

# STILL THANKFUL, STILL DANCING



Travelling around Khartoum, it's common for visitors to take taxis. Buses are of course much cheaper but they take quite a lot more Arabic, and so visitors are defeated before they start. But this year there weren't as many taxis around as there used to be. Hyperinflation has ground wages down compared with costs, and citizens have shifted to cheaper options.

Lack of cruising taxis is a small, surface sign of deep problems for ordinary people. In Sudan, inflation this January was 84% compared with the previous January. For church staff, wages were already minimal but the explosion of prices over the last three years has rendered them inadequate. The church simply cannot keep up with the rising tide. Collections are down and income generation schemes constantly lag behind.

## Pressed in on every side

It's not just deficient salaries: there is no money for housing repairs, and homes are deteriorating each rainy season. It was distressing to discover two "senior staff" women selling tea by the road side in order to support their family. Their activity exposes their underpayment and real need as the amount of money they can generate that way is meagre compared with the hours spent. For one of them, her diocesan provided house is uninhabitable.

Tea sellers are a feature of Sudanese town life. Women crouch by small charcoal burners selling glassfuls of black tea, sometimes with mint or cardamon.



They pay no taxes, and get no state protection – often the reverse as police extort money from them. Men have other types of jobs, working as day labourers. Both have unsafe working conditions, no benefits, and long working hours for irregular income. Many women are the only breadwinners for families that include people who are sick or have special needs. Because of high school fees, many cannot afford to send their children to school anymore. They really need the daily income they earn by selling tea and food on the streets.

To keep this in context, parish clergy are paid nothing, either having separate employment or dependant on the offerings of their congregation. From the annual funding that CASSS gives, all the ECS bishops are receiving a small stipend which frees them to concentrate on their work. But faced with life sunk in such difficulty how do the congregations still rejoice when they meet? How is it that they are still dancing and not lost in pain? When praise begins they dance, celebrating Jesus in whom they know their future is assured: "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God." (Isa 41:10) Gideon Heugh writing for Tearfund said:

***"When life feels overwhelming, joy is an act of defiance; delight is a form of resistance. Pursue wonder, chase after beauty, find what makes your soul sing. Speak to the dark, saying "I am still luminous."***

In the taxi to Omdurman you may well find the road closed and the taxi taking a diversion through rutted alleyways. Protestors against the military



regime still take to the streets, but whereas they used to be big demonstrations with placards they are now little more than youths blocking roads and throwing stones. I asked a taxi driver whether he was irritated by their disruption of simple journeys. He said that drivers were mainly glad that someone was still expressing defiance at the military junta. The use of violence against protestors continues, but the police also have a new tactic. If protestors can be grabbed, they are summarily imprisoned, released only on the payment of SDG 100,000 fine, that's £150, a month's money.

### Confined and isolated

Ahmad Ibrahim is based in Omdurman, from where he leads the Prison & Hospital Chaplaincy service for the Diocese of Khartoum. Ahmad works ecumenically, visiting seven prisons containing men and women and children, and describes his mission as working with Christians who do not go to church. He said he goes out "to find them, to catch them." Many prisoners are completely cut off from their families and need a friend on the outside to help them. When they are sick and need medicines, the prison expects them to be brought in from outside. Ahmed is dedicated to show the love of God by being that friend for so many.

In the main women's prison there are 200 women and 50 children. Ahmad's desire is to supply them with

handcraft material, to show them alternative ways of surviving when they are released, to help them follow new paths. Khartoum diocese has no funding for his work. In recent years Leeds Diocese has provided help for teaching materials, medicines, Christmas & Easter celebrations, and transport costs for the evangelists as they go to the prisons, visit courts and follow up children in their homes while mothers are in prison. Ahmad said, "In the name of the Lord Jesus, we change the behaviour of prisoners so that they return to God remorseful, and God

restores them to his fold, and they leave alcohol, murder, theft, harassing, arson, prostitution, fraud, asking God to find them the best living in their lives as long as they are alive."

Huda prison is twelve miles outside Omdurman, beyond where normal transport reaches. Some of the men walk about with chains on their legs. Ahmad explained that these men have been sentenced to be executed. Within the prison a room has been set aside for Christian acts of worship, and the men have decorated the walls with texts to remind them of their calling. On the east end, in large letters is written "Love your enemies: pray for those who hate you." The men who come to the service seem relaxed, but quiet, listening attentively to Ahmad as the Bible is read

and he speaks to them. When they sing, the men all clap out a rhythm, singing strongly alleluia to the Father and thanks to Jesus. Here as everywhere in Sudan the depth of feeling comes from the song not being from a book but from memory, from the heart. The men sway but don't dance. Perhaps in prison they haven't found a way to say to the dark "I am still luminous." They struggle to embrace joy as an act of defiance. But at least from Ahmed they hear a voice saying "The Lord is with you: do not be dismayed."



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