

**THOUGHTS ON VISIT TO UGANDA BY ROBERT MORTIMER,
ON BEHALF OF THE FRIENDS OF ACET UGANDA,
25 APRIL – 8 MAY 2010.**

I am immensely grateful to David Kabiswa for initiating this visit and it has been a privilege to go to places far beyond the experience of many, including most FAU donors. This has probably been the most meaningful and revealing visit, of life in Uganda today, of all the visits I have made to Uganda since 1996. I appreciate very much the opportunity. I am very impressed by all I have seen of ACET's work and in their depth of understanding and compassion for some very poor people.

KITGUM

Kitgum has changed much since my last visit in 2003. It is now a town with a purpose. There is some new building work, trade is growing in the markets and, to quote Richard Opio, Manager, ACET Kitgum, *'it is as if (the war) never happened'*. Although much of the site of Palabek IDP may look familiar, much has changed. Of the 16,000 who live in the area and for whom Palabek Gem is the centre of the community, only 10% live in the camp itself and they are the elderly, orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs) and the sick. The majority have relocated to their former villages. The medical centre, out patients department, maternity and baby units are a transformation on the inadequate medical support given at the time the camp was overpopulated. But in the surrounding area, many are still living in poverty as they try to re-establish their lives. Many people, including those at the two villages I visited, live on less than half a dollar a day. ACET's community based work is much appreciated, not least by the 5,080 OVCs in the area.



ACET also provides training to organise and run Savings and Loans Associations which are going well summed up by Esther (aged 50) who said - *'This morning, I did not know ACET was coming, when I heard, I left my garden in a hurry to see people who have given me (us) hope in life'*. Another member of a SLA, Narisister (aged over 60) said - *'I give thanks to God for every good gift you (ACET) have given and for sharing with others'*,

She had bought a cow which had calved and another is expected. She had been able to buy clothes for the seven grandchildren for whom she is guardian. She said - *'They can now live and have something to live for.'*

MBALE

Life is much tougher for those who live near Mt Elgon in the Uganda Red Cross Camp at Bulucheke, created for those who have been displaced by the earth slide on 1 March at Bududa south east of Mbale, where over 300 died when they were engulfed. There are over 4,300 in the camp which, when I visited, was very wet underfoot and there is nothing to do. People stand around, as the ground is too wet to sit on and their only rest is at night in tents. It took 3 ½ hours on foot for the rescuers to reach those whose homes were affected. Initially there were 51 large tents provided by UNICEF, but now many families are being housed in family tents, but there are not enough. They have very few possessions, just a few cooking pots. Since the slide on 1 March, 29 babies have been born at the camp and others are expected. Yet in their inimitable way the children did not seem in distress and were keen to follow the ‘musungu’ (white man) and have their photos taken.



TUMAINI CHILDRENS HOME - KAKIRA



I was greatly moved by the work being undertaken and the low level of accommodation/facilities for the orphans at Kakira, east of Jinja. I need to set that against the conditions of the Kakira slum area I visited. David Kabiswa also told me that in seeking to come to grips with the situation, I should appreciate that life for the orphans was very much better in the orphanage than in the slum homes from which they have come! The children greeted us warmly, sang beautifully and seemed happy – certainly not under any

stress. Meeting the daily costs of food and running a household of 71 orphans is enormous. Some needs require more urgent response than others and much work is needed to upgrade the house and classrooms.

NAKULABYE JS

Although I have seen many photos, this was my first visit to the new school site. In comparison with many other places I visited on my trip, I was impressed with the general state of the school, the classrooms, the resource centre and the educational work on display. I was disappointed that the flushing mechanism of the toilets had been disconnected although by the end of my visit I understood why Moses said that in comparison with their homes the toilets are ‘fantastic’. The



kitchen is still an issue, but I believe it is now a matter on which the new school board of management should decide. There is need also to consider replacing many of the desks and seats in the classrooms. Although I am pleased to have an audited account for Nakulabye to 31 December 2009, I was sorry to learn that it has been necessary to increase the fees.

Before Nakulabye School was built, the area was a meeting place for drug users. There was violence and it was unsafe to walk at night - now it is a real community space. The well is in constant use, many come to do their washing outside the school compound. The area is now safe day and night and is seen very much as being an important part of the community. As a consequence, it is no longer planned to fence off the well and FAU may need to re-allocate some designated funds.



My walk through the Nakulabye slum with Moses was revealing. Conditions, where many have lived for twenty years, although grim by UK standards, are not as bad as other living areas I have seen. There is some trade through stalls, most buildings are of brick construction although there are open drains flowing through the alleyways and animals roam at large. Significantly Nakulabye school buildings stand out and are seen by the community as a beacon of hope, an aspiration of what the future might be for them all.



RJM

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