A Healthy Future

Recently, Fr Joseph and I drove from Juba to Yambio, then on to Wau, a journey of two legs, each of about 400 kms, for a Board meeting of our Catholic Health Training Institute (CHTI). The journey to Yambio took 13 hours - longer than usual caused by a closed bridge and water too deep to cross. In Yambio we dropped off a very welcome new vehicle and reloaded our cargo of gas bottles, food, and other items into another vehicle. The next day our travel to Wau on better roads, still with many potholes took only eight hours!

After the Board meeting, I drove this vehicle back to Yambio while Fr Joseph took the public transport direct to Juba – a trip which can sometimes bed one within a long day. Fr Joseph, however, had an unwanted stop, overnight in Yirol, and then travelled for 5 hours the following day to return to Juba. He would normally have gone by plane but there were no flights on the public holiday to celebrate the end of Muslim month of Ramadan.

Nowhere was I stopped and checked on these days of travel. I was waved through various checkpoints and my overall impression was one of a peaceful and developing young nation, badly lacking in infrastructure but confident of a healthy future. When I returned to South Sudan, a couple of weeks ago, I changed money from dollars into South Sudanese pounds at a rate of 5.2 pounds for one dollar. Now the rate in Juba is 4.45 - another good sign for South Sudan even if my remaining dollars are now worth less in local currency. The agreement reached with Sudan in the north, on the flow of oil, is clearly impacting positively on the economy. The period of rapid inflation seems to have halted and some items are actually becoming cheaper. Good for the local people who don’t have dollars!

The highlight of this odyssey was being present in Wau for the joyful missioning of the 22 midwives currently following a three-year, residential, professional training programme in our Brother Bill Firman, FSC is Director of Education for Solidarity with South Sudan. On a regular basis Br Bill writes a reflection expressing his experiences living and working with the people of South Sudan.
CHTI. Along with the fifty South Sudanese young people also in a threec-year training programme - to become Registered Nurses - these young people promise a future of much better health care for the people of South Sudan.

Eleven students were not present in the CHTI as they are currently out on clinical placement.

Among the CHTI Board members are Comboni Sister, Maria Martinelli, a doctor and surgeon, who is now the Director of the Daniel Comboni Catholic Hospital and Dr James Ukello, who is Director of the Wau Teaching Hospital. Sr Maria was the initial Director of the CHTI while also raising funds and supervising the rebuilding and re-opening of the Catholic Hospital. The present Chief Executive Officer of the CHTI is Sr Dorothy Dickson, from New Zealand. She has spent many years in Africa including a long time in remote parts of Sudan during the years of war.

Each of these key people attest to the positive and co-operative relationship that exists between these key health care institutions. In a sentence, I believe what is being achieved in improving the provision of quality health care is absolutely magnificent.

There is some inevitable turn-over of staff. One of the pioneering sisters, Dr Mary Anne Williamson, a Franciscan Missionary of Mary, in her mid-seventies, an energetic and gifted woman, is soon to move on to new challenges, while a young Comboni Doctor, Brother Paolo, has just joined the staff. Finding qualified, professional staff is an on-going challenge but all associated with the CHTI can take great pride in what is being achieved. There is a healthy future for this institution that is now operating so well. A young Patrician Brother from Kenya, Placido, has joined the administration team this year while Maryknoll priests Fr John, administrator, and Fr Jim, pastoral team.

It is good to see a few more men in our ranks as most of the pioneering burden for Solidarity with South Sudan has been carried by women. In this country, that is counter cultural and a powerful statement to women and girls. Gradually we are opening up more possibilities for girls in South Sudan, one of the critical steps in building a healthy future.

Solidarity with South Sudan

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