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LETTER TO THE FRIENDS OF SISTER EMMANUELLE

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Dear Friends,

SUDAN

In my previous letter I was guilty of an unforgivable oversight which I must rectify right at the beginning of this letter. Probably due to the pressure of my imminent departure to Khartoum on behalf of the Association, I omitted to include "OPERATION ORANGE", created by our friend Jean Sage in the South of France, among our principal donors. This is all the more unforgivable since "Operation Orange" has contributed every year to the financing of all our programmes in Sudan and particularly the one which provides drinking water in the refugee camps surrounding the capital. Jean could have been angry at this omission and borne me a grudge. Not at all. This good friend, now retired, simply sent me a gentle reminder, which shows what sort of man he is. My apologies, Jean, and I hope to have put things right with this preamble.

On the 8th of February, just before Sudanese schools closed for the end of the school year, Mr. Trao N'guyen, from the French Association, and myself met up in Khartoum for a 5-day visit. The detailed report of this visit, which was sent to me by Trao, makes fascinating reading. Unfortunately it is too long to be included in this letter. Nevertheless, anyone wishing to read this report has only to request a copy and I will be pleased to send one. I give below, however, some of my strongest impressions.

The population around the capital has literally exploded. I was told that there were around 8 million inhabitants, which is a quarter of the population of the country. This over-population of the city's outskirts comes at the expense of the regions affected by the civil war. The infrastructure has, of course, not kept pace with the population growth and a large part of the displaced population live in camps in conditions of extreme deprivation, with no electricity, no means of transport and no water. The presence of the church and the "rakubas", therefore, take on a meaning which goes far beyond the services rendered. I was able to see with my own eyes how much the various activities centred around the "rakubas" (vocational training, lessons of hygiene and first-aid, women's workshops, odd jobs etc.) give back to the men, women and adolescents new HOPE. They are no longer alone, abandoned by everybody, without a future. TOGETHER they are organising themselves to build a future...with only the most modest of means (old sewing machines, small electrical appliances used for demonstration, a few books, a few tools) and a little raw material (a few metres of leather, some wood, thread and paint) all of which is carefully and proudly kept under lock and key in old containers to be re-used in subsequent lessons. The number of people benefiting from these programmes, which function smoothly and well, is enormous and this explains why they cost so much. We believe it is

essential to strengthen the educational aspects of these programmes to develop the survival ability of these displaced persons and to motivate them into succeeding.

One needs to have seen these camps situated far from the outlying villages to have an idea of what their daily lives consist of. The “pisé” houses (made of clay and straw) are built in one piece without doors or windows with just openings to let in the air and the sand... The walls merge with the ground and on the tracks, where lorries have left deep ruts, there passes occasionally a water cart pulled by a donkey on which is perched a young boy who sells his water. There is no respite from the sun and, since it shines directly above, there is no shade. There is not a blade of grass. And in the camp of “Gabarona”, which is a highly significant name meaning “they have forced us”, close to 500,000 people survive. How do they survive? It is a mystery to me. How do they manage to feed themselves? How do they go to work? What do they do with their days? Because one sees very few people in the scorched streets; all, in the hope of earning a few pounds, make their way to the town centre where small street shops offer to passers-by all sorts of goods, edible or not.

What was the strongest impression I brought back from this trip? It was that of contrast...between the virtually hopeless pain that I saw in the dejected and mournful looks of some of the children and adolescents, victims of traumatic experiences in their short lives that only God knows about...It was heartbreaking! And the lively, happy, smiling faces of the local project staff whose lives had clearly taken on new meaning. And beyond the immediate help given to the most deprived, I understood that the most important element of what we are doing is this: to give back hope and a reason to live to a whole population.

To conclude, here, in their own words, are the experiences of three of the adolescents from our homes. The curtness of the language is largely due to the fact that they are not expressing themselves in their mother tongue. And shyness probably also play a role. How could someone be interested to hear about their miserable lives? But, from their own simple factual accounts, we are able to get a glimpse of the horror they have lived through.

1. Miss Ayat Otto:

At the start of the war in South Sudan I moved from my town Embeli to Wau. When the war also started in Wau I proceeded to Khartoum.

While in Khartoum we were feeding ourselves from the food left in the coffee places. We started roaming about in the streets of Khartoum. We started meeting other vagrants. We were brought to St. Vincent de Paul Society where we received instruction in social behaviour. The Society looked after us well.

We finished primary education and the secondary one. Now I am in Juba University. My college is Social Studies. So, many thanks to the Society and all those who cared for me.

2 Mr. John Weigo Feng: (Born in 1278 in Mankin)

As the war became fierce in the South I moved with my parents to the south of Kadugli in the west of Sudan. Then we travelled to Khartoum. As my parents were illiterate and poor I started selling plastic