
July 2002 Mission Trip Report

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“They eat dust with us.”

The Camp

Change is the operational word in refugee camps: the refugees want change, NGO's work to achieve change, and the inevitable impact of time effects change. The overall conclusion to which I arrived was that the forces operating within the Nangweshi Refugee Camp have had a positive impact and there were many signs that ARC has made a contribution toward this positive change. More important than the tangible impact upon the camp is the relationship ARC has established with the refugees. An observation by one of the refugees, *“They eat dust with us,”* put across in no better terms the state of our partnership with them. ARC has thus made progress on two major fronts.

The first sign of positive improvements is evident upon entry into the camp. What was once a sea of tents and temporary booths made of grass lashed to a frame of branches has now become a village. Where grass booths stood, now are row upon row of traditional village homes.

Another sign of positive impact is that the ARC developmental programs initiated last December have unfolded impressively. The Church building gleams under its vast tin roof. A huge clay oven stoked for baking provided what seemed like an endless supply of bread. A garden, along with a chicken project, promised improved nutrition. A team of bulls and an oxcart, along with cows producing young, also inspire hope. All of these tangible signs of impact, however, are not as significant as the relational connection that has been established. Before elaboration, there is one glaring omission to the positive developments: developments in the new arrival section have stagnated.

A Village

The face of the camp we first visited in 2000 is no longer recognizable at the Nangweshi main entrance. The thatched meeting lodges and the tents mixed with grass booths that first welcomed us have been transformed into mud huts or adobe block homes typical of any village in Angola. The impression is of a rather beautiful Angolan village arising out of the Zambian bush. Rooflines often sweeping as high as 15 feet betray an energy and ambition not characteristic of those persons whose lives hang in a balance. The homes we visited had a cool airiness and spacious feeling that was a welcome experience after having seen men, women and children huddled beneath a tarp or within the confines of a tiny thatched booth. The 15,000 people who arrived in 2000, apart from the universal hardships of life in the African bush, are living quite comfortably. Food delivered by the World Food Program (WFP) has been boosted to full rations; the warehouse in Senanga is full to capacity. There is plenty of clean water; even the ARC compound has its own spigot providing running water. While the quality of life in Nangweshi has improved, living conditions are not as impressive for the “new arrivals,” those refugees that arrived following the escalation in fighting in October 2001.

“New Arrivals”

Toward the end of 2001 a renewed offensive by government forces--which eventually led the death of rebel leader Jonas Savimbi--led to a second major mass exodus of refugees from Angola. Approximately 10,000 of these refugees are being temporarily held in what is referred to as Village 1 and Village 2. The living conditions are very difficult: no water, shallow latrines, and thousands of tents. As this group of vulnerable people has been informed that they will be moved to a sight 10 kilometers from Nangweshi, developments have ceased and all efforts have been concentrated on developing a new site. Where new arrivals are currently living, bore holes have not been dug; there is no water accessible without having to walk long distances. Homes are not being constructed, thus people continue to live under their UNHCR issued tents, which are beginning to tatter under the searing sun. The expectation is that by October this mass of new arrivals will be moved to another site, but much uncertainty exists. Many of the ARC mission team members expressed concern that these “vulnerables” might be further traumatized by another move.

The “Vulnerables”

Pastor Haka, during our home visit, proudly showed us the storage room in his new home. I was shocked to see only two large bags of grain and a number of odds and ends, pots and pans along with some clothing. It impressed me that the failures of one truck load of food plunges the pastor and his family into a

crisis of food shortages. The impression gained by walking among the recently arrived refugees is that of even greater risk. Adding to matters is the observation that moving this large mass to another location will result in further serious trauma; it seemed evident that for this vulnerable group a preferred plan would be to help these refugees remain where they were. A second thought, however, leads to another conclusion.

Studies of the ecosystem revealed that the parcel of land at Nangweshi could sustain 15,000 people. There are now close to 25,000 on this same plot of ground. The trouble with this population density is that for the new arrivals to remain, it would mean that the entire caseload of refugees is put at risk. Why? As one example, let me cite the role of firewood. Rural Umbundu people have always cooked over open fires; substitutes such as paraffin have never been successfully received. At the Osire Camp in Namibia, for example, children could be seen miles away from the camp sanitizing the ground for any scrap of wood that could be used to hold the glow of a fire. The countryside for miles around Osire is being steadily denuded of trees and any vegetation that can burn. Reports were that some, in their desperation to find wood, having wandered into the land of commercial farmers surrounding the refugee camp, were shot as trespassers. Similarly, should all 25,000 refugees remain in Nangweshi, the forest will be stripped of wood, a problem that has far reaching impact in creating conditions not only for the erosion of the top soil, but also impacting the rainfall needed for cultivation.

The only suitable option is to create another camp. Thus ARC, to remain faithful to its mission of helping the most vulnerable, might well consider sending a team to support these people.

The Emerging Identity of ARC

It has always been very important to me that ARC teams, while we are with the refugees, live in a manner that resembles their level of life—when in Rome do as the Romans do. We maintain this philosophy not only for what it communicates to the refugees, but also for what it communicates to team members—we need not seek Paradise on this earth. While the refugees have continuously wanted to construct for us, their guests, accommodations that exceed those of their own, we have stressed and insisted upon living in the camp just as they do. *“When you have concrete floors in your homes, we too will stay in homes with concrete floors. If you lack electricity, then while we are with you, we too will live without electricity. If you have air conditioning, we will have air conditioning.”* While there is for us an escape from the hardships, an option that does not exist for the refugees, I am of the conviction that we can live no other way while we are among them. I have found this effort to be greatly rewarding and ultimately no hardship whatsoever beyond minor inconvenience.

I can think of no greater commentary on the rightness of the view of identification with the refugees than to have a refugee say to Maurice, in reference to the latest ARC Team, *“They eat dust with us.”* The comment had been made in reference to the dust raised during a joyful dance as the sun was setting one evening. It was a comment made within the context of discussions related to how we, the visitors, want to live among the refugees and regret that there are such inequities in life.

It became crystal clear to me that the twin aims in taking teams of Americans to Africa is to develop in the guests not only **compassion**, but also **confidence** in the refugees. Compassion by itself can lead to haughtiness, a ‘we’re better than they’ attitude. By developing confidence in those recipients of aid, a spirit of collaboration can grow. Our confidence in them also leaves us with the conviction that it is the African who is spiritually awakened and attuned to his or her people that can most effectively preach the Gospel; our task remains a humbler one of living the Gospel in tangible ways, believing that God will draw to himself who he will and have mercy on who he will.