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THE SPOILS

Battle in a Poor Land for Riches Beneath the Soil

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AIR MOUNTAINS, [Niger](#) — Until last year, the only trigger Amoumoun Halil had pulled was the one on his livestock-vaccination gun. This spring, a battered Kalashnikov rifle rested uneasily on his shoulder. When he donned his stiff fatigues, his lopsided gait and smiling eyes stood out among his hard-faced guerrilla brethren.

Mr. Halil, a 40-year-old veterinary engineer, was a reluctant soldier in a rebellion that had broken out over an improbable — and as yet unrealized — bonanza in one of the world's poorest countries.

A battle is unfolding on the stark mountains and scalloped dunes of northern Niger between a band of Tuareg nomads, who claim the riches beneath their homeland are being taken by a government that gives them little in return, and an army that calls the fighters drug traffickers and bandits.

It is a new front of an old war to control the vast wealth locked beneath African soil. Niger's northern desert caps one of the world's largest deposits of uranium, and demand for it has surged as [global warming](#) has increased interest in nuclear power. Growing economies like China and India are scouring the globe for the crumbly ore known as yellowcake. A French mining company is building the world's largest uranium mine in northern Niger, and a Chinese state company is building another mine nearby.

Uranium could infuse Niger with enough cash to catapult it out of the kind of poverty that causes one in five Niger children to die before turning 5.

Or it could end in a calamitous war that leaves Niger more destitute than ever. Mineral wealth has fueled conflict across Africa for decades, a series of bloody, smash-and-grab rebellions that shattered nations. The misery wrought has left many Africans to conclude that mineral wealth is a curse.

Here in the Sahara, the uranium boom has given new life to longstanding grievances over land and power. For years, the Tuareg have struggled against a government they largely disdained. But this new rebellion has shed the parochial complaints of an ethnic minority, claiming instead that the government is squandering the entire country's resources through corruption and waste. Armed with a slick Web site and articulate spokesmen in Europe and the United States, the movement has gotten sympathy from Westerners drawn to the mysterious Tuareg and their arguments for justice.

It has also pulled in a wide variety of fighters — not only illiterate herdsmen but also college students, aid workers, even former pacifists like Mr. Halil.

"This uranium belongs to our people; it is on our land," Mr. Halil said. "We cannot allow ourselves to be robbed of our birthright."

Useful or Useless

When Mr. Halil was in high school, an old French map hung in his classroom. The verdant crescent along the southern border was labeled “useful Niger.” The vast, dun-colored swath across the north that he called home was labeled “useless Niger.”

It was a profound lesson, in politics as well as geography. The agricultural belt along the south had all the power. The herders of the north were irrelevant.

It had not always been so. The Tuareg have plied the barren peaks here for centuries, ruling over the caravan routes that crossed the Sahara with the riches of Africa — from salt to slaves. With their camels and swords, they enriched themselves through tribute and plunder.

By the time Mr. Halil was born, that era was long gone. As a boy he dreamed of having a huge herd of camels, as his father had before the great droughts of the 1970s wiped out the herd. After excelling in school, Mr. Halil went to college in Benin, but he failed to get the Niger government to give him a scholarship to veterinary school abroad.

“My family had no connections,” he said. “Unless you have a friend in government, your chances of getting a scholarship are zero.”

Instead, he started a union of herders to try to get those notoriously individualistic people to band together for their common interests.

In his travels, Mr. Halil began to notice the stream of geologists from France, China, Canada and Australia scouring ever deeper into Tuareg grazing lands. Little seas of flags, used to mark potential mining areas, sprang up everywhere, he said.

“I asked myself, ‘What do we Tuareg get out of this?’ ” he said. “We just get poorer and poorer.”

An Insurgency Begins

Mr. Halil’s efforts were part of a wave of civic activism that has swept over Africa in the past 15 years as the continent has become more democratic. Many of the new elected governments are deeply flawed, but because of a more youthful, urban population in touch with new technology, their citizens are often better informed and less willing to tolerate the corruption that has squandered so much of Africa’s potential.

In February 2007, a group of armed Tuaregs mounted an audacious attack on a military base in the Air Mountains. A new insurgency was born. They called themselves the Niger Movement for Justice and unfurled a set of demands: that corruption be curbed and the wealth generated by each region benefit its people.

Far from useless, as Mr. Halil’s high school map had said, Tuareg lands produce the uranium that accounts for 70 percent of the country’s export earnings. But almost none of those earnings returned to those who lost access to grazing land and suffered the environmental consequences of mining, the rebels argued.

To fight the rebellion, the government has effectively isolated the north, devastating its economy.

International human rights investigators have also documented serious misdeeds on both sides. The rebels use antivehicle land mines that have killed soldiers and civilians, while the army has been accused of extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions and looting of livestock. In all, hundreds of people have been killed, and thousands have been pushed from their land.

Despite the violence, mining and exploration continues largely unabated, but the rebels contend that corrupt officials siphon off much of that wealth. The country's prime minister was forced to step aside after being accused of embezzling \$237,000, and last summer he was indicted.

"This wealth needs to be used to help the people, not the politicians," said Aghali Alambo, president of the rebel movement. "Otherwise it is just plunder."

The government argues that Niger is a democracy, if an imperfect one, with peaceful means of redressing grievances.

Officials dismiss the men fighting in the north as bandits and traffickers who have moved drugs, untaxed cigarettes, gasoline and even human cargo across the vast Sahara for decades. Some rebels admit to trafficking, especially of cheap gasoline smuggled from Algeria, to support the rebellion.

"Niger is a democratic country that is ruled by laws," said Mohamed Ben Omar, Niger's minister of information. "If someone has a grievance, let him form a political party and bring it to the ballot."

Poor Amid Riches

The Tuareg have been fighting here for centuries. The warriors cover their faces with long, blue scarves that stain their skin.

After France lost its grip on most of its Saharan colonies in 1960, the Tuareg found themselves a small minority divided among new nations created by arbitrary borders that meant little to them. Worse, droughts reduced them to penury.

But the parched land on which they lived was valuable. A French nuclear company, Areva, was scooping hundreds of tons of uranium from northern Niger every year. Unlike southern farmers, who owned their land, nomads could use pastureland but had no title to it.

The hardships of global warming and desertification, which eats away grazing land, further impoverished the Tuareg, forcing many to abandon herding. Yet as its fertility degraded, their land became increasingly sought after as the global price of uranium rose steadily. This paradox would prove explosive.

Mr. Halil sat out the last Tuareg uprising, which began in 1990 and ended with a peace agreement in 1995. Back then, he was idealistic, hoping to avoid violence. But he knew his people's history well.

"Tuareg are fighters," he said. "It is our nature."

In June 2007, an army vehicle exploded after driving over a land mine planted by the rebels. Villagers say that the army then slaughtered three elderly men; the army says no one was killed. But the story of the slaughtered elders spread swiftly among the Tuareg.

For Mr. Halil, it was a sign that nonviolence was foolish.

“If they were going to kill old, defenseless men, how could we even talk about negotiation?” he said. “Fighting was the only way to defend our communities and our way of life.”

After months of indecision, Mr. Halil sent his 2-year-old daughter and his pregnant wife to stay with her parents. He set off for the Air Mountains.

An Oath With Exceptions

Once there, Mr. Halil found a growing army. He learned to use a weapon and march in formation, but he was more useful in jobs closer to his former vocations — healer and organizer.

Wounded fighters sought him out under his tree in the camp. He treated infections and counseled men on splinting broken bones. Fighters started calling him the doctor.

“I felt that I was useful,” Mr. Halil said.

Each new recruit must swear a three-part oath on the Koran: never betray the movement; never attack civilians or take their property; serve all of Niger’s people, not just one tribe or clan.

But the oath has exceptions, and stealing from outsiders is not only tolerated but encouraged. Armed men stole a new, white Toyota truck from [Unicef](#)’s offices in April. The same vehicle turned up at a rebel base a few days later, its Unicef emblem scratched off. The rebels drove it to Mali to try to sell it.

Such slips made Mr. Halil uneasy.

“I was not born to be a soldier,” he said.

The fighters spend little time actually fighting. Mostly, they drive around on patrols, take shelter under the meager shade of thorny acacia trees and prepare Tuareg tea, a potent brew poured into small glasses.

At such moments, Mr. Halil ached for home. He thought of his newborn son, whom he had never seen. He wondered if he had made the right choice, leaving his family and taking up the way of the gun.

“Sometimes I have doubts,” he said, stoking the embers of a campfire.

In late June, Mr. Halil was on a mission when the thwacking sound of helicopter rotors suddenly broke the desert silence, he said. There had long been rumors that the government had acquired attack helicopters, a power that would fundamentally change the conflict.

In the firefight, 17 rebels were killed. Mr. Halil managed to get away and fled to Algeria, leaving the rebellion and taking up his studies once again. He hoped, at last, to become a real veterinarian.

“I won’t abandon the struggle, but I will continue by other means,” he said.

The fighters left behind, in bases deep in the mountains, vow that they are there to stay.

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