



Nigeria's long journey home

by Markus Gamache

"The Israelites . . . said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?'" (Exodus 14:10-11a).

Camps for internally displaced people (IDPs) began to form in northeast Nigeria in the city of Maiduguri and in Yobe State by late 2009, after Boko Haram started launching deadly attacks that July. Since then, the population of the camps has been on the increase. Camps later spread to all parts of the country.

People took displaced relations and friends into their homes, but there were not enough places to accommodate everyone. Camps were the only answer, and the camps were established by various sectors, non-governmental organizations, the government, individuals, churches, and mosques.

Many people who survived the violent attacks of Boko

Haram, and were privileged to be alive, took refuge at IDP camps hoping for things to improve. Most had witnessed killings of spouses, children, uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters, or even military personnel.

Those terrible acts are what they will always remember. Many still don't know exactly what happened to their houses, animals, and everything else that made up their former lives. Some have been out of their homes for three years, some for two.

The IDP camps are solely dependent on the food supplies that are being donated. Boko Haram has made matters worse by attacking IDP camps in the Maiduguri area and at the town of Bama. Another problem is that government corruption crept into the handling of relief materials, and some materials meant for the camps were diverted by people vested with the responsibility to manage or deliver them.

The people living in IDP camps have been rescued from violence, but now are in danger of losing their lives to



Donna Farrell

severe hunger. Mostly it is women and children who are malnourished. Some have contracted illnesses due to poor feeding, some have died due to lack of treatment of their protracted illnesses.

Returnees must begin anew

Displaced people have begun to return to their villages, which have been reclaimed by the Nigerian military, but many are regretting it because they have nothing to eat. They may find the assets they toiled for all their lives destroyed—buildings, food, farms, churches, animals. There are reports of some people going into fresh trauma, sickness, and loss of memory because of what they see on their return.

After returning home there is still fear of attack, since so many places are still under the control of Boko Haram. Many people also are afraid of political enemies, business enemies, ethnic enemies, and religious differences.

In the past months, places like Madagali have continued to be under attack, with insurgents coming at frequent intervals to take their little amounts of food, mats, mosquito nets, and any other valuables. In Damboa area of Borno State, some people were discovered digging and eating roots and the leaves of trees in order to survive. Damboa is close to Chibok, and Lassa, and all those areas have not been free from attacks, although the military has been chasing Boko Haram away.

Those who have accommodated dozens of displaced people in their houses also face the threat of hunger. Their facilities have been overstretched, resources have been exhausted, and they are not able to meet the demands of their own families. Sickness of all kinds is affecting host families who are not able to pay hospital bills.

Nigeria Crisis Response continues

The Nigeria Crisis Response of the Church of the Brethren and EYN continues to supply food and other aid to people living in IDP camps and others in need, through the work of the EYN Disaster Team and partner NGOs including CCEPI (Center for Caring, Empowerment, and Peace Initiatives).

A particular area for food distribution has been Maiduguri, where recent distributions took place in September and October.

“The EYN churches in Maiduguri have been housing and caring for hundreds to thousands of displaced persons,” reports Roxane Hill, coordinator of the Nigeria Crisis Response. “A medical team often accompanies the food distributions to provide

limited health services to the IDPs. We also have had four trauma workshops in Maiduguri, and a training of workshop leaders is planned.”

However, Brethren have focused their main effort south of Maiduguri in southern Borno State and Adamawa State, notes Roy Winter, associate executive director of Global Mission and Service and Brethren Disaster Ministries. He visited Nigeria in September, and reports that “this is good because few organizations are working in these areas, while many are working around Maiduguri.”

Nigeria Crisis Response staff report a variety of underlying causes for a worsening food crisis in northeast Nigeria, including inflation in food prices, lack of aid for families who are hosting IDPs, and the inability of dis-

placed farmers to plant their crops.

Winter says one challenge is simply large numbers of people in need: “The Maiduguri area has around 1.5 million IDPs, more than double the normal population.” Hill also points to government corruption. “There has been government money set aside in Nigeria for feeding the people in the northeast,” she says, “but due to corruption of the system, the needy people are not receiving the help.

“We are confident that our EYN Disaster Team funds allocated for food are reaching the most vulnerable in the areas where we do the food distributions.”

For more information and to support the Nigeria Crisis Response go to www.brethren.org/nigeriacrisis.

—Cheryl Brumbaugh-Cayford

WE MUST STRUGGLE TO SEE HOW WE CAN DEAL WITH THE PRESENT SITUATION, OR ELSE TOMORROW MAY BE MORE DIFFICULT.

Many IDPs who decided to go back home have to pay a fortune to reach the nearest hospital, or stay at home and wait for their final day to meet their ancestors. Going back home may mean giving up for death.

Our situation is proving that before the attacks of Boko Haram, and the destruction of oil facilities in the Niger Delta, the Nigerian system as a whole was on the verge of collapse. The fight between the government and the militants has succeeded in bringing this country to almost a standstill, with no progress in any sector of life. Unemployment is high, poverty is eating more and more people, religious differences are growing and even spreading. Trying to build understanding between Muslims and Christians is becoming more complex.

So many efforts have been put in place to address the issues facing Nigeria, but because of the destruction caused by the violence much of the impact of these efforts is not felt.

The needs of the present

Sometimes it is not good to talk about the past, because the moment you start you see trauma glaring from the faces of the people. Trauma has its stages, and some have more effects than others. For example, I know there are things that I do now that are not in line with my natural way of life. Since the beginning of this madness, my mind has not been the same, but I have to pretend just to encourage those who have seen the killing and the burning.

Support from the Church of the Brethren, SHARE Foundation in Germany, Mission 21 in Switzerland, and others brings healing to our hearts. We equally commend the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and Alhaji Aliko Dangote for their support to IDPs. The support is building a new hope. We know that we are not alone. People from afar are thinking of us, and we feel loved and secure in God's love.



Danna Parcel

We must struggle to see how we can deal with the present situation, or else tomorrow may be more difficult. Monies have been donated, we have been consoled over and over again, but returning back to the villages and starting from scratch is more difficult and scary.

Now that we are going home, do not tire of taking care of us. The needs at the present time are more than the ones you have met. The rebuilding of churches, houses, schools, hospitals, farms, wells, businesses—these surely will take time. Is it just too much for people who have worked hard to give millions of dollars to Nigerians whom you do not know and have never even seen?

The problems of this time are too many to address, but we must start somewhere, at least to show to the world that we are still alive, and we can do our part. 

Markus Gamache is staff liaison for Ekklesiyar Yan'uwa a Nigeria (EYN, the Church of the Brethren in Nigeria). He is a founder of the Gurku intentional inter-faith community for displaced Christian and Muslim families.

Alarming numbers

In September, humanitarian aid groups involved in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa that have suffered Boko Haram violence reported its continuing effects. The violence has contributed to a worsening food crisis in northeast Nigeria that affects young children in particular. These figures are from an Associated Press interview with the UNICEF chief in Nigeria, unless otherwise noted:

- As many as 75,000 children will die over the next year in famine-like conditions
- Severe malnutrition is found in 20 to 50 percent of children in pockets of northeast Nigeria
- Most of the estimated 2.6 million IDPs are subsistence farmers who have been unable to plant for at least 2 years
- Of 4 million people in desperate need of food, about 2.2 million are trapped in areas where Boko Haram is operating or in areas that are still dangerous, with 65,000 living in famine-like conditions
- In special need of assistance are the 2.5 million IDPs who are children under 5, pregnant women, and nursing mothers (21st Century Wilberforce Initiative and the Stefanus Foundation)
- Across West Africa more than 6 million people in Nigeria, Niger, Chad, and Cameroon face severe hunger, including 1 million on the edge of famine (International Rescue Committee, Oxfam, and other humanitarian groups)