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## **LETTER TO FRIENDS OF SISTER EMMANUELLE**

**No. 78**

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Dear Friends,

### **News from Sudan**

At the end of January our Swiss-German friends, Elizabeth Droz, Dr. Alfred Höfler and his wife Gaby, accepted Kamal's invitation to visit Sudan. Mrs. Droz has sent us the following brief report on their visit:

Knowing something of Kamal, his projects and the problems he faces, we thought we knew what was in store for us. The same stories, the same problems, except that the numbers of refugee children needing to be taken in, fed and educated increases year by year. But to actually see these schools with their thousands of children squashed on to benches like sardines, a class of 60 – 75 children in a classroom of about 25 sq. metres, was simply overwhelming. At mealtime (the only one of the day for most of them) they receive an aluminium plate full of beans – just one plate per bench – from which they help themselves with their hands. It did not look too appetising to us, but to see these children with their questioning eyes, so well-behaved, shy at first but then excited at playtime, was deeply moving.

We visited a dozen schools with around 1500 pupils in each. The schools are situated well out of town in the desert where the children live in primitive huts. With sand and water they make bricks, which they dry in the sun and with which they can construct walls. Too often the government's bulldozers demolish the "rakubas" which are constructed out of bamboo. They hope that their "hard" walls will stand a better chance of surviving. In this desert, where the sun beats down mercilessly and where there are no trees to provide shade, one imagines that rain would be considered a gift from God – but no! It would be a catastrophe since the bricks that were not fully hardened would break and the buildings collapse. Fortunately it does not often rain!

One of the teachers told us that he has a one-hour's walk to get to his school. His return home in the afternoon is under the searing sun with only sand as far as the eye can see. It is not surprising that some teachers try to find work nearer home or even abroad. The teacher we spoke to stays at his post for the love of his people and the refugee children, cherishing the hope that he will one day be able to return to his native home in the South where there are meadows with vegetation and enough means to survive.

After the playtime we are invited to go outside where 1500 pupils are assembled in total silence. We are dazzled by this silence which seems to last an eternity; 3000 questioning eyes are watching us. What response can we give them? Can we honestly tell them “we will continue to help you, feed you, protect you and love you”. We will certainly do our best – but is this sufficient? In this school there are “only” 1500 pupils, but there are many other schools looking after over 60,000 pupils and this number continues to grow.

There are even poorer districts. One teacher told us that the greatest problem is hunger. Ninety per cent of refugees have no work. Sometimes they walk for three hours to the nearest town in the hope of finding some odd job. They leave at three-o-clock in the morning and return at seven, eight or nine-o-clock in the evening. At the beginning of the school year 1150 children were enrolled, but this number has fallen to 900. The others were no longer strong enough to come to school. The teacher who told us this was, himself, very thin and seemed in poor health.

Yet another teacher told us that his small salary was quickly used up since all his relatives and friends came to eat at his place and, in addition to his own family, he had to provide for the wife and five children of his deceased brother.

We also visited many homes and farms that accommodated the children rescued from the streets. Rooms in the homes had 6 to 8 beds and, in the farms, there were up to 16 beds to a room. Each child had a wooden box in which to keep his possessions. In fact making these boxes is the first job of apprentice carpenters. These children nevertheless looked happy. They were all properly dressed and the girls, in particular, care about their appearance and went out of their way to welcome us with songs and dances.

At the farm Hag Yousif we met Ibrahim, a boy who had had his left arm amputated. He was, however, very gifted and, exceptionally, he had a table in a room which had 16 bunk beds. On this table he had drawings showing his talent. To encourage him I asked Kamal to enquire whether I could buy one. This poor boy then offered me the drawing I had chosen but would accept nothing in return. I was deeply moved and embarrassed by this gesture. Kamal suggested giving the money to the head of the farm who would buy clothes with it. He assured me that Ibrahim would be able to follow a course in the art of handwriting and drawing. Good luck to the future artist!

We also had the pleasure of attending the certificate distribution ceremony for 150 apprentices in electricity, shoe repairing, carpentry and sewing. We were impressed with everything we saw and can only repeat the Kamal and his colleagues make out of a minimum a MAXIMUM.

Michel Bittar  
President

**On the 19<sup>th</sup> April, Sister Emmanuelle, who celebrates this year her 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of service in the church, will be in Geneva to attend a concert of Negro Spirituals. This will be held in the John XXIII Centre, ch. Adolphe Pasteur in Petit Saconnex at 8.00 pm. Proceeds from this concert will provide scholarships for graduates from the “rakubas” who have managed to gain entrance to Sudanese Universities.**