

### Latest Progress Report on Sudan Schools--Improvements but Much Still to Do - posted Sunday, April 15, 2007

By Roger Hardister, Vice President for Program Development

Students were just completing their final exams as we drove up to El Tagwa School in Dar Es Salaam el Rabwa, on the outskirts of Greater Khartoum. The principal, Mohamed El Tayeb, and several of the teachers came out to greet us. My last visit was in December 2006, on an inspection of the new classrooms which had been added. At that time the newly-cemented exterior walls had been a gleaming white. Over the past few months, bleached by the intense sun and heavy rains, they had become a faded grey--a striking contrast to the bright and shining faces that met us.

El Tagwa is the largest of three community schools in the area receiving assistance from NEF (Near East Foundation), Human Concern International, and our supporters from the Middle East, the United States, and Canada. While El Tagwa now has 220 students in eight classes, the other schools--Al Tawheed and Awaitfe--are much smaller and provide pre-school and adult literacy classes. Despite recent and major improvements in all three schools, frankly it might be hard for the uninitiated to understand what progress had been made...so much remains to be done.

#### ACCOMPLISHED

Most of El Tagwa School now has a roof, albeit a broken frame covered with reed mats and adobe. Walls, made of sun dried bricks, have been raised and leveled to meet the new roof and plastered on the exterior with cement for protection against the pounding rains. Interior walls on all but one of the original five classrooms have been completed and openings left for windows, doors, and shutters. Three new classrooms have been added, opening outside the building, and the school enclosed with an earth brick protective wall. Earth floors have been leveled in each class. At the two smaller schools, where once there were only two foot high enclosures, walls have begun to move higher and canopies been erected to shade students from the harsh sun and sands.

However, interior walls still remain unfinished; furnishings are still missing. Most students, aged six to 14, bring their own broken benches and chairs from home each day in order to have a place to sit...others sit on the floor. One classroom and a teachers' "lounge" remain with only three walls in place. There are no bathrooms or latrines. The new roofing already leaks and needs fixing. The principal's office lacks doors and windows and was recently broken into.

These are considered only "minor inconveniences" by kids thrilled by the progress being made. Not only are they more comfortable in the renovated classrooms, but teachers now have access to books and most students have exercise books to work on. New and colorful children's books are available to supplement their reading. There are new clay water pots filled by visiting donkey carts that supply water to local houses, so they don't have to run home for a drink during their school day. And the soccer team will soon have new balls and sweat shirts. Life is good, and more is expected for the coming year.

These community schools were founded by local residents, from among the poor themselves, to provide an opportunity for those unable to attend government schools to at least get some form of education. If they do well, students can also take government examinations and obtain a certificate. Principals and teachers receive only a small incentive of US\$ 25-35 per month for their dedicated work--when funds are available. Women who teach...some of them nursing mothers, often bring their own children to class.

#### DAR ES SALAAM COMMUNITY

Pre-school and primary students in the three schools are from poor homes. Many are from single parent families. All are from families displaced from across Sudan due to wars and civil conflicts, although not officially considered displaced people or refugees. They have been given title to the land on which they have settled and built houses from locally made mud bricks. Most residents are day laborers and unskilled workers; likely a majority are unemployed. Working 12 hours a day, six days a week, a adult male can expect to earn up to \$50 per month...many much less. Young boys and girls typically are forced to leave school to work and help support their families.

Illiteracy among adults tops 80 per cent. Both parents and children are often sick due to poor diet, water borne disease and a lack of sanitation facilities. Water is delivered by donkey carts from nearby wells. More recently, a bus stop has been established in the area. Soon there will be paved roads reaching much closer to home.

#### TIME TO TALK

While visiting the schools, we had the opportunity to speak again with the founders of El Tagwa School, Mohamed El Tayeb and his wife Nawal Ahmed Jaber, both with a secondary school education who felt children in their community had a right to the education they had been fortunate enough to complete.

"Sheik" Ahmed Omar, 35, who founded the Al Tawheed School with its pre-schools and women's education class, told us: "Education is important for people...the only way out of this misery. They have to believe in an education for themselves and their kid--something that's hard when you and everyone around you are illiterate. Education also helps you to believe in God, whether Moslem or Christian, and when you believe in God, you believe in people and their abilities to improve themselves." His school's name translates to "only one God."

For her part, Awaitfe Ahmed Edris, founder of Awaitfe School, focuses on the eradication of illiteracy among women. At her school women are taught to read, receive health education, and learn Koran. With the improvements she has been able to make, Awaitfe has decided to rename her school Al Fatha Al Mobeen, which translates from Arabic to "is made clear," reflecting the hopes she has for the future. On departing, we left behind bags of dates to be distributed to the children and adult learners to celebrate the end of a year of progress in Dar El Salaam.

All three schools will submit plans and budgets for new improvements to be made over the summer months. And next year? More renovations, including new latrines, doors, and windows; tables and chairs for students; teacher training; capacity building with the newly-formed Parent Teacher Association; adult education materials, and teaching aids. At least we hope so, depending on the continuing support of generous, responsive donors, NEF will do as much as we can.

"I can't wait!" said eight-year-old Ahmed, nor can his sister, 10. She hopes to be a teacher some day.



New classroom at El Tagwa School under construction.



"Sheik" Ahmed Omar (l) who founded the Al Tawheed School with its pre-schools and women's education class sits with his students.



El Tagwa School founder and principal Mohamed El Tayeb having a look at the new books donated by NEF.



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