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Scenes one cannot forget

Posted by Kenneth Kaplan March 5, 2008 09:16 PM

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Behind the words "I was driven from my house."

Martha Thompson, a resident of Jamaica Plain, is Rights in Humanitarian Crises program manager for the Cambridge-based Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. Accompanied by UUSC program director Atema Eclai, she is visiting Nairobi and Kenya's Western and Nyanza provinces, touring internally displaced persons sites and assessing the humanitarian situation for the UUSC.

Tuesday, March 4

ELDORET, Kenya -- Today has been a day of terrible stories.

We have asked to talk with people who have been brought from Naivasha and Nakuru, towns in the Rift Valley province, back to their "ancestral homeland" of Kakamega, the provincial town center of Western province. The resettlement program is part of a government effort intended to lessen the post-election strife between ethnic groups. But it comes at a cost.

Anna, the regional coordinator of an NGO near Kakamega, has organized a meeting in her small one-room office, which is built on to a local kindergarten. As we walk through the gate, 20 four-year-olds greet us with glee, singing a song of welcome in English, waving their hands with huge smiles.

It is in almost visceral contrast to the group of people we find gathered in the office to tell us their stories. Sitting on benches that line the wall, twisting sodas in their hands, women and men speak up around the room.

"My name is Olito. My name is Paul. My name is Jaqueline. My name is Gladis."

All the stories start the same way: "We were driven out of our homes, we went to the

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stadium in Naivasha."

As people gain more confidence, they begin to tell the rest of the story and you realize how much those few words -- "I was driven out of my house" -- contain.

Privedes, a young woman who looks to be about fifteen but is in her early twenties with children, is almost last, and she has obviously decided we need to hear the full story. She begins:

"We heard that the Mungikiki (Kikuyu militia) were going to come at night, so we put the children inside and remained outside to guard. By midnight, the women went into the houses.

"In a few minutes, the first house was burning, police were shooting, two men had been killed. We heard that many people were coming with machetes 'to do their job.' People were being tortured.

"We ran with the children, the men jumped the wall and hid in a factory. We women ran into the parish St. Peters. The priest, Father Andato, brought us inside and locked the gate. He saved 500 of us in there as the killing and burning went on outside. He brought us to the stadium (the camp for internally displaced) but it was not really safe there so he gave us money to come here."

Her voice fades and then she says, "My husband is still there. I have not heard from him. I don't know how he is."

People begin to chime in. "They were using bodies as roadblocks, they were putting heads on the road." They are still in shock, still seeing scenes they cannot forget.

Other people are indignant as they talk about arriving in Kakamega after so much fear and terror, reaching there at 4 am, with hungry, tired, frightened children, and then initially being refused entrance at the police station where an internally displaced persons camp had been set up because they were from a different ethnic group than those already in the camps.

I look at these young mothers and I think of my own children. I cannot imagine going through this with children, trying to keep them safe, getting them out of burning houses, running with them in the streets at night, dodging gunshots and fires, figuring out where to run to be safe in that craziness, trying to make sure they have food, sleeping on the ground in camps with them, trying to keep them from seeing things no child should see.

These mothers sitting here have done all this and brought their children to safety, some are only 20 years old. We leave them, shaking their hands, I murmur good-bye in my few words of kiswahili, but truthfully I am speechless in any language in the face of their courage and their strength.

For more information on the UUSC and its activities, please visit its website at www.uusc.org. For information on how you can contribute to the Passport blog, please contact the Globe's assistant foreign editor, Kenneth Kaplan, at K_Kaplan@globe.com.