

TOGETHER FOR SUDAN and The Bishop Mubarak Fund

Appeal on behalf of the Eye Glasses Project

In January I made my first visit since last May to Soba Aradi outside Khartoum where over the past few months the shelters of thousands of people, already displaced from southern and western Sudan, have been bulldozed on government orders. Always a sad and chaotic place, Soba Aradi had undergone a terrible transformation. The mud brick houses have gone but most of the people – having nowhere else to go – remain, sheltering themselves and their children under plastic, cardboard and salvaged corrugated iron sheets. Their environment had deteriorated dramatically and so has their health.

Silas Jojo, TFS Country Director, and I drove to a small community based charity left standing as it had taken the precaution to purchase and register its land. Inside the building Dr. Nabila Radi, who would examine the eyes of 150 people that day, had already begun her work. Outside some 200 people, most of them women, pressed as close as they could get to the single door. The order was five women and then five men, admitted by group into the small examining room. But several men had shoved the women aside and were shouting about who would see the doctor next. Silas and I managed to push our way through the crowd and then Silas went back outside to settle the dispute. I was on the edge of a shocking discovery.

Over the next several hours Dr. Nabila, Sudanese ophthalmologist, part-time volunteer and full time saint, examined the eyes of all who came to sit before her. They were mostly women but also some men and a few children. (Children are normally seen on specific outreaches and our ideal ratio is two schools for every adult outreach. But some children always slip in with their mothers). I have been on other outreaches with Dr. Nabila but never have I seen anything like the serious eye conditions, which I saw in January at Soba Aradi.

Was it because many of these people are relatively recent arrivals from Darfur? Was it because most of them do not even have bus fare to get into Khartoum and take a chance that the government hospital might attend to them? Was it because many of the elderly do not speak Arabic and are, anyway, too shy to go into Khartoum? Yes, all of the above for many of those who live in Soba Aradi are “throw away people”. They are the displaced, the illiterate, the elderly, the unemployed, the chronically ill, people with HIV, women with no male support. And Soba Aradi is a windblown, barren desert area where water, except for the fortunate few who have bore holes, is supplied by donkey cart. And that, too, is expensive. If you cannot even keep your hands and face clean, how can you protect your eyes? Here is what I wrote to family and close friends when I got back to Tunis:

“Most of the people were westerners from Kordofan or Darfur, largely unused to what we call hygiene and unable to afford medicines and in some cases even soap. Can you believe a young woman irreversibly blind from glaucoma? There was nothing to be done but give her medication to reduce the pressure and ease her pain. What about an old man whose right eye will not shut because his face is being eaten by leprosy? Then there was a woman with trachoma whose in-turned lashes were scratching her cornea so that she was painfully going blind. A beautiful young mother, pregnant and leading a small child, sat down in front of Dr. Nabila. This woman’s left eye protruded alarmingly and Dr. Nabila began to ask about the symptoms of thyroid disorder. Replies were negative which left the possibility of a benign growth, cyst or tumour, or a malignant tumour. After that an old woman lifted her ravished face to show eyes filled with pus, which she said ‘came four years ago’. In a corner a small girl with squint waited patiently. Of the over fifty persons designated by Dr. Nabila as in need of further consultation, 48 she indicated as urgent.”

The Together for Sudan Eye Glasses Project began in June 2002 in response to the needs of women in Bishop Mubarak Fund literacy classes and children in BMF supported basic self-help schools. Our intention was to examine eyes and provide those in need with prescription or reading glasses kindly donated by Vision Aid Overseas. We had not counted on the enormous needs of communities in which medical services are entirely beyond the reach of most people. Nor has Dr. Nabila ever been able to examine people with infections and not provide them with antibiotics – or attend to patients with intestinal parasites, scabies, dehydration, ringworm, ear infection, dysentery, malaria, anaemia and other conditions and not medicate them free of charge. All this has become life saving to individuals, enormously beneficial to communities of displaced people in the Khartoum area and very expensive for Together for Sudan.

That is why I am sending this letter to a few caring friends. Last May when I sent a similar letter your generous donations allowed us to expand our outreaches from two to six per quarter. From July through December 2004 Dr. Nabila examined the eyes of 1,675 people, 1,219 of them women and children. All in need are being provided eyeglasses, medication or surgery. But medical interventions are expensive and we are now spending almost \$30,000 per year on the Eye Glasses Project. That is well over budget and I have, with a heavy heart, had to tell Dr. Nabila to cut back on the outreaches.

Are you able to make a special donation to Together for Sudan’s Eye Glasses Project? To invest in eyes is to invest in the future of the suffering Sudanese people and I thank you on their behalf.

Lillian Craig Harris
Director