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world."

According to the Reuters Foundation "AlertNet," Niger is facing one of the worst hunger crises in its history following severe drought and the country's worst locust invasion in 15 years. The World Food Program says 3.6 million of Niger's 11.5 million people face food shortages, while 2.5 million are on the brink of starvation. Children are most at risk, with some 800,000 under 5 years of age needing to be fed urgently.



Olivier Saugy of World Vision says, "Even in good years, people have little to eat during this season and we see cases of malnutrition. But this year, because of the drought, the number of malnourished children under 5 is soaring."

Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world. In "normal" times, according to Saugy, 60 percent of

the people struggle to survive on less than \$1 a day.

Parents will do anything they can to help their children survive, says Carl Becker of **Christian Blind Mission International (CBMI)**, an Australian development organization dedicated to preventing and curing blindness. "The parents in Niger are stripping leaves from trees and picking local grasses," Becker says. "The trouble is the leaves have to be soaked a long time and cooked properly – if they're not, they are poisonous. We've even heard of people scavenging anthills for anything edible they can find."



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In normal times, says Becker, CBMI does not distribute food aid. "But these aren't normal times, and obviously the people with disabilities we serve are some of the very worst-affected. They are the poorest of the poor and the least able to help themselves in a famine situation. We'll be helping them through the next critical two to three months until the new harvest comes in, and food is available again."

Christians in the famine-struck nation have contacted **Barnabas Fund** to ask for urgent assistance. Barnabas Fund works to support Christian communities, mainly in the Islamic world, that are facing poverty and persecution. Dr. Patrick Sookhdeo, the organization's international director, explains that Christians form less than one percent of the population of the Muslim-majority country of Niger.

"Experience in other countries shows that tiny Christian minorities like this tend to suffer disproportionately in any crisis," says Sookhdeo. "I urge Christians around the world to pray for their brothers and sisters in the Lord at this time."

Heart & Hands International (HHI) recently launched a world wide fundraising campaign that uses text messaging provided by the Mission Reach Foundation. By sending a text message to Heart & Hands International, donors can channel contributions to the Niger Famine Relief Fund and also enter to win a free mission trip to India or China.

Heart and Hands International helps children at risk around the world by building orphanages, rebuilding villages, providing surgical teams to children in need, and also educates and rebuilds children's lives.

"HHI's generosity is a true testament of what The Mission Reach Program was created for, which is to provide charitable organizations with mobile capabilities that can be used as a tool to creatively reach a larger audience for their fundraising efforts," comments L.T. Blassingame, founder and executive director of the Mission Reach Program.

According to Hearts & Hands, some relief efforts already are in effect but, due to delays, more funding is required. Earlier appeals have gone unheeded. The United Nations first appealed for assistance in November 2004 and received almost no response. Another appeal for \$16 million in March generated about \$1 million. The latest appeal on May 25th for \$30 million has received about \$10 million.

Relief workers blame the neglect partly on a general fatigue for African hunger crises from Malawi to Sudan, report Reuters, but Niger has raised more complex questions over aid policy, funding and longer-term solutions.

Christian Aid, an agency of the churches in the UK and Ireland, announced this week that it is giving \$50,000 to Action by Churches Together International (ACT) in response to the crisis. ACT is channeling the appeal funds through two partner organizations working in drought-prone areas in southern Niger. The charity has also sent an emergency officer to the area.

World Vision was one of the first organizations to respond to the famine. Food is being distributed at more than seven sites in the south around Zinder. Aid includes an outpatient therapeutic feeding program for up to 5,000 malnourished children. Severely malnourished children who have medical problems are evacuated to



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a hospital in Maradi — about four hours away by road.

Projects providing long-term solutions to the food crisis include food-for-work agro-forestry programs (planting drought-resistant Acacia trees) and stocking 120 cereal banks and building 25 more (loaning grain to farmers who pay back with grain from the next harvest).

"The situation is escalating and we aren't even at the peak of the hungry season between harvests yet," says Sarah Carr, a World Vision nutritionist serving in Niger. "Young boys are banging on my door at night begging for food. That's something I've never seen in Africa, even here in Niger where people are so poor."

Information and donation websites:

Barnabas Fund - www.barnabasfund.org

Christian Aid – www.christian-aid.org.uk

Christian Blind Mission International - www.cbmi.org.au

Heart and Hands International -

www.heartsandhandsinternational.org

World Vision - www.worldvision.org

PHOTO CREDIT: World Vision's Karen Homer captures the human face of starvation in Niger. [Click here](#) to read one-year-old Ousseini's story.

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