



SOLIDARITY with South Sudan

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FROM A BAT-INFESTED BUILDING ZONE



TO A BUSTLING HEALTH TRAINING INSTITUTE



“Please just get started, Sister, and don’t let your Institute ever be empty”. This is how Sr. Sneha Joseph Thenammakil was greeted at the Ministry of Health when she first came to Wau in October 2008. Painfully aware that South Sudan has the highest maternal mortality rate in the world, Solidarity with South Sudan, in collaboration with Ministry of Health, was planning to open a health training Institute and there was no time to waste.



Sr. Sneha, a Holy Spirit Sister, had just finished her Master programme in Nursing and Midwifery when she was asked by her Provincial Superior in Bangalore, India, to join Solidarity with South Sudan to train medical personnel. Sr. Sneha smiles when thinking back, “I had never been out of India and wanted some experience in Africa before starting my teaching job, so I was sent to Karamoja in Uganda. I was there for ten months, longer than I wanted. I felt the urgency; I knew my job was in South Sudan.” Sr. Sneha together with Sr. Stella and Sr. Patricia, all ready to teach, arrived in Wau in October 2008 and were introduced to the old

Health Training Institute, which had not been used for about 20 years during the civil war. “Imagine our surprise and horror when we came. There were squatters, bats and filth everywhere. The chairs were

broken, many already used as firewood, as were the books from the library. Toilets and sinks were broken. There was not even a place for us to live."

Many would have given up right then and there, but Sr. Sneha and the rest of the *Solidarity* team just rolled up their sleeves. Plans were drawn up, and with the help of generous donors the old Health Training Institute was repaired extensively. Thankfully no reconstruction was needed initially. The new Region of Southern Sudan wanted to decrease maternal mortality, and

the new Registered Nursing curriculum was already in place. "My big worry was whether the students could get enough quality, clinical experience at the local hospitals," Sr. Sneha recalls. "I went around to the local hospitals and health centres and I found possibilities for nurse training. Now we have excellent collaboration with Wau Teaching Hospital, the Daniel Comboni Hospital as well as health centres in Bahr-El-Ghazal and elsewhere."



Looking around the campus of the Catholic Health Training Institute, bustling with life, it is difficult to imagine the scene which met Sr. Sneha and her colleagues only five years ago. Much hard work has gone into making this transformation possible – and actually also some luck. "I believe we even experienced a miracle," Sr. Sneha laughs. "In order to get back the rights to the buildings, we needed to find the deeds, the official document which proved that

the land and the buildings belong to the Catholic Church and Sudan Catholic Bishops' Conference." Following 25 years of civil war, burning, looting and general destruction, it was not an easy task to locate this document. The Solidarity team was searching high and low in filth and garbage, dust and broken bricks – until one day in 2009 the document was found in a small box. "This was a day of joy. Nothing and nobody could stop us now."



The Catholic Health Training Institute (CHTI) started with 18 Nursing students in February 2010. This group is ready to graduate in July 2013. Sr. Sneha, now the Principal of CHTI, and her team continue to take the Ministry of Health's request very seriously. The institute is never empty at all – in fact, there are now 77 registered nursing and midwifery students learning there. Following a group of students with her eyes, Sr. Sneha waves to them. "When these students graduate they have commitment, dedication, and knowledge. Her love for and pride in the students is obvious. "I do hope and believe that they will be

responsible leaders who will be instrumental in the development of South Sudan." The group waves back and smiles. They know and appreciate that they have been given a special opportunity at the Catholic Health Training Institute. "We are giving them the tools to make a difference for their people and their country," Sr. Sneha says quietly, "and they will!"

