

Somalia: Want and waste

Volunteer agency's founder: 'We bring them to the point where they can walk alone'

Somali refugees' gift from Baw Area

By Scott Winslow
Examiner staff writer

Last of four parts
In a San Francisco home there is a shelf lined with eight albums of photos chronicling a refugee's life. A woman reviews an album, places it on a table and opens it.

Each page is covered with the upturned faces of very young Third World children. Their skins are smooth, their eyes are clear, and their parents are in their graves.

Look. Look at them all," says the woman, pointing. She is dark haired and high-strung, smoking tarantulas, wearing a rose of urania, with every word and breath.

Hundreds of infants and toddlers pass by, faces in a slight crowd lined to war, famine and pestilence. Illuminated by the glare of flashlights, the children unknowingly become, with a strange power that makes some things deep inside. Doors to the human heart.

For Maria Eitz, founder and director of Medical Volunteers International, the Baw Area relief agency providing health care in Somali refugee camps, the 126 million displaced persons worldwide represent a moral and emotional imperative.

"Having been a refugee, having lost my family, every person threatened the child as well as his own life," says Eitz, a 42-year-old psychologist from West Larch who arrived in this country in 1941.

Near her said a black boy, half Cambodian and half Somali, and a heroin addict said Eitz has really adopted the children as well as two others of Asian and African descent.

Last April, after watching the situation in the Horn of Africa build to emergency proportions, MVI's board of directors sent to Somalia a team of six volunteers from the Baw Area, including eight nurses and four doctors.

"It's always a matter of being your time waiting for the plane to leave," Eitz says. The volunteers landed at the airport in Mogadishu, the Somali nation's Indian Ocean capital, then traveled north to Lamel River some 200 miles along the Shabelle River toward the Ethiopian border.

In two camps 45 kilometers east of Belet Weyn, the capital of the province of Hiiraan, they established two clinics, dispensaries and feeding stations, joining more than two dozen other international volunteer agencies, the United Nations and the Somali government in a crash effort to save lives throughout the starving nation.

The camps (Baw) and Lamel are home to an estimated 900,000 Somalis and houses the camp majority women and children whose husbands and fathers died in the 1977-79 war with Ethiopia.

Many women are also fighting on in the displaced Ogaden region of eastern Ethiopia with roving Somali guerrilla bands. Some still struggle to maintain corn and root crops in the arid country at the foot of the high Ethiopian highlands.

Half of MVI's first team came down with malaria, hepatitis or a parasite disease within two months, but the effort began earlier this year continues today. Forty MVI volunteers, including members of the groups' 1979 effort on behalf of Khmer Rouge refugees in Thailand, have worked in Somalia since last spring. Ten workers currently are in the field. MVI expects to leave Somalia through 1981.

There has been progress, according to Eitz. Last April, she says, "MVI's work was 80 percent curative and 20 percent preventive. From mid-June through mid-July, 30-40 children died at each of the camps, three dispensaries."

Now, our work is 90 percent preventive and 10 percent curative and we lose three children at most per week in both camps together," Eitz says.

"We're not a disaster group," she insists. "What we'd like to do is give aid to people so they can do what needs to be done. We bring them to the point where they can walk alone in exchange for their dedication and the



'Having been a refugee, having lost my family,' says Maria Eitz, 'every person threatened as I was becomes my family'

lifelong doses of Ampicillin, a semi-synthetic penicillin, and Tetracycline, a broad-spectrum antibiotic. They administer MVI volunteers are rewarded with experience and perspective. They would have been unlikely to get it home.

"I changed my life. I have a new set of values. I was able to get a lot of my own problems in perspective. I realized I was very lucky. I learned a great deal about discipline and compassion, but mostly about strength and endurance," says Andrea Kretz, 28, an emergency-room nurse at Berkeley's Alta Bates Hospital.

"Says Jane Cleveland, 42, a Kaiser Oakland nurse: "When the wind is blowing and there's dust in your eyes and your mouth and your hair, your right down to the city center. The country is so harsh. The struggle basically is a struggle to survive. But no heart in it. In this kind of work it's not a feeling — there but for the grace of God go we or my daughter."

"I tell them they are wrong if they expect to get more out than they give, and they are wrong if they do not honor the Somali people," she says.

"There's a child died and one of our nurses cried. An old man came to me and said, 'I have a lot of love. You and I are the only ones that have enough water to try.'"

"Only two volunteers were sent home," Eitz adds. "One was disappointed of the Somali and was pulled out after 10 days. Another, an excellent nurse, took 14 days leave rather than the four days allowable each

month. She betrayed the trust of the group."

According to a U.S. field officer with responsibility for East Africa and Nigeria, MVI rates highly among nongovernmental agencies active on the beleaguered continent.

However, both the U.N. official and Dr. Donald Waldman, of Center for Disease Control in Atlanta, who did the first epidemiological study of the Somali emergency, contend that relief workers should not be immune from criticism because of the altruistic nature of their jobs.

"It would be nice to look at these situations objectively and try to learn what we can, but it helps," Eitz says. "They mock their alcoholism in New York, but not in the bushlands."

Not to drinking the only significant distraction for relief workers in the remote land, the official asserts. From the conversations and imitations, there's a lot of young people in these situations."

Says the official: "You know that old saying, 'You don't have to be crazy to work here — but it helps.' They mock their alcoholism in New York, but not in the bushlands."

Not likely. Eitz would not try to solve a Somali refugee crisis by shipping more and more food to the bush. That only draws more refugees there.

If they understood, they would know that the U.N. World Food Program's Emergency Fund is now digging at Baw Camp will make that spot in the bush a permanent settlement. With a constant supply of water, Baw becomes a city — a city surrounded by spreading desert, piled clean of firewood and fuel by a population naturally concentrated there. A city that can offer no means of livelihood to the inhabitants it has lured. A city that will have to be perpetually fed, or perpetually half-starved — a point on the map as definite as Mogadishu itself.

Do they understand? Some say they do. Among the senior relief officials, those who have been around longest, who have some experience in Africa, there is the sense that something is dramatically wrong.

Listen to Robert J. Lauenberg, head of the U.S. food program in Somalia: "Oh, I go on the record about that. It's a disaster. You cannot put those people on a diet and break up their traditional relationships of family and clan without running the society. It's destructive. It's a disaster. And the longer it goes on, the more disastrous it is."

Otto Magnuschke, the delegate in Somalia for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, is the man in charge of the whole relief effort. He says his program has been "a disaster" to the people it was meant to aid. He suggested that the food distribution might have drawn more nomads from the bush, created refugees.

"When you have a relief operation like this carrying on for years, you must, to an extent, admit the possibility, even the probability, that a substantial number of people have been attracted because you have a focal point. It may create a momentum which helps and there, encourage people to come."



Kris Jackson, a new volunteer, finds the children shy but she quickly meets them on their terms

'It's hard to know them'

By Richard Ben Cramer
Knight News Service

BOOTO REFUGEE CAMP, Hiiraan District, Somalia — Through the darkness of the quiet camp, Awali came to say goodbye. He came to the compound of the American medical volunteers, and he called the men "my brother" and the women "my sister."

In the end, the young American had to concede that they liked Awali. While he was camp commander, they fought him, cursed him and fed to whomsoever they could every bit of dirt about him. They had said the Awali was engaged, that he was a thief. At times, in anger, they had thought him responsible for some of the starvation at Bawo.

But now, in part through their efforts, he was being transferred. He had landed on his feet. He was going to Mogadishu to take a better job in the Office of the president.

"He had finished a little of the mission of the sending. Corruption did not come from the top. I did not corrupt."

But as the talk of the sending continued and did not seem to threaten, his lips began to give way to a sad, little smile. "I know everything about it," he said. "You Americans cannot understand."

"It is impossible to stop it. We are in Africa. Do you know what that means? In Africa, there is a feeling of nationalism. You want your country to have a foot. Here, we have tribes. Every man belongs to a tribe."

"So, if you take this man who is stealing and put him in the jail you will be killed. He has family — he tribe."

"Really, you do not understand. You would be killed."

Awali struggled for a moment to find some way to make the Americans understand. There was much that was hard for them to understand, including the bonds of Somali clanhood.

"It is like a plane leaving Moscow," Awali said, finally. "One plane with atomic bombs is flying toward New York. What will happen?"

"That plane will drop its bombs on New York. But after it will have to place to land because by the time it gets back, Moscow will be finished."

He looked around at the American again. "Really, you cannot understand. We live in a tribal military dictatorship. You cannot understand."

How much do they understand? Those Americans and British, Italian, French, German and Swiss — all the earnest, well-meaning ones of the refugee relief machine — do they understand the society they have come to aid?

They understand, for example, clan politics. That President Mohamed Siad Barre comes from a clan called Harjan and served in his clan's militia with the Ogaden, those refugees, whom he has to keep in the country as long as he can — structures himself with his hundreds of thousands of members against the ambitions of the rival clan group called the Ogadenis.

Not likely. It is too complicated. Awali would they find out? Siad has made it difficult even to talk of clan in Somalia. Discussion of the issue is scarce and secret. Most foreigners cannot hope to find out.

And yet, they know about the system of clan. They know about the politics of Somalia, the pressures of the officials they meet, the alliances and the enmities. They get a handle on the life that ends the refugees of about half of that life that is what they would know the organization of the clan and how the power and hence the food flows through the phalanx of family ties.

Do the foreigners understand the life activity of the nomad, walking with his herd and his house, moving his family and all his belongings to the source of food and water?

Not likely. Eitz would not try to solve a Somali refugee crisis by shipping more and more food to the bush. That only draws more refugees there.

If they understood, they would know that the U.N. World Food Program's Emergency Fund is now digging at Baw Camp will make that spot in the bush a permanent settlement. With a constant supply of water, Baw becomes a city — a city surrounded by spreading desert, piled clean of firewood and fuel by a population naturally concentrated there. A city that can offer no means of livelihood to the inhabitants it has lured. A city that will have to be perpetually fed, or perpetually half-starved — a point on the map as definite as Mogadishu itself.

Do they understand? Some say they do. Among the senior relief officials, those who have been around longest, who have some experience in Africa, there is the sense that something is dramatically wrong.

Listen to Robert J. Lauenberg, head of the U.S. food program in Somalia: "Oh, I go on the record about that. It's a disaster. You cannot put those people on a diet and break up their traditional relationships of family and clan without running the society. It's destructive. It's a disaster. And the longer it goes on, the more disastrous it is."

Otto Magnuschke, the delegate in Somalia for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, is the man in charge of the whole relief effort. He says his program has been "a disaster" to the people it was meant to aid. He suggested that the food distribution might have drawn more nomads from the bush, created refugees.

"When you have a relief operation like this carrying on for years, you must, to an extent, admit the possibility, even the probability, that a substantial number of people have been attracted because you have a focal point. It may create a momentum which helps and there, encourage people to come."