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While Live 8 plays, Niger suffers

Food aid chief says industrialized nations slow to respond

Saturday, July 2, 2005; Posted: 11:55 a.m. EDT (15:55 GMT)

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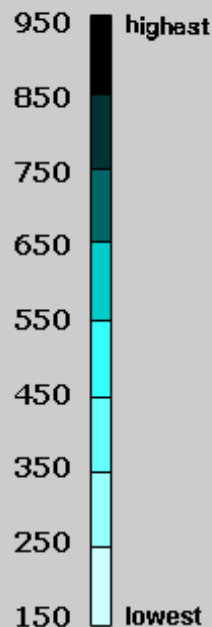
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NIAMEY, Niger (Reuters) -- Ask the man in charge of saving thousands from starving to death in Niger what he thinks of the Live 8 concerts and he shrugs: he hasn't heard of them.

What he does know is that the leaders of the Group of Eight industrialized countries whom the organizers want to pressure into doubling aid to Africa have largely ignored his country's pleas for help to tackle a devastating drought.

"People have to start dying before the international community starts taking any notice," Seidou Bakari, the coordinator of the government's food crisis unit said Saturday, hours after the Live 8 extravaganza began.

"The response is very slow, and we can't understand it," he told Reuters in an interview in his office in Niamey, the capital of the West African country on the edge of the Sahara.

Niger said nine months ago that drought and locusts had wiped out harvests, confronting 3.6 million people with food shortages, but emergency donations to the mainly desert nation have only begun trickling in during the past few weeks.

Aid workers say children have begun to die of hunger and disease in villages around the southern town of Maradi, where people are simply too poor to buy food, and that unless help comes soon thousands could die.

The tragedy is that it did not have to be this way.

"We launched an appeal in November, but who has responded?" said Bakari. "We would have reinforced our capacity to deal with the crisis. We're relying virtually entirely on our own funds."

Live 8 organizer Bob Geldof hopes the concerts held in cities including London, Tokyo and will pressure the leaders of the G8 to take concrete action to help Africa at a summit in Scotland next week.

Niger shows just how little they often give.

Bakari said G8 members Britain, the United States, Canada, Italy and Russia had yet to send any money to Niger's government to tackle the crisis, despite months of appeals.

France, which is the key donor for a fund to tackle hunger in Niger alongside the European Union, has contributed a further 1.5 million euros (\$1.8 million) in the past few weeks. The EU has just given an extra 1.7 million euros in emergency aid.

Japan and Germany have also chipped in.

Bakari said Niger, the second poorest country in the world, had been appealing since 2003 for help to build up its cereal reserves, which had fallen to the equivalent in stocks and cash of about 40,000 tons that year, compared with more than 80,000 tons in 1991.

Supplies fell partly because of political instability during the 1990s, which had perhaps discouraged donors from contributing.

Bakari said had the aid come, there would be no crisis.

"We wanted to tell them that even though we didn't have a famine, we needed to build up our stocks," he said.

"They did nothing."

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