

Update January 2021.

Dear friends and supporters,

We felt we should give you an update on the current situation in Mekele, at the Nicolas Robinson School.

General update

We continue to hear disturbing reports about the Tigray region. Many places we have visited in the past have been severely damaged and it will take a long time for the region to regain its economic strength. We are grateful that we are based in Mekele, where the impact of the war has been less severe. There is still a shortage of food and cash to pay for it, but most people are managing to eat something and sharing with relatives and neighbours, even if the diet is monotonous. The only possible communication is by phone, there is no internet service in the town.

Outside of Mekele, people have not been so lucky and our community has many family members outside of the capital city who continue to hear of relatives who have perished either directly after being shot by Eritrean or Ethiopian forces, or from medical complications through lack of facilities following the destruction and looting of hospitals. The only hospitals that seemed to be operational in the whole region are in Mekele. Most of our families have friends and relatives all over the state and they will be worried or grieving for them.

For now, our focus is humanitarian and education. We must support and pay our staff and then finally we will look to investment in education for the future but not until we are confident that the region is stable.

Since the 12th of December we have been in regular contact with the school. We have spoken to the school director every day, and taken the opportunity to speak to all of the management team and most of the senior teachers. So far everyone we know at the school in Mekele is safe.

In November and early December, there was a lot of looting in the city, but our school is undamaged and the only theft was a TV from the biology lab. Meanwhile in the city, the new "interim" administration, appointed by central government, is slowly taking shape. The school director has had conversations with several of the new officials. The logo of the school: "Uplifting Ethiopia" is seen as in line with their own objectives and they are supportive. Our local partners have also had meetings with the Department of Social Affairs, their humanitarian work through the support of families of the disabled is appreciated.

In Mekele, the banks have been open for about 2 weeks and they are running a limited operation. Cash withdrawals are limited as there is a shortage of bank notes, however many transactions can be done by bank transfer and in early January, the school transferred funds for the December salaries. The staff received the money and could withdraw sufficient cash for basic purchases. We are now sending funds to cover purchases of food for the school community and for the next salary payments. We also are paying workmen who are helping the school improve the security of the buildings.

School operations

There is now a rumour that schools might start classes in the next two to four weeks. This would bring a sense of normality to life especially for the children. We will have two priorities at the beginning of operations: physical and mental health.

Physical health

We will assess the health and nutrition of all the children and then give them extra food/nutrition. In particular, we aim to run the food programme for all classes right up to grade 12 as everyone will have suffered from food shortages. Once we know the full extent of the needs, we will put out an appeal for support. Likewise, for the support of extra sponsored children. Our school nurse can manage a team to support her in running the health assessment checks for the school and identify the highest priority cases.

Mental health

The school director knows an educational psychologist at Mekele University. We have also met him and he seems a very helpful and collaborative gentleman. He will have a meeting with the staff and then also with the students to help some come to terms with their experiences over the last three months. We hope this will enable the students to cooperate with each other and also for the teachers to understand if there are any conflicts between themselves. The community needs to build tolerance and look for unusual behaviour in the students who might be more aggressive or more tearful or have other reactions to the things they have seen and experienced.

For the last two weeks our class managers have been phoning all the families and getting an update on the status of the children and also the family situation. We will be getting feedback and a summary of the status shortly and then we will communicate with all sponsors about their children's situation. We are optimistic that most families remained in Mekele and are physically safe. However, the poorer families have certainly suffered even more than everyone else and often we are hearing of people who have not eaten for a week or more. Our first focus therefore is on feeding and the humanitarian aspects of the operation and when we have healthy students we can start teaching them again.

Kathryn will write to all the sponsors over the next few days to give an update on the situation of their students and families.

Some good news from our overseas scholars

You may recall that Samiya, a recent graduate of the Nicolas Robinson School and who later was awarded a scholarship at United World College has been accepted to study at Trinity College in the USA for her degree course and has a full scholarship awarded.

Another of our graduates, Hewan who is currently at the African Leadership Academy in Johannesburg, S.Africa, has been accepted at the University of Rochester, NY state, also with a full scholarship.

Selam, who graduated from the Nicolas Robinson School last year was incommunicado in Mekele for 6 weeks because of the war, but finally managed to get to African Leadership Academy for the start of term on the 3rd January!

Feven, studying in college in Minnesota is learning to walk in the snow and is a lot happier now that she can contact her family.

For all of them it has been a very stressful time, with no family contact for more than 6 weeks and worry about the danger their families were in.

For us and their proud families, these ladies are the beacon of hope for the future and we can all be very proud of them.

Chairman of the board of the TDVA

Finally, and very sadly, we have to report the death of Asmelash Weldeselassie (Abay), chairman of the board of the TDVA and school board member. The circumstances of his death are not clear (varying reports), but he was shot along with two comrades who were all veterans of the overthrow of the Derg regime (1974-1991). All three of them had been ministers in the Federal government until recently and had retired to their homes in Tigray state.



Best wishes,

Kathryn and Max.