69. Triumph or Tragedy by Br. Bill Firman

This is the last week, of the eight-week programmes, of in-service Teacher Training we are delivering in Yambio, Malakal and Leer. For the first time, we have been able to use our own purpose-built facilities in Malakal and Yambio. Better facilities were provided in Leer, and it really has been a great boost to the quality of what we can deliver. On each site, the teachers received seven hours of instruction each weekday from their SSS tutors. Progress is not always rapid but valuable steps have been taken towards improving the quality of primary education.

On each site also, although facilities are still to be completed, a few students lived in. So meals had to be arranged and improvised accommodation made available. Suffice to say the teachers in residence responded very well indeed along with great majority who came to classes each day from their homes. I have been able to visit each of the sites and have been most gratified at the excellent spirit I have observed among the student teachers and the SSS tutors. Given all the uncertainties in Southern Sudan when the programmes began in early February, I think our tutors and the participating teachers can rightly feel that something very valuable has been achieved. Perhaps one could be excused for having a feeling of triumph that all has worked so well.

Our programme was interrupted in Malakal when fighting broke out around our compound between rival military forces. Both tutors and the student teachers had to sit it out for several days until the fighting subsided but then classes resumed and numbers gradually built up to what they were before as the threat of looting subsided.

Unfortunately, the number of reports of fighting and division in the ranks of the Southern military forces has been steadily rising. The Bishops were meeting in Juba this week and the advisor to the President who addressed them spoke openly of the President’s concern that old divisions are reappearing and there are even threats of assassination of some of the leaders in the Government of Southern Sudan. The Government want the assistance of the Bishops who are willing to give it. Certainly they can lend great moral authority to the cause of peaceful co-existence of all in Southern Sudan but conflicting traditional rivalries are hard to soothe.

A few days ago in Boma, a rival tribe retaliated against the perceived transgressions of another tribe by herding women and children into their tukuls (house with grass roofs) and setting fire to them. At present this trouble is mostly in remote areas but it can show appalling lack of respect for the value of human life. The attack on Malakal was carefully orchestrated by self-interested rogue generals and there is even some talk of an attack on Juba, the capital. For all of that, I continue to witness and experience a calm confidence among most of the people. It would be a great wrong if the selfish ambition of a few leaders were to plunge back into violence the countless majority who want continuing peace.

Do we feel in danger? Not really. It is clear there is respect for Church people and there is respect for the services we are delivering to many people who have come to view us as friends. While the fighting in Malakal was very close by, it became evident our workers and our facilities were not a target. We are not the subject of white resentment. Rather I feel the people are somewhat protective of us and really appreciate what we are endeavouring to do.

We continue to pray that the good of peace will triumph over the great evil of war. We continue to plan, live and act on the assumption the future on the new country of Southern
Sudan is there to be built. There are many people, both local and expatriate, united in their efforts to achieve this goal. It would be tragic if the actions of an armed but very small minority were to disrupt the smooth transition to nationhood and prevent the resolution of outstanding issues with the north. I think there are, however, increasing reports of violence notwithstanding, still good grounds for optimism that peace will prevail.

- Br Bill

Active Class with Br. Heldon

Br. Dennis in Leer

Colourful

Comboni supper in Leer

Small among tall in Leer

Sr. Barbara in Malakal
Sr. Betty & Class

Sr. Jenny & Malakal teachers

Sr. Luchita in Malakal

Sr. Sandra in Leer

Sr. Jenny, Sr. Luchita & Teachers in Malakal