**Link: http://www.aljazeera.com/focus/unrestsahara/2008/07/2008710121834923863.html**

**Niger's nomads fight for rights**

**A mainly Tuareg group is waging a low-level war in the country's north.**

Alex Sehmer and May Welsh | 15 Jul 2008 13:24 GMT

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| http://www.aljazeera.com/mritems/Images/2008/7/11/2008711174734664112_5.jpg |
| **The MNJ want a greater share of uranium mining profits ploughed back into the region** |

They want the revenues from Niger's uranium mining - which is focused in the north and makes up over 70 per cent of Niger's exports - to be ploughed back into the region.

International companies are vying for access to Niger's uranium deposits, but though it forms the backbone of Niger's industry, the region remains poor, with little in the way of infrastructure, schools or health care.

"It is the uranium found in our Tuareg areas that is feeding this entire country," Kamel said.

**Low-level war**

The MNJ first came to the attention of the authorities in February 2007, when the group's fighters raided a regional army base. Since then they have killed at least 70 soldiers.

In July 2007, the group kidnapped a Chinese nuclear engineer working for China Nuclear Engineering and Construction Corps, holding him for 10 days. The move prompted the company to pull their operations out of Teguidan Tessoumt, where they had been prospecting for uranium.

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| http://www.aljazeera.com/mritems/Images/2008/7/11/2008711161748845797_3.jpg |
| **Mamadou approached Al Jazeera at the foot of Mount Tamgak** |

More recently, in June 2008, the MNJ took hostage four French nationals working for Areva, the French energy company which has substantial interests in Niger's uranium mines.

The government calls the MNJ a group of "bandits" and "drug-dealers", though despite this in May 2007 it earmarked $60m to fight them.

Although some in the government have advocated reaching a negotiated settlement with the fighters, Mamadou Tandja, Niger's president, has refused to talk to the group.

Subsequently northern Niger has been the scene of a low-level war for 18 months, with much of the region under military law and off limits to foreign visitors and journalists.

But the government has struggled to put down the rebellion and in reality the government has little control of this desert region in Niger's north and rebel patrols are able to move freely.

Rights groups have accused Niger's security forces of committing human rights abuses and in April, an Amnesty International report said Niger's army shot dead, tortured and abducted civilians in retaliation top attacks.

Mamadou, a young Tuareg boy, approached Al Jazeera at the foot Mount Tamgak. He brought with him a toy gun.

He said his father was killed in Tazerzeit by the army on suspicion of helping the MNJ and his school, built by an non-governmental organisation, was taken over by the army and used as a base to fight the rebels.

**Joining forces**

The MNJ is made up mostly of Tuaregs, a nomadic Berber people who make up Niger's third largest ethnic group.

Some fought the government in the first Tuareg rebellion, a five-year insurgency that came to an end in 1995 when the main groups signed a peace deal with the government, brokered by France, Burkina Faso and Algeria.

The MNJ say the 1995 agreement was never properly implemented. They want greater political representation, with more Tuareg recruited into the army and the police.

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| **Country profile: Niger** |
| http://www.aljazeera.com/mritems/Images/2008/7/11/200871111839457580_8.jpgThe UN ranks Niger as the fourth poorest country in the world.  Two thirds of its population live below the poverty line, according to the IMF.  One in four children are said to die before their fifth birthday and adult literacy is under 29 per cent.  **Population:** 13.3 million  **Ethnic groups** (per cent, 2001 census):  Haussa (55.4), Djerma Songhai (21), Tuareg (9.3), Peuhl (8.5), Kanouri Manga (4.7), other (1.2)  **GDP:** $4.17bn  **Major exports:** uranium ore, livestock, agricultural produce  *Source: CIA factbook* |

But other ethnic groups have also joined the MNJ, including Fulani nomads, traditionally cattle-herding people who have found themselves increasingly in competition for land with Niger's sedentary farming population.

With desertification eating away at six kilometres of Niger's usable land every year, conflict between farmers and herdsman has intensified.

"The government always gives the priority to the farmers over the herders and this is what we're seeing today," Major Lee, a Fulani who fights with the rebels, told Al Jazeera.

"I joined MNJ because of the injustice. The Fulani in this country are suffering a lot ... Every day because of conflicts between farmers and herdsmen people are being killed."

The Fulani had formed their own armed groups, battling farmers in areas such as Diffa, which borders Chad in Niger's far east, and Tillaberry, which borders Mali in the north-west, before joining the MNJ.

Some members of the Toubou ethnic group, another nomadic group found mainly in Chad, have also joined the movement.

"In MNJ you have all the nomadic communities here together," says Boubakar Mohamed Sogoma, himself ethnically Toubou and a commander with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of the Sahara (FARS).

All the groups feel discriminated against and marginalised by the authorities.

"When a Toubou goes to the city people say he's from Chad - that he's not a Nigerien," said Sogoma.

"In terms of education we are the most backwards people in the entire country. This is a policy of the state, not because people don't want to go to school."

**'No discrimination'**

But the government rejects the rebels' charges and points at that although the Tuareg form Niger's third largest ethnic group, they only make up under 10 per cent of the country's population.

By far the largest ethnic groups are Hausa and Djerma-Songhai, both traditionally groups that subsist on farming.

"No one is being discriminated against," Grema Boucar, Niger member of parliament for Diffa, told Al Jazeera.

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| **In depth** |
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"In reality there is no ethnic group in Niger the state doesn't care about. We are sitting in the parliament, we have all the ethnicities of Niger present  in the parliament - even the most reclusive areas are given special constituencies so they don't have to compete like in urban areas.

"Now if you want to talk about what's going on in the north, those men have made a choice to take up arms in order to air their point of view - they are free to make this choice but today in a democracy like Niger I have to found a political party and air my point of view."

President Tandja refused Al Jazeera's request to discuss the rebellion, but government sources have said revenues from Niger's natural resources are allotted fairly and accused the MNJ fighters of making the north too unsafe to permit development work.

"It's true the north of our country is a source of instability because of the behavior of certain individuals whose identity is not completely known but they present themselves as the MNJ," Nouhou Arzika, the co-ordinator of the Citizen's Movement for Peace, Democracy and the Republic, an non-governmental organisation, told Al Jazeera.

"We have to straighten something out here - this is not a rebellion. It is bandit operations and terrorism."

With neither side willing to give ground, the conflict in Niger's north looks set to continue.

In their base high in Niger's Air Mountains, the fighters train for combat and vow they will continue to fight until the government meets their demands.

"We have nothing to lose," Kamel said. "We can keep fighting another ten years no problem, because if we put down our arms we'll gain nothing."

Source: Al Jazeera