

Letter from Okulonyo

Dear Friends,

As I sit in the wide dusty compound of Okulonyo, in the shelter of a tree clothed with a passion fruit plant, it's like looking out over a dusty school playground. Flat and spacious, but rather than classrooms it's surrounded by mud brick huts thatched in local grass. Chickens scratch by, a number followed by squeaking chicks. In the hut next door, doves coo, nesting in converted jerry cans. The sing song voices of compound workers, resting in the afternoon shade, give a gentle background music.

This morning we travelled even deeper into the bush to meet new and recent settlers. We travelled pillion on 2 trusty motorbikes. CHIPS Christian International Peace Services doesn't believe in the bold statement of difference a 4 wheel drive supplied by an NGO makes. Some of the places we visit are so remote that there's only room for people walking in single file, a bicycle or a motorbike brushing through thorny undergrowth either side. The track we ride down is flat and straight with mountains in the distance, and for some represents the disputed border between Karamoja and Teso.

We arrive at a village first settled last year, and see maize, cassava and millet growing from seeds supplied by CHIPS last year. 10 years ago this area was a very deadly no man's land as a result of armed cattle raiding by the Karamajong and a brutal backlash from government troops.

CHIPS through the presence of peacemaking teams for the last 10 years has encouraged security and shown through its mixed teams that Karamajong and Iteso can live together and seek to model the reconciliation they are seeking to promote. In the village we met both Karamajong and Iteso who were living together and laying aside enmity.

At the centre of the village, a collection of mud huts and pioneer dwellings made of wooden poles and grass thatching. We sat on sun dried log perches as the village leader and village speaker welcomed us.

Shoeless big eyed children covered in dusty well worn clothes looked on muted by hunger. And famine/hunger was the big issue for the villagers as settlers the first year is always the hardest as there's nothing in reserve. We promised to alert a local food programme to their plight and also try to send some health provision they're way. The place is so remote and the settlement so new that few people know that the village exists.

As we left I thought of those other Israeli settlers I met last year. How different this village was, with none of the advantages of West Bank settlements, but also with none of the fear. The only fence here was a cattle Kraal to keep the rather lean cows in, rather than the enemy out.

Here, enemies had become friends and fellow pioneers, and any fences or walls of enmity had come down.

Jonathan