

Niger battles deadly floods as city streets swamped

September 4 2019, by Boureima Hama



Relentless floods have battered several parts of the city and the rest of the country

"That's it, time to go!" As a rising swell of muddy water creeps towards his house in Niger's capital Niamey, Mamoudou Barkire is finally

leaving.

Deadly floods have swamped several parts of the city and the rest of the country, forcing thousands to flee as it demolished homes and turned streets into rivers.

And the 63-year-old retiree, propped on crutches, is joining them.

But leaving was not an easy choice. Barkire, whose neighbours left weeks ago, spent the past two days piling sandbags onto a clay wall he built in a futile bid to keep the water away.

"I barely have enough to feed my family on this measly pension, and now I risk losing my home".

Extreme weather is an all-too-common phenomenon in Niger. Last year, drought and flooding led to [food shortages](#) in a crisis which, exacerbated by jihadist violence, left over 10 percent of the population needing [humanitarian aid](#).

But the World Health Organisation (WHO) has warned that the current floods—sparked by exceptionally high water levels in the river Niger—could lead to a [cholera epidemic](#).

The waterborne disease killed dozens last year in the southern Maradi region, currently the worst-hit by floods.

Red alert



In Niamey, locals struggle to save what remains of the capital's hardest hit areas

The disaster has already claimed 42 lives. Only 25,000 of the 70,000 people affected by the crisis have received aid, said Lawan Magadji, Niger's minister for humanitarian affairs.

Niger, one of the world's poorest countries, is in the midst of its annual rainy season, which lasts three to four months over summer.

At the start of the week, water rose to 6.38 metres (21 feet) in Niamey, levels "not seen in more than 50 years", the city's governor Assane Issaka Karanta said.

It prompted authorities to trigger a "red alert", which they renewed on Wednesday.

Even the arid Agadez region—home to a UNESCO-protected historic centre—has been hit.

In Niamey inhabitants have clubbed together in the struggle to save their neighbourhoods.

Children drag carts piled with dam-building materials through the streets, while women try their best to clean up courtyards brimming with water.



The vast majority of the capital's inhabitants live on the banks of the river Niger

With more heavy rain predicted in coming weeks, authorities have asked humanitarian agencies for help.

The vast majority of the city's inhabitants live on the banks of the river Niger, and some even built their homes on the river bed.

But "the worst has been avoided" for now, as dams surrounding the city "are holding up", Niamey's Mayor Mouctar Mamoudou said.

Sleepless nights

Watching over the city, a "brigade" of locals are tasked with keeping an eye on the river banks at night.

"We haven't been sleeping. If the water levels rise again, we'll let people know," says Ali, who hasn't slept for two nights.

And in the capital's Kirkissoye district—one of the worst affected—firefighters patrol the streets, assessing damage and registering victims on a list.



Authorities triggered a 'red alert' as water rose to 6.38 metres (21 feet) in Niamey

Saouda Abdoulaye is one of those who decided to stay, despite authorities warning residents to pack their bags and ration food and [water](#).

Abdoulaye says she had underestimated the damage the flooding would cause.

"Kirkissoye has suddenly turned into a swamp. At night, it's a ghost town," she says.

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