

Dear friends all,

News from Africa! This time from a place called El Waq in the border region of Kenya-Somalia. Last year Humedica, the NGO I am working with, started a medical aid project with the support of the German Foreign Ministry in this very needy region of Somalia. In agreement with the elders of two tribes, the Marehan and the Gare, the building of a former clinic was prepared to set up and start the work.

The political situation in this region is very confusing. There is neither justice nor order, nor law, only the stronger one can win. The stronger one is the one to shoot first! Kalashnikows are part of men's and even youths' outfit. The two tribes have problems of sorting out their neighborhood and living together in agreement. So quite often there is shooting. Since there is no regular government in the country, rules and regulations are left to the clans and tribes. On the Kenyan side there are also Gare living, they have adapted to the Kenyan administration and security rules.

For the sake of security we live in a comfortable house (for local conditions) in El Waq, Kenya. That means when working in El Waq, Somalia, we cross the border daily, about 9 km across arid country with dry shrubs and a few trees along a sandy track. In these days of insecurity there is Kenyan military patrolling the area. It is a hot region, not only by climate but also by security or rather insecurity.

Working in the clinic in El Waq is really tough: noisy, hot, dirty, busy. Usually – when we work there – we start at 8.30 a.m. till midday, have our meal which we take with us, and after a break of an hour we continue until there is nobody waiting for us. In any case we must return before dusk. The average number of patients we treat is between 50 and 100. In many cases it is simply treatment of symptoms, but there are also many cases of ear or eye infections in children, undernourishment, diabetes, high blood pressure. We try to combine our consultation also with the recommendation of improving the diet by adding some kind of vegetable, to drink a lot of boiled water, to keep wounds clean, etc.

A center for therapeutical feeding for malnourished children is in preparation. There is one thing really striking: the beauty of the people. They are tall, slim, with bright healthy teeth, especially the women are a joy to look at! And most of all the kids! It is not unusual that there are mothers coming to us, pregnant, one child still breast fed, one clinging at her dress, another one hiding behind the skirts of the mother.

One problem of running this clinic in a regular and continuous manner is the local situation of insecurity. In El Waq, Somalia, the Marehan and the Gare share the land,

and they even have a common council of about 40 elders to sort out their community problems. There is also an agreement between the elders and our organization that near the clinic no weapons (guns, knives, sticks) are allowed. But weapons are obviously a must for the male person of almost any age, and the threatening even of our staff is not uncommon. That means there are many and sometimes weeklong interruptions in working in El Waq, Somalia.

Although there are guards around the compound they have little effect. One of these incidents happened some two weeks ago. Following a heavy threat towards two of our staff members we evacuated immediately, went back to El Waq, Kenya, and got the order from our Head of Mission not to return there for the next few days. So we tried to find an alternative. It is difficult for a volunteer to travel all the way from Germany to the last corner of Kenya with best intentions, just to get stuck there and to be condemned to doing nothing. So we decided to cooperate with another NGO in Kenya and to go to Wajir, Kenya, a busy town about 350 km from El Waq, and to do a Mobile Clinic in the villages around this place.

It was a very good experience. We set up our "headquarter" in the guesthouse at the Catholic Mission and went to villages, each day a different one. What we saw was Africa at its best! Round houses built of mats woven by the women, or houses made of tree branches with a grass roof.

Boreholes for water, hundreds of camels along the red sandy track roads, thousands of goats jumping from left to right in hectic escape, dic-dics always in pairs crossing hurriedly, numerous giraffes feeding between the scrubs and trees, antelopes, monkeys, even a lonely coyote, and a dead snake. Colorful birds picking at the roadside were in little hurry to fly up.

We treated the wounds of snake bites, skin diseases due to malnourishment and lack of cleanliness, the usual heartburn and back pain, made incisions of nasty abscesses, cured burn wounds after the application of a local method of treating pains by red-hot charcoal. One night we spent in a village about 120 km from Wajir, in a wooden house. We even got beds with mosquito nets, but it was a cold night! The wind came from the nearby hills and kept blowing all night long. Next morning I had no bites but a bad cold. In this village there was even a kind of sanitary installation we could use. But actually we preferred the bushes! The people were very friendly, offered us food and the very delicious Chai. Another good experience was our Mobile Clinic in the shadow of a big tree. There was plenty of space, plenty of wind and fresh air, mothers and children being treated on mats, our pharmacy spread out on mats. Many people were waiting for consultation, now and then a young goat came to visit us. Another pleasant

working situation we found in a village in a goats' pen hurriedly swept clean of the goats droppings. Tree surrounded by a thorny hedge, plenty of space, mats on the ground, ready to work.

During almost two weeks we "toured" the most remote villages, we met people living the most simple way of life, and realizing this I always wondered to myself, why I do need so many things to be happy: TV, radio, PC, theatre, pictures on the wall, hundreds of books around me, car... But on the second look the romantic aspects of African village life faded away more and more when I saw the effects of lack of water, no education, unbalanced diet, etc. And would I like to bring up seven or more children starting at the age of 15, each year another one? And yet these people are part of the human family, they may be happy the way they live but we should offer them possibilities to improve in certain fields like access to health care, sanitation, clean water, and education, without disrupting their traditions. During these two weeks there was no access to any email, phone cells would work only within the reach of Wajir, we were definitely cut off from the outer world.

Four weeks of volunteer work are coming to an end. In the course of time they turned out to be a new and also fascinating experience which I had never expected when applying for this mission. Soon I will be leaving via a small plane to Nairobi (three hour flight instead of a four day bus trip) where I will meet friends and stay with the Sisters of the Precious Blood for one week. A chance to come back to civilization gradually.

To all my friends greetings and wishes!

Felicitas

(sitting in El Waq, Kenya, compound on an improvised "desk" made from a rough wooden board resting on the end of my bed and my knees)

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