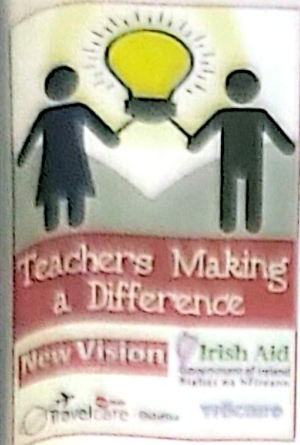


Two Canadian girls fundraise 700 dollars to support pupils in Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement



By Olyo Oloya

My journey to Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement in Yumbe district in northern Uganda began with an email. It came from Alison Schivo, a parent of twin daughters attending St Joseph Catholic Elementary School in Aurora, Ontario, Canada. I get a lot of emails from parents, most of them upset about one thing or another. Mrs Schivo's email was different. She went straight to the point, writing, "my twin daughters Ella and Myah have been deeply touched and affected by the stories from your homeland and they want to help."

For the past month or so, they have been baking and selling their wares at my office raising funds for you to take back to Uganda - when you go home to visit your Mother. So far they have raised \$500 (CDN) and their goal is to raise \$500 before the end of the school year...."

Ella and Myah did reach their goal and with top-up from the school, raised \$700 dollars, money they wanted to see go to nursery school in Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement in Yumbe.

New Vision had featured the story of teacher Sajidi Tabuga, who uses discarded objects to teach his students, an empty cardboard box stood for television. For Ella, Myah and their classmates, the money raised could make a difference in Tabuga's class. He could buy more storybooks for his students. He could purchase exercise books for them to write in. The possibilities were many.

I met Ella, Myah and their classmates on the last day of school before students dispersed for summer holidays. Both girls were mature beyond their age, calmly telling me about their project. Their classmates looked on as they gave me the money, including coins and cheques packaged in a ziplock bag. On the blackboard, written in white chalk, was the announcement that read: "For Bidi Bidi Refugee Camp". I let the class know that what Myah and Ella did was selfless and that this was something to be applauded and encouraged. The money would be delivered in Bidi Bidi to the hands of Tabuga.

On Monday last week, I followed through by delivering the money to Tabuga. The real lesson though was the camp itself. As it turned out, Tabuga is not alone in trying to make things work in the refugee settlement. There were many schools with thousands of children with vast



The writer meeting pupils of Alaba Primary School in Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement which has an enrollment of 3,500

Bidi Bidi needs an education officer

Education of refugee children requires co-ordinated international effort spearheaded by the host government



From left to right: Oloya, Myah, Ella, principal Oliphant and classroom teacher

needs. Within the same compound that is home to Tabuga's classrooms, there is Alaba Primary School. With an enrollment topping 3,500 pupils, the school is bursting at the seams. It is overcrowded, understaffed and lacking basic scholastic resources.

Like many primary schools in Bidi Bidi, children at Alaba Primary School have no reading books. There are few teachers. There are no textbooks. There are no computers. And the list goes on and on.

Lawrence Dumba, the headteacher, showed me around his school. In the Primary Six classroom alone, at least 100 pair of eyes stared back at me,

eagerly anticipating what goodies I brought to the school.

Two days earlier, a storm had blown away the tarpaulins that covered the classrooms, exposing the skeletal metal frames and the desks. Perhaps I brought with me something to make their school better.

But on this day, all I could offer were words of sympathy and encouragement, telling students that the world is beginning to learn more about their needs, that I would add my voice to letting their wants known.

But the education of refugee children such as those in Bidi Bidi

requires a much more co-ordinated international effort spearheaded by the host government. The immediate needs is for the education ministry to send a permanent district education officer or an equivalent attached to Bidi Bidi.

The job of the officer will be to work with local officials and non government organisations to identify the needs of schools within the settlement.

One of the issues Dumba spoke about, for example, was the accreditation of his schools so that his students can sit the Primary Leaving Examination. Currently,

candidates from Alaba Primary School register in another school in order to complete the examinations.

Once the issues are identified, it would be the job of this personnel to co-ordinate the assistance the Government receives from outside toward the refugee settlement.

If nothing is coming from the international community at the moment, the role will require the officer to develop a comprehensive needs assessment that should then be passed onto the education ministry and the foreign affairs ministry to embark on getting donors to support those needs. The main thing to remember here is that Uganda is hosting the South Sudanese refugees on behalf of the world and it is the responsibility of the world to come through with adequate funding to ensure that the needs of Bidi Bidi are met.

Of course, Myah, Ella and their classmates will continue to respond with bigger fundraising for the Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement schools. Already, the two Canadian girls have demonstrated that there is a lot of good will out there. They will likely harness the efforts of other schools in their neighbourhoods. The amount they will raise will likely top the amount sent this summer. The issue is whether the Government is doing its part to inform the world that Bidi Bidi needs help now and access the goodwill.

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