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PRODUCER: Caroline Pare

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ACTUALITY OF BABY CRYING

CUFFE: This summer, while political leaders at the G8 summit were pledging support for Africa, children in Niger were dying of hunger - the result of a food crisis that should never have happened.

EXTRACT FROM TV NEWS

NEWSREADER: The early warnings of drought and famine in Niger that the world didn't listen to. The three and a half million people facing starvation. The UN says too little help is coming too late.

CUFFE: There are three international early warning systems for the Sahel region of West Africa, designed to alert the world to the first signs of a food shortage. But nobody noticed that people were starving until it was too late. In File on 4, we travel to the world's poorest country to find out what went wrong. And, with countries in southern Africa facing a potential famine, we ask what can be done to ensure the world is better prepared.

SIGNATURE TUNE

ACTUALITY IN CAR

JOSSERAND: We are actually now on a dirt road, a very dusty road driving south towards Maradi. The landscape is dotted by many villages with granaries which are waiting to be filled with the upcoming harvest.

CUFFE: As head of the UN's Global Information and Early Warning System, it's Henri Josserand's job to predict and prevent famine. He has flown from his office in Rome to monitor the situation after this year's harvest, and he's part of an international delegation that includes people from the World Food Programme, the US State Department and the Government of Niger.

JOSSERAND: The reason why we are here is because we believe that, even if there is a good harvest this year, as we expect, Niger's problems are not over by any means. People have suffered, people have lost a lot of their assets. One year of good rainfall is just not going to set things right.

ACTUALITY AT MARKET

CUFFE: The delegation has stopped off at a market and Henri Josserand has disappeared into a crowd of farmers and herdsmen in their robes and turbans, and they're talking excitedly about the months of hardship and the state of this year's harvest. There's everything for sale here, from sacks of grain and beans, to donkeys and cattle.

It looks such a scene of plenty, doesn't it?

JOSSERAND: It does look that way, and there is plenty of stuff on the market, but you have to be careful, you know, not to conclude that everything is well, because the reason why there is plenty on the market is that people have to sell it. You see, if they didn't have to sell it, the market would be empty. I'd rather see it empty actually at this time of year than full of stuff. Now if you come back in six months, I would love to see a market full of stuff, but it won't be. It's not going to be.

CUFFE: So they're selling too much now?

JOSSERAND: They're selling a lot now because they need money. The question is, are they keeping enough for what they need, and that's very difficult to establish.

CUFFE: The information collected from this market will be fed into the Food and Agriculture Organisation's early warning system. It'll help build up a multi-faceted picture of food production and weather patterns across the whole of Africa.

ACTUALITY IN COMPUTER ROOM

CUFFE: I'll take my shoes off.

MOULAYE: This is our computer room, which we are using to acquire satellite data.

CUFFE: We're now in the control centre of a weather warning system called CILLS, the inter state Committee for drought control in the Sahel, run by nine African states. Here in the capital of Niger, Niamey, Oumarou Moulaye oversees a sophisticated array of equipment with satellite images and global tracking devices.

MOULAYE: One of our main projects is to gather all the information for sending agriculture, ideology, climatology, livestock, sanitary, market, training, demography, gas, and we are trying to put all this information together so that you from London, you can just connect to this database and tell the information you need.

CUFFE: It was the Ethiopian famine of the seventies which shocked the world into investing in early warning. The European Union finances the Sahel region's weather monitoring exercise as well as an early alert system run by the Government of Niger. And the US, which wasn't satisfied with the FAO's methods, has its own system called FEWSNET. But despite all the 21st century expertise and international funds, it seems no-one in the early warning business predicted this year's crisis.

ACTUALITY IN MARADI

CUFFE: To find out why, we've driven seven hours from Niamey to the region of Maradi in the south-east. This is the heart of the arable belt, which produces most of Niger's food. And here, at the edge of a village, women are pounding millet in a large wooden bowl, with babies on their backs and half-naked toddlers clinging to their skirts. After last year's harvest, agricultural experts reported a slight drop in production in this area, but on an early colour-coded warning map of Niger, it was shown as green for normal. In contrast, wide swathes of largely pastoral land to the north - which had been hit by locusts as well as drought - were red, meaning extremely vulnerable to famine. And while attention was directed elsewhere, children here in Maradi were beginning to starve.

USMAN (VIA INTERPRETER): Last year was extremely hard. There was no food and I had to go begging in the village of Tiberi.

CUFFE: Salusu Usman grows sorghum, millet and peanuts on one and a half hectares of land. That's more than most of his neighbours, but it has to produce an income for his three wives and seventeen children. When the food crisis hit, wife number three, Zeinabou, went out to work to earn extra money for food, but it wasn't enough.

ZEINABOU (VIA INTERPRETER): When things were bad, about three months ago, we gave to all the seventeen kids half of this calabash full of local porridge called fura.

CUFFE: So seventeen children would have had to share half a bowlful – and it's quite a good-sized bowl, but is that for seventeen, is that really what they had to eat?

ZEINABOU (VIA INTERPRETER): They can't have more than this. And in the name of Allah, when the kids have managed to get some porridge in this calabash, we, the father and mothers, we do eat the leaves of trees and some flour, and at times we even go on empty stomach.

CUFFE: What, so there might be a whole day without eating?

ZEINABOU (VIA INTERPRETER): Yes, of course, at times we'd go on empty stomach for three days.

ACTUALITY OF PRAYERS

CUFFE: The local chief, the Emir of Gudur - in a white robe and dark glasses - holds a weekly court at his mud palace, introduced by a eulogy from his special praise singer. This is an opportunity for village elders to come and pour out their troubles, and he says that's exactly what they did last year when the harvest failed.

EMIR (VIA INTERPRETER): Now, specifically with this crisis, many many heads of villages have come to us requesting food. In the many villages we visited, the rainfall stopped untimely and the crops which started growing, dried up, that is what we noticed.

CUFFE: And yet by January of this year, the maps of the region were showing that this particular area was normal, that there was no problem. Now how could that be?

EMIR (VIA INTERPRETER): I can't answer to your question, because I am not the one who made that chart. What you should understand that, if the assessment of the agricultural advisor on the ground was made when the farms were green and he did not come back at the end to see that the green plants he saw have turned to barren crops. He could have the green colour on the map, but the grains were not there.

CUFFE: The basis of the international early warning system is the field assessments made by agricultural officers employed by the Government of Niger. They go round the country measuring rainfall and damage by pests and report to the regional Departments of Agriculture, which sends weekly bulletins to the Ministry in Niamey. But in a country without a proper infrastructure, the business of sending information is hit and miss. Sometimes officials have to wait for a lorry that's heading for the capital and ask the driver to deliver a letter. So it's not surprising that nearly a quarter of bulletins fail to arrive.

ACTUALITY OF MOTORBIKE

CUFFE: I'm now at the offices of the Agricultural Extension worker for Tiberi. He has been out in the fields, but he's just arriving back on his motorbike. Monsieur Yakouba, bonjour.

YAKOUBA: Bonjour Madam.

CUFFE: This is your method of transport, the bike?

YAKOUBA: Yes

CUFFE: So how many kilometres might you cover in a day?

YAKOUBA (VIA INTERPRETER): About one hundred and fifty.

CUFFE: In a day?

YAKOUBA: In a day!

CUFFE: That is a lot of work.

YAKOUBA (VIA INTERPRETER): I am the only agent for these 126 villages.

CUFFE: Well, could we see inside your office and see what you do with the information when you come back from the field?

ACTUALITY IN OFFICE

YAKOUBA: [speaks in French]

CUFFE: Yes, you don't even have a light!
This bare office, with no light and no telephone, is a far cry from the computer laboratories in Niamey and Rome. But Mr Yakouba is clearly proud of his record-keeping - and he's now showing us his notebooks with tables of information beautifully set out in ink.

CUFFE cont: Last year, did you manage to predict what was going to happen, or did you get results that showed that this area was going to be normal, as far as production goes?

YAKOUBA (VIA INTERPRETER): Last year we noticed that the situation was not good and we reported it to the headquarters, because at that very time last year, there were villages which did not harvest anything at all. You could find plants standing in the farms, but barren, without any grain. We reported that case in September last year.

CUFFE: So what is your view of why the information that you gave was then interpreted at headquarters as being a normal situation, everything okay?

YAKOUBA (VIA INTERPRETER): We are six agents in the district. Everybody makes his own report and we send it to district level, where they make a synthesis and it is the average figures that are taken into account. Minorities are excluded. From on the ground to the district level to regional level and Niamey, the information could be distorted. Or if an area is getting deficit it could be compensated by another area, since we are talking about a global view.

CUFFE: When the early warning system fails, children starve.

ACTUALITY AT FEEDING CENTRE

WOMAN: The children who are now here cannot eat. They will go to the hospital, and after we will continue the treatment at home.

CUFFE: Because what are the effects of severe malnourishment? Is he eating? Is he managing to feed?

MAN: He is suffering from diarrhoea, from a cough, from also stomach ache and he has a fever.

CUFFE: This is a walk-in feeding centre run by Medecins Sans Frontiers in a village called Madarounfa, which is one of those pockets of food deficit that got overlooked in the early warning system's global view. Three hundred and twenty children have died in the last few months, and even now new cases are coming in every day. Rows of mothers sit patiently nursing children with runny noses and distended bellies, while Gwenola Sadao, a field officer, supervises a process of weighing and measuring.

SADAO: It is something like a factory here, it grow quickly.

CUFFE: Yes, you have a lot of mothers and children waiting here. So here they are weighed. They are putting a little girl in a sling and hanging her from a pair of scales, lying her down and measuring her. So how does that compare to what a child of this age should be measuring? How old is she?

SADAO: Twenty three months.

CUFFE: And yet she looks a few months old, doesn't she?

SADAO: 65 centimetres. The normal height for children six months old.

CUFFE: And she's nearly two.

Malnutrition is a long term problem in Niger, where one in four children dies before his or her fifth birthday. Women have, on average, seven children, and custom dictates that they stop breastfeeding as soon as another baby comes along. Against this background, it only took a small drop in production to tip them over the edge into starvation. By February this year, Denis Gouzerh - head of MSF in Niger - says it was obvious something exceptional was happening.

GOUZERH: We start our programme in 2001, with not a new problem for us to face, malnutrition, because we start five years ago now, and this specific year, 2005, we reach a very huge peak of malnutrition. Last year we received, in Maradi province, around ten thousand children under five with severe malnutrition. This year, at the end, we will have received around forty-five thousand. Imagine!

CUFFE: And what were you able to say to the authorities about this?

GOUZERH: We have been talking with the authorities and with the donors, and our message was, we are facing, in the very close future – maybe two or three months – a huge problem of malnutrition, so we have to do something very urgent, and so we ask them to do something in terms of distribution for example.

CUFFE: And what was the response?

GOUZERH: The response was okay, MSF, you are medical people, so you are not dealing with the food security. Maybe you don't understand exactly what's the problem, so please stay with your children and we will continue like this.

CUFFE: But at this very time that you were alerting the authorities, they were receiving information through their famine warning system that implied all was well in this part of Niger.

GOUZERH: Yes, but the early warning system in Niger is certainly well done, but they forget about at least one main point, one main factor for us. It's the status of the population in terms of earth, in particular, the status of the under five children dealing with malnutrition.

CUFFE: So if everyone here in Maradi saw what was coming – from the farmer in his field to the Emir in his palace, the agricultural officer with his notebook to the medics at the feeding centre – why didn't international experts like Henri Josserand of the FAO broadcast that information through the early warning system?

JOSSERAND: Well, we were giving partial information. In retrospect we were entirely right in terms of the assessment of production in terms of the impact of the drought, in terms of the impact of the locusts, in terms of what we saw happening, for movements of people south, movements of livestock. What we did not see was a number of things. We're talking about income, spending, food consumption, nutrition, and we didn't have that available. It is a very large country, very poorly surveyed overall. We cannot get it from Niger.

CUFFE: Shouldn't it have been available?

JOSSERAND: Well it should be available in theory, but it's extremely expensive, and the point is it should be done on a long term basis, and we just did not have the detailed information one needs to have.

CUFFE: But if the system is going to work as it should, and give early warning of famine, then surely it should take those things into account?

JOSSERAND: Well, what we needed last year and which we did not have, and what is needed in the long term in Niger for the poorest country in the world is a better monitoring system for food consumption, household incomes and nutrition. Because, you know, we could have a perfect rainfall, perfect year, but if some other factors are to work that undermine people's incomes, they won't be able to take advantage of it.

CUFFE: Over the last fifteen years, people have been talking about the need to introduce nutritional information in this kind of warning system.

JOSSERAND: Yes ...

CUFFE: So you're still not doing it.

JOSSERAND: Nutrition should be much more of a component of the monitoring that we do. It is a matter of all agreeing that it's needed and putting the resources to do it.

CUFFE: So the warning system looked at how much food was produced, but not at the amount that people were eating. And it missed another vital element in the overall picture. It wasn't just Niger that was suffering the effects of drought and locusts, but the whole Sahel region, and that had an obvious effect on supply and demand, turning a shortage of food into a calamity.

ACTUALITY AT MARKET

CUFFE: Today the central market at Maradi is bustling with life, sacks are being filled with ground nuts and grain, porters are carrying 100 kilogram bags of cereal on their heads and piling them onto huge lorries. It's not just locals who are buying. Half an hour from here is the border with Nigeria, where 120 million people need food. Over the past year, they've been suffering from a shortage too, and they've got more money to spend than the locals. At one point there were rumours flying around about traders who were hoarding their grain and watching prices rise while they waited for rich Nigerian buyers. Whether that was true or not, the cost of food being sold here went through the roof. Today Somale Ibrahim is buying cereal for a local merchant.

IBRAHIM (VIA INTERPRETER): Last year's harvest was bad in Niger, and that's what has pushed the prices to shoot up, to reach up to 30,000 CFA francs per sack or equivalent to £30 per sack. Only the wealthy people could afford to buy a sack of millet when its price grew higher. A poor man resorted to buying food by cupfuls.

CUFFE: Did some of the food go to Nigeria last year? Were some of those rich people from Nigeria?

IBRAHIM (VIA INTERPRETER): Yes, we do export food to Nigeria. We do have solid partnership with Nigeria, who are our kin, brothers. We can't refuse their demand, their requests to sell them food, that's how it works.

CUFFE: The Government of Niger has its own grain store, though in recent years it's cut down on the quantity of food it holds. In the early days of the crisis, it was able to offer subsidised food in the hardest hit areas, but it wasn't long before supplies ran out. Seydou Bakari, director of the food crisis cell, which is based in the Prime Minister's office, says they were then forced to look on the open market.

BAKARI (VIA INTERPRETER): Niger occasionally gets some excess in cereals, but where is this excess going? Unfortunately mighty businessmen from Nigeria come to Niger, purchase cereals and then sell it at a higher cost.

CUFFE: And as a government, did you have enough food resources to cover the need?

BAKARI (VIA INTERPRETER): We had stocks of 23,000 metric tons of cereal, and when we noted that the situation was getting worse and worse, we used 3 billion CFA francs to purchase food and cereals on the market. Unfortunately the market was so dry that we couldn't find the cereals that we needed here, and abroad there were the closure of the borders among Niger's neighbours.

CUFFE: Is there nothing that you, as a government, can do to control the prices in the market so that they are affordable?

BAKARI (VIA INTERPRETER): We are living in a liberalised system, where markets are left alone. Therefore we had no power on markets. Now I think it is the time to think twice. Will we accept and continue to work in this kind of wild liberalisation?

CUFFE: But like other poor countries in Africa, Niger has to do what it's told by the World Bank and the IMF if it wants to receive loans. And it's signed up to a structural adjustment programme in return for debt relief. It has reduced state regulation, privatised water and started to charge for health services - policies which have squeezed the incomes of its citizens and reduced its capacity to control the market. The Government of Niger now wants more room for manoeuvre, and the man who can give it to them is Madani Tall from the World Bank.

What Maradi in particular has clearly shown is that famine isn't about food production really. It's about whether or not people can afford to buy food. And if you've got an unregulated market, then people won't be able to afford food at times of shortage.

TALL: I agree with you that the market may have played a role, and the fact that the market was not regulated in this particular instance, in this particularly difficult year, I mean, in retrospect one could say that. Clearly one cannot be dogmatic about this. But at the same time, we don't want to go the route of the extreme to say, you know, let's regulate at all cost, at any price, because somehow, somebody has to pay the price of regulation. But again, I think Niger basically was vulnerable in a sense that its borders are closed. I don't think you could have put any regulation package that would have kept people to come and buy as long as the incentives were right for them to do and they had the purchasing power, which is much greater than what people have in Niger.

CUFFE: It wasn't just rich Nigerians and outsiders who were buying up Niger's dwindling stocks of grain and pushing up prices. In February, the World Food Programme started an emergency operation, targeting 400,000 people, and for that it needed six and a half thousand metric tons of cereal. Other international NGOs were also trying to build up stocks to give to the most vulnerable groups - particularly women and children. The director of Agriculture in Maradi, Ilyasu Bubakar, says that traders trying to supply local families found it impossible to compete.

BUBAKAR (VIA INTERPRETER): As soon as the harvest was finished, not only did businessmen both purchase it from the market and stored it, but also development projects, which are fully aware of the dangers of famine, they also purchased stocks of food that they hoarded.

CUFFE: Right, so the NGOs contributed to the food shortage and the food crisis?

BUBAKAR (VIA INTERPRETER): I don't think that the NGOs meant it intentionally to harm Niger's people, but it's the way they did that was a bad way, because I think they should be aware of the vulnerability of the market in Niger and buy food from foreign country, because at that time the salesmen have refused to relieve the quantity of food they stored and they hoarded.

CUFFE: Medecins Sans Frontiers needed supplies for its feeding centres. Denis Gouzerh admits that, with foreign currency, his organisation could outbid local traders.

GOUZERH: It's true that most of the NGOs were buying grains everywhere in Niger and outside of Niger. For MSF we were buying outside Niger, but even the subregion, like a country like Togo, for example, maybe we destabilise a little bit the market, even in Togo, so we have to be very very careful when we organise such a big response to emergency.

CUFFE: So did that contribute to the crisis then?

GOUZERH: It's difficult to measure this destabilisation. But for sure it could add a little bit to the price maybe during the crisis.

CUFFE: By March, the situation in Niger was so bad that 150,000 people took to the streets of Niamey to protest.

ACTUALITY OF DEMONSTRATION

CUFFE: The crowd blamed the Government for failing to keep enough food in its grain store and doing nothing to control prices in the market, but the last straw was when it imposed VAT on water and luxury food items like milk. Arzika Nouhou, president of the consumers' association, says they were also angry with their political leaders, because they hadn't made an urgent appeal for foreign aid.

NOUHOU (VIA INTERPRETER): It is the government's responsibility to dramatically depict the situation in its fullest, so that it can draw the sympathy of the international community, and it has not been done.

CUFFE: Why do you think the government didn't do that?

NOUHOU (VIA INTERPRETER): Well I can't foretell the reason why Niger's Government has decided to downplay the exact situation of famine. It could be a self delusion or self pride that has pushed the authorities to hide this situation.

CUFFE: When opposition parties and UN aid agencies began to alert the world to a serious food crisis, they were criticised by the President of Niger, Mamadou Tandja, who said they were exploiting the idea of famine for political and economic gain. At one point he told a BBC reporter that the people of Niger looked well-fed. In May, the UN launched a flash appeal, saying it needed \$18.3 million to stop children from dying, but it met with a resounding silence. Even while world leaders were pledging support for Africa at the G8 summit in July, Niger stayed off the radar. Madani Tall of the World Bank says it was no wonder that the international community failed to respond to the crisis.

TALL: Government also has realised that, you know, maybe it did not manage the crisis as well as it could have. For a long time there was a debate whether, you know, this was a famine, whether this was a food crisis. We got into semantics for a long time, and until there was a clear recognition and a marching order from Government for the donor community to move on this and move swiftly on this, it was also, you would have to agree with me, a bit difficult to move faster than Government on an issue as important and as political as food.

CUFFE: The Prime Minister of Niger, Hama Amadou, has the food crisis department in his own office, so takes full responsibility for what went on. And he is adamant that the government never underplayed the crisis.

AMADOU (VIA INTERPRETER): The consequences of famine are well known in Niger. What we faced this year was not famine, but a major food crisis. In 1984 and in 1974, when famine hit, it was clear and noticeable that people were dying like flies. I am challenging anyone to show me that this year around people have died of famine, because the Government has taken all the necessary steps to face it.

CUFFE: Do you not think that by refusing to call what was happening a famine, you sent out the wrong signals to the international community, because they really didn't think there was sufficient problem to raise funds quickly?

AMADOU (VIA INTERPRETER): I reckon that you have come here to defend the international community. Right from October last year, I shared the information about the ongoing crisis, food crisis in Niger. Together we came up with a conclusion that things were running the risks of being bad in Niger.

CUFFE: It is widely felt that the Government of Niger's response to the food crisis was inadequate. There was not enough food in the grain store. There was not enough food to give subsidised food to those who couldn't afford it on the market. There was not enough urgency in the Government's appeal, and there was not enough leadership in making sure that the whole community got together to solve the crisis.

AMADOU (VIA INTERPRETER): I would like to say in a very clear but firm manner that Niger was not helped as it should be by the international community. We were blamed for our delay in addressing the issue, but the international community always responds late.

CUFFE: It was only in July, when the BBC and other media reported on the food crisis, that donors responded and money came pouring into Niger. Even then though, they gave less than they'd been asked for, and for many children it was simply too late. But Britain's Secretary of State for Development, Hilary Benn, defends the international community.

BENN: The truth is that there were contradictory signals about what had happened. The harvest was down a bit – about 7% - but it didn't appear at that time that that was going to lead to a crisis. I myself was in Niger in February. I saw the Prime Minister and the President. Neither of them raised an impending crisis with me. We talked about a lot of things to do with the country. In April the Food and Agriculture Organisation produced its list of countries across Africa where they were concerned about food shortages. Niger wasn't on the list. So I think the truth is that this was a failure of the early warning system, and as a result people then had to rush very much to catch up. Whereas if we'd had better information, we could have responded earlier. But it was the fact that the signals were contradictory that I think was the cause of part of the problem. If there's clarity from all of those who are looking at it – the Government, the UN, from the NGOs who are working on the ground – that this is a developing crisis, then I think everybody would have acted early.

CUFFE: You've criticised the early warning system, but some people would say, given the shoestring operation that it is, it's no wonder that it's not adequate.

BENN: Well, if more resources are needed to make sure there are effective early warning systems, then that's something that we ought to look at. But the UN's got the responsibility for leading on this. What has the UN done to try and improve the early warning system? Is it just a question of resources? Because this clearly was a structural problem.

CUFFE: For donors and aid agencies, the food crisis in Niger marks a watershed, a realisation that they have to think again about the way they predict famine and how they respond. But in the meantime, even as a new harvest comes in, nearly two and a half million people in Niger remain vulnerable to malnutrition and no one knows for certain how many have died. As the UN warns about more food shortages in southern Africa - Gian Carlo Cirri, head of the World Food Programme in Niger, says the lessons are being learned.

CHIRRI: It has been said that we were late in the emergency response. Okay. If you look at it closely, in fact the whole international community is late, okay? Who cared about Niger? Okay? Who gave the necessary funding to have consistent, current strong early warning system in place? Okay? I will not challenge the fact that the international community, everybody was late. Though we would have liked to have a response to be implemented much earlier, the emergency response that we deployed was effective in the sense that in two and a half months, 3.3 million people received food aid, and we avoided the worst. We've started the lessons learn exercise. It's the right time to look at the whole segments, from the early warning to the emergency response – what went well, what went wrong, okay? The early warning system needs to tell us where is the problem, who is in need. If you miss this in Niger, people die.

SIGNATURE TUNE