

NIGER

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Niger, a small, landlocked sub-Saharan country in western Africa, has approximately 11.5 million inhabitants and covers an area of 1.3 million km². President Mamadou Tandja was elected in 1999, and his government is credited with an economic upturn. The economy is centred on subsistence farming, animal husbandry and uranium deposits. Uranium exports contributes some 5% to the State tax income. In 2003, GDP grew by an estimated 3.8%; GDP purchasing parity per head of population was about US\$800. By sector, agriculture contributes about 39% of GDP, industry 17% and services 44%.

A revision of the mining code has been undertaken in order to adjust its terms to the UEMOA (West African Economic and Monetary Union) legislation. The state-owned corporation ONAREM was changed to an administrative state organisation ERGM (Establishment of Geological and Mining Research).

Several companies hold exploration licences in the Liptako region, including African Geomin Mining Development Corp Ltd (AGMDC), Orezone Resources Inc and Vergene Capital Corp. The most advanced gold project is the joint development of the Samira Hill and Libiri gold deposits located 90 km west of Niamey, the capital city. The properties are held by AGMDC in which Etruscan Resources Inc holds a 50% interest and Semafo Inc the remaining 50%. Semafo is, in turn, controlled by Managem, the mining division of on the Moroccan industrial conglomerate, Groupe ONA. The deposits host a 2 Moz resource of which the first 0.75 Moz will be mined by open pit. The US\$27 million mine and carbon-in-leach plant were due to officially opened in October 2004. Mineable reserves at Samira Hill and Libiri total 10.1 Mt averaging 2.21 g/t Au. Output of 135,000 oz is scheduled for the first full year of production at a cash operating cost of US\$177/oz, with an average of 100,000 oz/y over the expected mine life of 7.2 years at an average cost of US\$203/oz. Etruscan has outlined a gold belt extending for over 60 km, extending into neighbouring Burkina Faso.

Official gold production by artisans in the Liptako region amounted to 1,032 oz in 2003.

Elsewhere in Niger, in the north of the country, 5.3 t of cassiterite were produced by artisans in 2003. Various projects are to be developed by the government with foreign assistance: Maggia Valley limestone and gypsum (17,652 t of gypsum were produced last year by artisans); investigation of the Zangon Kalgo polymetallic property; and institutional support to the Ministry of Mines and Energy. A €35 million agreement was signed with the EU, covering airborne geophysics, prospecting and mapping of the Air massif, establishment of a computer database and assistance to artisanal miners.

During 2003, the Chinese assisted in the launch of the Salkadama (Tahoua) coal exploration project.

Niger possesses two main uranium mines, Arlit and Akouta, in the north of the country. They are operated by Somair and Cominak, both subsidiaries of Cogema of France. Uranium production amounted to 3,143 t in 2003. Uranium exploration licences are held by Cominak and Cogema. In the same region, Sonichar operates an open-pit coal mine at Anou-Anarem, on the western edge of the Air Massif. This operation produced 188,915 t of coal in 2003.

Three petroleum exploration licences are held by foreign companies: Agadem by Petronas-Esso, and Tenere and Bilma by CNPC of China. No field-work was carried out in 2003, but three holes should be drilled in the Agadem licence area in 2004. Halliburton and the Chinese organisation BGP, have both opened offices in Niamey for the provision of services to oil exploration companies. The Algerian company Sonatrach and the Niger Government have signed an agreement to evaluate the potential of the Kafra and Bilma areas.