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AGAINST FAMINE and PLAGUE

Southern Africa Trip Report

A Report on the Visit of J. Michael Cleverley, Deputy Chief of Mission, and Geoffrey Wiggin, Minister Counselor for Agriculture, U.S. Mission to the United Nations Agencies for Food and Agriculture

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The small commuter plane that flew between Johannesburg and Manzini Airport near the capital of Swaziland lifted off early in the morning, 6:30. As we drew up through the clouds, Nina Sandli of the World Food Programme (WFP) handed me a briefing packet on the UN organization's activities in this small kingdom bordering South Africa. On top the stack of brochures and papers was a fact sheet that grimly noted that the adult prevalence rate of HIV infection in Swaziland was 38.6%, "second highest in the world after Botswana (38.8%)." The statistical difference was so small, we thought, who knows who gets the world's top "honor?" Another WFP Fact Sheet noted that 10% of the families in Swaziland were headed by children; 41%, by women; and "40% of the children under five show signs of chronic malnutrition." Finally, "There is expected to be a rise in illness and death until at least 2008."

This was all context to the visit we had made two days earlier to a community on the outskirts of Soweto Township near Johannesburg. There, an NGO, Humana People to People, had organized local people into a trained team of instructors, called "passionates," to provide intensive HIV/AIDS education to the 100,000 people living in small one-room houses. Videoclip: Passionates
Over the course of three years, they would provide three sessions to at least 90 percent of the inhabitants. Usually, the sessions were one-on-one since traditional African families did not easily speak about sex-related issues between generations or genders. (Another American-based church group, however, told us it had succeeded in providing instruction to 90,000 people gathered as families in southern Africa.) We accompanied a passionate on a home visit. When the instructor pulled out a female condom to explain, the sixty-something year old pupil dropped her mouth in amazement. This was the second session for her and she got high marks for remembering just about everything said in the first. She also correctly debunked the commonly held myths about condoms, like they had worms.

Pauline Njuguna with a four-wheel drive from WFP was at the airport to meet our arrival in Swaziland. As we bumped across the back roads, she ex-

plained the Khuphuka Neighborhood Care Point where we were headed. The primitive center provided a school lunch daily from WFP-provided corn, soy and vegetable oil. The 45 orphans and vulnerable children did not have the $60 a year necessary to attend normal public school.

Videoclip: Khuphuka Care Point

As we talked with the local caretaker of the program, the children surrounded one of the women of our party. Soon she had them singing and dancing. Then, it was their turn. Around her the danced, singing a song whose words went something like, "We all have AIDS; we are all dying of AIDS." Whether they were all dying of AIDS, we, and probably they, didn't really know. But they knew all about dying from AIDS. They saw it all around them.

We drove the dirt road from Khuphuka to the Manyeveni Primary School where enrollment had shot up by 20% over the past year due to the introduction of a WFP school feeding program. Along the road we stopped at a WFP food storage warehouse. Two canvas enclosures provided by Norway stocked primarily US-donated corn, soybeans and vegetable oil. "The 500 hundred children at the school no longer show the same levels of malnourishment as they did when it began," the grinning headmaster told us. The children were full of life, all dressed in colorful uniforms and anxious to have their pictures taken. Teachers fed the children of their own classes. We asked the headmaster if he knew where the food came from. With a gleam in his eyes, "Your country." That was as good a comment about our country that we had heard for a long time.

Behind the school a lone nurse struggled to provide care from a clinic built years ago with funds from an American religious organization. The clinic was now largely forgotten by everyone – except the people who needed it. There was little of anything. The nurse was paid nothing; there was no public support. But WFP provided food for pregnant women and new mothers. That was something. And when the alternative was absolutely no medical care, the nurse's daily uncompensated efforts with hardly anything, seemed little short of heroic. She showed us the cracks that ran in a single line across the walls, floor, and ceiling. We wished we had had a bag of money to offer for repairs. We did not men-

tion that few donors today grant bricks and mortar funds. Nor did we ask why her own government did not provide support for the most basic repairs and supplies.

What we saw in Swaziland was stark, but hope radiated from the young faces whose future was brightened by WFP's school lunch program. That hope was not as apparent when we arrived two days later in Porta Farm squatter camp in Zimbabwe. There, survival, itself, was at issue for many people. Porta Farm was a vulnerable community of people, once farm laborers on large commercial farms and now uprooted and a pariah class for their association with the previous economic order. The Mugabe Government dumped them on empty ground along a main road to Harare where they now have to fend for themselves. The only services available for this community of 10,000 were ten water taps and a primary school set up by a Non Governmental Organization (NGO).

We made the morning rounds with another local NGO that delivered home care. The nurse provided rudimentary medical help and WFP-supplied food to households suffering from AIDS. In one case the house was on the verge of collapsing on the invalid woman occupant – she had had the strength to build it when in good health, but as AIDS weakened her, she was not able to correct the disrepair. On her mud wall she had attached a hand-written poster that read, "I love those who hate me for nothing." In another similar hut, a young man and his wife sat on the dirt floor, exhausted by their AIDS infection, watching their two infant children, as they wasted away. WFP food kept them alive. Next, we went to the house of two children whose parents had already died from AIDS. At seven and twelve years old, these brothers had been catapulted into the world alone. If such personal alienation from life can be degraded into a symbol, it is one of hopelessness shared by millions. But the seven year old cooked WFP soy-maize blend, and the older kept a garden. The nurse said the younger was smart and did a lot.

Given the complete lack of services (people don't even have the money for transportation to clinics to have their physical problems diagnosed and treated – they sit and suffer), the food provided was medicine, sustenance and a suggestion of hope. WFP's representatives were fully engaged and on top these situations, as best as one could, moving food efficiently into the homes of the squatter village's worst cases.

WFP hosts had us at Porta Farm's school in time for the school feeding. The food, com-

ing from US and EU donors via the WFP, the same corn meal-soya blend we saw in Swaziland, was cooked in large pots on wood fires by volunteer mothers. The feeding was strictly for the children. The headmaster of the schools said that enrollment is 1200 children, and he estimated "very conservatively" that were there no feeding, the school would not have more than 800 students. A year ago, before the school feeding began, most of these children were malnourished. That had changed with school lunches. The population of Porta Farm had virtually no land available for producing their own crops. Many families were trying to grow crops around their homes. The only local sources of income were collecting firewood, which was becoming increasingly difficult as more and more distant sources had to be tapped, and fishing. The community was located on the margin of an old commercial farm that had a reservoir rich in fish. The Porta Farm people caught fish and sold them to passing cars on the Harare road. The houses were makeshift shacks made of mud, straw, cardboard, and tin – whatever was available.

Porta Farm was truly a desperate place, and certainly worse than what we found more generally among many other people in the countryside. Nevertheless, the drought of the last two seasons had exacted its toll from these people, leading them to question their normal ability to feed themselves. Working alongside, and hand-in-hand with the WFP were UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) experts who were assisting traditional Black farmers to harvest their crops. It was apparent that under

normal circumstances with supportive policies these were good farmers with a means to sustain themselves. They had lived on their small plots for generations, but still were unable to acquire their land from the State. Standing among the late planted corn and sorghum that looked good now that the rains had finally arrived (any planting done in September in anticipation of the normal arrival of the wet weather was for naught as drought continued), the seeds provided by FAO appeared providential, while food assistance looked unneeded.

In one communal farming area, FAO had introduced treadle pumps for irrigation. With two people standing facing each other, treading up and down, the treadle pump raised water into a hose that could water crops and raise yields enough that even a small 2-acre plot could sustain a family with money left over.

Videoclip: Treadle

Most of the people using treadle pumps had built new homes over the past two to three years with proceeds from their higher yields. We met with a group of 14 farmers who with FAO help ($300 per treadle pump) had installed these pumps. Their testimonials to the time savings, and the extra income generated through their use was persuasive.

In another success story, one of FAO's Zimbabwe projects was bringing traditional small farmers into the commercial market by supporting a local NGO to assist farmers grow for commercial buyers. These farmers were radiant in their expansion plans under the program and for the manner in which they were going to invest their improved income. A key

factor in the success of this project was the time that the implementing NGO spent building the capacity of the farmers before attempting to put them into contract growing. If buyers are disappointed, they would never return to small producers.

In southern Africa, we found some successes, but only within a crisis setting where no one at this moment knows victory. For future generations, today's AIDS epidemic may remain one of the defining events of the late 20th and early 21st century, much as the plague was in earlier centuries.

Videoclip: Linkages

One big difference, of course, is that ignorance of the disease will not be a qualifying defense for our generation. In southern Africa, where the epidemic is at its worst, we saw the international community battling to deal with the epidemic, especially in producing and making available food in societies, the extent of whose devastation was still only becoming evident. The UN's WFP and FAO, in partnership with many nations like ours and with private actors, were fully engaged in this struggle. We were proud that our food was stocking the warehouses, and that we were part of the global attack on hunger. But at the same time, we realized that the challenge ahead is formidable.