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Groups of men sporting their white jelabiyas, women enwrapped in colourful tobés, children in their smart new outfits: everyone was on the streets, visiting from house to house, greeting one another in celebration of the Eid. What better way to get to know my new neighbourhood as I shared fresh dates, biscuits and sweets in local homes.

Dear Friends in Christ,

After the month-long rigours of Ramadan, with fasting from sunrise to sunset, the Eid is a much welcomed time of festivity in Khartoum. Early in the morning, as soon as the prayers are finished, the activity begins. First in the local vicinity, visiting from house to house. Then further afield, to visit friend and relatives. Then the chance to travel even outside the city, as work in Khartoum shuts down completely for the best part of a week. For me it was a great chance to visit the homes of my new neighbours, and then to go back to my old street and drink cups of tea with my young friends and their families. Offers of breakfast abounded but had to be deferred this time as I was setting off on an Eid desert expedition to Northern Sudan with members of the Sudan Archaeological Society.



Out and about in Northern Sudan

Our intended destination was the rocky stretch of the River Nile upstream of the 4th Cataract. We followed the Nile from Khartoum northwards as far as the bend at Abu Hamed, after which the Nile turns sharply and runs in a south-westerly direction before finally turning again northwards towards Egypt. This south-westerly stretch runs through some striking scenery with rock formations and villages perched above the Nile, while date palms fill the available arable waterside. To the north, sand-dunes have banked up, swept across from the Nubian Desert. The tragedy is that some 70 miles of this stretch – the villages and the date palms together with the evidence of millenia of continuous settlement beside the Nile – will soon be submerged forever as water floods from the newly constructed Merowe Dam. Visiting these villages, I was acutely aware of it being the closing chapter of their



Houses and date palms near the 4th Cataract of the Nile

history. Some people had rather hopefully begun to pile sandbags in an attempt to salvage something of their land to live off, while others were pragmatic about the facilities to be provided in the new settlements. But for most there seemed to be a lingering disbelief that anyone could allow what were assuredly the best date palms in the world to be destroyed. Or that their homes, built upon ancient rocks, might ever be assailable.

Displacement continues to be one of the harsh realities of life in Sudan. A whole generation of those displaced by the war in Southern Sudan have struggled to find shelter and make ends meet in the desert edges of Khartoum. Meanwhile, the crisis in Darfur has resulted in another enormous displaced population. And it continues, as reports come in of new villages being razed to the ground. From the contact I have with some of the aid agencies working there, it seems that not only are the living conditions near impossible but it also becomes increasingly dangerous to distribute badly needed relief items. A widely acceptable political solution to the Darfur situation is long overdue, not only for the stability of the region but also for the long-term sustainability of the peace agreement in Southern Sudan.



Worship in Kibera with Sudanese congregation

Thankfully there have been some indications of the latter peace agreement bearing fruit. Establishing the mechanics of government both at state level and within the new Government of Southern Sudan has been slow and difficult. Starting out from nothing where there has been no basic infrastructure is a serious challenge. I know from first hand down in Juba recently as we were trying to run our Round Table



Orphan Elephants

meeting between the church departments and international partners. Our church guesthouse has both taps and light switches in plenty. But these are not much use when there is no supply of either water or electricity! Nevertheless, the autonomous Government of Southern Sudan is taking shape, even becoming a significant international actor in mediating the peace talks between the Ugandan Government and the LRA which we are all praying will yield positive results.

There have been some positive indications in Khartoum too. At the end of August I was preaching at a service in a large displaced area called Jebel Aulia among a congregation consisting almost entirely of Southern Sudanese. It seemed a sizeable congregation, but I was told it was down to about half its normal size, as people had left for the South - some permanently, seeking to re-establish their lives "back home", others testing the water while leaving their families in education in Khartoum. Even those who remained seemed to have no doubt about where longer-term their future lay. We hope these aspirations are well-founded. The Church sees it very much part of its responsibility to ensure that they should be. There is much work to be done for this, both in providing the services which are essential to re-building lives in the South - particularly education and basic health care - but also in building the kind of environment in which peace can be sustained.

It was through my involvement in developing the Church's plans for the latter that I recently spent 4 weeks in Kenya, participating together with a Sudanese colleague in the Peace-building Institute run jointly by the Nairobi Peace Initiative and CORAT Africa for "peace actors on the African Continent." It turned out that Sudan was the best represented country of all in the Institute, with a sister and 3 Catholic priests also from Sudan. It was a lively programme involving regionally focussed inputs as



Garden Hotel in Machakos

well as role-plays in conflict mediation. Playing the part of an uncompromising rebel-leader was surprisingly satisfying, while it was often all too easy to take issue with the international community's best intentions. But we also heard at first hand of some of the successful peace interventions in the region, and of particular interest were the practical aspects of the Sudan peace talks mediated over many years by IGAD.

With Sudanese colleagues at Simba Lodge, Naivasha it was of special significance for those of us coming from Sudan to have the chance to visit the two places in Kenya famous for their association with the Sudan peace process - Machakos, where the framework for peace in Sudan was agreed in 2002, and Naivasha, where the Comprehensive Peace Agreement was signed in January 2005. The Anglican Bishop of Machakos was immensely hospitable and took us to see the Garden Hotel where the crucial early stages of the negotiations had taken place. Staff had many stories to tell of how the two parties had to be accommodated and fed completely separately. And then we proceeded on, down into the Great Rift Valley to the shores of Lake Naivasha. The staff of the Simba Lodge proudly showed us the rooms used for the talks and even the tree planted jointly by the late Dr John Garang, Chairman of the SPLM/A, and Sudanese First Vice President Ali Osman Taha after the major breakthrough had been



With Sudanese colleagues at Simba Lodge, Naivasha

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

achieved. The visit would not have been complete without viewing the waterbuck, hippos and flamingos at the lakeshore. But the visit had a real sense of pilgrimage – both personally and as part of the wider pilgrimage walking together with the Sudanese people as they try to achieve a lasting peace in their country.

Please continue to pray for God's grace for all the people of Sudan and for the gift of peace. Please pray for the Church's work, both in peace-building and in ministering to the many needs in the community. And please pray for all of us as we seek to proclaim the Gospel of Peace, giving thanks for everything that has been in 2006, and for all that lies ahead.

With my Christmas greetings and gratitude for all your prayers and support during the year.

All best wishes,

Joanna

