

JOURNALS POSTED ON APRIL 10, 2016

This Is Our Time



ANN & BILL CLEMMER



DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO, SOUTH SUDAN

I am writing this letter from the shores of Lake Kivu in the Democratic Republic of Congo on the mountainous border between Congo and Rwanda. Ann is in the United States preparing

to travel to Ohio, Michigan, and South Dakota to speak at churches. We started this year of furlough together with a plan to visit churches, friends, and supporters across the United States, in what would be our first year of home assignment since 2006. We left Maine by vehicle in mid-summer on the first leg of a cross-country tour; sharing stories of joy and tears as we traveled for five months, through 36 states and 22,000 miles. Having spent 25 of our past 33 years in places such as Haiti, Congo, and South Sudan, it was interesting to be in the U.S. again... but admittedly, after our 99th speaking engagement in a small town outside of Portland, Oregon, our hearts yearned to return to Africa. The call came 3 weeks later after celebrating Christmas in Maine with our children. IMA World Health, a partner agency, has been running a program in Eastern Congo providing care to over 25,000 women and children, victims of sexual and gender-based violence in the context of ongoing war in a region that has known nothing but conflict over the past 20 years. There was a need for interim leadership and was I available for 30 days? When do you want me to start, I asked?

30 days have turned to 90 and now it seems we will be here for an extended period; the needs are over-whelming. The work that IMA and its indigenous partners are doing in a challenging context is inspiring, and it is humbling to take leadership of a program that has had an indelible impact on the lives of those who have endured what few could imagine.

Rape is a weapon of war in the persistent attacks by rebel and militia groups such as the LRA. The stories are too horrific to relate; mothers who witnessed the slaughter of their husbands and children while being raped, fathers forced to watch their young daughters brutalized before being shot... the maiming and disfiguring of women so no one will have them. The victims vary from ages 7 to 70; some are held for weeks, some escape to find their families or villages have disappeared. Others return to husbands who refuse to have them; they come to us in various stages of desperate need. For those who come on time, there are pills to prevent Aids, endemic in this context. Others in need of surgical care are sent to referral hospitals (Heal Africa and Panzi Foundation). Most need counseling, which we provide in 72 village-based clinics or in any of a dozen safe houses established for such women. Some will never be welcomed back into their communities; the victims become unjustly victimized.



Our mandate is to provide healing for the whole person; providing balm for the wounds...

and hope and encouragement for the soul through Christ's love.

This is not our typical assignment. It differs from the usual work we have done over the past 25 years: training of doctors and nurses, establishing clinics and schools, setting up vaccination and clean water programs in refugee settings, etc. My credentials and training don't exactly meet the 'job description' but I find myself where I believe I should be...and blessed that God has found a place where we can help those in desperate need. This is also not the 'safest place' we have ever worked. Aside from the fighting and continued culture of violence, there are ongoing episodes of kidnapping for ransom of nationals and expatriates alike. Doctors Without Borders, Save the Children, and others have had persons abducted and consequently pulled back to rethink how to meet needs in such an environment.

If that is not enough, there also are environmental threats. An active volcano overshadows the town of Goma where we reside. The last eruption in 2002 spewed an immense river of lava into the middle of this heavily populated border town, leveling houses, schools, clinics, even the airport, killing scores of people unable to escape. The threat level has recently been raised to yellow as the lake of molten lava in the crater spews tongues of fire and smoke into the air.

Lake Kivu, on whose banks I sit while writing this letter, has one of the highest concentrations of methane gas known in a natural setting, trapped under layers of water in this deep lake, built up over the years from the underground volcanic fissures. A similar methane-imbued lake on the other side of Africa, erupted in huge gaseous cloud in the 1980s, killing thousands of those who lived by the water.

The city of Goma with 500,000 persons, is tucked between the volcano and the lake; an eruption of either would be devastating.



However, we have an abiding sense that this is where we should be. Ann came out for a visit before Easter and will return in July, after these last U.S. deputation visits. She has been asked to assist one of our indigenous partners, Heal Africa, to develop educational and capacity building programs for orphans and abandoned street children. In our 25 years of service overseas, I don't believe we have ever intentionally sought out a country or place to work. We don't 'bid on assignments, strategize for posts, or compete for positions.' It has rather been a matter of being available and willing. However, in all our years of service, we have been overwhelmingly blessed. Whether in the midst of abject poverty in Haiti, rebellion

in Zaire, austerity in South Sudan, or war in Congo... we have never been alone nor could have ever imagined a more meaningful or fulfilling work.

We don't know when the volcano will erupt, when the methane in the lake may bubble up, when the rebels will reenter Goma, or if abductors linger by the path. We do know that over 25,000 women and girls have been brutally assaulted, and we have been given the capacity, the occasion, the means, and time to make a difference. For us, this is our time, and we are thankful for the opportunity and support to be precisely where we are.

The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

Psalm 34:18