

darfur, sudan

“I have just returned from hell on earth. A place where children are dying from malnutrition, where women are raped by gangs of heavily armed militia and where men are killed trying to protect their families and property. The place is Darfur in Sudan where a terrible humanitarian disaster is unfolding before our very eyes and yet the rest of the world remains largely ignorant to the plight of its inhabitants.”

“ In many respects, Darfur is already on a scale with Ethiopia and what makes it even more tragic is that it's probably going to get worse. One of the poorest and most underdeveloped regions in Sudan, Darfur is already the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today. ”

“ Concern has been working in Sudan for almost 20 years and was one of the first aid agencies to highlight the current plight of Darfur in March 2004. In November I took a TV crew out to see their work in Western Darfur - totally unprepared for what I was about to witness.”

“ I visited three camps - Aro Sharrow, Mornei and Manjura - an experience that will stay forever in my mind. Aro Sharrow is only 70 kilometres north of Concern headquarters in El Geneina in Western Darfur but it took us four hours to get there by jeep in blistering heat over dirt tracks and dried up riverbeds ... 6,000 now live in conditions that we in Northern Ireland wouldn't put our household pets. They live in huts made of branches and leaves and covered with a plastic sheet ... They don't have enough food; medical care and equipment is basic and toilet facilities are holes in the ground.”

“ In Aro Sharrow, I watched as Concern workers distributed food to mothers with children under the age of five. Once a fortnight each child receives 20 grams of vegetable oil, 250 grams of CSB (corn soya blend), 20 grams of sugar and two bars of soap. They queue in an orderly fashion and wait for up to four hours before receiving their life saving rations, meagre though they are.”

“ Human suffering in a country thousands of miles away doesn't register. My God, what kind of a world do we live in?”

} Gerry Kelly
The Gerry Kelly Show
UTV

the gift of water ethiopia

Famine is never far away, but in places like Darrimo, Ethiopia, a Concern-sponsored irrigation scheme has bought growth and optimism where not long ago there was despair.

Water has been brought to the people in a way that has dramatically improved their lives. Where less than six months ago humans and animals drank water from the same river, spreading disease and death, now people are provided with clean water to bring home to their houses on the hills.

The irrigation development, finished only four months, ago means that the women can do their washing in clean water without the back-breaking labour of having to bend over on the river bed. The livestock drink separately and there is even a shower facility for men and women. The miracle of a good water supply has transformed agriculture in

Darrimo. The entire agrarian and water development on four hectares has cost between €6,000 and €7,000 derisory by Irish standards.

Awole Mussa Mohammed, 68, grows carrots, onions, beetroot, sugar cane, bananas and tomatoes on his newly irrigated plot with the help of his son Endrise, 18. “I am now earning a lot of Birr. My daughter Fatuma, 13, is in fifth grade in school in Darrimo and wants to be a medical doctor,” says Awole.

The new Darrimo is today a busy social hub for the area, with both men and women enjoying a Sunday afternoon chat in the Ethiopian sunshine.

Concern's programme coordinator Endalamaw Belay said: “This integrated scheme involving clean water for humans and animals, clean water for washing, and irrigation for the landholder's plots, has transformed people's lives.

“An essential part of it is the three kilometre road, which allows access where there was none before. In addition to Concern bringing in programme materials, the community has easier access to a local clinic, to schools and to a bigger market. In return for bringing water here, local people helped build the road.

} Aengus Fanning
Editor
Sunday Independent

Train of hope throws a commercial lifeline to millions of people in war-torn Congo

When labourers started clearing jungle foliage from the disused rail track, the people of Samba laughed. A train? In this isolated, war-torn bit of Congo? It seemed absurd. “They said it was a joke,” said Louis Ngongo Bila, one of the labourers. “I have to admit I didn’t have faith either, it seemed a folly.”

After a horrific war which left more than 3 million dead, the economy in ruins and rural towns marooned in the bush, their transport and phone links cut, optimism does not come readily to the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Years of looting and destruction bled almost everything of value from Samba, down to doorknobs and the station manager’s pencil. Rehabilitating the line seemed fanciful.

Thanks to the government, the charity Concern and other relief agencies, the train is back. Since June it has chugged through Samba twice a month, a blast of colour and noise which draws hordes of children, traders and passengers to the station.

Dating from the 1920s and 1930s, the box cars clank,

rattle and toil along the reopened 870-mile track, sometimes wheezing to unscheduled stops, but the sight stirs hope of a brighter future.

Once a busy market stop on the line between Lubumbashi and Kindu, two provincial capitals, Samba went back in time when the war destroyed the railway six years ago. As jungle vines colonised the track and trees sprouted between sleepers, the town crumbled. People fled into the bush, shops and schools closed, fields were abandoned. Peace deals have restored a modicum of security to the province but you can see the war’s legacy in the hollow cheeks, distended bellies and yellowing hair of malnourished children.

At therapeutic feeding centres like the one in nearby Kasongo

some are too weak to sit up. Kabala Machozi, 10, his ribs protruding, used every ounce of energy raising a yellow plastic cup to his lips.

Concern’s emergency response should save Kabala but it took more than nutrition and medical care to revive a community drained of resources and confidence. What Samba needed was economic opportunity.

So Concern helped the National Congolese Railway Authority to rehabilitate the track and stations, a surprisingly swift operation completed in under a year by several thousand labourers ... [Samba’s] recently arrived doctor, Norbert Lofole, the first since colonial times, said that at current rates of improvement malnutrition could be eradicated within two years.

} **Rory Carroll**
in Samba, Congo
The Guardian

uganda

It was a marabou stork worthy of an Irvine Welsh nightmare. With its gnarled head and arrow-like beak, the huge bird tugged and probed at the heap of rubbish lying rotting in one of Kampala's slum streets.

Behind in the distance, the sun was coming up over a palm-fringed Lake Victoria, an altogether more tranquil, picturesque scene that belied the harsh realities of living in Kampala's most deprived neighbourhoods.

Somehow the two scenes side by side seemed to sum up Uganda for me - this evil, monster-like predator stalking the country's poorest and most vulnerable communities against the backdrop of an otherwise beautiful landscape. But in Uganda today, the real predators are not the scavenging wildlife, but the combined threat of HIV/AIDS and one of Africa's most brutal rebel groups, the so called Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). The combined effects of these two horsemen of the apocalypse recently led one

senior United Nations spokesman to refer to the situation in northern Uganda, where the LRA's abduction and sexual abuse of children has led to the spread of HIV/Aids, as the number one under-reported humanitarian story in the world today.

"Where else in the world have there been 20,000 kidnapped children? Where else in the world have tens of thousands of children trekked into villages and hospitals every evening to sleep on the dirt for the night, to go back without being fed to their villages - and they do this because they are scared for their lives?" asks Jan Egeland, UN emergency relief co-ordinator. My own journey into Uganda's world of HIV/AIDS and forgotten children began two weeks ago, with the help of

humanitarian agency Concern Worldwide, in the capital Kampala.

"Welcome to Kamwokya neighbourhood, our home and place of work," says Yusuf Senoga, in a deep, sonorous voice that seemed strange resonating from the slight man standing in front of me. Yusuf is the local co-ordinator of the Bukkadde Magezi, an association of elderly people, mainly grandparents, who have come together to care for the many Aids orphans that live in one of Kampala's most notorious slum communities. This is a place where tens of thousand of people live cheek by jowl in tiny wooden shacks set into the rust coloured clay earth that turns into a mire with the late afternoon downpours of the rainy season.

Here, Concern helps fund the work of "local empowerment groups" like Bukkadde Magezi. As I was to hear time and again from the individuals and families that work with the group in Kamwokya, surviving here is a perpetual balancing act. A constant struggle to keep at bay the combined killers of HIV/AIDS and poverty. However ... this is also a place of inspiration, ambition and a genuine commitment to tackle the problem of HIV/AIDS head on, the sort of commitment that has seen Uganda become something of an African success story in combatting the disease.

Since the confirmation of the first Aids case in Uganda in the 1980s, it is estimated that more than two million Ugandans have been infected

with the HIV virus. Of these, 800,000 people have died, leaving one million children orphaned. At its height, heterosexual transmission accounted for 75 to 80% of new infections. Mother-to-child transmission constituted almost all other cases.

Staggering as it is to imagine, the toll could have been worse had the Ugandan government not enlisted international help to contain and finally reverse the spread of the disease. Set against this comparative success, though, is the spectre of the war in the north of the country, where the marauding evil of the LRA has accounted for many of the recent HIV infections ... the LRA is mainly made up of abducted children between the ages of 11 and 15, many

of whom are used as porters, soldiers and sex slaves.

This suits Kony, [Joseph Kony, the LRA leader] and his men for children are malleable and very quick to obey orders. "Children copy exactly what is taught in training, they don't pretend," said one former LRA commander.

His views are echoed by UN press spokesman Shashi Tharoor. "We have kids as killers. According to some estimates, as many as 90% of armed soldiers of the LRA are children, and they are victims. The ones they're killing, abducting, violating, are children, too. It's a story of children killing children that isn't getting enough attention."

} David Pratt
Sunday Herald
Scotland

‘We want to produce something - and we will’ Somalia

A ragged group of men, women and children emerge from their aqals, the round temporary shelters made from a few bent branches, planted in the midst of scrub and acacia trees in sub-Saharan plains. The Calvin Klein and Nike labels on the men’s fake designer T-shirts mock their desperate circumstances. Only a few children have the energy to come forward and meet the visitors from Concern.

This is Barwaqo village which houses around 250 families displaced by floods that have pushed the Shabelle river, south west of Mogadishu in Somalia, some eight miles beyond its banks, engulfing hundreds of homes and tens of thousands of hectares.

The immediate cause is almost twice the seasonal fall of rain. However, these families are also the victims of a civil war that began in 1991 ... a civil war of which the world has largely grown tired and forgotten. It has been on hold for the last two years while the chief protagonists have been grinding out the details of a provisional federal government in Nairobi involving all the feuding clans. This has led to an uneasy peace between the warlords who have carved up the country. But that doesn’t help the people of Barwaqo. In the absence of any government or infrastructure they look to Concern for aid through the provision of emergency kits, which includes items such as plastic sheeting to cover their shelters and cooking pots. “The [Barre] government had a department which removed

the silt from the river and ensured it had a capacity to carry the water,” said Mohamed Mahamud Rirash, an agronomist working with Concern. “Another problem is that farmers themselves sometimes deliberately cut the riverbank to get water for themselves and finally maybe farmers pay some gatekeepers, who control levels, to keep the gates shut to ensure they can have some water for their land. All this leaves things in a state that, when the really heavy rains come, they are caught out.”

It is hard to overstate the devastation caused by the war: famine in 1992, as well as the war, killed around 600,000 of Somalia’s 9.8 million population. No one really knows exactly. Eighty per cent of educated Somalis emigrated after the clan-based militias destroyed, dismantled or looted anything of value, removing every aspect of modern civilisation, right down to the copper wiring beneath streets used for telephones.

Gradually, the main focus of Concern’s work has changed from emergency aid to development, providing an

infrastructure of support in the absence of government.

The aim is for sustainable development that concentrates on the poorest of the poor. These people have no reserves and the tiniest change in weather, the failure of a crop, or a fresh bout of fighting makes them immediately vulnerable.

It is a matter of pride to Concern that all their staff who work in the country are Somalis. Abdi Rashid Nur joined Concern just after the charity arrived in Somalia 12 years ago to tackle the famine that accompanied the civil war. He now heads the team of 40 and has no doubts about how much worse things would be if they were not there.

“When you see a child who has been saved at a feeding station in 1992 and you then see that same kid coming through a school that Concern helped build and know he is now ready to go to university, you know you have made an impact. Long-term development is not about two to four years - but 10 to 15 years.”

} Chris Elliott
The Guardian

angola

Generosa lives in Esanjo village, Kunyingo municipality, Bie province. She is a 50-year-old grandmother of 11 children. She and her husband act as parents to seven year old Amandu Zacheo whose parents were killed in the war.

“I lost four of my children in the war. Three of them were killed by shelling or crossfire. Another died in fighting. He was a policeman and was forced by the government to fight. He was the father of Amandu Zacheo. We are now Amandu’s parents” she told me.

“There is a huge difference between living in war and living in peace. During the war we constantly had our children on our backs, ready to run. You try to plan your life but suddenly the fighting erupts and all you can think of

is fleeing with your children. Survival is your only consideration. Everything else that you have is left behind, and usually it is taken by the soldiers.

“During the war everybody was at risk, there was total fear. I had 13 children in total, now only nine are left. I have 11 grandchildren. Three other grandchildren died of various illnesses. Now that the war is over we can move freely and without fear. There is a strong feeling that things can now improve. When we returned home Concern gave us zinc

sheeting so as we were able to build a good roof for our home.”

“My granddaughter, Rosachemba became very sick during the war. She was malnourished. Concern put her on the feeding programme and her condition improved so much. Afterwards she looked like a different child. You see her here before you as a healthy girl but it is only because of Concern that she is still alive ... Look at my son. He is building a house and attending school ... He is planning for the future.”

} Danny Rowan
Concern