAGE IS** consummated, the bride cooks a special meal and returns to her family’s home for the first time since the wedding.

Marliya served her parents the meal after her first night alone with her husband.

The 14-year-old bride was asleep on a sheet of plastic when he came in. Her family had spent her entire dowry, not even leaving enough for a \$10 bed mat.

He closed the door of corrugated tin. She tried to run, but he grabbed her arm and twisted it, until she fell back onto the floor.

When he left, she pulled on her veil and ran to complain to her older sister. “This is what he did to me,” she said, twisting her arm in mid-air.



Her sister told her that was normal, and sent her back to her husband's house.

The next day, she asked her in-laws for food for her parents' meal. All they could give her was a cup of millet. The dish is served with a meat sauce, but these are hard times in

ceremony and has not been seen since.

At first, the 14-year-old pushed her husband away. She gave in after a few days, because she did not want to seem ungrateful to the in-laws who had bought her mattress.

Sarey came down with a fever on her

wedding day. They still made her go. She ran away a dozen or more times, until she too made the meal.

Zali fought for a month.

At night, her husband tried to touch her. She pushed him away. It was like this the second night. And the third. Weeks passed.

It was then that her mother-in-law took her aside to dress her down.

That night, Zali lay down on the mat in her unlit hut. He said nothing when he came in. He just opened her legs.



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Children play in the remote village of Hawkantaki. It is the rhythm of the land that shapes the cycle of life and crucially, when they marry their daughters.

Hawkantaki, and no one can afford meat. So Marliya pounded the green-hued grain and served it to her parents plain.

And so it was for the other girls, sooner or later.

Rama's marriage began with humiliation, because her father had spent every penny of her dowry. Too ashamed to bring his daughter to her husband's house empty-handed, he absconded the day of the

**THE NEXT DAY, ZALI'S** mother walked into the barren fields that radiate outward from the village. She found the kalgo tree.

All over Niger when the millet runs out, desperate families

are reduced to boiling its leaves for food.

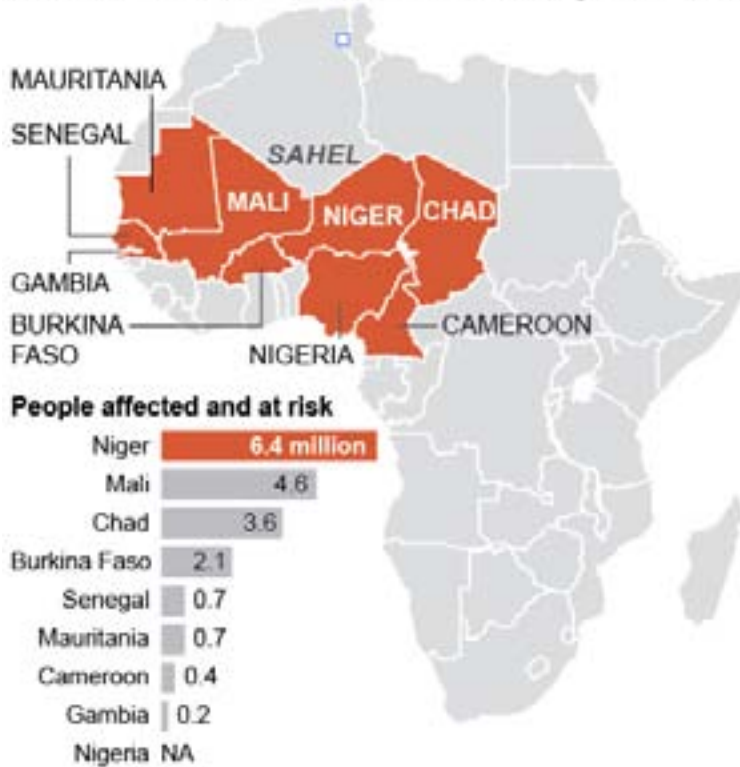
Her mother went to collect the leaves for a different reason, because they are also known for their anti-inflammatory properties, and are prescribed for new brides.

Zali's mother boiled them and prepared compresses to soothe her daughter's crotch.

So many mothers went to pick the leaves this spring that hardly any were left on the denuded branches of the tree.

## Nutrition crisis in Africa's Sahel

Irregular rains, poor harvests and insecurity have put at risk 18.7 million people due to food shortages in the arid swath of Africa below the Sahara. The largest number live in Niger, where a third of the children face life-threatening malnutrition.



SOURCES: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs; UNICEF

AP



AP Photo/File

Fighters from Islamist group Ansar Dine stand guard during a hostage handover in the desert outside Timbuktu, Mali.

Dec. 31, 2012

## Mali – Al-Qaida’s Country

By RUKMINI CALLIMACHI  
Associated Press

MOPTI, Mali (AP) — Deep inside caves, in remote desert bases, in the escarpments and cliff faces of northern Mali, Islamic fighters are burrowing into the earth, erecting a formidable set of defenses to protect what has essentially become al-Qaida’s new country.

They have used the bulldozers, earth movers and Caterpillar machines left behind

by fleeing construction crews to dig what residents and local officials describe as an elaborate network of tunnels, trenches, shafts and ramparts. In just one case, inside a cave large enough to drive trucks into, they have stored up to 100 drums of gasoline, guaranteeing their fuel supply in the face of a foreign intervention, according to experts.

Northern Mali is now the biggest territory held by al-Qaida and its allies. And as the world hesitates, delaying a military

intervention, the extremists who seized control of the area earlier this year are preparing for a war they boast will be worse than the decade-old struggle in Afghanistan.

“Al-Qaida never owned Afghanistan,” said former United Nations diplomat Robert Fowler, a Canadian kidnapped and held for 130 days by al-Qaida’s local chapter, whose fighters now control the main cities in the north. “They do own northern Mali.”

Al-Qaida’s affiliate in Africa has been a shadowy presence for years in the forests and deserts of Mali, a country hobbled by poverty and a relentless cycle of hunger. In recent months, the terror syndicate and its allies have taken advantage of political instability within the country to push out of their hiding

place and into the towns, taking over an enormous territory which they are using to stock arms, train forces and prepare for global jihad.

The catalyst for the Islamic fighters was a military coup nine months ago that transformed Mali from a once-stable nation to the failed state it is today. On March 21, disgruntled soldiers invaded the presidential palace. The fall of the nation’s democratically elected government at the hands of junior officers destroyed the military’s command-and-control structure, creating the vacuum which allowed a mix of rebel groups to move in.

With no clear instructions from their higher-ups, the humiliated soldiers left to



AP Photo

Lalla Arby, 22, who was beaten by Islamist group Ansar Dine for sitting outside her home in Timbuktu with her head uncovered.

defend those towns tore off their uniforms, piled into trucks and beat a retreat as far as Mopti, roughly in the center of Mali. They abandoned everything north of this town to the advancing rebels, handing them an area that stretches over more than 620,000 square kilometers (240,000 square miles). It's a territory larger than Texas or France — and it's almost exactly the size of Afghanistan.

Turbaned fighters now control all the major towns in the north, carrying out amputations in public squares like the Taliban did. Just as in Afghanistan, they are flogging women for not covering up. Since taking control of Timbuktu, they have

destroyed seven of the 16 mausoleums listed as world heritage sites.

The area under their rule is mostly desert and sparsely populated, but analysts say that due to its size and the hostile nature of the terrain, rooting

out the extremists here could prove even more difficult than it did in Afghanistan. Mali's former president has acknowledged, diplomatic cables show, that the country cannot patrol a frontier twice the length of the border between the United States and Mexico.

Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, known as AQIM, operates not just in Mali, but in a corridor along much of the northern Sahel. This 7,000-kilometer (4,300-mile) long

ribbon of land runs across the widest part of Africa, and includes sections of Mauritania, Niger, Algeria, Libya, Burkina Faso and Chad.

“One could come up with a conceivable containment strategy for the Swat Valley,” said Africa expert Peter Pham, an adviser to the U.S. military's African command center, referring to the region of Pakistan where the Pakistan Taliban have been based. “There's no containment strategy for the Sahel, which runs from the Atlantic Ocean to the Red Sea.”

Earlier this year, the 15 nations in West Africa, including Mali, agreed on a proposal for the military to take back the north, and sought backing from the United Nations. Earlier this month, the Security Council authorized the intervention but imposed certain conditions, including training Mali's military, which is accused of serious human rights abuses since the coup. Diplomats say the intervention will likely not happen before September of 2013.

In the meantime, the Islamists are getting ready, according to elected officials and residents in Kidal, Timbuktu and Gao, including a day laborer hired by al-Qaida's local chapter to clear rocks and debris for one of their defenses. They spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear for their safety at the hands of the Islamists, who have previously accused those who speak to reporters of espionage.

The al-Qaida affiliate, which became part of the terror network in 2006, is one of three Islamist groups in northern Mali. The others are the Movement for the Unity and Jihad in West Africa, or MUJAO, based in Gao, and Ansar Dine, based in Kidal. Analysts agree

## The country cannot patrol a frontier twice the length of the border between the United States and Mexico.



AP Photo File

Fighters from Islamist group Ansar Dine leave after performing a public amputation, severing the hand of a young man found guilty of stealing rice, in Timbuktu, Mali.

that there is considerable overlap between the groups, and that all three can be considered sympathizers, even extensions, of al-Qaida.

The Islamic fighters have stolen equipment from construction companies, including more than \$11 million worth from a French company called SOGEA-SATOM, according to Elie Arama, who works with the European Development Fund. The company had been contracted to build a European Union-financed highway in the north between Timbuktu and the village of Goma Coura. An employee of SOGEA-SATOM in Bamako declined to comment.

The official from Kidal said his constituents have reported seeing Islamic

fighters with construction equipment riding in convoys behind 4-by-4 trucks draped with their signature black flag. His contacts among the fighters, including friends from secondary school, have told him they have created two bases, around 200 to 300 kilometers (120 and 180 miles) north of Kidal, in the austere, rocky desert.

The first base is occupied by al-Qaida's local fighters in the hills of Teghergharte, a region the official compared to Afghanistan's Tora Bora.

"The Islamists have dug tunnels, made roads, they've brought in generators, and solar panels in order to have electricity," he said. "They live inside the rocks."

Still further north, near Boghassa, is the second base, created by fighters from Ansar Dine. They too have used seized explosives, bulldozers and sledgehammers to make passages in the hills, he said.

In addition to creating defenses, the fighters are amassing supplies, experts said. A local who was taken by Islamists into a cave in the region of Kidal described an enormous room, where several cars were parked. Along the walls, he counted up to 100 barrels of gasoline, according to the man's testimony to New York-based Human Rights Watch.

**“We consider this land our land. It's an Islamic territory.”**

In Timbuktu, the fighters are becoming more entrenched with each passing day, warned Mayor Ousmane Halle. Earlier in the year, he said, the Islamists

left his city in a hurry after France called for an imminent military intervention. They returned when the U.N. released a report arguing for a more cautious approach.

“At first you could see that they were anxious,” said Halle by telephone. “The more the date is pushed back, the more reinforcements they are able to get, the more prepared they become.”

In the regional capital of Gao, a young man told The Associated Press that he and several others were offered 10,000 francs a day by al-Qaida's local commanders (around \$20), a rate several times the normal wage, to clear rocks and debris, and dig trenches. The youth said he saw Caterpillars and earth

movers inside an Islamist camp at a former Malian military base 7 kilometers (4 miles) from Gao.

The fighters are piling mountains of sand from the ground along the dirt roads to force cars onto the pavement, where they have checkpoints everywhere, he said. In addition, they are modifying their all-terrain vehicles to mount them with arms.

“On the backs of their cars, it looks like they are mounting pipes,” he said, describing a shape he thinks might be a rocket or missile launcher. “They are preparing themselves. Everyone is scared.”

A university student from Gao confirmed seeing the modified cars. He said he also saw deep holes dug on the sides of the highway, possibly to give protection to fighters shooting at cars, along with cement barriers with small holes for guns.

In Gao, residents routinely see Moktar Belmoktar, the one-eyed emir of the al-Qaida-linked cell that grabbed Fowler in 2008. Belmoktar, a native Algerian, traveled to Afghanistan in the 1980s and trained in Osama bin Laden's camp in Jalalabad, according to research by the Jamestown Foundation. His lieutenant Oumar Ould Hamaha, whom Fowler identified as one of his captors, brushed off questions about the tunnels and caves but said the fighters are prepared.

“We consider this land our land. It's an Islamic territory,” he said, reached by telephone in an undisclosed location. “Right now our field of operation is Mali. If they bomb us, we are going to hit back everywhere.”

He added that the threat of military intervention has helped recruit new fighters, including from Western countries.

In December, two U.S. citizens from Alabama were arrested on terrorism charges, accused of planning to fly to Morocco and travel by land to Mali to wage jihad, or holy war. Two French nationals have also been detained on suspicion of trying to travel to northern Mali to join the Islamists. Hamaha himself said he spent a month in France preaching his fundamentalist version of Islam



AP Photo/File

Islamist group Ansar Dine stand guard in Timbuktu, Mali, as they prepare to publicly lash a member of the Islamic Police found guilty of adultery.

in Parisian mosques after receiving a visa for all European Union countries in 2001.

Hamaha indicated the Islamists have inherited stores of Russian-made arms from former Malian army bases, as well as from the arsenal of toppled Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi, a claim that military experts have confirmed.

Those weapons include the SA-7 and SA-2 surface-to-air missiles, according to Hamaha, which can shoot down aircrafts. His claim could not be verified, but Rudolph Atallah, the former counterterrorism director for Africa in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, said it makes sense.

“Gadhafi bought everything under the sun,” said Atallah, a retired U.S. Air Force lieutenant colonel, who has traveled extensively to Mali on defense missions. “His weapons depots were packed with all kinds of stuff, so it’s plausible that AQIM now has surface-to-air missiles.”

Depending on the model, these missiles can range far enough to bring down planes used by ill-equipped African air forces, although not those used by U.S. and other Western forces, he said. There is significant disagreement in the international community on whether Western countries with their better equipment will carry out the planned bombardments, which could significantly affect the outcome.

Another factor in the success of a military intervention would be the reaction of the people, who, unlike in Afghanistan, have little history of extremism. Malians have long practiced a moderate form of Islam, where women do not wear burqas and few practice the strict form of the religion.

The Islamists’ recent advances draw on al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb’s near decade of experience in Mali’s northern desert, where Fowler and his fellow U.N. colleague were held captive for four months in 2008, an experience he recounts in his recent book, “A Season in Hell.”



Originally from Algeria, the fighters fled across the border into Mali in 2003, after kidnapping 32 European tourists. Over the next decade, they used the country's vast northern desert to hold French, Spanish, Swiss, German, British, Austrian, Italian and Canadian hostages, raising an estimated \$89 million in ransom payments, according to Stratfor, a global intelligence company.

During this time, they also established relationships with local clans, nurturing the ties that now protect them. Several commanders have taken local wives, and Hamaha, whose family is from Kidal, confirmed that Belmoktar is married to his niece.

Fowler described being driven for days by jihadists who knew Mali's featureless terrain by heart, navigating valleys of identical dunes with nothing more than the direction of the sun as their map. He saw them drive up to a thorn tree in the middle of nowhere to find barrels of diesel fuel. Elsewhere, he saw them dig a pit in the sand and bury a bag of boots, marking the spot on a GPS for future use.

In his four-month-long captivity, Fowler never saw his captors refill at a gas station, or shop in a market. Yet they never ran out

of gas. And although their diet was meager, they never ran out of food, a testament to the extensive supply network which they set up and are now refining and expanding.

Among the many challenges an invading army will face is the inhospitable terrain, Fowler said, which is so hot that at times "it was difficult to draw breath." A cable published by WikiLeaks from the U.S. Embassy in Bamako described how even the Malian troops deployed in the north before the coup could only work from 4 a.m. to 10 a.m., and spent the sunlight hours in the shade of their vehicles.

Yet Fowler said he saw al-Qaida fighters chant Quranic verses under the Sahara sun for hours, just one sign of their deep, ideological commitment.

"I have never seen a more focused group of young men," said Fowler, who now lives in Ottawa, Canada. "No one is sneaking off for R&R. They have left their wives and children behind. They believe they are on their way to paradise."

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*Associated Press writer Baba Ahmed contributed to this report from Bamako and Mopti, Mali.*



Aug. 18, 2012

## Sale of Niger nomad's last camel is sign of hunger

By RUKMINI CALLIMACHI  
Associated Press

SAKABAL, Niger (AP) — In a part of the world where the worth of a man is measured by his animals, Tuareg nomad Soumaila Wantala has come to this market to do the unthinkable: Sell his last camel.

He crouches in the shade of a thorn tree as traders haggle over the 4-year-old male animal, Yedi. When the sale is complete, Yedi rears his enormous neck and lets out a cry, like the deep, subterranean call of a whale. It

takes three men to drag the camel out of the arena, as if he understands the fate that has just befallen his master.

In markets all over Niger, hungry people are selling hungry animals for half their normal value, giving up on the milk and money of tomorrow so that their children can eat today. Their plight is a sign of how far the economy of the desert has broken down, leaving its people unable to feed themselves in drought after drought.

This is a community so tied to its animals that children play with miniature camels or

cows cut from rock. It's in livestock that a man settles disputes, pays the dowry for his future bride and leaves an inheritance to his sons.

So to see a nomad sell his last camel is like watching someone sell their house and car, liquidate their 401(k) and empty their bank account all at once, just to buy groceries.

Such fire sales are now happening with frightening regularity in cattle markets like this one, poised on the edge of the massive grasslands that run like a ribbon across the neck of Africa.

In a normal year, an adult camel like Yedi could sell for as much as \$1,600. After spending all day under the thorn tree, Wantala, a 35-year-old who looks like a human stick, was forced to accept half that price. Across the plains, his wife and

six children were waiting for him under an animal-skin tent, their bag of grain nearly empty.

"It's a deep shock. It's like I've fallen into a hole," said Wantala. "But right now, I'm hungry. And I need first of all to remove the hunger."

**ANIMALS IN THE SAHEL** act as a buffer, a cushion against hunger. In times of need, a cow or camel provides milk, and is also an asset that can be traded for food.

Eighty percent of people in this landlocked nation, and virtually all in its rural areas, depend on livestock for some part of their income, according to Niger's breeders' association.

In a time of drought, the animals lose weight, and nomads literally see their assets



Jerome Delay • AP

Tuareg men leave at the end of the livestock market in the desert village of Sakabal, Niger.

shrink. At the same time, the cost of grain goes up. The price of millet, a local staple, is now at record levels.

In March of last year, a goat could be traded at a market in Niger's Tahoua region for 179 kilograms (394 pounds) of millet, according to the FAO. By March this year, it took two goats to fetch the same amount of cereal.

"For the herders, it's a double whammy," says Paul Sitnam, West Africa director for humanitarian emergency affairs for World

Vision, which works in Niger's pastoral region. "The animal represents their capital. Their savings."

Animals can feed children over time. UNICEF estimates that 1 million children in the Sahel face life-

threatening malnutrition this year due to the drought, more than a third of them in Niger. The all-too-familiar period without rain in this former French colony of 16 million is so painful that it is called the "soudure" — French for "soldering" lips shut.

Aid groups have saved lives by trucking in food and setting up feeding centers. It's an expensive fix, though, that does not mend a broken food chain. During the Sahel drought of 2005, it cost donors \$80 a day to save the life of a severely malnourished child, according to United Nations figures. Preventing malnutrition would have cost just

\$1 a day.

But it's a tough sell to get donors to save the goats which could prevent a child's hunger.

"Pictures of starving goats do not attract aid in the same way as images of dying children," says Maiga Ibrahim Soumaila, a representative of the United Nations Organization for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

For generations, nomads like Wantala have lived in a precarious equilibrium with the sky above them.

When the first rains come, they head north toward the Sahara desert, where the grass is said to be saltier, packed with minerals. They time their movements according to the clouds, waiting for the second major downpour before making a U-turn back to the greener south.

Herders keep both camels and goats. If a camel is an investment account like a 401(k), a goat is petty cash, traded during the lean season for bags of millet.

Wantala's troubles began three years ago, when the rains abruptly stopped during the drought of 2010. He found himself stuck between two watering holes, dozens of miles from the nearest market. And while a camel can last 10 days without water under the blasting sun, goats and sheep will only live for two to three days, experts say.

By the time he reached the auction block, the ones that had survived were so thin they sold for almost nothing.

Out of goats by the end of 2010, Wantala was forced to begin selling his five camels. His only female camel became weak from the

## Herders keep both camels and goats. If a camel is an investment account like a 401(k), a goat is petty cash.



Jerome Delay • AP

Helpers prepare camels just purchased for their new owners to take with them at the livestock market in the desert village of Sakabal, Niger.

drought and died, robbing his family of their milk supply.

So last month, Wantala saddled Yedi one last time and rode to Sakabal, where nomads in varying degrees of despair were selling several dozen other camels. Each precious camel wore a leather pouch around its neck with a strip of paper, printed with recitations from the Quran, to protect it from the evil eye.

Despite their attempts, the nomads have not found an amulet to protect the camels from drought.

**NIGER IS NO STRANGER** to famine, and the worst droughts are remembered with special names. There was the one known as “the wind that carried away our children.” In 1968,

herders lost between 50 and a 100 percent of their animals. Then, between 1972 to 1973, more than six million of Niger’s animals died, or half the national herd, according to historian and author Thurston Clarke.

Between those droughts, though, the rains returned, allowing people to rebuild their depleted herds. British charity Oxfam estimates that it takes three years to rebuild a herd of goats or sheep, and up to eight for cows and camels.

In recent years, herders have had no time to recover, hit by the relentless hammer of bad rains in 2005, in 2010 and again this year.

At the camel market this spring in Agadez, one of the northernmost points on the caravan route traced every year by herders, a skinny

black-and-white goat with a mangy coat dropped down dead. Its owner immediately slit its throat, hoping a belated attempt to satisfy the Muslim ritual of bleeding the animal to death would allow him to sell the meat.

“He wasn’t sick,” the man babbled at a gathering audience. “He just didn’t have enough food.”

An adolescent camel also fell awkwardly, weak from hunger. It broke a foreleg, condemning it to the butcher’s lot. A tear trickled from the young animal’s eye as it was

carted away.

The merciless frequency of the drought has wiped out the fortunes of even the most affluent nomads.

The style of Mobaga Bango’s black turban, wrapped in cords over his head and around his chin,

shows that he was once a man of means. The old man now sits destroyed at the market in Bermu, his eyes watery as buyers poke his little cow with their staffs.

At home, he only has a few cups of millet left, and with 10 children and eight grandchildren to feed, the math of hunger is ruthless.

“It’s to pay for food,” he says weakly, as a trader squats beside him, receipt book in hand, to fill out the paperwork for the sale. Receipt No. 09189 is for his cow. “There was

no grass,” he explains. “The drought is too much for us.”

The cow’s ribs are poking through her hide. He’ll only get half her normal value, and she is one of the few he was able to save.

In 2010, he lost around 80 head of cattle, and instantly went from the upper echelons of the herder class to the bottom rungs. This year, he lost seven more, a third of his remaining herd.

The old man rattles off the names of the cows he lost, like the names of ancestors: First was Saigna, then Ouage, Lelowaye, and Tidime, then came Wobe, Sekangi. Finally Tadia. And now he has sold Bague.

The old man used to wear flowing robes and elaborate turbans. Now the stitches in his pants are coming apart.

“Some people mock me — make fun of me because I’m poor now,” says the old man. “It’s okay, because I know there are people that don’t have so much as a single cow.”

**ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE** is Wantala, who is facing the end of his nomadic life.

Wantala tries not to think of Yedi’s pained cries, as the camel yanked his head around at the market to look for his master. The Tuaregs say camels are so attached to their keepers that they must be tied up for two or three months after they are sold, so they do not run back.

Yedi was bought by a Hausa, a farmer belonging to a sedentary ethnic group that lives south of the grasslands. An increasingly familiar sight in Niger is that of a camel pulling a Hausa’s plough.

Wantala used to make fun of the Hausas,

**At home, he only has a few cups of millet left, and with 10 children and eight grandchildren to feed, the math of hunger is ruthless.**



Jerome Delay • AP

A Tuareg man smiles as his camel rises from laying down at the livestock market in the desert village of Sakabal, Niger.

calling them “the people who go to the bathroom in the same place where they went last year.” Now his clan, which has lost nearly all its camels, has asked the Hausas to teach them how to plant.

Wantala holds out his hands as a humiliating reminder of his fall. They are

marred by calluses from holding a hoe for the first time.

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*Callimachi reported this story from Sakabal, Dakoro and Bermo, Niger. Africa correspondent Michelle Faul contributed to this story from Agadez.*

Sept. 22, 2012

## Massacre of preachers in Mali sign of broken army

By RUKMINI CALLIMACHI  
Associated Press

DIABALY, Mali (AP) — It was dusk when the aging Toyota pickup truck pulled into the first military checkpoint, loaded with at least 17 bearded men fingering prayer beads.

This pinprick of a village in central Mali is not even large enough to appear on most administrative maps. Cars pass through here so rarely that donkeys fall asleep in the center of the highway.

The preachers were coming from Mauritania and had paperwork showing they were on their way to a religious conference in Mali's capital, 270 miles (430 kilometers) away. None of them was armed.

Soldiers arrested them and brought them to a military camp. There they opened fire on the stationary truck, spraying it with their machine guns. Then they dragged out the corpses, buried them in a mass grave and launched a manhunt for those who had escaped.

Within 1½ hours of the car arriving at the checkpoint, 16 of the 17 men were dead.

The AP has found that rank-and-file soldiers carried out the massacre of their own accord, ignoring not only the normal rules of engagement but also their own command structure. Their actions show just how much the military of this onwce-stable nation has broken down since a coup six months ago, with officers no longer able to control their troops.

These concerns about Mali's military come at a time when the world is considering sending arms, equipment and troops to help it take back the north, which has fallen to Islamic extremists. Just this week, the United Nations Security Council instructed Mali's neighbors to submit a detailed plan for military intervention, which the U.N. would support.

"It's as if Mali has fallen into a coma," said analyst Gilles Yabi, the West Africa director for the International Crisis Group and author





Rukmini Callimachi • AP

Children play on the roadside in front of the military camp where 16 Muslim preachers were executed by Malian security forces on the night of Sept. 8, in the village of Diabaly in central Mali.

of a recent report on this troubled country. “The reality on the ground is that it’s the rank-and-file soldiers that are now in power. ... And it’s in this context that you can explain such a grave blunder as what we saw happen in Diabaly.”

Mali is a country of 15.8 million people that is turning into an ungoverned vacuum, a source of increasing worry for the rest of the world. It’s been exactly six months since junior officers overthrew the democratically elected government on March 22. In the wake of the coup, rebels allied with al-Qaida seized control of the north, creating a new haven for extreme Islam.

It was into this turmoil that the group of preachers stumbled, at around 7 p.m. on the

night of Sept. 8. The AP has pieced their story together through interviews with the one known survivor, two police officers present at the time of the attack and their superior, diplomats, villagers, and family members in Mauritania, who prepared their bullet-riddled bodies for burial.

The Toyota minibus with plate No. 0148AN00 RIM rolled in just as dark was enveloping the bridge at Dogofri, nine miles (15 kilometers) north of Diabaly. Anyone in these parts would have recognized the letters RIM as standing for Republique Islamique de la Mauritanie, or Mauritania, Mali’s more religious neighbor to the north.

The preachers included at least nine Mauriticians and seven Malians, ranging in

age from 25 to 54. They belonged to the Dawa Tablighi, a fundamentalist but non-violent current of Islam.

The Mali military had been instructed to monitor members of the sect, especially those trying to enter from neighboring countries, according to an internal memo dated Sept. 5, seen by Amnesty International.

“In view of the situation in the north of the country,” the memo from the Department of Home and Security said, “It

seems appropriate to consider steps to better marshal this association, particularly with regard to foreign participants, in order to limit their entry into the national territory.”

The preachers met up in Fassala, a town at the Mauritanian border.

Two of them had tried to come to Mali in July but had been turned back. So to make sure they wouldn’t have any problems, they hired Moctar Bechir, a Malian truck driver who frequently transports merchandise from Mauritania to Mali.

On Sept. 8, the truck had already been rented by a wholesaler transporting about a ton of beans. The preachers sat squished together in the cab and on top of the sacks of beans, said 51-year-old Maouloud Ould Sidi Mohamed, the sole confirmed survivor of the massacre, in an exclusive interview with The Associated Press.

The preachers were stopped at the entrance to Dogofri, where police checked their identity cards and asked questions. The paramilitary police, or gendarmes, wrote down the list of names in a register, a copy of which the AP saw.

They were stopped again at the bridge, this time by the military. That’s when the trouble started.

“There was a young man with us, Amane. He has a really nice beard,” said Mohamed. “When they saw him, they got suspicious.”

They sent the men inside and searched the car. All they found, Mohamed said, was a couple of pots.

Then they started to interrogate the preachers, one by one. They opened one man’s bag, and found clothes and a bar of soap. Then they put the men back in the Toyota and drove them to Diabaly, in a caravan between two pickup trucks mounted with machine guns.

When they saw what the soldiers were doing, the gendarmes radioed their commander. He instructed them to send one police officer to follow the convoy on his scooter. All the gendarmes who spoke to the AP requested anonymity out of fear for their safety.

It takes less than 20 minutes to drive from Dogofri to Diabaly, a nine-mile-long dirt road of red earth beaten down by the tires of lorries. The road is lined by rice paddies on the left and a tributary of the Niger River on the right.

On that evening, like on every other, women bathed in the river topless and laid their laundry to dry out on the rocky ground.

**They were stopped again at the bridge, this time by the military. That’s when the trouble started.**

Just about the loudest sound on any normal night is the high-pitched braying of a donkey.

When the caravan arrived at the camp, the gendarme and the soldiers in the two accompanying cars went into the commander's office. Just 15 minutes later, the shooting erupted.

The gendarme ran back out and saw bodies lying on the ground. He called his superior to say the soldiers were killing the preachers. The senior officer confirmed to the AP that he received the call between 8 and 9 p.m.

"It's due to the indiscipline inside the army," said the senior officer. "The night that this happened, everyone knows which soldiers were on duty. They decided themselves, without being given an order, and without consulting with their higher-ups to do this."

The survivor, Mohamed, said the men in the truck could hear the soldiers discussing what to do with them.

"I don't think my friends could have imagined what was about to happen," said Mohamed. "But I knew. I know this country. And I understood that it was over for us."

When the shooting suddenly started, Mohamed saw people falling around him. He himself fell and hid between the cadavers in the bed of the truck.

A few moments later, he saw two people



Rukmini Callimachi • AP

Maouloud Ould Sidi Mohamed, the sole known survivor of a military-led massacre in central Mali, shows the gashes on his feet, sustained as he hid in the forest for five days.

try to run. He followed them out of the car, crawling between the wheels of the lorry.

He reached a small wall. While climbing it, he lost his shoe. So he left the other one behind, ran barefoot across the rice paddies and jumped into a canal. His robe hung heavy with water, so he took it off. He swam in his underwear and undershirt.

On the other side, he hid by some trees. He says he saw the light from the torches of the soldiers looking for him.

He hid for five days. On the night of Sept. 13, they found him and took him back to the camp.

Mohamed was held by the military incommunicado for a week. He was transferred from Diabaly to a garrison in the capital, Bamako, where he was kept under constant watch. He was too afraid to even speak with an envoy from the Mauritanian embassy.

He was released this Thursday after immense diplomatic pressure, and spoke to the AP inside the Mauritanian embassy in the minutes before he was whisked off to the airport. Both Malian and Mauritanian officials confirmed his identity. The soles

of his feet were pockmarked by gashes after five days of walking without shoes.

If you follow the red dirt highway another 1.2 miles (2 kilometers) south, you reach the village of Kourouma. Souma

Diallo, a 40-year-old machine operator, was getting ready to go to sleep at around midnight on Sept. 8 when he heard people shouting.

He stepped out and saw the soldiers had caught an old man with a long beard. His hands were tied with his own turban. The man's whereabouts remain unknown.

Diallo also saw a young man who was bleeding from his head. It was the truck driver, Moctar Bechir — whom Diallo

recognized because both have extended family in nearby Niono. Diallo told the soldiers he knew the young man, handed over his phone and asked the driver to call people who could confirm his identity.

A few days later, on Sept. 12, the soldiers returned to Diallo's home and arrested him, he said. They accused him of complicity "with the rebels."

They brought him to the camp and started screaming at him. The soldiers had bloodshot eyes, like they were drugged, he said. When they briefly left him alone, Diallo bolted, crawled through a hole in a wall and ran for his life.

Behind the kitchen, he came face-to-face with the driver, Bechir. He was tied to a bench with a rope around his waist. They said nothing to each other.

Diallo spoke to the AP from his hiding place in a different part of Mali on the condition that his whereabouts not be disclosed.

In the days after the shooting, nine bodies with multiple bullet wounds were repatriated to Mauritania. Seven were buried in a municipal cemetery in Bamako. Mali issued a government communique expressing deep condolences, but stopping short of taking responsibility for the deaths.

Col. Idrissa Traore, director of public relations for the Malian military, acknowledged that the troops at Diabaly had violated the command structure. But he noted that the preachers came from the former sect of Iyad Ag Ghali, the head of one extremist group now controlling Mali's north.

Traore said the military had kept

**Diallo also saw a young man who was bleeding from his head. It was the truck driver.**

Mohamed for a week because he was “in a bad psychological state,” and they wanted to question him.

“An investigation is in process to determine all of this. And once we are done, we will make a declaration,” he said.

Representatives of the families of the dead have met with the minister of defense. He denied knowing anything about the driver.

Hassane Bechir, the 44-year-old brother of the driver, now spends his days waiting inside a room in Bamako. He smokes cigarettes, his dull eyes watching the passing images on a television a few feet away.

“So long as I don’t have proof that he is dead, then to me, he is alive,” said the missing man’s older brother. “They haven’t given me a body. At the very least, give me his body.”

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*Associated Press writer Baba Ahmed contributed to this report.*

Dec. 15, 2012

## Lack of food stunts Chad children, damages minds

By RUKMINI CALLIMACHI  
Associated Press

LOURI, Chad (AP) — One morning, a little girl called Achta sat in the front row of this village's only school and struggled mightily with the assignment her teacher had given her.

She grasped a piece of chalk in her tiny fingers. Her face tense with concentration, she tried to direct the chalk clockwise across her slate. She'd been asked to draw a circle. What she drew looked more like a lopsided triangle.

After half a dozen tries, her teacher took away her slate and tried to hide his frustration as he wiped it clean with his palm of his hand. He held her miniature hand in his and traced a circle, then a second, then a third. "Like this," he said. "Like an egg. See?"

Drawing a circle is considered a developmental marker. It tests fine motor skills, the use of the small muscles that control the fingers, allowing us to eat spaghetti with a fork or cut a piece of

cardboard with scissors. Children who are developing at a normal rate can trace a circle by age 3, and Achta doesn't look much older.

She is so small that you can hoist her up on one hip easily, as her mother sometimes does when she carries her to school. She is so small that when she sits on her bunk in class, her feet dangle a foot off the ground.

But Achta isn't three. School records show she is 7 years old.

In this village where malnutrition has become chronic, children have simply stopped growing. In the county that includes Louri, 51.9 percent of children are stunted, one of the highest rates in the world, according to a survey published by UNICEF. That's more than half the children in the village.

The struggle that is on display every day in Louri's one-room schoolhouse reveals not only the staggering price these children are paying, but also the price it has exacted from Africa. Up to two in five kids across the continent are stunted, researchers estimate, which means that they fall short physically and, even more devastating, mentally. It's a



Rebecca Blackwell • AP

Teacher Djobelsou Guidigui Eloi works with a student at the blackboard in Louri village's school hut in the Mao region of Chad.

slowdown that creeps across a community, cutting down the human capital, leaving behind a generation of people unable to attain their potential.

“We have a habit of focusing on mortality, because the photographs are more shocking. But there is a silent phenomenon that is going on — it’s stunting,” says Jacques Terrenoire, the Chad country director of the French aid group, Action Against Hunger. “It poses a fundamental problem for the future of a country.”

Elementary School No. 1 in Louri is a reflection of the village’s modest means. It’s made entirely of dried grass woven into a lattice held together by branches, creating a kind of grass igloo. To enter the school,

you bend down, tuck in your head and slip through a hole.

The school is organized into two rows of bunks. The smallest children sit in the front.

Last year, 78 boys and girls enrolled in the equivalent of first grade in Chad’s school system. Of those children, 42 failed the test to graduate into the next grade, a percentage that almost exactly mirrors the number of children stunted in the county.

School director Hassane Wardougou sums up the reason for the class’ overwhelming failure: “They’re too little,” he says. “When they are this small, they don’t understand anything.”

Among those held back this year were 7-year-old Achta, as well as the three boys

who share her bunk — Youssouf, Mahamat and Nasruddin. Taken together, they are a window into this hidden scourge which is undermining efforts to right Africa.

Stunting is the result of having either too few calories, or too little variety in the types of calories consumed, or both.

Achta's birth seven years ago coincided with the first major drought to hit the Sahel this decade. Climate change has meant that

the normally once-a-decade droughts are now coming every few years. The rains that failed to fall over Chad when Achta was born failed again when she was 3, when she was 5 and when she started first grade last year.

The droughts decimated her family's herd. With each dead animal, they ate less.

Most days, Achta leaves home without eating anything. Usually there isn't anything for lunch, either. Dinner is millet flour mixed with water, eaten plain. Her mother's kitchen doesn't have so much as a pinch of salt or a cube of sugar.

"They come to school having had nothing more than a glass of water. They can't make it till the end of the day," says their teacher, Djobelou Guidigui. "Some fall asleep in class. Others vomit."

When a child doesn't receive enough calories, the body prioritizes the needs of

vital organs over growth. What this does to the brain is dramatic. A 2007 medical study in Spain compared the CAT scan of a normal 3-year-old child and that of a severely malnourished one.

The circumference of the healthy brain is almost twice as large. Presented side by side, it's like looking at a cantaloupe sitting next to a softball.

This delay in the maturation of the nervous system imposes a stunning price on society. The World Bank estimates that individuals stunted as children lose more than 10 percent of lifetime earnings. The countries in which they live lose between 2 to 3 percent of GDP per year due to low labor productivity.

The lasting damage that this causes inches across a community, leaving behind a population that struggles with the most basic of tasks.

Teacher Guidigui dismisses the class for recess on a recent morning. Then he sits on Achta's bunk and puts his head in his hands. The new school year started two months ago, and half his class is repeating the lessons he first taught them in 2011.

Instead of the lessons going more smoothly, the children struggle with the same simple tasks they did a year ago. "They've forgotten everything," he says, dejected. "Really, it's not easy. You need to be courageous to do what I do."

When recess is over, Achta runs back in. She piles into her bunk. Youssouf climbs over her. Nasruddin and Mahamat wiggle into place in the bunk they are now sharing for the second year.

**They come to school having had nothing more than a glass of water. They can't make it till the end of the day.**





Rebecca Blackwell • AP

Seven-year-old Achta, right, walks with her mother Fatme Ousmane in the village of Louri in the Mao region of Chad.

It's time for the math lesson. Guidigui wants each child to get up and count to 10 out loud.

The teacher goes bunk by bunk, pupil by pupil. When it's his turn, Achta's older brother, who is several years her senior, counts as far as eight before getting tripped up. He is around 9 years old, and he sits in the back of the class with the older children. The performance becomes more and more muddled as the instructor works his way to the front, where the youngest children sit.

Once he gets to Achta's bunk, Youssouf stands up, looks at his feet and mumbles his way up to five. Achta is last and by the time the teacher calls on her, she's heard 40 other

children repeat the sequence. She stands and smiles shyly at her instructor.

Even the number one escapes her.

A gust of wind sweeps into the schoolhouse. It comes in through the spaces between the dried grass, blowing a horizontal shaft across the bunks. For a second it fills the awkward silence, as the 7-year-old girl struggles to perform a skill normally attained by the age of 4.

Progress on reducing stunting has been painfully slow, in part because the phenomenon does not rise to the level of an emergency. Globally, the percentage of stunted children fell from 39.7 percent in 1990 to 26.7 percent in 2010, according to a

report by Save the Children.

It's Africa, though, that is paying the highest cost. The continent has seen an overall reduction in stunting of just 2 percent in 20 years, and today more than 38 percent of kids in Africa are stunted, says the report. In fact, slow progress combined with population growth means that by 2025, 11.7 million more children will be stunted in Africa than are today, the London-based charity found.

Two decades ago, Asia and Africa had nearly the same rate of stunting, but Africa has stagnated while Asia leapt forward. Experts say there is a direct link to progress in agriculture. In Africa, the yields of staple

cereals are now one-third of those in Asia.

The parents of Achta and her bunkmates live off the land exactly the same way as their forebears did. What's

changed is the sky above them.

The village of Louri is located on a ledge of sand, a seven-hour drive from the nearest paved road. The sun is so bright, it bleaches the landscape white. Almost nothing takes root here.

For generations the people of this bone-dry region lived off their herds. They drank their milk for protein and sold what was left to buy the many things that cannot be produced in this village, starting with vegetables.

When the rains were plentiful, the wild

grasses around the village stayed green for months at a time. Now they are only green for a brief flash, right after the short-lived rains. For the rest of the year, the fields are the dull color of cream of wheat. The village's animals are in sync with the land, giving birth and producing milk only when the grass is at its most nutritious.

"When I was small, we had milk all year round. And we didn't get sick," says village chief Abakar Adou, the father of Achta's classmate, 7-year-old Nasruddin. "Now we're lucky if we're able to get milk two months out of the year."

Without milk, the villagers are forced to sell their actual animals, usually a calf or a foal, for cash to buy basic staples.

The families of Achta, Nasruddin and Mahamat had no baby animals to sell in recent months, so their kitchens are bare. The flour they eat day after day lacks folic acid, iron, zinc and Vitamin A, micronutrients that are crucial to a child's development.

Only Youssouf's family had a goat that recently gave birth. They sold the kid at the market for \$15. His mother used some of the money to buy dried okra and sun-dried tomatoes.

There is no electricity in the village. That means there are no refrigerators. So even when people here are able to buy vegetables, the only ones that make it to this remote backwater are preserved. Youssouf's mother keeps the dried vegetables on a pot lid, stored behind a curtain. Each week, the little boy is allowed a few tiny pieces, like a treat.

Malnutrition and disease are intertwined, with lack of food leading to a weakened

**"When I was small, we had milk all year round. And we didn't get sick."**

immune system and illness. Youssouf's older brother wasted away and is buried in the village cemetery, which mostly holds the tiny graves of malnourished toddlers. Youssouf himself was so weak that he almost died from a fever at around 8 months old. Mahamat was sick too. So was Nasruddin. Achta barely made it.

That they didn't die is a victory for their families. They are the ones that slipped through the noose of malnutrition, but at what cost?

Under the microscope, the permanent damage done to the brain is unmistakable. In an often-cited survey done in Chile, researchers compared brain cells from healthy and malnourished babies. A brain cell from a healthy child looks like a tree in bloom. The one from a stunted infant looks like a tree in winter.

The branches are the synapses, which connect one brain cell to another. Simply put, the brain cells of a malnourished child are less able to communicate with each other. Researchers have found that height in childhood is directly related to success in adulthood, with a 1 percent loss in height due to stunting leading to a 1.4 percent loss in productivity, according to the *Asia Pacific Journal of Clinical Nutrition*. The children in this first-grade class are on average 4.3 inches shorter than they should be.

Guidigui says that he sees the effects of stunting every day, an hour into the school day. The kids, he says, are not there anymore. They stare through him. They use their fingers to trace the ridges in their desks. They play with their clothing. He says he often feels

like giving up.

Late one morning, he lets the class out for recess at 11 a.m. Then he sits, splayed out on one of the bunks. A few minutes later, he steps outside and announces that school is dismissed. "There's no point," he says.

In Chad and several other countries in Africa's hunger belt, the United Nations' World Food Programme has tried to address the problem by sponsoring school canteens, offering a free lunch. In Louri, enrollment ballooned as families signed up their kids, says school director Wardougou.

But for Achta and her friends, it's most likely too late. It's the first 1,000 days of life, through the age of 2, that are critical. Even if a child gets more food later in life, the damage cannot be reversed.

At Elementary School No. 1, the star pupil is a girl called Fatme. She throws her hand up to answer each question. The teacher has stopped calling on her in an effort to get the other students to participate.

She only gets to show off when no one else in the class is able to answer, like during a math lesson.

The teacher writes the following problem on the board:  $1 + 1$  (equals) —.

"Anyone?" he says. When no one else volunteers, he finally calls on Fatme.

The lanky girl walks to the front of the class and takes the chalk from her teacher's hand.

"Sir," she says. "The answer is one plus one. That equals two." She carefully writes the number two on the board.

"Correct," says Guidigui.

The only problem is, Fatme isn't 7. Fatme is 15 years old.



**Rukmini Callimachi** is the West Africa Bureau Chief for The Associated Press. She is based in Dakar, Senegal, and covers a vast region that spans 20 countries, including Mali, and Niger.

Callimachi is an award-winning journalist who has worked with the AP for almost a decade. She was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for International Reporting in 2009 for her in-depth investigation of the exploitation of impoverished children in West and Central Africa, and ranked as a finalist for the Batten Medal the following year. In 2011, she won the Eugene S. Pulliam national award for writing for her story about a community that formed across the world in the wake of the collapse of the Hotel Montana in Haiti's earthquake.

In 2012, Callimachi took the Best of Show prize for print in the National Headliners for her coverage of the conflict in Ivory Coast, including digging up evidence on a previously unreported massacre. She has also won the McGill Medal for courage, has been a finalist twice for the Michael Kelly award, and has been honored several times by the Associated Press Media Editors.

Born in Bucharest, Romania, Callimachi graduated with honors from Dartmouth College and completed her master's in linguistics at Exeter College, Oxford. Her poetry has been published in more than 20 journals, including *The American Scholar*. In 2000, she co-led the Royal Geographical Society of London's expedition to Tibet.