

It so happens that I've left the best for last. Today we head off in our 30-or-so-years old land rover from the UNAMID base to the Women's Center in Kassab camp, just a few kilometers north of Kutum town. Kassab is home to 25,000 people (mostly women and children) somehow surviving without infrastructure or security.

I'm greeted like an honored guest. Fatiah F, a natural leader and one of the three-member management team that includes Fatiah A and Aisha A, *apologizes* for not having snacks to offer (ain't that a woman talkin'). At Huda's recommendation, I've brought a plastic tub of hard candies that are well received.

I'm pleased with the three women's willingness to be the leaders that keep the center going. But the place has become a shadow of its former self. The two large tents that had served as working and meeting places had been stripped of their roofs by a gang of thieves in the middle of the night. They'd menaced the guard with knives and clubs, then left one thug to keep him at bay while the other two stripped off the tent roofs. (Good canvas is a valuable commodity). At one point, the guard began shouting. Since all his family and friends live around the center, a whole lot of people roused from sleep and came running. But it was too late.

In the aftermath of that night, a decision was taken to remove and store the remaining canvas walls of the tent...evidently until the right idea came along. I say that I want better for them -- that the improvised sisal-mat covering the top of the tent frame is inadequate, especially with the rains coming. I ask them what they thought would remedy the situation. Fatiah proposes to take the canvas panels to the local market and sell or trade them for UNICEF plastic tarps -- less subject to theft because it's all over the camp. The guard is leery of being an intermediary; Fatiah tells him just to make the connection and she would do the haggling. I tell them to go for it.

They've run up a tab for water delivery and tea. Not much, but a debt they want to pay. Done and done.

The next agenda item is improvements to the Center -- a locking metal shed to store basket materials (*buno*, a shiny thin dried palm leaf; *zaf*, dry grass that is the primary material of the basket, and *tifta*, the natural dyes used to create designs); a supply of tea and sugar, glasses for tea, and a large kettle (free tea with the ladies is the closest they get to spa treatment), a water tank so they can have plenty of drinking water AND enough reserve to plant and maintain a vegetable and flower garden (for me as a veteran gardener, this is a fabulous), a couple of planting tools and, before the really cold weather comes, a supply of blankets. It's all simple and doable. I will ensure they get what they need.

Flashlights with hand crank to recharge batteries were a HUGE hit. (Thank you Lynn Cook!) And a bag of small individually wrapped soaps. I'm convinced that whatever I can facilitate or acquire that helps them maintain a sense of themselves as valuable human beings -- and as women deserving of all good "woman stuff"-- the more progress the Center can make as a place of safety and recovery.

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The second day at the women's center begins with distribution of photos I took of each woman the day before. Huda and I had camped out for a couple of hours in the UNAMID conference room – the only place I could find an electrical outlet -- and printed the photos with my portable Canon iP100, a great little traveler. I imagine that some of the women – maybe most – had never seen a photo of themselves and, judging by the smiles and laughter, were genuinely pleased to have one.

We sat in the “office” (a covered lean-to framed with branches and covered with woven sticks and grasses), drinking tea and designing a new system for preparing the baskets for shipment to Amber Chand who sells them in the US. I've brought a bag of plastic fasteners to attach each lid to basket. I have small hangtags printed with “Hand Made in Darfur by \_\_\_\_.”

64 weavers had come that day. Fatiah calls each in turn. Some present their baskets with obvious (and deserved) pride. Fatiah writes each weaver's name on a hangtag in Arabic; the other Fatiah on the team helps fasten lid to basket, adding the hangtag; Aisha, organizes the baskets in neat piles for packing when the driver brings the boxes I'd requested. My translator Huda counts out the cash payments (25 SDG for each basket). Each is focused on her task. Payday makes everyone happy.

We discuss some adjustments in our “order” for the baskets:  $\frac{3}{4}$  of them will be the small version (wow” is the usual first impression of these 5-inch wide baskets), and  $\frac{1}{4}$  would be the previous medium size that is 9 inches wide. Of course, given the variation in materials and imagination, each basket has a unique “signature.”

I find the women stunning, like exotic birds, draped in *tobes* of dazzling hues and designs. After a short time I understand that they are hurt, needy, confused -- as I surely would be in that environment. They also are quick to find humor and enjoyment in a day, especially one that bring good news. Though I sense a great reserve of resilience, I wonder how long can they survive against really bad odds? How long should they *have* to hang on, waiting for adequate security in the villages they have fled? I envision enormous accomplishments when they no longer are stranded in this camp.

This women's cooperative is the antithesis of mass-production. Each woman brings a unique eye for design and color. They work sitting on a sisal mat on the ground, their legs straight in front of them, seldom hunched, for hours. One of them reminded me – in a frank but non-combative way – that this was her lifeline. She *had* to get paid for this time-consuming work. Clearly we need more exposure for the basket sales since these women are producing beyond the rate we had imagined. And later this year, we may open another Women's Center – perhaps in Abu Shouk camp.

The one intractable problem we have is shipping the baskets from Khartoum to Hartford, MA, the location of Amber Chand's warehouse. For the last 18 months, we have been paying too much for shipping – almost 20% the cost of the basket. We ship 3-4 times a year, average about 350 lbs per shipment. Despite numerous proposals and requests to international airline companies, not one has stepped forward with even discounted rates, much less free space-available shipping. Clearly I just have not identified the right contact.

We negotiated new salaries and everybody seemed satisfied – for at least the time being – with 200 SDG per month. That's about \$100 each for the three women and the guard, who graciously accepted an egalitarian compromise. At some point, they'll get raises.

The women have asked for training – all kinds of training. I'd spent time in Khartoum and El Fasher meeting with Sudanese Red Crescent staff, arranging a three-day first aid training for mid-May at the Center 20 women. It turned out well except the first aid kits did not arrive with the trainer and will have to be delivered by another staff visit. We'll do this training again – several times.

We discussed literacy instruction and, acting on the recommendation of Gretchen Wallace, I found a couple of high-school educated women to begin classes in reading and writing – and they'll probably be full since so many of the women never received any formal education.

Later in El Fasher, I will meet with a lovely woman from the Daya (midwife) training school who enthusiastically welcomed as many trainees as we could send from Kassab and Kutum area. Sudan has the fifth highest rate of maternal mortality in the world. Doctors are scarce, particularly in rural areas. A trained midwife (or three) is a crucial asset for any community. The training cost is approximately \$8,500 per woman for one-year intensive instruction that includes room and board. Clinical practice is guided through the El Fasher Women's hospital.

I need scholarships for Midwife Training for 10- 15 Kassab women. Next session of training begins in mid-July 09.

Since the Women's Center concept was first written in the summer of 2005, all of my thinking about what works, what matters to the women – has been altered. I'd tried to implement institutional “models” of “women's programs” and found they underestimated what was necessary and possible. However, I'd always figured the women were fully capable of articulating their needs and take their lead in strategizing /problem solving within the Center and ultimately within the camp.

They only element of the original Women's Center concept that has not been realized is the medical support including mental health. These may come through a Health initiative that DPDO has been invited to initiate (with a requirement to “bring the money” to make it happen.) Meanwhile, it's useful to the women to be able to gather in a safe place to work. Some bring their small children. When women work together, they talk.

**Photos posted in DarfuPeace.org Gallery** My friend Avril Fitzgerald calls it the “stitch and bitch” model of sanity building. During my visit, the women described some of the rapes that had occurred – gang rapes of young girls and older women. They live with a great deal of fear. And they are angry at what has been done to them. One of my next steps will be to help them develop strategies – including more use of the solar cookers - to bring some control and safety to their lives.

Our parting at the end of the day is emotional with lots of hugging –like sisters who have fueled up together -- and want more. I love these women. I want to see them safe and happy again – soon.

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