Voices of Sisters

Coronavirus



Food provided by the United Nations is unloaded in the Habile Camp for internally displaced Chadians outside the village of Koukou Angarana in Chad, in this 2008 file photo. Food insecurity is among the many challenges that the country endures in 2021, in addition to COVID-19. (CNS/Paul Jeffrey)



by Sr. Patricia Thomas

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I live with my community in N'Djamena, Chad. There are four of us Sisters of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus — three of us are from Nigeria and one is our first Chadian sister.

N'Djamena is the capital and largest city of Chad. It is also where the central government resides. Our president of 30 years, Idriss Deby Itno, was killed by insurgents in April this year. He is the first president who really worked hard to develop the country. Now, his death has added to the uncertainty of our country's future impacted by COVID-19.

The effects of COVID 19 cannot be overemphasized because even before the virus arrived, our congregation's ministry here was going through financial challenges, which keep growing. Once COVID-19 arrived, we could no longer pay our staff because we depend on school fees, which ended when parents lost their jobs and could no longer pay during the lockdown.

The poverty level in this country is extremely high. Ninety-nine percent of our students are poor, surviving by working as housemaids. They are either dropouts from school or had never been to school before coming to us. Many are orphans and forced into early marriages. Some do have sponsors that help pay school fees for them to learn dressmaking and knitting of babies' pullovers. Without these skills, they have no future. But as their sponsors themselves lost jobs, or were not paid even part of their salaries, they were no longer able to pay the needed fees for the children.

Some of the students who had stopped coming to school have not come back. Those who returned can only pay about half of the fees. In order not to close the school we encouraged parents and sponsors to pay in cash at the end of each month, even small amounts.

Our country's biggest challenges are illiteracy, poverty and unemployment. Although our congregation first came to Chad in 1990 to do pastoral work, and some of our sisters still work full-time in the parish, we soon realized that education was even more important. Our education focus is both formal and informal. Those who cannot attend formal school learn dressmaking, cooking and other crafts that can help them earn an income for their families. We have opened a nursery/primary school where

we encourage parents to also send their girls as well as their boys. We continue to try to help parents see that education of their daughters is not just a waste of money. Girls here can be married off at age 13 — and even below, at times.

Unemployment contributes to the high level of poverty in Chad. Although oil was discovered in the southern part of the country, gradually making it the 10th largest oil producer on the African continent, nothing has changed much for the ordinary family. The majority of our families eke out a living by farming, even though much of the country is desert.

The desert zone is one of three zones, the other two being the central and southern, which is semi-tropical. We have three seasons here, rainy, dry, and intermediate. These different seasons are dramatic and can be unfriendly and harsh to us humans and animals too.

Climate change is severe here in Chad, with heat rising to 130 degrees Fahrenheit during the dry season. There is a high record of deaths, both human and animal from these temperatures. Rivers dry up just at a time when everyone and everything needs water the most. Disease increases and food has to be imported from neighboring countries of Nigeria and Cameroon, increasing family costs.

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Chad does produce grains like maize, millet and sorghum and a variety of vegetables, but even these have decreased as the rainy season has shortened. The majority of food production is in the south where the land is fertile, and in past times it was where most of our food came from; but now, without the ability to store food, we all suffer from shortages. We are also blessed with a diversity of animal life for food: goats, sheep, chickens, ducks and guinea fowl, along with camels, horses and donkeys. Unfortunately, these too are experiencing the impact of climate changes.

Along with climate change, almost constant war since even before independence in 1960, keeps the poverty level increasing and the entire country deprived of adequate infrastructure and human development. Money is spent on arms, not only to fight tribal wars within the country but to help out our neighbors, Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and Mali.

Neighbors are important to us because we are landlocked by six countries: Libya, Sudan, Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger and the Central African Republic. Along with negotiating with these countries, our former president also tried to bring about national peace, and in 2003 he held a national conference to bring together rebel leaders who at the time promised to lay down their arms and embrace peace, but those intentions seem to have ended too quickly.

Living with war day in and day out is stressful. You start running for your dear life hearing shooting or threats of rebel groups entering the city. It is important to always be watchful and aware of your surroundings. The insecurity is leading some who can to leave the country. This drains the country of human resources needed to build up the nation.

In spite of so many negatives, Chad can boast of great beauty. Lake Chad is especially well known among the many lakes in the country. The lakes provide us all year round with fresh fish and places of refreshment.

At this time, with all the insecurities we face, there is little hope for COVID-19 vaccinations. We received aid when the pandemic started — soap, sanitizers and facemasks — but the people did not always believe the disease was real, so even if vaccines come, it may be difficult to convince the people of their value. In the face of these many challenges as a country, all we can do is hope and trust in God and pray that minds and hearts can be changed.