

Comfort International trip to Rwanda and DR Congo, 11th-24th July ~ Roslyn Wilson

A group of eleven - three from a Dumbarton church, others from Lennxotown, East Linton and Broxburn - met at Edinburgh Airport. Among us were an ex-Church of Scotland minister and a retired Baptist minister. Two of our group, an inspirational couple, Billy and Fiona, had been out each of the past 22 years. When we arrived in Kigali we were joined by a couple from Brazil.

From the outset, the trip had been difficult to organise for the staff and volunteers at Comfort International, since we were on a connecting flight in Qatar. The journey continued in the same vein, as our flight from Edinburgh was delayed and we missed our connection to Kigali. This meant travelling via Nigeria but not before two security alerts in Doha airport!

We had plenty of time to bond on our long journey and I look back upon our group with great fondness. After arriving at our guest house in Kigali at 9pm on the 12th and washing through our clothes (our suitcases had not been transferred from Nigeria and we didn't get them until 3 days later), half of our group travelled the next morning to DR Congo, a journey of four and a half hours. The journey was very beautiful; the land is verdant and small subsistence farmers have terraced plantations all down the hillsides. Entering Congo was a shock; the area around Goma is very poor and the volcanic nature of the soil means that everything is covered in a grey ash.

Our time was spent visiting some of the charity's many projects. We went straight to Hope Village, our first of two visits, where we met Callum Henderson, the CEO of Comfort International, who has twice spoken at Liberton Kirk. He had been out for two weeks already and was planning to visit Uganda after we left to lead pastor training. Most of the children in Hope Village are ex-soldiers and the adults who are attached to the project are rape survivors. Our colourful journey was relayed to all the children, and after introductions we fed the children with a simple meal of bananas, rolls and water, sang songs and played with the younger children. We heard testimonials from some of the older children, such as Destin, who is now eighteen years old. He has been part of the project for five years, having been on the streets from age eleven to thirteen. His plan was to rob to survive; he got mixed up in fights and the police, he said, 'would do whatever they wanted'. But he found a church, God spoke to him and he started to study. God he said, has helped him, so that one day he can help others. He now lives with a host family in Goma.

We also heard from, among others, Ebambai, now thirty-four years old and part of the Heshima rape survivors project. She tried to leave the displaced people's camp that many had been forced into when the M23 took over Goma. She was followed, her children and herself were beaten, and she was raped. She has seven children, three as a result of rape. She is grateful now that she can send some of her children to school, and the project has helped her start her own business selling potatoes and beans.

We stayed in a seminary in Goma where most of our days had the rhythm of devotions at 7.45am, followed by breakfast, leaving for projects around 9am, returning around 6pm for dinner, followed by reflections. We travelled in a borrowed ambulance (which would be returned immediately if needed) with little suspension. We visited a hospital miles out in a desolate area which had previously housed thousands of displaced people in camps. We spoke to mothers, saw newborn babies, and had a tour of the hospital; it has basic equipment, and the electricity goes out at night. This month 320 patients have been treated and twenty-three women on average deliver per month. Most cases seen are of sexual infection and many of the women have been raped. The doctor told us that the hospital has no perimeter wall and is thus



Hope Village children

not secure; it also needs an oxygen concentrator and surgery kits. The staff however, are inspiring, dedicated and full of love.

Another memorable visit was to Saki orphanage, where we fed fifty children and another sixty, who had gathered outside the orphanage gates. The children just want to be held; there is little comfort or colour inside their home, but it is safe, they are sheltered and loved and receive a basic education. We made craft head-bands with the children, sang songs and did lots of dancing.



Cooking area at Saki



Saki Orphanage



Making crafts at Saki

Before we left Congo we visited the Eglise du Christ du Congo for four hours; where we sang with tambourines, danced and listened to Callum preaching. We did our 'Lost Sheep' drama here again!

Back in Kigali, and re-united with the other half of our team, we visited the Steet Kids Rescue project in Batsinda, where we served beans, rice and yams to the children, did sports, games and crafts, danced and sang. This year there are thirty-two graduates from the project, some of whom have started their own businesses, taxi-ing bicycle services. Eighteen new children have joined, but fourteen of them are still not sponsored. Mupinzi Ejidt had never seen people showing such love and hope before, and could not believe that this could happen in his life. He learned welding and now comes back to the project to inspire younger children. Claude was badly beaten on the street, but never forgets the day he saw a hand reaching towards him while he was living on a rubbish heap. He had never experienced such love before. In his words, 'What was planted has now grown into a fruitful tree'.

Transformation is not easy and it can only be gradual; many of the children carry knives and fight when they first come to the project and find it difficult to trust others. Inspiringly, some street kids are now Comfort International staff.

Then we went to the Joy Centre, where young people are taught sewing and welding. At a pineapple farm high in the hills we heard powerful testimony from genocide survivor Magdalena, who lives in the same community as the man who killed her family during the genocide. It is thirty years since this horrific event, but the work of reconciliation and forgiveness evident in the community could only happen if God were part of it.

We managed an hour's work weeding a pineapple field in the Karengera community before we were taken pity on. Comfort International helped them to buy land and fund the building of a store-house. A church from



Batsinda Street Kid's Rescue

Bishopbriggs is supporting the purchase of more land for growing coffee, tomatoes and yams. One of the most incongruous moments from the trip must have been us in the middle of a field having a video call with a member of the Bishopbriggs church.

God is at work at the heart of this charity. The transformation in the lives of those it touches is really powerful. I am privileged to have heard and seen so much and the people we met will live in my heart forever.

If you are interested in the work of Comfort International or are interested in sponsoring a child or donating to one of their many projects, please visit: comfortinternational.org. The next supporters' day is on Saturday 6th September at the charity headquarters in Cumbernauld. If you are interested in coming along then please text or email: 07772115978/roslyn.wilson@blueyonder.co.uk