



AFRICA/NIGER - Brief Overview of the Country

Rome (Agenzia Fides) – The Republic of Niger has an area of 1,287,000 km² and a population of about 14 million inhabitants. It is bordered to the north by Libya and Algeria to the west by Mali and Burkina Faso, on the south by Benin and Nigeria, and east Chad.

The country's main ethnic groups are the Hausa, the most numerous and involved in politics, followed by Zerma-Songhai, the Fulani, the Tuareg, and the Berberi.

History

The Niger has been since time immemorial a hub for economic exchanges between the inhabitants of the Maghreb and Chad. Virtually unknown to Europeans for a long time, in 1890 an agreement between France and Britain made the country enter French orbit. In 1922, Niger became a French colony in French West Africa. In 1960, independence was proclaimed.

Niger is a republic governed by a President elected every 5 years. Even the Legislative Assembly is renewed every 5 years. The history of independence is marked by a series of military coups. The last one took place on February 18, 2010 and overthrew President Mamadou Tandja, who had forced a change in the Constitution in order to obtain a third term.

Another recurring crises is related to the integration of the nomadic Tuareg, which triggered a series of rebellions in the last 20 years.

Economy

The country is rich in raw materials: uranium (Niger is home to 7.5% of global uranium production), iron, silver, platinum, and titanium. Niger, however, ranks 174 (out of 179) on the Human Development Index of the United Nations. 90% of the population is illiterate and lives on subsistence farming and pastoralism.

Religion

90% of Niger's population is Muslim. Approximately 250,000 people belong to traditional religion. Catholics are about 20,000 (0.20% of the population).

The Catholic Church

The work of evangelization was begun by the Fathers of the Society of African Missions (SMA) who founded the first mission in Niamey in 1931. The mission was established as a Prefecture Apostolic on April 28, 1942 and elevated to a diocese on March 21, 1961. Working there are the Redemptorist Fathers, missionaries of SMA, the Missionaries of Africa (White Fathers), the Little Brothers of Jesus (of Blessed Charles de Foucauld), the Brothers of Christian Schools, and 7 female religious congregations.

On June 25, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI created the new Ecclesiastical Province of Niamey, which has as its suffragan the Diocese of Maradi.

Some data on the Catholic Church in the country: there are 2 dioceses with 19 parishes. There are 3 bishops, 22 diocesan priests, 24 religious priests, 4 professed brothers, 91 religious sisters, and 255 catechists. The Catholic Church runs 7 kindergartens with 1,482 students, 14 elementary schools with 6,161 pupils, 2 junior high and high schools with 2,550 students. The Catholic Church also operates 2 hospitals, 6 clinics, a leper colony, and an orphanage. (from the most recent Church Yearbook). (L.M.) (Agenzia Fides 20/3/2010)