Agricultural production in 2004 has been severely affected by locust infestations and drought in the northern regions of Niger causing a total loss of cereal production estimated at an average of 26 percent in the affected regions, and 7 percent at the national level, taking account of the weight of these regions for total cereal production. Production losses have been caused for two-thirds by drought and one-third by desert locusts.

Net cereal production for 2004/2005 has been estimated at about 2,651,571 tonnes of millet, sorghum, maize, rice and fonio. The provisional cereal deficit for 2004/05, having taken into account estimated commercial imports, is 278,350 tonnes, or about nine percent of national needs, estimated at 3,156,660 tonnes. This deficit will have to be covered by the government and its development partners. Although the deficit does not seem enormous at the national level, this should not obscure the fact that more than 3 million people in some 3,000 villages, located mainly in the agri-pastoral zone in the centre and north of the country, are now extremely vulnerable to food insecurity.

These vulnerable populations have reacted quickly by adopting some strategies that could prejudice both social harmony and medium and long-term development. Amongst others, these strategies include: early transhumance with the risk that livestock will invade crop areas before they have been harvested; de-stocking of animals, selling them off at poor prices; and excessive fuel wood extraction as an alternative source of revenue but leading to an acceleration of desertification.

There is a need for an urgent and targeted supply of food, agricultural inputs and fodder in order to enable affected households to begin the new crop season in good conditions beginning in April 2005.

The mission recommends that desert locust control should be carried out effectively not only in Niger but also at the regional level in order to prevent outbreaks of swarms from the start of the 2005 crop year. Control should probably continue beyond the next season, as the locust problem seems to have taken a firm hold.

1. **OVERVIEW**

In 2004 Niger suffered severe locust infestation which, in addition to variable weather and irregular rainfall, has noticeably affected the harvests in some regions of the country. A joint FAO/WFP/CILSS mission visited the country from 4 to 18 October 2004: to make an estimate of this year’s harvests and the damage caused by the desert locust to crops and pastures; to assess the resulting food situation overall; and to predict possible food requirements for 2004/2005, including imports and food aid provided by the international community.

From 2 to 4 October the experts and representatives of FAO, WFP, CILSS-AGRHYMET and FEWS-NET, together with the ministry officials, adopted the mission’s programme of work and held some preliminary information sessions with the national departments involved in various ways with the question of food security: the DPV (plant protection department), the DCV (subsistence food crops department), the national Met Office, the SAP (early warning system), the CCA (food emergency unit), and the SIM (information systems on livestock and agricultural markets).

The mission enjoyed the support of all the central and regional departments of the Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Water as well as the support of the other services and ministries which were called upon. Fruitful discussions were also held with some agencies of the United Nations (FAO and UNDP), donors (in particular USAID and the World Bank), and some NGOs and cereal importers. The mission divided into three groups and was able to cover all the regions suffering from desert locust infestation.
At each stage in the field, the teams met with the local authorities and held working sessions with regional and local agriculture and livestock departments to examine the progress of the 2004 crop season, focusing attention on the desert locust but also looking at rainfall since these are the two most important factors to influence agricultural yields and production and fodder supplies. The teams went into the field to assess the state of crops and pastures, talk to farmers and breeders about production conditions, expected yields, and their strategies in the face of damage caused by the desert locust, drought or other pests dangerous to crops. The teams also visited the markets to observe the price movements of the main food products, in particular, cereal and livestock prices.

The field visits were followed by meetings with Niger’s interested central services and its development partners. In particular, the mission held working sessions with officials from the DSCN (statistics and national accounts department), the DCV (subsistence food crops department, agricultural statistics section), the DPV (plant protection department, locust control coordination section), the SAP (early warning system), the CCA (food emergency unit), the Ministry for Animal Resources, CILSS-AGRHYMET, the European Union, French Cooperation, USAID, and UNDP.

The documentation submitted to the mission by the central services were used to complete the information gathered in the field and during meetings with the various officials. Amongst others, they examined the Bulletin issued at ten-day intervals on the general crop situation by the agricultural statistics department, the summary of the food situation in vulnerable areas issued by the CCA, and the bulletin issued by SIM (information system on agricultural markets).

The preliminary results of the mission were confirmed on 13 October 2004 at a round-up meeting attended by officials from the central services mentioned above and by Niger’s development partners. These results were then edited and presented to the Ministry for Agricultural Development on 18 October in the presence of representatives from CILSS, FEWS-NET, FAO, and WFP.

The analysis of the information collected by the mission shows that the factors influencing the 2004 crop year in Niger are basically of two kinds:

- Insufficient rainfall which is particularly affecting the agri-pastoral and northern areas of the country. The first rains were recorded in several places in the month of April when planting could begin in some 1 500 villages compared with 950 in the same period in 2003. However, when planting was well under way, in May the rains stopped, according to zone, for a period of three to six weeks, with very harmful effects for the seeds in the northern zones of the departments of Mayahl, Dakoro, Aquié (Maradi region), Tanout and Gouré (Zinder region), Mainé Soroa, Diffa and N’Guigmi (Diffa region), Tahoua, and Iléia (Tahoua region). This meant that replanting was necessary as soon as the rains began again in July. In some zones in the regions of Dosso, Maradi and Zinder, millet and sorghum developed satisfactorily but water stress on crops and pastures continued in several places, especially those where the rain had stopped earlier towards end August/beginning September.

- The phytosanitary situation has been dominated by locust infestations. The infiltration of swarms of desert locusts in the crop zone was observed beginning in August, followed by hatching of hoppers on a massive scale in Tamesna and the north-east of the Tansout district. In September, some swarms were reported to be moving in the Ithazer, Air and Tamesna as well as in the north of the regions of Tahoua, Tillabéri, and Zinder. Hopper bands were also seen in the regions of Tahoua and Maradi. The mission was able to see the vast stretches of crops and pastures devastated by the desert locusts as they moved across the region. Towards the end of October, some 195 000 infested hectares had been treated. Nevertheless, the available means at the time (three aeroplanes, one of which chartered by FAO) did not seem sufficient to address the size of the problem. Other pests also damaged crops here and there. In particular, these were grasshoppers and other insects and grain-eating birds.

This situation led to a large fall in levels of crop yields for millet and sorghum in all the regions affected by the desert locust and drought. Using rapid methods of enquiry at meetings with producers, in addition to information supplied by departmental agricultural services, the mission was able to estimate the production losses in relation to 2003 for millet: from 20 to 47 percent in the Tillabéri region, from 8 to 30 percent in Tahoua and were about 15 percent in Maradi/Zinder. As regards sorghum, the corresponding levels were 25 percent, 12-38 percent, and 26-30 percent.

It proved difficult to establish exactly the part of the damage that could be attributed specifically to locusts. Nevertheless the mission estimated that locust infestation was responsible for a third of all losses and the rest could be attributed to other factors, in particular drought.
It should be noted that some zones which were not affected by locusts enjoyed fairly good rainfall and these areas recorded good harvests in 2004. Amongst others, these areas were the departments of Dosso, Zinder (south), Maradi (south) and Kollo in the Tillabéri region.