

"MEDICAL OPPORTUNITIES IN SUDAN"

Talk to the Sudanese Doctors' Union in the UK. 28 June 2003

I am grateful to Dr. SK Babiker for inviting me to speak to you today and to Dr. Hania Fadi for suggesting that he do so.

Medical opportunities such as Sudan presents to us today are rare. Medical services and even aspirin are unavailable to most Sudanese. The health crisis presented by conditions in southern Sudan and the Nuba Mountains and among the displaced in squatter settlements around Khartoum and other major cities are nearly beyond belief. Some two million displaced people live in wretched, sand blasted squatter settlements surrounding Khartoum. There are virtually no government services in these areas. Rates of malnutrition are high and water must usually be carried in by donkey. The people suffer gastro-enteritis, skin diseases, night blindness from vitamin A deficiency, malaria, bilharzia, measles, pneumonia, trachoma, and tuberculosis. There is growing incidence of HIV/AIDS. When the heavy rains come the flimsy shelters often cave in causing traumatic injuries. Many families are headed by a single surviving parent, often a desperate mother. Imagine what it would be like to live with no hope of medical help if you had malaria, a sexually transmitted disease, a gallstone, fistula, and a traumatic eye injury. Think how you would feel if you had to watch your children dying. Yet in some of these squatter areas three out of five children die in their first year.

In face of this catastrophe many normally kind and caring people turn away, thinking there is nothing they can do to help. Please understand that I realize that many if not most of you here today have also suffered, some even physically, by leaving Sudan. Some of you have experienced loss, which will affect the rest of your lives. And most of you are probably also helping relatives back in Sudan. But I have come today to suggest a way to get more deeply involved, a way both to help those who suffer in Sudan and also to enrich our own lives. When I was a child, I read the biography of an American woman who received an education only because someone outside her family helped her. This woman and her sister were the destitute children of a former slave. Yet a woman who did not know them well and was not wealthy herself saw in them her own opportunity. Those women sent the two children to school — and then to medical school. We can each do something like this. Remember that the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.

I am the Director of two small English charities, which grew out of the years during which Alan and I lived in Sudan. Both these charities are working to build peace at the grassroots. Both are helping displaced and marginalized Sudanese hold on to life and hope until peace comes. The Bishop Mubarak Scholarship Fund for Nuba Women is all educational work: university and school scholarships in Sudan, women's literacy classes, payment of teacher's salaries in self-help schools. Together for Sudan, the other charity, was set up to support this educational work through projects such as solar panels in areas off the electricity grid so that people can study at night and a Women's Income Generation project which helps displaced women support themselves and their children. Most Together for Sudan work is with displaced and marginalized people in the Khartoum vicinity and in the Nuba Mountains. We work through a small Khartoum office staffed entirely by Sudanese. And increasingly, although this was not our original vision, together for Sudan has moved into medical and medical support work.

It is easy to see why this has happened. Both Together for Sudan and the Bishop Mubarak Fund believe in education as a human right and as the basic building block of civil society. But neither adults nor children can learn to read if they can't see. Nor can sick people concentrate on education. And children who are hungry don't learn much of anything. So Together for Sudan has set up several projects to help.

"The Together for Sudan Eye Glasses Project is run by a volunteer Sudanese ophthalmologist, Dr. Nabila Radi Elias. Dr. Nabila and her team have in this past year treated several hundred people, including for cataract, and the project has provided hundreds of people with corrective lenses and reading glasses.

"Together for Sudan also runs a Breakfast Project which provides a simple meal of milk and lentils or unimix to kindergarten children in schools where the Bishop Mubarak Fund is paying teachers salaries.

"Then there is the Wheel Chair Project. In this coming year a group in California will send us an entire container of specially designed, lightweight, all terrain wheel chairs. These will be distributed to disabled people in the Khartoum area and to landmine victims in the Nuba Mountains. Like all TFS work, the chairs will be free to all recipients.

*And not only do we have our own projects but Together for Sudan provides management and financial support to the Women's Action Group for Peace and Development. WAG, as it is called, is a civil society group, which Dr. Magda Ali first envisioned and helped me and others set up in 1997. Today from their women's center in Khartoum, the WAG runs a Street Girls Project as well as a unique HIV/AIDS Awareness Outreach programme.

*But I have saved for last what is currently the project most on my mind. The Medicine Box started three years ago at three sites: Gedaref in the east, Dilling in the Nuba Mountains and Soba Aradi outside Khartoum. Today we have many applications for new sites and could manage a total of 12 sites in the near future if we could find the funding. Such work is only stopgap, of course, in view of the overall need. But it is already lifesaving to hundreds of people.

The idea of the Medicine Box is simple. Together for Sudan supplies boxes of basic medicines to self-help clinics or to medically qualified individuals. Each site must be supervised by a doctor, nurse or medical practitioner who orders the medicines quarterly according to the projected needs of the coming season and in keeping with a specific budget. All medicines are dispensed free and reports are returned to the Khartoum office when reordering. I have just authorized a new type of Medicine Box, which we are calling "the mobile medicine box". This will be rather like the old Chinese concept of what they called "the traveling bare foot doctors". One of these mobile boxes will operate out of Kadugli in the Nuba Mountains and provide medicines to two or three remote villages. The other will be under the care of a Sudanese doctor in Khartoum who will provide medicines to inmates in the Omdurman women's prison and the Kobar men's prison. I have great plans for this mobile Medicine Box idea and hope that when peace comes we may have the resources to expand it far into the Nuba Mountains and also to southern Sudan. It will be a long time, even in a peaceful Sudan, before this type of non-governmental effort will no longer be needed.

Now I understand well that physical healing is not the only sort of healing needed by Sudan. When I lived in Khartoum, I was involved in setting up Befrienders Khartoum, which, like the Samaritans in the UK, offers empathetic "listening therapy" to those who are suicidal and despairing. There is much trauma, which needs to be worked through in Sudan today. And two very effective ways to help communities heal is to engage people in listening to one another and in service to one another. This, too, is part of what Together for Sudan is about and part of the medical opportunity to which I have referred.

Sudan today presents us all with a physical, a psychological, even a spiritual, opportunity. Islam and Christianity agree on many truths. And one of them is that if we do not open our hearts to the poor, we cannot expect God's heart to open to us. It just won't

happen. But to begin to open our hearts to others through service, as painful as that often is, enables us to grow, to become more fully human.

Peace will not be made in Sudan; it will have to be built in people's lives. Reconciliation, forgiveness, genuine reaching out to people who are not "like us", are absolutely necessary if Sudan is to be healed from the years of hatred, conflict, destruction and killing. I trust that the people of Sudan will be able, with God's help, to work this miracle. But they will need support from us on the outside. If we intend to help, we need to be asking ourselves, "What are the front-line needs which people have? And how do suffering people really feel, not just physically but mentally and emotionally?"

Years ago when Alan and I visited Rumbek at a time of great suffering, a man looked into our foreign faces and said words which are forever written on my heart:

"We are looking at you but you are not looking at us". Together for Sudan is my way of looking, of working to reaffirm the humanity of others who live far from my world.

In reaching out to the displaced and marginalized, to those who suffer more than we do, we can work to heal and to empower not only them but also ourselves. Together for Sudan needs your understanding for our work — and your financial support. Together we could help heal the broken bodies and the broken hearts of many more Sudanese. Our current most urgent need is funding for both the Eye Glasses and the Medicine Box projects. I appeal to you as individuals, as Sudanese doctors, and as an organization to join us in this opportunity.