

OBI Looks To Expand Sustainable Grain Bank Program In Niger As 8 Million Face Hunger

VIRGINIA BEACH, VA (July 27, 2010) -- A severe drought that has gripped Niger is threatening up to 8 million people with hunger, nearly half of the country's population. International aid agencies are ramping up efforts and calling for help in order to ward off a major catastrophe.

Since 2006, Operation Blessing International (OBI), the 7th largest international charity, has been establishing a network of 17 self-sustainable grain banks in the country. Located in the Diagourou region, an area roughly 180km (112 miles) from the capital consisting of small subsistence farms, the 17 grain banks were originally designed to provide grain to 10,000 residents. However, due to the growing shortage brought on by a recent drought, the grain banks have reduced the amount that a person can purchase in order to stretch the existing supply to support 22,000 people, or half the region's population.

The OBI grain banks consist of masonry buildings that each hold 100 bags of grain totaling 1,000 kilograms (2,205 lbs). A special steering committee of village elders is selected to manage the stores of grain in each facility. To initially stock the grain bank, OBI uses donated funds to purchase the grain.

Each May, near the end of the 9-month dry season, food supplies run out and the market price of grain skyrockets due to low supply. Being subsistence farmers, the villagers are not able to afford the higher prices and thus would go hungry if not for the grain banks.

Bill Horan, president of OBI, said, "The grain banks play a critical role. During the harvest, villagers sell their grain to the grain bank and receive income to provide for their families. During the hungry season, when grain prices skyrocket on the open market, villagers are then able to purchase what they need from the grain bank at below-market prices - the lowest possible price. The income the grain bank receives is then saved until the next growing season when the committee will use the money to purchase more grain locally from the villagers. By creating this self-sustaining cycle, these grain banks not only benefit the local economy and provide income to the villagers, they also ensure a year-round supply of food."

To date, the program has supported over 570,000 people.

Due to the recent drought, OBI is looking to expand the program even further in order to support the remaining 23,000 villagers who are not currently included in the program. Rich Danzeisen, Vice President of International Programs and Operations for OBI, said, "That would mean doubling our capacity either by providing twice as much grain at each grain bank or by building more facilities. Due to the success of this project, word is spreading in the region and Diagourou has been growing in population because our grain bank villages have become like cities of refuge; the villagers know that food is available and see the success of the program and are relocating there. The need is overwhelming."

Within Diagourou, OBI hopes to build ten additional grain banks to provide better geographic coverage. The cost of building and stocking one facility is \$5,800 USD. Seeing the success in Diagourou, other villages are asking for a program in their region as local leaders struggle to find food for their communities.

Horan said, "The conditions here are quickly growing to a similar degree of severity to what we saw in 2005, when millions faced starvation. Families desperate to find food are traveling many miles looking for food. Others are making plans to move permanently to locations near our grain banks. Mothers bring their children to our staff who are now suffering acute malnutrition and ask for emergency intervention."

For more information or to donate, please visit www.ob.org.

ABOUT OPERATION BLESSING INTERNATIONAL:

Operation Blessing International (OBI) is one of the largest charities in America, providing strategic disaster relief, medical aid, hunger relief, clean water and community development in 22 countries around the world on a daily basis. In 2009, OBI was awarded Charity Navigator's coveted 4-star rating for sound fiscal management for the fifth year in a row, a feat that only 4% of rated charities have ever achieved. Forbes, which currently ranks OBI as one of "America's 200 Largest Charities" as well as one of "America's Most Efficient Charities," awarded OBI a perfect 100% rating in fundraising efficiency and 99% efficiency in charitable commitment. Additionally, the Chronicle of Philanthropy currently ranks OBI as the 39th largest charity and the 7th largest international charity. Founded in 1978, Operation Blessing International has touched the lives of more than 215 million people in more than 105 countries and 50 states, providing goods and services valued at over \$2.1 billion to date.

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Photographs and B-roll of OBI's Niger grain banks in operation are available upon request.

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