

A MEAK Eye Mission to Turkana, North West Kenya in February 2011

Chief Alexander (The Great) N'Gobi sits amidst a group of around fifty of his tribespeople and others, waiting expectantly in the early morning sunlight at the Kakuma Mission Hospital in Turkana, North West Kenya.

Chief Alexander is a tall, spare man of advanced years, with a proud erect bearing and leathery wrinkled skin burned and dried out by the intense sun and constant sand-borne wind. His features, set in his thin high cheek-boned face, are emotionless. He wears a soft camouflage desert hat with an ostrich feather, a long multi-coloured shuka or cloak is slung over one shoulder and he clutches a few possessions - a long walking stick, a stool that also serves as a headrest, and a water bottle.



He and his companions sitting in the shade of the outside waiting area all display the same badge, a clue as to why they are here over 200kms away from their villages in the remote areas near the Sudanese and Ethiopian borders. They all wear a white gauze patch over one eye that contrasts starkly with their dusty black skin and gives the whole scene a surreal atmosphere. They are quiet and nervous.

They stir as a group of surgeons and nurses arrive and start to remove the eye patches and apply drops to the eyes. After allowing a little time for the drops to take effect they are led one by one to count raised fingers and read an eye chart taped to a wall.

They can see! Some can read the chart right down to the smallest symbols! Some had been blinded by cataracts others suffered severely diminishing sight. After being screened by MEAK (Medical and Educational Aid for Kenya) on a field trip to their village they had been selected to be transported here for surgery by a surgical team from the Outreach Department of the Lions SightFirst Hospital in Nairobi.

The patients return to their seats: they show little if any emotion, no joy, no gratitude. This is their way, there is no word in Turkana for 'thank you'. If they are given something they study the giver for a moment, then simply reach out and take it. This is because historically they have rarely been given anything. They have had to claw a living out of this unyielding and unforgiving land close to the Great Rift Valley in East Africa, often having to fight to the death to defend their right to be there, which makes them suspicious and careful.

Prior to his operation Alexander had to be led everywhere but now he stands up and walks unaided to the door where he stops and turns, surveying the scene around him with an imperious look then strides back to his seat and sits down absolutely still and expressionless. Suddenly, he exclaims, 'Aieeee, Aieeee' loudly and drums his feet on the ground before resuming his composure.

Gradually there is a murmur among the group and they start to talk and laugh among themselves. They are happy, the surgeons and nurses are pleased and our film-maker Trevor Harrison-Phipps is busy recording the event and charming the tribeswomen, even encouraging them to dance. It is a joyous moment and makes the many days of arduous work in bringing them here worthwhile for all involved.

The fact that they are here is a story of two cultures, an indomitable humanitarian spirit and trust.

A few days earlier a six-wheeled Mercedes Truck courtesy of Guerba (Kenya) lumbered along a murderous rock-strewn track into various villages along the route from Kaikor to Lokichogio on the Sudan border. On board were a seven strong MEAK (Medical & Educational Aid for Kenya) team - Dee and Mike Belliere, founders of the 18 year old charity, embarking on their 40th Mission to date; Nargis Kasmani, Cabinet Secretary of Lions of Kenya; Isabel Wilcox, an American sponsor, Trevor Harrison-Phipps, film-maker; Eberhard Zeyhle, a parasitologist; Samson and Jeremiah, trained eye screeners; Lydia, their 'Secretary/Assistant' and Martin and Marion Nighy. N'Jenga the driver/mechanic and Daniel Wambah the company cook were provided by Guerba, wages paid by MEAK.



At each village Samson or Jeremiah made an announcement by loudhailer, in Turkanan, that MEAK would be screening for eye problems and people who needed help should be at a certain place and time to await our return. This was the pattern over five days in different villages visited. Many people gathered for the screenings, it was an event not to be missed for entertainment value if nothing else. There were lots of lively,

noisy children and a few self-appointed guardians striving to keep them under control by smacking them with switches producing squeals of pain and excitement.



The tribespeople queued patiently in an orderly fashion, standing or squatting. The elders tended to push in but after a little jostling were allowed to stay in position. The men, however, would often just walk to the head of the queue. The women do all the domestic work and child-rearing including breaking down and transporting the manyattas or huts as the tribe migrates. The men are excellent herdsmen, butchers and warriors. The more livestock a man has the wealthier he is and thus he will attract more wives and produce more children.

Over the next few days the MEAK team would screen almost 3,500 people for cataracts, glaucoma, trachoma, etc, and gather two hundred or so for treatment,

transporting them back to the Kakuma Mission Hospital in a second hired truck. The tribespeople had to trust that MEAK would fulfill their promise and heal and return them to their homes - some wanted to be paid to come! The patients had to be fed and watered and N'Jenga and Daniel the cook looked after that. They were outstanding, nothing was too much trouble and they worked long hard days from 5am to late at night. N'Jenga was worth his weight in gold: he had to deal with three punctures and terrible driving conditions for him and the Mercedes and assist with erecting tents and cooking and washing up. He is a Kikuyu with a keen sense of humour and a devout Muslim, a credit to his tribe and his faith.

The MEAK Team visited many remote villages along the route from 15th to 20th January 2011 and ventured deep into the Elemi (or Ilemi) Triangle (The Disputed Territories), a dangerous area close to the Sudanese oilfields that is claimed by Kenya, Sudan and Ethiopia.

The Mission took much careful planning and organising by Dee and Mike Belliere, founding directors of MEAK. Even though this was their fortieth, it had its own unique and unexpected difficulties. Getting nine heavy boxes of medication and eye drops through check-in and customs including a 35kg 7' 6" x 3' examination couch and then transporting them, the team and its baggage across Kenya by light aircraft and truck is no mean feat. Throw in a nail-biting wait for the second truck to arrive, managing and co-ordinating the teams, feeding and 'housing' over 200 patients, taking them to the hospital and, after treatment, returning them to their villages and you have a recipe for potential disaster. Dee and Mike took it all in their stride and thanks to them everything went smoothly. We were most grateful to Jamie Roberts of Tropic Air for the use of his Cessna Caravan light aircraft in which he shuttled us to and fro across the Rift Valley including a difficult landing on an airstrip in the N'Doto (Dream) Mountains in the Milgis area near the Matthews Mountain Range.



Here to greet the team were Helen Douglas-Defrense and Peter Ilsey of the Milgis Trust who in partnership with MEAK have refurbished the clinic in Latakwen where the examination couch and some supplies of medication were destined to go. Isabel Wilcox was particularly interested in visiting the clinic as she was paying the salary for a nurse and cleaner for two years. The new nurse Rita Lekisaat was impressive and very well organized and the clinic was a credit to all concerned. The examination couch was 'unveiled' and solemnly presented to the clinic with Mike Belliere reclining on it to officially launch it. Afterwards a group of schoolchildren sang and danced for us as a thank you.

Dee and Mike are the first to agree that they could not operate as well in Kenya without the assistance of Nargis Kasmani. She is a facilitator extraordinaire and networks tirelessly to achieve sponsorship and help. A truly good person, Cabinet Secretary of the Kenyan Lions, a mother, grandmother and fantastic cook to boot; she is quiet and unassuming but a force to be reckoned with, not to be deterred from her humanitarian work for Kenya.

There were too many memorable aspects of this mission to relay here in this abbreviated piece but a few highlights stand out and are worthy of mention -

Tribespeople emerging from their beehive-like manyattas in the Elemi Triangle, backlit in the morning sunlight; the vivid colours of the shukas, necklaces and beadwork; the erect bearing of the men and women and their varying hairstyles; how thin they are; the large numbers of boisterous inquisitive children, their joy when Mike Belliere gave them footballs and frisbies to play with; encouraging children to sing with and for us in Kaikor; observing at close quarters the two surgeons, Hiram M'Wanga and Evans Sherond, as they operated; seeing the bandages removed the next day and patients, previously blind or near blind, reading wall charts.



Trevor dancing with the tribesladies - tres sexy; a woman taking Dee's hands in hers and saying, 'Mama Dee, may you have many years'; 'Doctor' Mike assisting Samson to screen and learning how to identify different eye conditions; the tenderness and care which Mike and Dee exhibit toward the people; the strength-sapping heat; the dry, dusty, stony, semi-desert landscape in the death grip of a severe drought; fields of purple aloe vera erupting from the stony ground near Lokitaung.

Sleeping on the roof of the Kakuma Mission Hospital, under a vast canopy of glittering stars and a huge, creamy bright full moon turning night into day and illuminating our seven mattresses in line, the white mosquito nets glowing

eerily like monstrous cocoons; playing guitar and singing songs around the campfire, (I know, I know!); the Musseins in their minarets calling the true believers to prayer; a dawn chorus of cockerels crowing, goats bleating, donkeys braying, dogs barking, birds singing, people talking, the heart-throb of a new day in this blessed, blasted land.

The landscape in the disputed territory is hilly and surrounded by spectacular distant blue mountains. It is red, sometimes grey in colour, dry and dusty, littered with rocks, stones, bones, scattered acacia trees and scrub. The land and the populace are crying out for water - it hasn't rained for ten months and rainfall has declined year on year over the last four years. The goat herds look gaunt with ribs sticking out, grazing is scarce and some animals are dying. We came to realise that when we selected people to come with us for treatment they were reluctant because they might miss a visit from UNICEF who supply UNIMIX a protein rich porridge. They are traumatised through lack of food as a result of the crippling drought and famine: food and water are number one priorities. We were asking them to choose between sight or food. We tried to convince them that we would feed and water them whilst with us but they were distrustful. They have been neglected and treated badly over the years; this conditioning is unhelpful in gaining their trust, making our job much harder.

As we got closer to the Sudanese and Ethiopian borders we came across young men and boys with AK47s slung casually over their shoulders. They were the village's defence against raiding parties from across and within borders - there is a history of raiding or rustling in this area that goes back hundreds of years. It used to be that a young man could not marry unless he had killed in battle. In the past they used spears, wrist knives and bows and arrows. Today it is guns, more lethal, and sadly there are plenty available.

We arrived at Kaleng late one evening as the light was fading fast and were led to a small compound where we could bivouac and swiftly erected our tents. A quick supper was rustled up and we settled down for the night. Early the next day Eberhard introduced us to Father Robert J. Metcalfe, a Carmelite priest and doctor specialising in diseases of the desert nomads. He has been working in the Lokitaung Region for thirty five years and is revered by the tribespeople for his dedication and commitment to their welfare. As they are unwilling to go to a doctor or clinic he visits them in their manyattas on his bicycle. We met him in his modest old colonial-style bungalow on top of a small hill overlooking the village where he is assisted by Suleka, a charming and capable local woman whom he has trained in nursing and medicine. Father Robert is the author of a book on the subject of desert diseases published by the Irish Carmelite Press ISBN 978-0-956074-0-1: he proudly showed us his well-thumbed copy.



In the course of our travels, in addition to the eye patients we collected, we were brought a child with an hydatid cyst in her heart requiring a very, very difficult operation, which Michael Belliere

managed to arrange to be carried out by Mr David Anderson, an eminent cardiac surgeon from Guy's and St. Thomas' Hospital, London, who is heading up a MEAK Heart Mission Team in Nairobi in May 2011. We were also asked to help a young woman with a potentially cancerous growth on her neck, a child with a badly broken leg that needed re-setting and a fourteen year old girl with a very large pre-cancerous tumour in her uterus. All of these cases will be attended to thanks to MEAK's presence and influence. It is heartwarming to observe MEAK in action enabled by the generous donations and gifts they receive and the practical field and medical help provided by many willing people and surgeons.

So, eight days later we find ourselves back at Kakuma Mission Hospital observing the result of our labours. Watching people like Alexander (The Great) regain sight, dignity and purpose - a truly life-changing event for him and for us. Even the surgeons who had given up their time to fly down from Nairobi to perform the procedures for very little reward were affected. As one of them, Hiram M'Wanga, said in theatre 'My heart is glad when I can use my God-given skill to help my impoverished countrymen by improving or restoring their sight. I thank MEAK for bringing us together'.

Thanks to MEAK we were privileged to go into the remotest part of Kenya, the 'Cradle of Mankind', to one of the harshest and most inhospitable environments, under very trying conditions, bringing relief and an improved quality of life to many of the "Voiceless People" in and around the Disputed Territories. Our deepest thanks go out to all who made this possible by their kindness and generosity to MEAK and the untiring and unselfish efforts of its directors and associates.

'Your generosity makes others dreams a reality'

Martin & Marion Nighy for MEAK February 2011