

I was raised in a missionary home and always dreamed of helping people in a needy country. My parents had already worked as medical missionaries in Lesotho, when in 1991 they accepted a call to serve in Sierra Leone. I decided to go with them to finish secondary school at Kenya's Maxwell Adventist Academy.

As my graduation approached, I began thinking that it would be great to have a missionary experience before starting college. I was a bit discouraged because many told me that I was either too young or that it was too late to process the proper paperwork. However, I claimed God's promise, "Give yourself to the Lord; trust in him, and he will help you" (Psalms 37:5, TEV), and He took care of things. Shortly before graduation, Haroldo Seidl, one of the leaders of Adventist Development and Relief

tion and thousands of violent deaths. Many more people had died of starvation, not so much due to lack of food but to irresponsible management of the supplies and looting. Fortunately, by the time I arrived in June 1993, food and medicine were reaching many of the neediest people.

From the moment the plane landed in the southern airport of Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, I could see that life was going to be very different for the next two months. There were soldiers with machine guns, tanks, and helicopters everywhere. I was happy to see Hawa, a woman with a commanding presence, waiting for me. We got into a very old car and drove off, accompanied by two armed escorts. The driver honked the horn continually as we sped down the streets. I was told that the speed, horn honking, and armed guards were necessary to ward off aggressive car thieves.

As we drove to the ADRA headquarters in northern Mogadishu, I began seeing the terrible effects of the war. Buildings, monuments, and mosques that had been beautiful were now scarred by bullet holes. What the bullets and bombs had not destroyed, the looters had taken, including the light bulbs from the traffic signals. Despite the armed men, children played in the street. They waved at us as we made our noisy way past, and many smiled at us.

I spent my first night in Mogadishu hearing the frequent drone of helicopters overhead and occasional distant gunshots. I can truly say that God was with me, because in spite of what I had seen earlier and what I was hearing that night, I wasn't afraid. Instead, I felt excited to be somewhere where I could help.

The next morning, we continued our trip down a bumpy road to the clinic, which is located in the small town of Cadale, about 90 miles (150 km) north of Mogadishu. The clinic had once been an oceanside fish factory, but the war had forced it to close. The scenery was deserts and the wind constantly blew over the dunes. I was warmly welcomed by everyone. Despite the language barrier, by the second day at Cadale I felt as if I were among friends.

Since this part of Somalia had once been an Italian colony, our meals often included an Italian basic: pasta with tomato sauce. In the villages, the people eat rice and goat meat. The local specialty

Mission to Mogadishu

by
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Agency (ADRA), visited my school. He had just been to Somalia, so I asked him if there was anything I could do there. Mr. Seidl said, "There sure is!" Soon after graduation, I was on my way to Somalia on a two month assignment.

Somalia is the easternmost country on the "horn" of the African continent, located east of Ethiopia. It has a territory of more than 637,000 sq. km (240,000 sq. mi.). The approximately six million inhabitants speak the Somali language, and the large majority are Sunni Muslims. Somalia became independent from Great Britain and Italy in 1960. Although about 95 percent of the people share the same language, culture, and religion, clan allegiance is their most important identification.

I was aware of the Somali civil war that began in 1991. Fierce clan loyalties and the vengeful policy of "an eye for an eye" had resulted in widespread destruc-



The ADRA Clinic in Cadale, Somalia.

is *muffo*, a round, flat cornmeal bread served with goat stew. The ingredients are mixed and eaten with the hands.

The ADRA clinic has a laboratory, a pharmacy, two examination rooms, and space for 15 patients at a time. The clinic team I worked with was composed of two Somali doctors, three Somali nurses, two American nurses, and two laboratory technicians. In addition to this team, eight ADRA health directors in the Cadale district provide health care and education to the people. About once a week, we delivered medicine to them and brought very sick people to our clinic. Many of these villages are not permanent, however. More than half of the Somalis are nomads, moving around with their cattle and small collapsible round huts made from mats braided from straw.

My assignment was dispensing prescriptions in the pharmacy. I sometimes helped in emergencies. One night, a woman came in, bleeding from a deep cut in her scalp. She had been fighting with another woman, apparently over a man. We stitched her up and hoped that this would be her last quarrel.

Because few of the people who came to the clinic spoke English, translators were a necessity. One of the best was a blind man who had been a school principal before the war. Although a disease had claimed his sight, he managed to keep cheerful and was a great help. Since the clinic staff needed the translators the most, I quickly learned to say things like "take two pills each day" in Somali. Many of the patients who had learned Italian during Somalia's colonial period found that I spoke Spanish, so we were able to communicate in these languages as well.

Although the clinic was located a



The author (left) and a friend show decorative dance shields and head gear.

good distance from Mogadishu, there was still some danger where we were. One day while I was in the compound, I heard shooting that lasted about four minutes. We later learned that looters had tried to steal a car, but two had been shot dead and the rest had fled. Another time we learned that looters had shot at one of our cars returning from Mogadishu with supplies. The driver is always the prime target, and our poor driver lost a finger in the unsuccessful attack. The other passenger was a thin young woman who had thrown herself to the floor as soon as the shooting began. A bullet hole through the door on the passenger side of the car showed us she had done the right thing at the right time!

What amazed me the most was the Somali people's spirit. Although they live every day knowing it might be their last, they have learned to cope. In the evening, the villagers sit together and share the news of the day. They have to walk long distances to get water, but they rarely complain. The wealthier Somalis carry their water by camel, but the poorer ones carry it on their backs. ADRA is building deeper wells to replace the current wells, which provide salty water contaminated with animal excrement. The buckets made out of old car tires will be replaced by pumps.

Up to the time I arrived, the only entertainment children had had was playing around soldiers, guns, and dead bodies. Fortunately, some primary schools were starting to re-open.

Another important activity carried out by ADRA is food and clothing distribution. Soldiers supervise the distributions; otherwise many of the needy people become violent. Our clinic also distributed clothes in outlying villages. The village people live in the most miserable condi-

tions and are most in need of help. The village elders were always very helpful, directing us to the most needy people.

The Somalis are proud of their culture. They are a very good-looking people. Their features often show evidences of their mixed blood with Arabs centuries ago. Somalia is quite a strict Muslim country. Men are allowed up to four wives and can divorce them whenever they want to. Women do not have a say in anything and live in submission to their husbands. ADRA is working with another aid agency directed by women, called SACCID ("help" in Somali). Their goal is to help Somali women by improving their opportunities for work and education.

As for the civil war, I believe that only the Somalis will be able to stop it. One of their sayings is telling: "Me and my brother against the world. Me and my brother against the clan. Me against my brother."

Despite many sad things that I saw, I was impressed by the dignity and goodness of the Somali people. I learned that the old saying is true: In giving yourself to others you receive much in return. My two-month experience in Somalia taught me to value things that I had taken for granted in the past—simple things like water, as well as important things like life and freedom. I thank God for giving me this chance to help my neighbors in need.

Born in Argentina, Gisele Rostan has accompanied her missionary parents to Paraguay and to Africa. She plans to study medicine in her homeland and eventually serve as a medical missionary.

Readers interested in volunteering their services through ADRA should write to: ADRA Volunteer Coordinator; 12501 Old Columbia Pike; Silver Spring, MD 20904-6600; U.S.A.