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SPEECH BY THE HONOURABLE PAUL MARTIN
AT THE INAUGURATION OF
"LA ROUTE DE L'UNITÉ
ET DE L'AMITIÉ CANADIENNE"
(THE ROAD OF UNITY AND CANADIAN FRIENDSHIP),
GOURE, NIGER,
DECEMBER 17, 1972

DEPARTMENT OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
MINISTÈRE DES AFFAIRES EXTÉRIEURES

Mr. President
Honourable Ministers
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honor for me, as representative of the Canadian Government, to be present at the inauguration of "La Route de l'Unité et de l'Amitié canadienne" (The Road of Unity and Canadian Friendship). I am deeply moved by your warm welcome. I look upon it as evidence of the friendship between the people of Niger and Canada and of the attachment to the human ideals of brotherhood which we share and on which we have begun to build through cooperative efforts. This is not a new experience for me. I have visited this vast country twice before and have had the occasion to appreciate the hospitality of the people of Niger and their friendship towards Canada. Today, once again I have the opportunity - and it is certainly a great pleasure - to once again thank you for your welcome.

My visits to Niger, Mr. President, have enabled me to appreciate your goal and that of your people, to build an honorable place within the great family of African nations. Each time I have come here, I have been able to take stock with great satisfaction of the progress made by your country as a result of your efforts toward its development.

I might add that during talks with the Prime Minister of Canada, the Right Honourable Pierre Elliot Trudeau expressed to me his admiration for the determination of the people of Niger to move ahead in economic and social development. This occasion gives me the welcome opportunity to say how much your unswerving will and enthusiasm has impressed the Canadian Government. The official relations between our two governments and the individual contacts that are being forged between our two peoples at an increasing rate are proof of the friendship that is developing between our nations. I should like to review with you for a few minutes the principal stages in the growth of this friendship.

On the official level, to begin with, I note that 1972 marks the 10th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between our two countries. Shortly thereafter, we made a modest beginning to our aid program with the arrival in Canada of students from Niger and the arrival here of the first Canadian volunteers. At that time Niger seemed to most a far off country, little known to Canadians. It was not until 1967 that our relations were truly launched through Niger's participation - in reply to our invitation - in the celebrations marking the 100th anniversary of Canadian Confederation. The active part which Niger took in Expo '67 in Montreal, and your presence there, Mr. President, for the Nigerien Day, enabled thousands of Canadians to get to learn about the people of Niger and to increase those first contacts established by Nigerien students who had come to Canada to continue their studies.

Since that time, Mr. President, our exchanges have become deeper and more intense. Our diplomatic relations, which have never suffered from disagreement of any sort, are now the means to active co-operation in the most important realms of your nation's development. The year after our Centennial celebrations, the Honorable Lionel Chevrier came at the head of a Canadian mission of co-operation, to study with you the areas in which Canada and Niger might work together. Later, in response to your own proposal, Mr. President, Canada decided to join with Niger and other French-speaking countries of the world, at the first Niamey Conference which decided to create the Agence de Coopération culturelle et technique which came into being here two years later.

As a result of your initiative - and in addition to our bilateral ties - we became partners in a multilateral organization designed to enable us to work together on a world scale and in many areas on the basis of our common French heritage of language and culture. Moreover, to give further impetus to our growing friendship, you, Mr. President, returned to visit Canada in 1969 and again last year. These visits are the clearest demonstration of the intimate, even "family" bonds which have grown up between us.

Canadian friendship for Niger is shown in another special way by the dozens of Canadians who have been eager to come in recent years as replacements for those already here in various technical assistance fields: agriculture and cattle breeding, health and economic planning, and perhaps particularly in tackling the transportation problems which Niger faces.

This ceremony marks the beginning of work on the "Route de l'Unité", which is the greatest single project within this overall program.

Canada's contribution in the transportation sector is designed to be comprehensive, integrated and effective. It attempts, in this context, to link the development of air and river transport facilities with land communications.

At this very moment, Mr. President, a fleet bearing the flag of Niger and established with Canadian assistance, has crossed the boundary of Niger, en route to Gaya. The presence of these vessels on the Niger is an example of what can be done by our two countries when the will to succeed is shared so eagerly.

We can be proud of the scale which cooperation between Niger and Canada has reached. This is especially so when one considers the distance which separates Ottawa from Niamey. But apart from distance, there are geographic and human factors, political and material similarities which bring us together. Let us take for example the vast plains and desert regions of Niger. Although they do not resemble the often snow-covered Canadian prairies, the hardness of the soil, its dryness and the effects of wind erosion make them similar. In both cases to make them productive requires the same courage and determination and, on occasion, comparable techniques. For both our countries, economic development requires massive investments in transportation and communication links across vast empty spaces. In the last century, Canada invested enormous sums in railroads;

today, whatever the effort required, you must bridge the gap by completing this road, which will become the foundation of your development. We have built the St. Lawrence Seaway; you are contributing to making the Niger navigable.

But it is on the human level, above all, that our respective national objectives and common interests come together. An overriding objective in the political life of our two countries is to enhance the quality of life of our peoples. In Canada, this is not only an objective for our own people. To the extent possible, the Canadian Government seeks to foster it through its programs of assistance to other countries. In its White Paper on Foreign Policy, published in 1970, the Canadian Government stated that aid projects overseas should, and I quote:

"support and foster the growth and evolution of the social, educational, industrial, commercial and administrative systems of the developing countries in such a way that their people can improve their own organization and capacity to produce, distribute and consume goods and services, and thereby improve the quality of life in their countries".

I know of no better way than through the text I have just quoted to explain the reasoning behind Canada's decision to participate with Niger in building this road of Unity and Friendship.

The Canadian Government is contributing to this project because it realized that this road is indispensable for an entire region of Niger. It is also conscious of the effects which construction of the road will have on the economic development of a vast area and of the benefits which it will bring to its population. This is, indeed, the basic reason for my presence here today. It is an expression of the Canadian Government's desire to co-operate with countries such as Niger which are devoted to economic development in order to bring greater well-being to their populations, and to encourage their efforts. It is also a sign of the seriousness with which we regard our role in Niger's development, begun by the Chevrier Mission, maintained by regular meetings between representatives of our two countries, and already defined once last winter, during the visit here of the President of CIDA, Mr. Paul Gérin-Lajoie.

Mr. President, both Canada and Niger are immense countries in comparison to their small populations and one might say that both are multicultural.

Unity in each of our countries requires effective communications among their population groups. Each of us has also found in his own way, that the conduct of international relations rests on just this same factor, thus showing that the distinctive character of our national unity also serves to express the international calling of our peoples.

The place of Niger in Africa, specifically its mediating influence and its role as a frequent interpreter of the Continent to others, is becoming clearer to the benefit of its non-African friends and its neighbors alike. Canada, for its part, wishes only to be a sincere friend and partner of Niger; one who listens, who understands and who responds according to its abilities and in accordance with its own experience.

We rejoice in a friendship which bridges the seas and the continents and in a history of co-operation which we believe to be exemplary.

Vive le Niger! Vive le Canada!

Vive l'amitié canado-nigérienne!