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CCP 12-5593-0

THE BABIES FEEDING PROGRAM

Started in **2002**, this program is the latest we launched. Unlike the other actions set up with the local office of the Saint Vincent de Paul Society (SVDP), it is an emergency aid program. Its aim is **to ensure the survival of the children in the camps of displaced people on the outskirts of Khartoum.**

Having fled from the war and famine ravaging the South, two millions people have been living for several years in camps around the capital.

Their living conditions are all the more precarious, since the authorities often move them further away in the desert.

Camping in the middle of nowhere at one hour / one hour and a half from the city centre by car (taking chaotic trails), these derelict populations have many difficulties finding means of subsistence.

Since the signature, early 2005, of the peace agreement between the Khartoum government and the separatists of southern Sudan, the everyday life of these populations has not really changed.

Most IDPs have neither the means of traveling back to the South, nor the hope of finding anything but a devastated area where famine, economic chaos¹ and insecurity are prevailing. In 2009, inter-tribal conflicts in some southern states have made thousands of victims. Some displaced people who went back South in 2006, have since returned.



In addition, the recent conflict in Darfur had taken over the North/South one, and the escaping population has been swelling the ranks of displaced people in Khartoum.

¹ No infrastructure whatsoever, all kinds of traffics and speculations, a cost of living three times higher than in Khartoum, no schools...

The association has founded **feeding centres for kids between 3 and 7 years**, knowing that when they are older, children are able to manage more easily on they own.

This action fights the effects of malnutrition (psychic disorders, immunizing deficiencies, motor and intellectual troubles, deterioration of reproductive functions, blindness, death).

Moreover, there are much fewer children roaming the “streets” near our centers.

Finally, by ensuring **a daily meal, 3 days per week**, for the little children, this program makes it possible to their parents to devote their energy to other needs.

It should be noted on this matter that some of our feeding centres are located in our vocational training centres for adults.

We have built and equipped these centres, on lands that have been most often bought by the Saint Vincent de Paul Society.

One of the center distributes food to the babies who live confined with their mother in prisons for women.

Until 2007, the number of feeding centers created by SVDP was 17 and the number of meals provided was 5 per week. In 2008, a center has been closed. **In 2009**, the fall of funding resulting from the global financial crisis, and the rising food prices have forced us to

reduce the number of weekly meals from 5 to 3 **and to close 7 of our 16 centers from March (when all the food that was stored has been consumed) to August.**

Since September 2009, thanks to the contribution of donors like the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there are again 8100 children who received these meals.

Finally in 2009, an average of 4 228 children have received three meals per week against 8 010 children last year.

These figures represent the regularly registered children. They are below the actual number of beneficiary children (around 5100 children).

The total cost of this program has been reduced by 60% in 2010. It has even been slightly under the budget set at the beginning of the year (-1%).

Despite the heavy logistics of the program, **food represents half of its total cost**, knowing that the price of certain staple food has risen sharply again, for the third consecutive year: lentils +76%, rice + 50 %, onions + 87% ...



SVDP has a drinking water supply program. But the cost of water supply of the feeding centres is borne by the feeding program.

The maintenance costs of the centres are high (15% of the total). Often built out of fragile material (reeds, bamboo, wood or even plastic...), the buildings and the fences around the centres are subject to damage caused by the summer storms. This year, the torrential rains in August were the highest in 21 years. Maintenance work had to be made in our Gebel Awlia and Kharia West Omdurman centres.

Then the government sometimes requires the relocation of our centres for "city planning" reasons (!). We must therefore rebuild the centres a bit further. This year it is the Amal centre, in Mayo, that had to be rebuilt and equipped again.



The centres being very distant from one another, it is necessary to have a staff on site in each centre to prepare the meals. The distribution is made by some mothers of children who are registered in the program.

Each person in charge supervises three or four centres, according to their geographical proximity.

The staff has been reduced **from about 100 people in 2008 to 58 employees in 2009, from which 70% are**

women. There is only one salaried person.

However, wage costs amount for € 26,531 (13% of the total program costs), that include a fixed charge of 14% (6500 €) of the staff expenses of SVDP's offices in Khartoum.

The remaining € 20,000 are the single salary and the cost of the food distributed to the volunteers as their payment; it should be noted that this year again, the price of certain foodstuff has risen sharply.

Finally, personnel expenses decreased by 48% compared to 2008 and 12% compared to 2007.

Vehicles are undergoing daily trials, and the breakdowns are frequent; occurring sometimes in the middle of the desert; they cause a great loss of time. That is why SVDP sometimes prefers now to rent some vehicles near the feeding centres to transport food supplies, rather than have one of its old wrecks come from downtown.

In 2009, transport costs account for only 8% of the total cost of the program, as against 12% in 2007.

SVDP overheads (transport and wages not included) charged to this program account for 6% of its total costs.

Total costs of a meal	2006	2007	2008	2009
In €	0,30	0,20	0,23	0,34
In CHF	0,50	0,30	0,35	0,51

Two testimonies

The representative of one of our English donors:

« I rarely cry. On more than one occasion I have been accused of, at best, having a heart of stone and, at worst, having no heart at all. I managed to remain objective at some of the smaller, quieter centres. When we visited one of the larger centres, however, my emotions took over. Confronted with the sight of 500 babies and children clamouring for food with arms outstretched I could not hold back the tears. As I watched a little girl, no more than six years old, refuse to eat until the baby in her arms had stopped reaching out for more food, I was completely and utterly overwhelmed.



The weekend before I went to Sudan I visited some friends who had recently had a baby. As I sat among the children at the centre I tried to imagine how I would feel if it were their son sitting on the dirt floor. How would they feel having to watch their son crying out for food while flies settled around his eyes? I couldn't imagine it because I knew it would never happen. We would not tolerate such a situation in the UK. Yet the people who are being

served by the centres have no choice but to tolerate it: having been forced out of their homes and away from their livelihoods the parents of these children are politically impotent. They do not choose to tolerate the situation: they are forced to.

Sitting among the children at the centre the desperation and magnitude of the situation began to dawn on me.

At my desk in London I had written about the Baby Feeding programme and my aim was to encourage individuals to donate money so that the project was financially viable.

At no point did I question the need for such a programme.

I would not wish this for my own child yet I had accepted without a second thought that this was a basic need in Sudan. If it is not good enough or acceptable for me, for us, why is it permissible for the people of Sudan? But until that question is answered there are empty stomachs to fill.”

Deacon Robert Ferrua, volunteer of Caritas Monaco (in March 2010):

"The morning fears were justified: it is difficult to hold back the tears in front of the sufferings of a small child, and it's also hard to bear those looks. But this contact gives us the strength to continue our mission, especially for us who are in affluence.

We enter the centre. It is a large courtyard surrounded by a wall, with three rooms: a storage facility with a reserve of food for one month, a small kitchen with a gas stove, and separate toilets for boys / girls. Outside: the water tank, and bowls for the hygiene of the children.

Despite the limited facilities and equipment, the centre is clean, many people (men and women)

are present to assist, support, monitor and entertain children. A reeds roof protects from the sun and the heat. On the ground, a large straw mat welcomes the children. We see them still happy, and very well behaved. They welcome us with great dignity. At breakfast, ¼ litre of milk will be served, and today for lunch, rice and lentils are on the menu. The children sing to welcome us. The degree of solidarity between them surprises us: the elder ones help the small ones, and they are also often fed, as at home, there is nothing to eat. "

What prospects?

In March 2009, many Western NGOs working in these camps and in Darfur had to pack up and leave the country within 24 hours. Thank God, it did not happen to our local partner SVDP, a 100% Sudanese NGO, which we have chosen to cooperate with for 24 years.

Our flexible, economical and effective organization has convinced our donors in Switzerland, Austria, France, England and Australia. Their support has enabled us to pursue our struggle to improve the living conditions of children in IDP camps.

In the beginning of 2010, two new donors have decided to support the continuation of this program:

- **the Swiss Confederation**, through the Swiss Embassy in Khartoum, has donated six tons of milk powder;
- **the Australian Federation of St. Vincent de Paul** has made a donation that ensures the food distribution to 1000 children during the 10 remaining months in 2010, after the end (in February) of the contribution of the French Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs,



which had been supporting this program for many years.

As far as the evolution of this program is concerned, SVDP plans to provide, within or from these centres, other services to children, thus gradually transforming this emergency aid into development assistance.

So whenever possible, SVDP helps parents to enrol their children in nearby schools.

If we had enough money to meet the urgent needs for food, we could then think about making available to children some toys and athletic equipment.

(Pictures : Florent Jullien)