

## Education is a human right: English-speaking refugee students from Nigeria are eager to continue their studies in Niger



Photo Tamfu ©UNHCR July 2014: Nigerian displaced youths at Ajiri Village in Diffa waiting for education

***The fate of more than 200 Nigerian female students abducted in Nigeria since April moves the world. Among the estimated 50,000 forcibly displaced persons from Nigeria that have entered Diffa region since last year, there are several hundred students that had to interrupt their studies in Nigeria because of the prevailing insecurity in that country. They are now here in Niger unable to continue their studies in the French language and a curriculum that is alien to them. Hence, UNHCR and the Niger government requested Ms. Felda Asaava, a reputed educationist with rich experience at designing educational programmes in refugee situations, to plan for secondary education for English-speaking students from Nigeria that will begin with the next academic year in October 2014***

In this interview Ms. Asaava explains her vision of a distance education programme for the displaced Nigerian youths living in the Diffa region Issiaka Abdou est le chef de mission de MSF France au Niger « au début, il y avait une

urgence et donc un vrai besoin d'appuyer les soins primaires et secondaires en travaillant de manière inclusive avec le centre de santé d'Abala qui est un centre isolé et qui n'était pas en mesure de faire face à la situation. C'est cela qui a motivé notre présence ».

***Question: Ms. Asaava, you have been to Diffa. What has been your overall impression?***

Reply: The Diffa region is vast and expansive. In this expansiveness are villages dotted miles apart thus the nature of catchment makes secondary school establishment rather expensive. This is why secondary school enrolment in the Diffa Region is generally low. The security situation in the region especially Northern Nigeria is a barrier to accessing preferred education. The displaced students terminated their studies abruptly at various levels in Nigeria and because of differences in curriculum and the language of instruction it is difficult to pick up secondary school education here in Niger. That is why distance education is the best option for Diffa for the present and the future.

***Q: But there is a little more peculiarity with the Diffa region?***

R: Yes, you know the Nigerian refugees and the Niger returnees are from different backgrounds and cannot readily fit into the Niger secondary school system. The Niger Government and the UNHCR Niger have opted for out-of-camp approach to manage the refugee situation in the Diffa region. This means that refugees are hosted by individual families and as I have said before the villages and settlements are separated by long distances. Also history has proven that in many cases refugees do not want to lose their culture or way of life. They try as much as possible to preserve their identity, hence the distance education program.

***Q: How in practical terms is this programme going to function?***

R: The process of identifying students is ongoing. Likewise, English-speaking teachers from the refugee community are being identified to instruct the children. This year we are setting up two study centers to start with: one at Bosso and another at Maine Soroa.

Initially, refugees will use books and traditional learning materials for their self-study. The refugee teachers will be around to help them. At appropriate intervals they will conduct tests, experiments, practical sessions, and any other academic activities that will enhance the learning experience. The students will follow the curriculum of their native Nigeria and for this reason we are in close contact with the responsible authorities there.

***Q: There is a lot of technological development in distance education. Can technology also help in the context of Diffa and the English-speaking refugees from Nigeria?***

R: Indeed, we hope that in the future technology, such as radio, television, video, internet and telephone, will play a major role in passing knowledge. For that we need to acquire appropriate technological solutions as well as train both teachers and students on how to make best use of these modern means of technology.

***Q: Here you are referring only to secondary education.***

R: Children at the primary school level are too young for this system of education. For primary school children and beginners UNHCR's strategy foresees that the refugee children enroll in the local (French-speaking) schools. Specific courses will help them to learn French and, thus, catch-up with the local children.

***Q: Distance education for refugees is evidently an innovative programme, are the funds already available?***

R: UNHCR management could not have engaged the project without the required resources. But I must hasten to add that it is an economical way of providing education particularly with regards to the scattered populations as in the Diffa region. Initially it may seem expensive at the outset but when the initial investments are already done with, the programme will run cost effectively.

***Q: What estimated numbers of students are being referred to with regards to this program?***

Mrs. Asaava: Based on the estimates of the displaced population which totals to 50,000 and an estimated school population of almost 20,000, we could extrapolate the secondary school population in Diffa at about 5,000. However, as school enrollment and literacy in northern Nigeria is low we expect that by early next year around 300 pupils will attend the study centres..

***Q: Is this the first distance education programme in a refugee situation in Africa?***

R: Distance learning is an old concept in education even outside refugee situations. It has worked very well in many refugee situations, such as in Sierra Leone for Liberian refugees, for South Africa, during the struggle for independence, Eritrea, and even in Afghanistan.. In Kenya, it is used for teacher training. So distance learning is an old concept that can be adapted for any environment regardless of the prevailing conditions.

***A career Educationist, Mrs. Felda Asaava holds a master degree in education from Manchester University in Britain, has been involved in setting up distance learning programmes at Makerere University in Uganda, University of Dar-es-Salaam in Tanzania and in many refugee situations She is a retired Lecturer of the University of Nairobi.***