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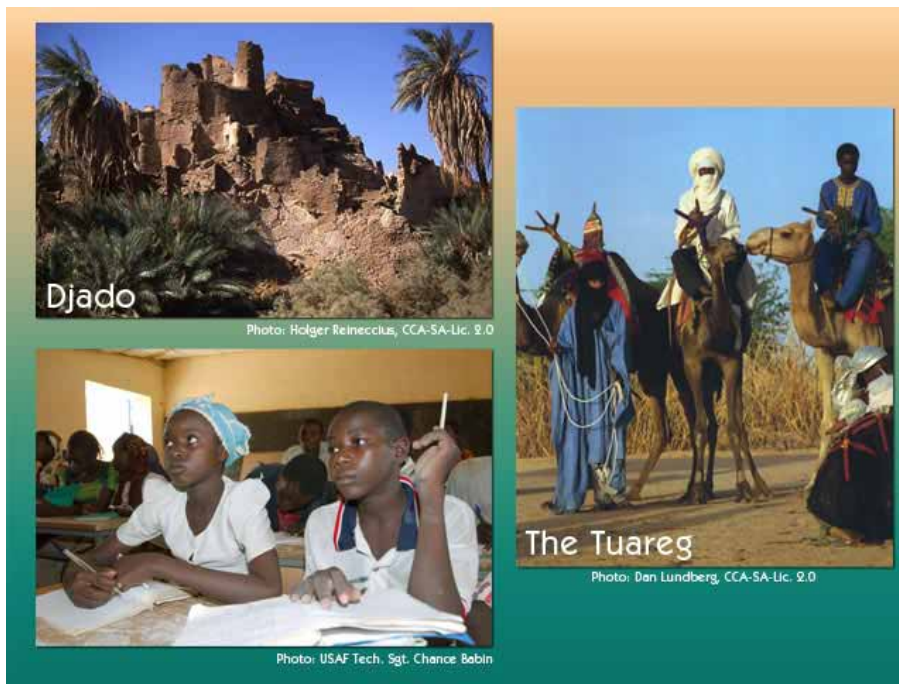
Niger (pronounced knee-ZHARE) is a landlocked country in central Africa that borders seven other countries. Being landlocked has made it difficult for Niger to develop its economy; it doesn't have any seaports that can be used for shipping or receiving supplies. In addition, more than 80 percent of Niger's land area is located in the Sahara, the world's largest hot-weather desert. And every year, the Sahara grows several miles larger, eating more and more of Niger's land.

The country's only real farmland is very overcrowded. This area is located in the southwestern part of the country, fed by the Niger River, the largest river in West Africa. The water in this river is not just for irrigation. It is also used for drinking and cooking water, for laundry, and for baths.

Niger is one of the poorest countries in the world. Most people in Niger are very poor and live on the little food they grow themselves. In 2005 and 2006, Niger suffered a severe food shortage and had to get aid from the United Nations. Today, the food crisis is not as severe, but the country still relies on international aid for survival.

The mineral uranium makes up most of Niger's exports. Uranium is the key mineral in nuclear power and nuclear weapons. This has helped the country's economy, although uranium prices have gone down in recent years. And Niger's two uranium mines are owned by French companies.

The nation's president is Mahamadou Issoufou. He has been in charge of this country since 2011. He rules from the capital, Niamey.



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Western Africa has been home to many civilizations over the centuries. One of the largest and most successful of these was the Songhai Empire. This kingdom expanded out of the Sahara around the time of the Middle Ages. It became very rich through trading with African and European nations. Ruins still stand in the ancient town of Djado in Niger, once a station on a slave-trading route.

By the 1800s, however, Europeans began coming to this area, and Niger became a French colony in 1922. Niger's official language is still French. The country did not become independent until 1960.

Very little can survive in the desert, but the group known as the Tuareg have been doing just that for a long time. The Tuareg have traditionally been nomads. They have no permanent home, but instead move from one place to another as food becomes available in different areas for their goats and cattle.

Throughout Niger's early history, the Tuareg bred livestock and operated trade routes across the desert. Many of the Tuareg people still make their living this way today. Some Tuareg rock groups, which play a kind of "African blues," are famous throughout the world. The Tuareg are also known for the beautiful silver jewelry they make. Today, the Tuareg in Niger are part of a movement wanting a greater share of the profits from uranium mined in Tuareg territory.

As Niger moves forward, it will have to try to change the extreme poverty faced by most Nigeriens. Almost half the population is 15 years old or younger. Of these, only about a third ever get to attend school.