

128. Life Goes On, More Or Less

A cease-fire agreement for South Sudan was signed on 23rd January but it has had little effect in resolving the conflict. Sporadic fighting continues in some areas and the dispute between the leaders continues without sign of resolution. At least the fighting has not spread to other States: the peaceful areas remain peaceful and one gains an impression, rightly or wrongly, that the rebels are losing momentum as supplies of ammunition, fuel and food dry up. I think much of what is reported is based on impressions rather than reliable information.

After the agreed cease-fire was signed, nonetheless, nine Comboni priests, brothers and sisters were driven, from their houses in Leer by aggressive invaders and have now spent twelve nights in the remote bush, probably with little food, no purified water and no change of clothes. They are with the local people whom they serve. The recent nights in South Sudan have been unseasonably cool. I wonder how cold it is for them in the bush with no beds, nor fresh clothes to put on. The Combonis, however, seem to take tough missionary assignments as the norm and do remarkable work in isolated places.

For most of us, life goes on as usual but we pray often for our isolated friends. For four years we went to Leer to deliver teacher training at this time but concluded the programme last year. We now fear also for the welfare of our Leer graduates who were very responsible and positive. They are Nuer and one disturbing thought, since the 'white army' rebels are also Nuer, is that many innocent people, such as those in Leer, will now be victimized in other parts of the country simply because they are classified as part of that tribal group. Retribution is an unfortunate, ingrained part of the culture here.

During this past week, I visited our teacher training in Yambio where local people from several different cultures mix together in friendly and supportive fashion. The programme is going very well with instruction for seven hours each day. Although education of teachers is the prime goal, our teaching and nurse training colleges that recruit nationally are also helping the process of reconciliation and recognition of all people as valuable. In these Colleges, traditional tribal enmities are overcome and a South Sudanese nationality, rather than tribal identity, is being forged. The informal processes of cooperation and mutual living in our residential college are very significant contributors to reconciliation. So we are determined they will go on.

In Malakal, where the situation is still far from secure, we have had to suspend our programmes. The damage must be repaired. It was principally beds and mattresses that were stolen, along with food, suitcases and clothes. The looters were selective, however, leaving behind religious habits and liturgical vestments! Now the danger is stealing by hungry residents who are simply trying to survive. There has been so much death, damage and waste – and now desperation.

Our pastoral team, with the support of the Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese, are planning for the delivery of a workshop and retreat, with a focus on trauma healing, for priests and religious of the Makakal diocese. Malakal is a diocese in diaspora with only three priests and the retired bishop remaining in Malakal. In the other major towns, or should I say ruins, of Bor, Bentiu and Leer, there are no priests and almost no people! There are so many dead who have been buried unceremoniously by the UN, the Red Cross, and other NGO personnel. One catechist, after being trapped for a month in the bush, was finally brought out only to learn his elderly mother had been shot dead.

Out of the death and the ashes, new hope must emerge. The tragic crisis here makes the problems in some other parts of the world seem minor indeed. - Br Bill