

Amazing change

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Refugee children from Darfur attend a primary school. (photo by Jane Roy)

Vaulting up the water tower was clearly one of the more audacious things we have done in all our trips to Sudan. It couldn't be helped, for reasons you'll find below.

Three years ago, when a team of Londoners discovered that some 100,000 Darfur refugees had flooded into the area where we worked in south Sudan, the needs were just so great that it was impossible for our organization, Canadian Aid for Southern Sudan (CASS), to supply them all. Historic settlements were in danger of being overrun by the newcomers, whose needs covered every basic of life.

Returning to Canada, we put in a request to the Canadian government on behalf of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) for funds to meet the basic needs of the refugees. A year later, \$3 million was granted and work began.

It wasn't until our most recent trip in January we witnessed the effects of those funds and it was remarkable.

In 11 refugee villages, the IOM had built schools, women's centres for democracy and education, and micro-enterprise businesses for the women in the local markets. Everywhere we journeyed, these communities wanted to express thanks to Canada, often waiting for days for our arrival.

But it was the sight of the gleaming silver water towers with the large Canada flags on the side that brought our excitement to the surface.

The IOM had done its research and building well, constructing in-ground water systems through pipes running under the villages. (All the trenches were dug by the villagers themselves.) Deep wells had been dug and the water was pumped up the towers by the use of solar panels.

Throughout the villages, people could frequent any of the watering stations and just turn on a tap to receive clean drinking water - a remarkable thing to behold.

Walking up to the tower in Manjankar, a village of 3,500 resettled refugees from Darfur, several London team members climbed the ladder to the top and surveyed the entire village. The changes were indeed gratifying. Satisfied with all that the Canadian money had provided, the villagers had opted to stay where they were instead of overrunning other traditional villages nearby. In one significant dispersal of Canadian money, the region had been stabilized and growth had begun.

We visited other such villages close to the border of Darfur and found similar advancements. Through what seemed like endless meetings with local officials, we learned the entire region had survived the previous difficult months because of the generosity of Canadians.

Speaking with some of the Canadian team members at the end of the day, one of them commented, "That's the difference government money can make." And they were right.

It was a remarkable success story lived out in one of the most remote regions of the planet, brought about by the wonderful generosity of Canadians and the resolve and tenacity of the Sudanese themselves. With 11 villages altogether, the Canadian funds had not only transformed the area, but also alleviated mounting pressure on the region's resources. Now our challenge is to make sure these essentials remain maintained for years to come.

The challenges presented by the Darfur arrivals are pressing but hardly exclusive - other CASS programs are also proceeding in rewarding ways.

This year's team oversaw everything from CASS's Water School in the more developed areas, Abuk's Herd (an initiative to provide goats to former slaves and exiles), and the provision of medical supplies to a local clinic.

And for the fourth year in succession, London jazz singer Denise Pelley and Lucy Ogletree, an artist who owns the Winter Wheat store near Sparta, enjoyed the management of their music and art camps, respectively.

With the IOM, CASS will be constructing a new high school in the Yargot region for the Darfur returnees. And with the kind gift from former prime minister Paul Martin of \$100,000 from his personal funds, a second high school will be constructed by CASS, with another non-governmental organization, and with the co-operation of village elders, tribal chiefs and the Southern Sudan Ministry of Education.

With all the debate swirling around foreign aid these days, it is important to remember that across Africa similar successes are being recounted by non-governmental organizations, large and small.

CASS has learned through experience that by staying in one region, even during the most difficult days of a civil war, and participating in the building of peace that follows the end of such conflicts, the ability of international development to provide new life and economic opportunity for what were once hopeless situations, opportunities yet remain for Canadians to make remarkable differences.

Our special thanks to all of this year's team members who fully entered into community life and left the compassion of Canadians in every place they touched.

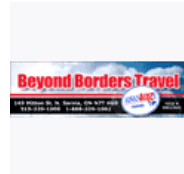
Next year we take our three children, originally from Sudan, along with Paul Martin for the opening of the high schools. It will be a time of deep reflection and thankfulness for all what Canada has done.

But right now, what stays in our minds are those water towers - remarkable feats of engineering, gleaming in the brilliant Sudanese sun and reminders of the great compassion of Canadians.

Glen Pearson is a volunteer national representative with Canadian Aid for Southern Sudan and the member of Parliament for London North Centre.

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