

Quaker food relief action in Zimbabwe

By John Schmid


At Easter 2002, Friends at Central and Southern Africa Yearly Meeting decided to help the people of Zimbabwe in a practical way by providing food relief in selected rural areas affected by drought. With money from Friends in South Africa, Botswana, Ireland, the UK, the U.S., and Australia, we managed to buy and distribute 180 tons of cornmeal (the staple food) in ten villages in Matabeleland South during the following two years.

Botswana Monthly Meeting agreed to keep the funds for us in a Botswana bank to protect them from the ravages of Zimbabwean inflation, currently more than 500% per year. My wife, Kelitha (who is Zimbabwean), and I, were asked to identify areas of great need and do the actual distribution. For this we use the four-ton truck of Hlekweni, a Quaker rural training centre, founded in 1967 near Bulawayo. In the past, the centre was assisted by the Canadian Friends Service Committee (CFSC). Unfortunately CFSC's rules made it difficult to help us with our very informal feeding scheme, though Quaker Service Australia and Irish Quaker Faith in Action had no such problems.

But why, after so many years, do we still need funds for food relief? You may have heard that large parts of Africa are at present affected by drought. When that happens, the subsistence farmers, who constitute a large part of Zimbabwe's population, are particularly hard hit as they

cannot grow their own corn to feed themselves and earn some money for things like school fees. With no money in their pockets they cannot afford to buy food in town — food whose costs have escalated both due to inflation and due to scarcity. Add to this the difficulties caused by the lack of fuel and an erratic political climate and life becomes very precarious.

In our project we distribute one 10 kg bag of cornmeal per household to 1400 households, aiming to do this at least once or twice a month. The planting season this year started with good rains at the beginning of December but since then there hasn't been a drop of rain and we are worried that people will suffer another failed or minimal crop. Our project will have to continue for the foreseeable future.

If you can help our project with any amount, we would be most grateful. In North America, please make cheques payable to Schenectady Friends Meeting; write 'Zimbabwe famine relief' in the Memo section; and send them to David Gerhan, Treasurer, Schenectady Friends Meeting (Quakers), 930 Albany Street, Schenectady NY 12307. Enquiries: gerhand@union.edu 

John Schmid is a member of Bulawayo Monthly Meeting, and also its treasurer.

EDITOR'S NOTE: AS WE PREPARE THIS ISSUE, I HAVE RECEIVED THE FOLLOWING INFORMATION FROM JOHN, WHICH I INCLUDE AS IT ADDS FURTHER UNDER-

STANDING TO THE ZIMBABWE SITUATION.

"SINCE SENDING YOU THE PIECE A MONTH AGO, SOME LOCAL CIRCUMSTANCES HAVE CHANGED. FOR EXAMPLE, ALMOST AS SOON AS I HAD SENT IT, THE HEAVENS OPENED AND WE HAD SIGNIFICANT RAINFALL, WHICH GIVES US HOPE THAT FROM MAY OR JUNE ONWARDS FOR A FEW MONTHS PEOPLE WILL BE ABLE TO EAT THEIR OWN FOOD.

BUT AS SEEDS WERE SCARCE AND EXPENSIVE, MANY FAMILIES HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO PLANT AS MUCH AS THEY USED TO, AND THE CHANCES ARE THAT BY DECEMBER WE WILL HAVE TO RESUME DISTRIBUTION.

WE ARE ALSO HAVING A PROBLEM WITH GOVERNMENT AGENCIES WHO WANT TO STOP US FROM ACTUALLY GOING OUT AND DISTRIBUTING THE FOOD — SUCH IS THE PARANOIA IN OFFICIAL CIRCLES. WE ARE WORKING HARD TO OVERCOME THIS PROBLEM.

ON THE OTHER HAND WE RECENTLY RECEIVED REQUESTS FOR HELP FROM COURAGEOUS PRIESTS IN BULAWAYO WHO ARE SUPPORTING VICTIMS OF THE CLEAN-UP OPERATION IN MAY/JUNE LAST YEAR AND DESPERATELY NEED EXTRA FOOD SUPPLIES, FROM A LADY WHO SUPPORTS OVER 1000 ORPHANS, AND FROM A LARGE PRIMARY SCHOOL ATTACHED TO HLEKWENI WHERE MANY CHILDREN ARE SEVERELY UNDERNOURISHED AT HOME AND BECOME LISTLESS, AND WHERE A REGULAR SCHOOL LUNCH COULD MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE.

MY WIFE AND I ARE VETTING ALL THESE REQUESTS AND WILL HELP WITH FOOD RELIEF WHERE WE CAN BE ASSURED OF TRANSPARENCY AND HONESTY."