



## Notes from Darfur Mission Dec 8-27, 2009 -- Susan Burgess-Lent

Wednesday 9 December 2009 Khartoum, Sudan

The part of this journey I usually find most exhausting is the flight. Something about sitting around doing not much in a confined space for 14 hours that just depletes me.

Last trip, I arrived the day of a coup attempt. This time, I arrive the day after a public demonstration that ended with the arrest (and alleged torture) of two prominent opposition party leaders.

I spend most of the day today running necessary "routine" errands – changing money, getting a new SIM card for my cell phone, reserving and paying for upcoming flights, arranging for cargo shipment, checking in with contacts to arrange meetings. The central issue always is getting my travel permit from HAC (Humanitarian Aid Commission). They control who gets into Darfur, when and for how long. Inshalla, they will be cooperative and allow me out of here by Sunday. If not, I readjust accordingly.

Taxiing around Khartoum, I'm struck by a few changes. Lots of big buildings going up. A flood of new cars - but the same old beat up taxis. The airport jammed with returnees from the Haj. License plates with Arabic *and* Western numbers (Arabic is prettier). Pre-election photos of Pres. Bashir popping up prominently (Election hoped for in April.) Lovely weather: mid-80s, slight breeze, dry, clear. Some locals just *hate* the "winter" between Nov and Feb.

I had a moment of pure joy in the midst of malevolent traffic – a sense that I know this place, the look and energy of people on the streets. Though I'm a *hawalja* (but fire-walled by my staff from the usual predations on foreigners), I somehow also am attuned. I'm no longer afraid, but entertained or challenged or humbled by what I see.

- Restaurants: Kook Door, Chicky, LuckyMeal (the 'M' as in McDonalds), National Shrimp
- A seen-better-days black GTO with *Big Boyz* stenciled in lurid orange letters on the driver's side. Some mini-van shuttles sporting Nairobi-esque window tats of names like *Titanic*.
- MTV Arabic, BBC Arabic
- ATM machines (a recent merge with the rest of the consumer world)
- Unity High School (new, well-built and private, I'm sure) "Unity" being a theme the Sudanese are visualizing for themselves – against odds.
- Young girls darting through traffic, tapping on windows to beg
- Loud Arabic /rock /? music spilling out of shops

I'm more open to Arabic tutoring – finding it fun to be everyone's student, noticing the frequency of the words "*belie*" (phonetic spelling, roughly means "no kidding") and *shinu* ("What?" with attitude), getting straight on the gender and tense endings, adding vocabulary (to the undisguised delight of strangers).

Geez, *Hotel Rwanda* is on TV.

Thursday 10 December 2009 Khartoum, Sudan

Huda, my young tri-lingual translator, meets me at a new café next to the hotel. She is bubbly about the trip. Seems that after our last journey together in May, she got the bug to work in humanitarian aid and development. This pleases me, especially since she is such a willing protégé and keeps up on the news from Darfur. Full of hunger to know, lovely outrage, stamina. I've brought her "pay" – a tennis racket (she is quite the athlete), some Sidney Sheldon books, a journal. All of this was shipped to her after my last trip and returned to me exactly one month later. Can't decide which postal system caused this.

I set off walking to the DPDO office that I remembered to be due west of the hotel. As the neighborhood began to look less familiar, I stopped to ask directions -- three times. Energetic gestures and earnest Arabic from my random advisors seemed to have distracted me from understanding fully what they were saying. But I made it. My staff and I discussed the solar cooker program -- taking it to a new level as micro-enterprises run by women. Ali, our solar cooker trainer, just got married and looked like a happy man. He is canny and clever and likes that I challenge him to find the things that need improving.

Mohamed Ahmed returns triumphant from a successful trip to HAC -- he's got my travel permit. He is fishing for compliments on the achievement (two days IS pretty amazing) and I gratefully oblige.

Off to meet a rep from DHL to see about discount rates for shipping the ladies' baskets to our distributor in Hartford, CT. DHL has moved recently into cargo. I've been working on finding cheap international shipping for more than a year. This may be a break for the program.

Talked with the new UNAMID commander in Kutum to confirm accommodations at their base. (Only the World Food Program (WFP) still has a guesthouse near Kassab camp, and they were full. All the other NGOs have closed up shop -- or so I hear. I plan to arrange a meeting between UNAMID and the women at the Center to develop some solutions to security in the camp.

My dear friend Adam, who calls me "sister", has invited me to dinner; he always finds the more lavish restaurants. A long-time friend and his lady join us. A long provocative discussion about relatives in Sweden, Egyptian/Sudanese antipathy, violence in America, the possibility of peace in this country. Adam tells a funny story about a tour bus operator in DC who was confounded that there were no McDonalds or Starbucks in Sudan. Later we pass a Jovial (high-end watches) shop owned by one of his friends. The guy went to Switzerland to request that he become the sole agent. Jovial said only if he could meet a sales target within six months. The guy came up with the idea of engraving team logos on the watch face for soccer players. Sold 10,000. The company gave him the store -- literally. The whole thing looks like it belongs on -- well, a street in Geneva.

At night, this city smells like musky incense and looks like an abandoned set from *Casablanca*.

*Saturday 12 December 2009*

Friday here is the equivalent of Sunday in the States. Everybody's day off to go to the mosque. I spent part of the day working on a lengthy grand plan to rebuild schools in North Darfur. A three-year program, at least. Visualization heavily required, along with a frightful amount of prioritizing, refashioning (I'm working off a temple created for India) and willingness to ditch any overwrought element(s).

Today (Saturday) I met with a Canadian woman from UN OCHA in hopes of gaining insight into navigating the UN system. She's in charge of the yearly Work Plan, a strategic document that provides access to the Common Humanitarian Fund (CHF). Seems that a decision has been made (finally) to build the capacity (really) of Sudanese organizations to take up the relief and development work in Darfur. Going forward, international NGOs must be tied in some way to a national organization to implement programs. DPDO is a national organization but could register, under a slightly different name -- DPD Inc. -- as an international organization tied to DPDO Sudan. That way we could play both sides of the funding scheme. Lots of paperwork, but a worthy goal. The UN is drowning in its paperwork.

Huda, my translator, came with me to the meeting, though her translation skills were not needed. I wanted her to get her toe in the expatriate-dominated aid system here. Personal contact is, as in most businesses, essential. She has been invaluable to me as a liaison with the women's center, calling the (Arabic-only speaking) manager at the Kassab Center, then reporting back to me via email. I send all my messages to Kassab through her.

Off to a second staff meeting. I'm again reminded that face-to-face meetings beat the hell of emails or even phone calls when it comes to working out problems. I like these guys better in person - they are clever, thoughtful and facile enough with English to keep misunderstandings at a minimum. In truth, we are capacity building within our own organization. It's not easy to track on all the incoming information, much less make sense of it, and much less use it to create effective programs on the ground. I filled them in on all my "foraging" for resources and feel much more confident that they can follow through. Of course, they all asked for raises.

On I fly-by of the airlines office, I find out that the Sun Air website posts the time you should *arrive at the airport*. The flight time is actually 2-1/2 hour later.

I have a unique encounter with the family of Mohamed Ahmed, my affable, indispensable helper here. His is a large extended family living together in a compound in Khartoum North. His mom - I guess her to be in her 80s (at least 30 years past average life expectancy in Sudan) -- is a delightful, welcoming lady, her face a lovely map of wrinkles, with bright discerning eyes. We chat in a funny mix of Arabic and English. I have an appointment to be henna-ed (like tattoos that eventually wear off) before I come home. As I am leaving, one of the sisters brings a small bottle of perfume. It is a custom to give guests a scent to take with them - usually just a dab on the wrist or neck. However, she gave me a whole vial nearly filled with a cloudy amber liquid. After all these years, I finally understand the power of scent to transport.

Now I'm back at the hotel to work on that school proposal. All my skills are fully deployed here. It is a heady, full-winged journey.

*Sunday 13 December 2009*

One of the tedious things about this kind of travel is the constant mindfulness about what I am carrying and where. I try to make a meditation of it - keys, phone, money, glasses, computer, charger, water. And currency conversion! Many people are *still* quoting prices in the old dinar (changed to the Pound in 2007), which means I have to take three zeros away, then divide by 2.5 to know the dollar value.

I scored some first aid kits for the women's center at the Red Crescent. Last time it took about 3 months to work it out. This time, about 30 minutes. When the Red Crescent guys loaded the boxes into a taxi, the driver told me the trip was no charge. Random kindness in unexpected places.

I'm hauling about 65 kgs of stuff to El Fasher, only a small part of it mine. When I get there, I have to pick up 300 blankets from OCHA for the women at the Center. (It's cold at night up in the northern highlands.) Also a bunch of textbooks for the literacy training. Cargo has to be booked separately at least two days in advance of the flight so that HAC can approve. This cargo may or may not be loaded on my UNHAS helicopter flight. If not, I have to arrange for it to be taken by truck (a 65-mile six-hour trip).

I think of all the simple things that make a comfortable life and how much of a struggle it is to get these things into the camps. In particular, Kassab camp is at the end of the supply line. Then there's the second challenge of bringing the women's handmade products out. We pay each weaver about every six weeks for what she produces. I consider this vital to their welfare - their lifeline for supporting families.

An old friend of Suliman's invites me out to dinner. Kind of a paternal feel to his attention though I am certain he is younger than me. The restaurant is in a part of the city called Amarat near the airport. Every wall of the place is a mirror. A battery of ceiling lights reflects and multiplies into hundreds of mini-spotlights. The acoustics prevent any sort of conversation. Our command of each other's language is about equal so we just chow down. Serving sizes adequate for two obese people. Then he insists on buying me provisions for

Darfur – fruit and nuts and *Perrier* water. I had to stop him, make him understand that I had more than enough stuff to carry. He wanted to be generous. I'm glad for the bag of cashews.

There seems a new enterprise afoot to build sidewalks in the commercial areas. Attractive grey fitted stones. This is fortunate since one risks ankle injury just walking down the block.

In the local papers, the situation in Darfur is now referred to as "the Darfur problem."

I brought 8 of "the most powerful whistles on earth" in an effort form up a women's community protection scheme (when you hear the whistle blow, coming running to help). Sound theory in the tradition of the "Ring the Bell" campaign - with infinite possibilities for screw-ups. When I floated the idea a couple months ago, I got all the reasons why it's wouldn't work. Desperation usually breeds a willingness to try a new idea. We'll see.

Hurdles have been cleared to open a larger, more secure compound for the Women's Center immediately adjacent to our current one in Kassab camp. I can't wait to see the ladies again. This time, I have a whole week with them.

*Monday, 14 December 2009 El Fasher, Darfur (Capital of North Darfur State)*

Flight to El Fasher delayed for 2-1/2 hours; the airline did not find it useful to share the reason why. Huda and I suspect it was due to some high-level laggard who high-fived his way onto the plane as we waited on the tarmac at Khartoum Intl. Then an hour waiting in El Fasher for our luggage that either wasn't put on the plane or wasn't off-loaded. The usual morose guy in sunglasses from HAC buttonholes me for my travel permit. A whole day shot for a one-hour flight. We could have *driven* in less time. So it goes in Sudan.

Stop by the site of the new high school DPDO is building. An impressive graded 4000 sq meter lot surrounded by a 7-foot brick/cement wall. It's really happening.

I'm staying at the WFP guesthouse near the airport. A new building – part of the land development craze going on here to accommodate UN staff. Razor wire tops the perimeter walls, metal gate and entry doors secured with slide bolts and during the night, with long iron 2x4-sized poles. Spartan but comfortable. Quiet as a crypt. Only other resident is a lovely Indian woman named Remi who works for UNDSS (Safety and Security). She's here on a two-year contract, leaving soon for 24 days of R&R in ... Serbia (boyfriend is the draw).

Wireless internet here but no one available to give me the password. Tomorrow is a full day – meetings with staff (updates and procedures), OCHA (blankets) and UNICEF (schools reconstruction).

*Tuesday, 15 Dec 2009 El Fasher, Sudan*

Sun Air left our baggage in Khartoum – expected today. Let's do bullet points today.

- To OCHA at 8:30 for approval of Blankets; asked for 300, got 100. Thrilled. pickup at UNJLC East side around 2pm
- HAC for travel permit (most of the HAC people are security guys from Khartoum).
- Call Shola UNICEF – still in Khartoum -- will meet 23<sup>rd</sup> or 24<sup>th</sup>
- Call Cheryl at UNHAS – OK for cargo
- To office - discuss disbursement, receipts and reporting form/schedule
- Anka guys at office Ismail Abdulgalim
- Photos from Bridile, Mallwi schools
- Huda confirms with our driver Sudani in Kutum
- Call from Cheryl - I need to get HAC approval for cargo

- Find cargo form and revise - no luck with internet file transfer from my computer, connection too slow. Huda fixes printer
- Yagoub to give solar training duties to Muna / Ali Eisa to cooperate on
- Get blankets at UNJLC, truck to office
- HAC may give DPDO a 4WD vehicle after national youth Olympics in January
- Lunch Huda calls Fatiah - be there around 11am?
- Office - finances
- To Women's Center - Abu Shouk: 100 kids. 150 women, lots of weaving going on, several hundred baskets ready to ship; two young women mind this kids while the moms work. Deeply moving to see that this Center is working. We are due back for in-depth discussions here after Kutum.

Children singing a welcome song --some of the lyrics "you are the tree and we are the birds." I love that image.

- To airport to check on luggage - not arrived
- To Sun Air Office - bags in Khartoum - tomorrow Inshallah
- Decide to rent truck/driver to take blackboard and luggage to Kutum 600 SDG
- Huda and I shop for a change of clothing, shampoo and toothpaste/brush
- Stop for water and juice
- Back to WFP Guesthouse - talk with Remi, do hand laundry, notes, pay room invoice, check money supply.

*Wednesday, 16 Dec 2009*

As in the past, an on-time flawless chopper flight piloted by a Russian. I so admire this desert landscape, vast plains with surprising craggy uplands that seemed dropped like great dollops of rocky brown cement, all of it splashed ochre, sepia, pink in the morning light. The air is dry, the sky relentless cerulean.

Ibrahim has returned as our driver in his ancient Toyota 4-wheel drive. I love this old rattling truck.

This time at the UNAMID based, we have a room in "the white house", a compound of guest rooms in the Sudanese style - cement floor, tin roof, metal shutters locked with slide bolts, three bunks and a table. We have very active critters on the roof - pigeons and some scrambling nocturnal four-legged creatures. Military time - tea and biscuits from 6 to 6:30am. "brunch" at 11am supper at 6. Bring your own cups and plates - except for guests. (My cup is in my lost suitcase, which we pray will arrive today). Aside from my clothes, snacks, a few toiletries, I have so many things for the Center in my suitcase. A breathtaking sunset in pink and violet. Astonishing display of stars.

Fatiah from the Center calls to see if we have settled in OK. How sweet is that! She lives in an IDP Camp. My phone is completely useless - except for the flashlight feature. I was assured that the Sudani network was the best for Darfur but it seems that the company introduced a newer service (the one I have) that is not compatible with the old one that works well here. Lucky for me, Huda's phone is the "old" network.

Electricity scheduled out until dusk. Broken generator on the base. Water on only about 4 hours day. Mosquitoes buzzed me most of the night - surprising, given how dry it is now.

Though I thought out what stuff I'd need for the field, I did not anticipate fully that I would have only my satchel with mission critical items like money, computer and electrical adapters, meds. phone, charger, camera (alas without its charger).

Second-tier stuff that would make life easier are in my luggage - I can only carry so much on my back -- and who knew the bags would fall into a black hole.

SO happy to see the ladies. We met for about three hours to discuss what we wanted to accomplish this coming week. Discussion of baskets production, new products, payment for

current inventory, literacy training schedule, midwife training candidates, solar cooker training, registration procedures for new members and ID badges, the protection scheme with whistles, and the considerable needs of the youth in the camp. I note the heavy influence of the sheikhs who have come to sit with us. Traditionally these men (community leaders, sometimes self-appointed) must approve of all activities. The women are deferential (I suspect this is purely a practical response). I have to find a way to keep the guys happy while the women do what they need and want.

Huda told me that Yagoub has heard about drug traffic (weed and opium), banditry and prostitution in Abu Shouk camp (close to El Fasher). Here in Kassab, I hear about hooligan boys who steal and vandalize. Random assaults and rapes. All of this unusual before this conflict. The societal values of respect and community have eroded badly.

The Women's Center compound is slightly improved from last time – the tent frames have waterproof roofs, a few young trees and shrubs have been planted. We'll have a big job rehabilitating the adjacent compound – much larger and with more buildings -- that we now have sheikh-approval to use.

Thursday 17 December Kutum / Kassab Camp, North Darfur

We devote the morning to discussing management of the Center and systems we can put in place to improve operations. I listen to stories of how it is in the camp: Most of the women have been here for 5-6 years. They would like to work their lands but "the Arabs" have taken them over. The occupiers never plant, and won't let anyone else do it either. There has been no indication that the government will intervene – not surprising since the Khartoum govt created this dilemma.

Once a month, the ladies get rations delivered by GOAL, an Irish NGO. The items include sugar, salt, oil, lentils, and a grain mixture they call *kalta*. Most of this does not last the month for the normal (extended) family size of about 6 people. They have to supplement with food bought at the local market. This gets dicey when a family has no source of income.

This is the traditional meal schedule: start the day with tea and a maybe biscuit. The Sudanese use *lots* of sugar: 3-4 teaspoons in a small (4 oz) *glass* of tea. The price of sugar has tripled in recent months to the equivalent of about \$1.24 per lb in the rural areas. Sudan is the largest sugar producer in the region, so go figure.

Discovered a new unit of measure: the ruttles. 1 kg = 2.25 ruttles

Breakfast at 10 or 11 might be something like *asida* - a thick cousin of grits. Lunch, the main meal around 4 or 5, would be any meat available plus a salad. Before bed, milk or yogurt. Obesity is rare here – not surprising with such a paltry diet.

During the worst violence 4-5 years ago, our driver Ibrahim used to offer a free shuttle service for his Kutum neighbors trying to be somewhere else. Also handled couriering money for people. He says he's been arrested 5 times by the government, but they can't seem to find anything to charge him with. His adaptive strategy under arrest was simply to take a nap. Finally the security people stopped bothering him. He's a jolly man, content with his life and family of 8 children, popular around town. He believes the best way to solve problems is to sit and laugh with friends.

He helped us collect the best deals on a variety of provisions for the Center: exercise books for the literacy classes, carbon paper (really) for copies of monthly expense records and registrations, sacks to transport the baskets, string for the basket hangtags, copies of registration forms. To my surprise, the Kutum markets offer quite a diversity of products, many Chinese-made.

Ibrahim says rebel troops -- of any affiliation, and there are at least 17 groups now -- are known here as "Tora Bora."

Friday, Dec 18, 2009 Kutum, North Darfur

Today is the off day. We make a trip to see Suliman's mom who lives nearby. I was under penalty of being expelled from the family for rudeness if I did not stop by. It was a lovely visit. She fussed about cooking asida, plying us with orange juice, dates and peanuts as we waited. She tells a hilarious story about her return from the US – getting lost at the Doha airport and finally making the flight via special shuttle. She talked about being "hungry as a dog" but willing only to eat the biscuits Suliman had given her for the flight. I find the Sudanese to be finicky about their traditional foods and decidedly unwilling to try unfamiliar cuisine.

Day 5 without luggage. We've adapted. However I may get nasty if it doesn't arrive tomorrow as promised. Unfortunately, it's a rough road between El Fasher and Kutum. I won't even go into the ridiculous reasons for the delay.

Back in our little cubby, I have work to do to reinvent a set of simple procedures and forms for the Center – and the rest of the staff. I believe that the long war has embedded a kind of hopelessness that, coupled with the laid-back cultural sense of time, the infernal patience of suffering people, makes it hard to get anything done efficiently. The trick for me is to know when to push and when to wait.

The mostly South African soldiers posted here are unfailingly polite and helpful. They make about 520 Rand a month – about \$70. This includes an allowance for "Danger and Deprivation" and "International Obligation." There is absolutely nothing to do here at night but the usual volleyball game before dusk. I often hear music from the tents. There are two TVs in the mess hall, one usually tuned to CNN and the other to American movies of the war or thriller genres, with the sound cranked up to maximum volume. Last night we were invited to a religious observance. Top-notch preacher with spirited singing. Very much like African American churches, though the songs were not familiar. Lots of "halleluiahs" and spontaneous call-outs. I learned I can move mountains if I embrace Jesus.

I have a head cold. Lots of dust in the air. Food is unvaried: some kind of meat, a large helping of rice with a sauce and an overcooked vegetable. Occasionally the meat is inedible.

Big powwow tomorrow with the sheikhs and youth groups in Kassab. One of my goals is to redirect them from undermining the women's center. They want to circulate women through; I want to build a strong core group, adding women for training etc. It will be a public speaking challenge.

Saturday 19 Dec 2009 Kassab camp, North Darfur

Discussion with women about training programs: literacy, solar cooking, women's health, midwife training. They are like flowering plants hungry for water. So many details to address, supply issues to resolve.

Then a tour of the abandoned IRC compound next door to ours. Two large semi-permanent buildings in need of new roofs and rehabilitated interior spaces. Two excellent locking tin sheds for storage; need new guard room, kitchen and latrine, The perimeter of most compounds, including ours, is lined with a barrier of thorny branches to discourage trespass; these need to be replenished. New paint for the doors. New exterior sign. The ladies want a flower and vegetable garden. They want to name the center Ein Al-Shams (Eye of the Sun). The whole walk-through was like buying a fixer-upper and imagining results after all of the dreamy ideas are put into play.

Gossip has it that during a recent election of the area commissioner (mayor), the voters resoundingly elected an independent candidate - that is, not a government operative. He was promptly poisoned and replaced by a pro-government guy.

I note that young girls (8 – 10 years) are the babysitters while their moms work. They expertly carry infants and toddlers around on their back or hips, taking walks to settle their fussy siblings who are often dressed in multiple layers of clothes and a hat. I have yet to see a child under 3 that does not have a runny nose.

Luggage arrived late in the afternoon, along with other cargo for the Center. I lost a bet with Huda about the arrival time by just 5 minutes. She wants a large chocolate bar when we get back to Khartoum. We are thrilled to have a change of familiar clothing.

Sunday 20 Dec 2009 Kassab camp, North Darfur

Today was payday for the weavers and we had a full house at the Center. Nearly 10% of the women have infants. Huda and I have been speculating about the high fertility rates in IDP camps. These places are no way conducive to romantic liaisons – at least not in the comfortable Western sense. My thought is that many women simply submit to sex –and there is also rape. The likelihood of their child surviving past 5 is poor. However, they are doting moms.

The UNAMID peacekeepers here are mostly English speaking. There is little evidence that the organization places value on facility with the local language, or on foot patrols, or on any sort of fresh food -- despite the abundance of produce in the local market.

Invariably when we drive through Kutum and the camp, children race out to see the *hawalja*. I haven't seen a mirror for more than a week, so perhaps something of particular interest has developed in my appearance (beside my white hair.) In any event, they call out "*hawalja*, OK" giving me the thumbs up sign.

Ibrahim keeps a collection of items dangling from his rear view mirror. They include a small foxtail, assorted *hejabs* (tiny leather amulets with Koranic verses sealed inside to ward off trouble), an old ID badge, and a (real) cat's tail.

Virtually everyone wears *hejabs* including toddlers. I "ordered" a couple through one of the women at the Center. They have to be specially made.

Over lunch (about \$2.50 for 3 people) in a small café owned by Suliman's brother, Ibrahim tells me that the biggest problems in the area are access to water and education. The *wadi* (seasonal river) is dry now so people must resort to wells, and God help them if anything breaks because parts and maintenance expertise are hard to come by with fewer NGOs in the area.

A very wide wadi divides Kutum. All the officials have offices and live on the other side of the *wadi* from the main town and the camp. During the rainy season, rather than attend to the difficult business of crossing, they go on leave.

I've printed photos for each of the women (love my portable printer), just to make them happy. Seeing themselves – in all their beauty and sorrow – seems to matter a lot. Probably for some, it will be the only photo they have of themselves and their baby.

Monday 21 Dec 2009 Kassab camp, North Darfur

In a classic example of the universe conspiring to assist, we are waiting at the gate for our driver when two women in *tobes* approach. The sentry speaks no Arabic. Huda goes to assist. The women are from the Ministry of Health and the Daya (midwife) school – exactly the people we had planned to hunt down. We discuss our goal to support midwife training for some women from the Center. Another matter for follow up.

I have received some lovely gifts from the ladies – small crocheted doilies in vivid colors and designs, and several beaded baskets. It deeply touches me that they want to show their gratitude and affection. We laugh a lot together.

Flirty stuff goes on between Ibrahim and the two Fatiahs; he teases them that he would marry them as a "package deal." He tells us of a local plant (called aweer, literally "stupid") that allegedly has a euphoric effect. People put the leaves in their shoes and it's been whispered that some men even put them in their shorts for, I assume, a boost. Of course, I request a sample to test.

Fatigue.

Since I was here last May, the UNAMID Base has taken on a barnyard feel – more resident chickens (to break up the monotony of the mess hall fare?) and a new goat. I'm ready to kill the rooster that crows endlessly in late afternoon.

Seems that in a recent meeting, an evidently clueless UNAMID liaison person was asked by the sheikhs about the recipient of UNAMID's reports. Her (wrong) answer was "the government". This cleared the room and reinforced already grave suspicions that UNAMID is working with the government against the civilians. Thus I'm introduced to the Arabic word for "shooting self in foot": *dagaas*

Not to be outdone in this regard, the sheikhs refuse a meeting with the base commander, an affable, practical man who actually accepted and appreciated my perspective on "what just happened" – informed in part by the women at the Center. The camp is such a gossip mill.

He told me that the Govt moves UNAMID bases at just about the time they've completed their infrastructure and access improvements. This evidently has become a key element of the regime's strategy for rural development.

### **Tuesday 22 Dec 2009 Kutum town and Kassab camp**

Today we are prepared for a meeting with the sheikhs and youth group (*shabab*). Sometimes the politics is so arcane and self-serving, I don't know how to react. The sheikhs don't come, but there are about 10 young men and 25 women. The men feel they should be able to critique the Center managers and to enforce a rotation of women out of the Center every three months to bring in a new group. I let them know we are committed to keeping the current members and adding more, then I describe our training plans. Suddenly, they refuse to discuss further until they get Suliman's input. Luckily, I am able to get Suliman on the phone; he backs me up. After a lot of back and forth, we agree that the *shabab* and the sheiks will deliver a written agreement giving us use of the old IRC Center. Beyond that, we will have a written "rules of engagement" between community and DPDO (this to repair misconceptions seeded by our former Khartoum director who was sacked). Good lord, the Sudanese love to talk.

Back at the Center, I sit among the women to talk, and quickly feel the nakedness of their need. In particular, they want to earn income. Wherever you look in Sudan, needs create desperation. Everything is broken, dirty, torn, chipped, smelly, jerry-rigged, old, cheap, inadequate, heaped or scattered. People adapt, but the horror is that they *accept* their lot. It's hard to find sustained progressive thinking – probably because it's so dangerous.

Huda has been incredibly poised and helpful. Despite all the illusions shattered, she is seriously moving in the direction of a career in humanitarian aid and development. I love mentoring her because she is open and willing to see.

When we return to the base to gather our stuff, the commander invites us to a good-bye party at 17:00 hours. So we head to Ibrahim's for supper with this wife and 8 kids, then to Suliman's mom's house -- where we will stay the night – to drop off our stuff. At the Base command center, we sit at an enormous table with the commanding officers. Each in turn thanks us for being there. I'm humbled since I hadn't realized our presence had been so duly noted. The appetizers are sausages and fried-fish nuggets, with Sprite and Pepsi.

Off to *haboba's* (grandmother's) where our third meal is offered. The night is exceptionally quiet, and *haboba* has brought out a new comforter for me. Suliman told me she periodically asks him to send new blankets. These she doles out to needy neighbors.

Total exhaustion... I'm tired of being gritty dirty, always thinking about where to get water, and dealing with hole-in-the-ground toilets and their stench. This is the standard of living here.

### **Wednesday 23 Dec 2009 Kutum – El Fasher**

Morning milk tea. I sit in the kitchen and watch the process of preparing it, then washing pots and kettles with no running water. The habit of careful use since all water has to be hauled home.

We are at the Kutum landing strip at 9am for the arrival of the 9:35 flight. It's a clear windy morning with mist skirting the Kutum range of seven low craggy peaks. Watching wild dogs chasing each other. Off about 50 meters, two donkeys stand as still as statues until Huda decides to commune with them; they skedaddle out of reach. Ibrahim is playing some bouncy Sudanese music. I'm excited to see chopper approach from the east; I'll soon be one step back into "the world". We learn that the flight has added another destination – Um Baro to the west – so that an MSF team can make a short visit. They'll be back at 4pm to collect us. The good news, I did get my cargo of baskets booked on the flight.

With no better options, we return to the UNAMID base. We are warmly greeted, offered brunch and the use of "our" room until we need to leave again. I'm glad for the chance to rest and collect my thoughts

### **Thursday 24 Dec 2009 El Fasher**

Today was a surreal experience. DPDO now has a very good office here – after much struggle. I spent about an hour with Yagoub debriefing him on all the developments at Kassab and items for his follow up. Then people started arriving (I believe dear Muna put out the word.) Like a parade of petitioners to Don Corleone on the day of his daughter's wedding. First four men from Mallwi school. The community had no support from the government for education so they opened their own school with volunteer teachers. A few crude classrooms, a few "classes under the tree". One old barrel for drinking water, as many as 10 trips a day to a distant water point to keep it filled for 383 primary students, no pay for teachers, no latrines. They receive food from UNICEF for a breakfast feeding but must pay about \$350 per month to have it trucked to the school. Overall, a dismal situation. They wanted DPDO to help. I promise them I will ask Suliman for some sort of assistance. Later, he agrees to provide money for two months transport plus two water barrels. They are happy with this, but obviously so much more is needed. At least three dozen other schools that I know of have similar circumstances.

Next come two women from a program in Dar al Salaam, about 75 kilometers west of El Fasher. For 13 years, they have run numerous programs to support rural women. In recent years, they've lost a lot of funding to programs in the camps. This has had the effect of driving women from their villages to the camps in order to receive assistance. A truly bad outcome. They have a long list of needs, but I can only assure them of solar cooker training.

Then a teacher from one of our more distant schools to complain that they haven't been paid – a fact, since our donations tanked this year. In truth, NGOs should not be doing the job of the Ministry of Education; paying teachers has resulted in little obvious improvement to the schools. That's why DPDO is moving in the direction of reconstruction.

Kassab Camp and Abu Shouk Camp have become small towns with very different characters. Kassab is a warren of alleyways between makeshift and semi-permanent "homes" with tiny local "stores" and open-air markets. Abu Shouk is twice as big (about 55,000 residents) - a desolate suburb of El Fasher with numbered "streets" and community latrines (tarps over frames) on the corners of the main intersections.

All the residents came from rural villages that were destroyed between 2004-2006. They are farmers without land, stuck in a place that breeds all the problems of urban environments – prostitution, drug trade, and informal gangs of thugs. No better way to crush a culture. The government’s plan now plays out by attrition. The residents have nowhere to go.