

A HART for the Hopeless

Caroline Cox, describes her work with her new organisation, HART, established to try to bring light to some of the darkest parts of the world, helping victims of unjust regimes and forgotten people in forgotten lands.

**'Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves,
For the rights of the poor and destitute,' (Proverbs 31:8)**

Many decades ago, when I was a Girl Guide, I was patrol leader of the Scarlet Pimpernel patrol. Little did I think then that my life would develop in ways similar to the main character in that famous book – crossing borders clandestinely, trying to help victims of oppressive regimes. The original 'Scarlet Pimpernel' devoted his life to rescuing aristocrats in the French Revolution doomed to die at the guillotine. My work gives me the privilege of trying to help some of the poorest, most vulnerable and forgotten people in the world today.

My small organisation 'HART' [Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust] has been established to serve people who are off the media's 'radar screen' and who are not served by major aid organisations. Many are trapped behind closed borders, suffering at the hands of brutal regimes intent on physical or cultural genocide. Famous aid organisations, such as those working under the United Nations (UNHCR, UNICEF), the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross), and Save the Children, can only go to places with the permission of a sovereign government. If a government is victimising a minority in its own borders, and does not give permission to these aid organisations to visit the victims, they cannot go to them, so they may be left to suffer and die, unreachable, unhelped.

HART makes such people our priority. It is a Christian's mandate to speak for the oppressed, to heal the sick, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked and I think it is in keeping with the Franciscan commitment to try to reach some of the most poor and outcast, bereft of aid and advocacy, trapped in intense conflict zones or post-conflict areas of acute devastation.

We operate according to the principles of the '4 A's':

Advocacy - speaking for the oppressed, especially in areas generally neglected by the world's media.

Aid - taking humanitarian aid to people who often receive nothing from the major aid organisations.

Authenticity - going in person to ask local people for advice on their priorities and to deliver aid directly to the hospital, clinic, school, or representatives of the local community.

Accountability - to those for whom we speak, ensuring our advocacy is accurate and sensitive; and to our supporters, to inform them of what we have done with what they made possible.

We do not have the word 'Christian' in our name, because we believe, as Christians, that our compassion and aid must be unconditional. Therefore, as we help anyone in need, regardless of their faith tradition, we do not wish to compromise them by being overtly 'Christian'. However, our logo, which you can see on our website (www.hart-uk.org), has the cross enshrined, with a heart, in a circle of flowers, representing passion and compassion, as witness to our Christian faith,

However, 'faith without action is dead'. So, what are we doing?

Aid: we currently have aid programmes in Russia, the Armenian enclave of Nagorno Karabakh, Burma; Nigeria; Sudan; East Timor, Uganda and Sri Lanka.

Advocacy: we try to raise awareness about the plight of people suffering in these areas in the political arena: parliament, political arenas in other countries, churches [we are happy to visit yours!], universities, schools, and the media.

Our programmes: we are still very young, with meagre resources compared with more established aid organizations. In some places, we build on aid projects that I was already supporting through other organisations, such as CSW (Christian Solidarity Worldwide). When CSW decided to curtail its aid commitments, to focus on advocacy, I felt committed to continuing responsibility and established HART for this purpose. We find that relatively small sums can have a transforming effect in the areas where we work. We are always humbled and inspired by the dedication, expertise, commitment, and hard work of the local people, which transform our 'little' into so much. They are not passively waiting for aid; they are already trying to help their own people, but without resources; it is our privilege to provide some help for them to turn their visions into reality.

Burma

The Orwellian-named military junta which dominates Burma, the 'State Peace and Development Council' (SPDC), is systematically oppressing ethnic national groups such as the Karen, Karenni, and Shan people in the east and the Chin, Kachin, and Rohingya in the west. It inflicts indescribable suffering on these people, such as forced labour in conditions so harsh, many perish; some are used as human minesweepers, forced to walk ahead of SPDC soldiers. Recently, I met a young mother whose husband had died as a human minesweeper and whose oldest son had been so badly beaten by soldiers that he suffers permanent brain damage. Hundreds of thousands of people have been forced off their lands and now live as IDP's (Internally Displaced People). They are on the run, under conditions of severe deprivation and in constant danger in the jungle, with no proper shelter, food, education, or health care. During another recent visit, I met a mother whose five children had just died of malaria. HART supports cross-border mobile medical teams and schools. These teams, at great risk, provide health care for the sick and injured trapped inside the conflict zones inside Burma; they also help to provide supplies to enable teachers to give children some education.

East Timor

This little nation is still devastated by bitter conflict but the majority of emergency aid organizations have withdrawn, leaving a devastated infrastructure, acute poverty, and a desperate shortage of survival necessities. In rural areas, there is widespread malnutrition and untreated disease. HART is supporting the Hiam Health Clinic. When we visited the Clinic last November, we were extremely impressed by the excellence of their health and nutritional programmes, which have saved many lives.

Nagorno Karabakh

The Armenians who live in this little enclave suffered attempted ethnic cleansing by Azerbaijan in one of the most high-intensity conflicts in the world during the early 1990s. Subjected to massive aerial bombardment (400 Grad missiles a day pounded onto the capital city, Stepanakert, during 1992), all the towns and villages were effectively destroyed; tens of thousands of refugees have been forced from their homes by earlier massacres in Azerbaijan and by the war. However, because its political status is still unresolved, UN organizations such as UNHCR will not work there. HART supports a Rehabilitation Centre, which has introduced innovative therapies unknown in the former Soviet Union and has gained recognition as a Centre of Excellence, disseminating these innovations throughout the region, to Georgia, Chechnya, and even Azerbaijan.

Under the former Soviet system, those who were afflicted with chronic disability were admitted to institutions where they were 'warehoused' without effective therapies to enable them to realise their remaining potential. Consequently, they were doomed to stunted lives, often with premature death from preventable causes such as pressure sores, urinary tract, or respiratory tract infections. Even a previously healthy young man could die within 2 years from pressure sores and systemic infection. Depression and despair were commonplace.

However, in our Rehabilitation centre, our visionary Director, Vardan, has introduced a range of therapies and activities, which have brought hope to the hopeless, and smiles to people who thought they would never smile again. A professional wood carver teaches hemiplegics how to create beauty through carving traditional Armenian crosses, which they can sell – earning an income to support their families; there is an 'IT' room where patients can 'surf the web' to see vistas far beyond the confines of Karabakh - and teach others how to become computer-literate. They can also earn an income and not suffer 'aid dependency'. An inspiring musical teacher encourages patients to find beauty, personal fulfilment, and realisation of potential through making music - and they do! There are also, of course, traditional therapies, such as speech therapy, physiotherapy, tissue repair for pressure sores, all combining to provide a holistic response to patients' needs. Sometimes the results surpass any developments which orthodox medicine could achieve, as in the case of young 'Mike', who was told by specialists in Moscow that he would never walk again. When I next visited the Centre, I nearly walked past him – because he was standing - and smiling! Mike is now home in his village, where he spends so much of his time enjoying the freedom that mobility has given him, that he spends relatively little time at home!

Nigeria

Last year, a donation of £2 000 enabled the rebuilding of two schools and four churches destroyed in recent conflicts in Plateau State. Subsequent donations will support the Christian Institute, established by Bishop Benjamin Kwashi in his diocese of Plateau state. The Institute will train men and women for the ministry and other work, such as maternal and child healthcare.

In February this year, militants attacked Bishop Ben's home, intending to kill him. When they could not find him, as he was in England at the time, they beat his two sons and subjected his wife, Gloria, to sexual

assault, torture, and gross humiliation. They then forced her to walk naked through the town to the Bishop's office, where they assaulted his staff, including Deaconess Susan Essam, and stole all the money they could find. HART has subsequently sent a donation of £5 000 as a practical expression of the sympathy we had already conveyed.

Russia

HART supports 'Our Family' programmes in Moscow, which are developing foster family care to replace the long-established, horrific policy of institutionalization of orphaned and abandoned children.

The 'Our Family' programme has been path-breaking, spreading foster family care throughout the Russian Federation. At a recent Conference, representatives came from over 40 regions to study how to implement family care for orphaned and abandoned children in their parts of Russia. This could change the lives of countless children as it did for little Dima, aged 4 years-old, found dying by a dustbin; when I last saw Dima, he had been living with a loving family: he was full of happy mischief – and playing a violin!

Sri Lanka

Last year, HART supported emergency aid programmes in areas affected by the tsunami, which were not being served by many aid organizations for security reasons. Our grant was used to help the provision of emergency shelters.

Sudan

In February, a HART delegation visited Yei, in southern Sudan, where we support an orphanage. The people of southern Sudan are suffering from the ravages of the long and bitter war, which raged for many years before a Peace Agreement was signed last year. Yei was subjected to intensive aerial bombardment. At the height of the war, there were 13-14 raids by Antonov aircraft daily, with 13-14 bombs in each raid. The fighting on the ground was also intense: after one battle, it was impossible to walk on the road for one kilometre because of the density of bodies. The people are now trying to cope with the aftermath of war, which left a devastated infrastructure and a 'lost generation' of children who were unable to receive any education.

HART hopes to develop aid programmes in Yei. This would include contributing towards the provision of health care, especially in rural areas where there are many unmet needs, and helping local people rebuild their shattered lives and devastated infrastructure. For example, we were deeply impressed by a local Teacher Education and Theological College, which trains students and pastors in ways compatible with their own way of life, including allowing time away from studies for the collection of the harvest.

Uganda

According to the former UN Under-Secretary General and Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict, in northern Uganda, 'An entire society is being systematically destroyed – physically, culturally, emotionally, socially and economically....' During recent years, 500,000 people are believed to have been killed, 25,000 children abducted by the so-called Lords' Resistance Army (LRA), and approximately 95% of the one and a quarter million people have been displaced. They are forced to leave their villages to live in miserable conditions in camps rife with disease, hunger, and terror, where, according to various international agencies, 1000 people die every week. In February, we went to Gulu, Kitgum, and Patong, and visited three camps, two Night Shelters for 'Commuter Children,' and a Rehabilitation Centre for children who had escaped from the LRA.

The atrocities inflicted on these children are beyond imagination. As we try to be 'A Voice for the Voiceless', I finish by letting one of these children speak, describing the horrors she has suffered – typical of those inflicted on countless children in Uganda and emblematic of the suffering of children, women and men in many 'forgotten lands'.

Monica, now 18, was abducted in 2003 from her home at night. Her father had been killed by a helicopter gunship and her brother had already been abducted – she met him a year later in Sudan, when they were both taken to an LRA military training camp. They were then separated and she has never seen him again. She was tied up, beaten, and shot in the leg (scars still clearly visible) during an ambush. She was not given any treatment. When she was taken to Sudan for military training she was 'given' to Commander Palaro. She became pregnant and gave birth with no help at all.

'I was just treated like an animal. I had to go to fight in Uganda, carrying my baby with me. I was ordered to abduct other children. If any resisted, they were immediately killed. I have had to kill time and time again. In a battle, one has to kill. During one battle, not far from my home, I met a woman whom I knew. I thrust my child, now 18 months old, into her arms, because I could no

longer carry my baby and my gun. I have not seen my daughter again. Even up until today, the memories come back, especially when I wake up from my sleep; they go down but then they rise up again. I see those I killed.'

Please pray for HART as we try to do what we can to apply Franciscan principles of unconditional love to some of the most outcast, neglected and hurting people in our world. Above all, please pray for all who suffer from war, conflict, oppression, and injustice, whose voices echo Monica's anguish, in different ways and diverse places. She speaks to you, for all of them.