

Death in the Sahara: An Ill-Fated Attempt to Reach Fortress Europe

By Hauke Goos and Bernhard Riedmann (Photos)



Photos ▶

Bernhard Riedmann/ DER SPIEGEL

One year ago, a group of 113 people set off from Niger hoping for a better future in the European Union. A few days later, they were left stranded in the Sahara Desert without vehicles or water. Only 17 survived to tell the tale.

• October 22, 2014 – 05:24 PM

In the hottest part of the desert, an adult sitting in the shade loses up to one liter of water an hour, and significantly more when moving. A person starts to feel thirsty when fluid loss reaches half a percent of his or her weight. At 2 percent or more, physical and mental capacity begins to wane, and starting at 5 percent, he or she experiences dizziness, nausea and muscle cramps, and the skin turns purplish. At 10 percent, disorientation sets in.

At that stage, people are prepared to drink anything: blood, urine, engine coolant or battery acid. In the Sahara, a person can easily die of thirst in a single day.

On Oct. 15, 2013, a group of 113 men, women and children set out from Niger for Europe, where they hoped to find food, prosperity and happiness. The group included Samani, a 25-year-old Nigerien -- his intended destination, the Mediterranean coast, was 2,500 kilometers (1,553 miles) away.

Samani was traveling alone. He had been married for a year to a woman who had been selected as his bride by a friend of his father's. His wife was a stranger to him at first, he says, but after being married to her for a few months he began to love this woman, in a shy, hesitant way.

But she didn't return his love, so he decided to pin his hopes on a life in Europe instead. He hoped that his success in that faraway place would improve his prestige in his village, and that his return, perhaps in a car of his own, would inspire his wife to return his affections.

The route to Europe passed through the Sahara. The Arabs refer to the expanse as the "very large desert" or the *bahr bila ma*, which means "sea without water." It covers an area of nine million square kilometers (about 3.5 million square miles) and stretches from the Atlantic to the Red Sea. It is 26 times the size of Germany.

Four days later, or perhaps five -- Samani no longer remembers exactly how long it was -- 92 people were dead.

When we visited the survivors in their villages in southern Niger, near the border with Nigeria, they told us in their native Hausa language what they endured during their journey toward Europe. An old man who had lost his wife, his

daughter-in-law and two grandchildren smiled occasionally as he spoke. The interpreter later explained that in his tribe, it was customary not to show signs of mourning.

'Fortress Europe' Expands into Africa

It's an [African](#) tragedy, but its causes extend beyond the continent's poverty and suffering -- all the way to Europe. To keep refugees out of the European Union, the continent's leaders have almost surreptitiously shifted the borders of "fortress Europe" southward, into Africa's interior. European politicians argue that North African countries must enhance their border controls to fight terrorism, organized crime and weapons smuggling.

But this has led to the creation of a bulwark that is insurmountable for people like Samani, who are willing to leave everything behind in the hope of achieving a better life. Those who do make the attempt risk dying an even more invisible death than those [who capsize off the European coast](#).

One of the goals of Europe's aid to developing African countries is to dry up unwanted immigration. European experts, for example, train Niger's police and court officials on how to keep local citizens from leaving the country. Algeria and Morocco receive EU funding for stronger measures against refugees. As a result, people like Samani have to to circumvent checkpoints, abandoning the main routes as they approach the border and traveling along unmarked paths northward, straight into the Sahara.



DER SPIEGEL

Samani and his fellow passengers began their trip in Arlit, a city in northern Niger whose economy depends on the French engineers operating the nearby uranium mine. After negotiating a price with traffickers on the road, the group loaded their belongings -- water canisters, clothing and some food -- onto two trucks. At 4 a.m., shortly before morning prayers, they took their seats in the darkness. The men sat along the perimeter of the trucks -- where it was dusty and drafty, their legs dangling over the side -- and held onto ropes tied in place by the drivers. Women, children and older passengers sat in the middle, where it was hot and humid. It

was so crowded on the smaller vehicle, a Nissan pickup truck, that the men had to stand.

There were 29 people on the Nissan and 89 on the larger truck. The group included women, children and infants, married couples, men traveling alone and entire families. The small convoy's first destination was Tamanrasset, a desert city in southern Algeria, where some members hoped to stay, at least temporarily, in order to find work so they could earn enough to pay for the next stage of their journey. Others planned to simply continue northward.

Samani was squatting on the bed of the large truck, on the left side behind the driver's cab. He had an 18-liter water canister behind him and was holding a bag filled with three shirts and three pairs of pants. He had paid 30,000 CFA francs, the equivalent of about €46 (\$59), for a space on the truck -- the traffickers had waived a portion of the fare, because it was all the money he had. He had also bought some underwear with a zippered pouch in front so he could hide his travel money.

Acquaintances had assured Samani that clothing was free in Europe. A friend who had made it to Spain told Samani that Europeans happily hand out sweaters and jackets against the cold. Europeans replace their household goods every year, says Samani, placing whatever they no longer need on the curb.

Even the taxi drivers drive Mercedes in Europe, he says. "You hear a lot of things, many good things, but some things that are not as good." From his standpoint, the fact that there are some drawbacks to Europe makes the good things more believable.

Scorching Heat

The trip from Arlit to Tamanrasset normally takes two days. Samani had brought along sugarcane, couscous and two packages of powdered milk. He had tied a scrap of cloth to the handle of his water canister to indicate that it belonged to him and protected himself against the sun by unbuttoning his shirt and pulling it over his head.

As they entered the Sahara, Samani and the others had to cope with temperatures that took their breath away: 50 to 55 degrees Celsius (122-131 degrees Fahrenheit) in the shade. Sometimes the heat reached 60 degrees Celsius.

Tens of thousands travel north through the Sahara every year - - not only from Niger, but Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana and Ivory Coast -- for a variety of reasons. Life expectancy is about 55 in Niger; infant and maternal mortality rates are high. Villages rarely have electricity, few have generators and water comes from wells. About 30 percent of young people leave their villages. Those who don't make it to Europe and return without property are considered failures.

Many Africans see Europe as a paradise with a pleasant climate, plenty of food for everyone and a simple rule: Those who make it there can apply for asylum in their country of arrival. The journey is usually undertaken by men, but when the situation becomes sufficiently dire, they are also joined by women. If your homeland is a hellish place, any faraway country can seem like paradise.

On the afternoon of the first day, Samani and the others on the large truck received a message from the Nissan: one person had died, a girl of no more than three or four years. It was her first time traveling in a vehicle, and when she couldn't stop vomiting, the adults thought she was merely carsick.

The women undressed the girl, wrapped her in cloth and pushed the bundle into a corner of the truck bed. Some placed their luggage on the dead girl's body. They resumed the trip two hours later, but then one of the trucks had a flat tire, which had to be patched, wasting valuable time.

While they were waiting, Samani met a young father of five named Ali Sani from a neighboring village. He was traveling on the smaller pickup truck and suffering from a malaria attack -- the fever had given him the chills.

Even before the flat, the passengers had heard a metal part rubbing against the tire: The axle was broken. It had been fixed, but improperly -- and the delay was dangerous, because the passengers had only a limited supply of water. The people on the truck wondered what would happen if there were another flat.

The drivers took advantage of the break to bury the dead girl. The ground was so hard that they had to use water from the canisters to soften it.

Trouble at the Border

When the convoy reached a well that evening, the passengers ate and prayed, filling their canisters and setting up camp for the night. The first day was over.

The next morning, both trucks had flat tires. Despite his fever, Ali Sani helped the men change them, afraid that they were losing too much time.

The two trucks crossed the border into Algeria at about 4 p.m. on the second day. They had been traveling through unmarked territory for hours, after the drivers had left the main route. Because only the large truck had an Algerian license plate, the

drivers were trying to enter Algeria to the east of the regular transit route. Furthermore, very few of the passengers had papers and hardly any of them had visas for Algeria.

When they spotted Algerian border guards on a hill, the drivers decided to turn around and return to Niger, where they planned to hide the trucks behind rocky hillocks and wait.

They tried again the next morning, the third day, but they were forced to turn around once again. This time, they kept driving instead of hiding the trucks. None of the passengers knew whether the drivers were searching for a different place to cross the border or had decided that morning to return to Arlit.

Water became scarce on that third day. One of the unspoken rules on the truck was that water was not shared. Some gave a bit of their water to the children, but others didn't. Each passenger was on his or her own.

Ali Sani, who had brought along two four-liter canisters, was silent during the trip. "You think of home," says Ali Sani, "of what you've left behind. But you also think of Europe, of paradise, of the solution to all of your problems. And you wonder: Will I survive this trip?"

A woman on the large truck died at around 4 p.m. on the third day. She had been traveling with her sister and three-year-old son. The men lifted the woman's body, wrapped in her clothing, onto the cab of the Nissan, where they tied it down with straps otherwise used to secure water canisters.

Toward nightfall, both of the rear tires on the Nissan burst with a loud noise. When the pickup began to swerve and almost veered off the road, everyone on both trucks immediately knew that it meant the end of their journey.

The drivers placed the Nissan on rocks, removed the front wheels and carried them to the large truck. They decided that the men would return to the well on the large truck to fetch water, while the women and children would wait with the Nissan. The men couldn't leave them any water or food, because there was nothing left.

From then on, their goal was no longer to find a way across the border -- it was to survive.

An elderly couple, Issoufou Abdou and his wife Rahina, were among those left behind. They were traveling with their son, his wife and their three children who were six, five and barely a year old. Abdou had wanted to go to Tamanrasset for treatment for an eye ailment.

Abdou, born into poverty in 1940, remained poor, even by Nigerien standards. He owned a few gourds as drinking vessels, and his three robes hung from a hook in his hut. He had sold his only cow for 98,000 CFA francs to pay for the trip north. It was the first trip of his life.

Until then, Abdou, his wife and their three grandchildren had been riding on the large truck, while his son Mouddha and daughter-in-law Rachida were on the Nissan. Rachida was one of the few members of the group who could read and do arithmetic. She also spoke a little French. She had negotiated the price with the traffickers in Arlit, eventually paying the equivalent of €150 for the family, normally far too little for four adults and three small children. But she had somehow managed to convince the traffickers.

Lacking water or food, Rachida was one of the first to lose consciousness in the Nissan group. The three children didn't notice, because they were with their grandparents. The adults gave the children empty canisters, telling them beat them like

drums, to make noise and drive away the silence. The group listened to the drumming and the baby crying for a while, but then silence returned.

Ali Sani, feverish and exhausted, felt his throat becoming dry. He drank the rest of his water, but began having stomach cramps. Ali Sani later said that as he waited for the other men to return with the truck, he thought of his wife and children, and that at some point during that night, he gave up hope of being rescued.

Rahina, the old man's wife, was huddled on the ground. She had drunk water from the well the day before, but then she began complaining of stomach cramps and diarrhea. Abdou, her husband, squatted next to her, so weak that he was trembling. He watched his wife die in the sand. "Allahu akbar," he said. It was God's will.

Rachida, his daughter-in-law and the mother of his three grandchildren, died a short time later.

A New Plan

When the large truck returned around noon the next day with water from the well, 13 women were dead. The men, too exhausted to dig graves, covered the bodies with sand.

On the late morning of Oct. 18 , or possibly the next day, the 100 survivors gathered around what was left of the white Nissan pickup. There was not a tree on the horizon, the nearest road was many kilometers away and the sun had been high in the sky for hours. The group was trying to decide what to do next.

One of the drivers made a suggestion: they would collect money, and each person would tell them what to buy with it.

Then they would travel with the large truck to the nearest city, where they would buy food and water, and get help. It wasn't a decision -- it was the pronouncement of a decision that the drivers had already made.

The drivers were members of the nomadic Tuareg people and they looked down on the migrants, viewing them as pathetic farmers. When one of the men from the group asked them to take the passengers to the well, where there was at least water, one of the drivers stepped forward and hit him in the face.

No one knew why the drivers refused to take the small detour to the well or why they didn't want anyone riding on the bed of the truck. Perhaps, the passengers thought, they didn't want to lose time. Or perhaps the men didn't want to have to choose the passengers who would be allowed to travel with them.

No one resisted and no one mustered the courage to stage a revolt. None of the migrants had a driver's license, Ali Sani said later. Even though they were all afraid that the drivers would leave them behind in the desert, no one felt capable of leading the group to the nearest city.

When the Tuareg left in the large truck, they took along four people who had paid more than the others and were thus allowed to travel with them in the cab.

About 100 people remained behind, and they knew that it was time to make a decision. After some discussion, a few of them said that even if the Tuareg truly intended to return, they stood no chance of surviving without water.

The men, women and children finally began walking to the well. They agreed that the men would help the elderly and the weak. But the plan soon changed, with the strongest forging

ahead while the others were told to follow the leaders' tracks in the sand.

The two groups remained together as long as the path was level. But when they reached the first sand dunes, steep and difficult to climb, they began to drift apart, with each member of the group seeking his or her own path in an effort to walk around the dunes. Soon they lost sight of one another.

A young girl was the first to give up. She sat down in the sand and died.

When Will It Be My Turn?

According to Ali Sani, many women and children simply fell to the ground. The women screamed at first, and the children cried, but eventually there was silence. A woman supported Ali Sani at the beginning. He didn't know her, but they walked together in silence. When the woman's strength ran out, she crouched on the sand, a scarf over her head to keep out the sun, and simply sat there. Ali Sani sat down next to her and tried to encourage her to get up. Eventually he continued alone.

He could no longer see the others in front of him. All he could see was dunes. He felt that the heat was easier to bear if he kept walking instead of standing still, and he passed people lying in the sand, waiting -- for night to come, to be rescued or to die.

A person who loses significantly more than 10 percent of his weight to dehydration is beyond help. The tongue swells up, making it impossible to swallow. The skin becomes brittle and contracts, the eyes retreat into their sockets and urinating becomes painful. A state of delirium sets in.

The body removes the water it needs from the blood stream. The blood, in turn, becomes viscous, and it can no longer transport heat developing inside the body to the surface. The body temperature rises rapidly, the victim goes into convulsions and the end comes as a relief.

When will it be my turn? Samani wondered. He imagined that there was a certain point at which a person dies. He wondered when he would reach it.

Those who happened to be near someone who was dying tried to give them hope. Keep on going, they would say. Do not die. Not now.

What was the worst part? "There is nothing that couldn't have been the worst part," say Samani, Issoufou Abdou and Ali Sani. Sitting on the truck bed. The heat. The way the trucks shook as they bumped across the desert. Being so thirsty that you couldn't feel your throat anymore. The swallowing reflex, the pain caused by swallowing. Whenever they thought they had seen the worst, something even worse happened.

Samani went ahead with the other men. Mouddha, the son of Issoufou Abdou, was walking next to him, holding the hand of his son Dalhibou. He had left his two daughters behind in the second group, with a woman he didn't know.

Soon the boy began to moan. He had lost his strength and his shoes were broken, so Mouddha and Samani took turns carrying the boy on their shoulders.

During the march, there was a moment when Mouddha lost his strength and proposed leaving the boy behind -- his son. We can't leave him behind, Samani replied. They tied material around the boy's feet to protect them against the hot sand, and then the three of them kept going. Samani somehow managed

to carry the boy, drawing on a reserve of strength that Mouddha had lost.

Issoufou Abdou, the old man, walked near the back of the group, with the women and children. He had sat there and watched as they covered his wife with sand, and as they placed his daughter-in-law Rachida next to her body. He says that he was too exhausted to feel any pain.

The old man searched for the two girls. The older girl, Sakina, was holding the hand of a woman he didn't know, and someone else was carrying the baby. He doesn't know who it was. He could see his granddaughter in front of him for a while, but the distance grew and eventually she disappeared into the dunes. He never saw her again.

He discovered the baby soon afterwards. She was lying on her back, lifeless, already half covered with sand.

Finally Rescue

On the fifth day, the first members of the group reached the well. Ali Sani, still with a fever, doesn't remember how he was rescued. He was told that someone came walking toward him and pulled him across the sand to the well.

He remembers that the ground around the well wasn't as hot as the desert sand and that it was rockier. He remembers that he drank very slowly, and that he was surprised when someone offered him some millet gruel, even though he had no money to pay for it.

In the end, only 17 people reached the well. Among those rescued were Samani, Mouddha and his young son, the old man, Issoufou Abdou, and Ali Sani, the man with malaria.

The government of Niger warns Europeans against traveling near the border, the region where the tragedy happened. Everywhere in Niger, both criminal gangs and the terrorist organization al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb are "targeting foreigners for the purpose of kidnapping," reads the website of the German Foreign Ministry. Both the border zone and the area where Samani and the others live are considered dangerous.

As a result, our only sources of information about the tragedy are the survivors' memories -- and a video of the site, taken by a Nigerien journalist on the day the bodies were found.

Some died alone, away from the others. In the video, they almost look as if they were resting for a moment, their heads placed on their arms, trying to make themselves a little more comfortable before they died. Others are lying in small groups at the base of a bush, as if it were easier to die in the shade. One image shows the body of an adult, presumably a man. He is lying on his stomach, wearing a T-shirt with dark stripes on it, his right arm extended as if he were reaching for something. There is a child lying next to him, no more than two years old, also on its stomach and in almost the same position, its small arm extended, its naked feet at a slight angle, head turned toward the adult and embedded in the sand.

The survivors remained at the well for four days. According to Samani, a Toyota SUV turned up on the evening of the fourth day with a Tuareg at the wheel. He had brought along food, water and a gas cooker. He had left Arlit two days after their group had departed and when he reached Tamanrasset and saw that they hadn't arrived, he drove out to search for the migrants.

The man drove the survivors to Tamanrasset, but they had to walk the last few kilometers on their own. It wasn't until he

arrived in Algeria that Ali Sani understood that his journey to Europe had ended. The group was detained by the police, given temporary papers and told to leave Algeria within 10 days. Samani and the others were so exhausted that they lacked even the strength to beg. When they ventured out into the city for the first time after a week, young Arabs threw stones at them.

They returned to southern Niger on the same route they had taken to reach Tamanrasset, in pickup trucks and in taxis, completing the last few kilometers on foot. The people in their villages mourned the dead for three days, sitting in the mosques in silence.

The government of Niger announced that it was going to launch an investigation. It had the drivers arrested, along with the woman who had allegedly organized the trip. It was rumored that 30 people were arrested, including police officers. The president of Niger traveled to Tsaouni, where most of the dead were from. When he was there, he said that the Nigeriens should seek their fortunes at home. "Pull yourselves together," he told them.

A slim young official from the Interior Ministry of the Nigerien government agrees to a short conversation on a Sunday evening. He doesn't refer to the deaths of the 92 people in the Sahara as a "disaster" but as an "incident."

Many questions go unanswered. How many people leave the country for the north every year? "I can't say anything about that," he replies. How far has the investigation come? He smiles, asks for our understanding and says: "*Mon ami*, I cannot say anything about that." Will there be a report, with results and conclusions? "Of course," says the official, tapping his fingers together. "When something like this happens, we

work hand in hand to search for the causes together and eliminate them."

Spaniards and Italians, he says, pay the government to ensure that Nigeriens stay in Niger. The young official calls it "aid." Is the fact that the Algerian border is being guarded more heavily than before, in response to pressure from the EU, the reason that the two trucks took the fateful detour? It played "a big role," says the official.

Samani, who had hoped to gain his wife's love by making the trip to Europe, was back in front of his hut. He had built it himself, with the help of neighbors. In his village, a man has to own his own house to be permitted to marry.

His wife had heard about the tragedy in the Sahara and for several days she had assumed that her husband hadn't survived the trip. Under tribal rules, a wife is free to remarry after spending 40 days in mourning and Samani isn't sure whether she was glad to see him again.

A few newspapers reported on the disaster in the Sahara and Pope Francis included the dead in his prayers. Nothing else was reported on the tragedy, perhaps because of where it happened: The desert is farther away from Europe than the Italian island of Lampedusa, where many of the recent nautical disasters involving refugees have taken place, and it seems to have no beginning and no end. It is an oddly placeless place, a no man's land.

Would Samani make the trip again?

He looks at the interpreter, pauses for a moment and then looks me in the eye.

"Yes," he says.

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan