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Camp of Malakal, 12/08/2021

I have been in the United Nations camp for Internally Displaced people since November 2014. There are now as of today 33,000 people living in the camp in plastic sheeting tents or in small tin roof structures very close to one another. There have been some cases of the delta variant but it has yet to affect the whole population here

Thanks to donor support I have been able to remain with the people being present with them in their struggle to get through each day. I visit families in their tented homes to find out how they are doing, visit the hospitals and clinics to be with those who are sick, help organize the many activities in our Catholic Church while trying to instill hope that better times are coming for our people here when they can once again return to their homes.

The Catholic Church made of simple tin sheeting which we affectionately call the 'Tin Box' since it gets very hot inside as the temperature rises in our tropical climate was closed in March 2020 due to the pandemic. It was reopened on August 15, 2020 with strict protocols of mask wearing, social distancing (not an easy task for African people) and hand sanitizing as they enter the Church. Because of my age (72) only the younger and middle aged folks were permitted to attend Church services. The elderly over 60 and children were not allowed to enter for Church services.

Since I was not allowed to preside at Church on Sundays, the younger local South Sudanese priests in town were able to come to the camp to be with the people.

What we decide to do for those who were not able to attend was to do a recorded worship service over our public radio station in the camp called Nile Radio.

Each Saturday morning, I would meet with a few members of the church to do the recording which was then aired on radio at 9am on Sunday. It was a way for me to stay connected with the people as we became a Church of the Radio Waves!!!

Every 2 months, I usually leave the camp for some time off for rest and relaxation. This means that 5 to 6 times a year I do round trip plane flight on WFP (world food programme airlines from Malakal to Juba and back. Donors provide the money for these trips for which I am grateful.

I have been temporarily removed from going into the camp not because of security reasons but because of covid-19 restrictions because of my age factor.

The security situation in Upper Nile State, however, is still tense. Since the attack on the camp in which the government army along with the Dinka ethnic group burnt down most of the homes of the Shilluck and Nuer ethnic groups in February 2016, the relationships between these ethnic groups remains volatile and uncertain. The Dinka after the attack with the help of the government army moved in to occupy Malakal town which does not belong to them for it is considered part of the Shilluck kingdom. So this is where we are at the present moment with the failed peace process agreement of 2018 and lack of good leadership in the country to unify the people to live in peaceful coexistence with each other in South Sudan.

I have always preached to the people over these past years to help them understand that on this earth and especially in South Sudan that we are one family of God meant to live peacefully together

There is a wonderful story about a boy named Taban Nyot Dak who is now 15 years old. He has lived in the camp with his mother and three sisters since 2013. Taban's father was killed during the civil war. I would often visit Taban and the family in their little tented home. There was only a small room with 3 beds where you had to sit down and talk to

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the family. They also has a place outside where they did the cooking. One day when I was visiting Taban noticed that my hat was dirty with dust and that he wanted to wash it for me. I gave him the hat and as he was washing it outside the small room in a tub of water he started singing songs from our Church that he had learned. Once he finished singing, he then came out with a phrase in English that just amazed and surprised me. Taban said: "***We are one family of God.***" He understood what I had been saying for many years that touched my heart that day.

Stay well and thanks again for all the support and help from our donors that has allowed me to stay and be among the people in the camp during these difficult times. We hope and pray for better days to come in their lives when one day they can leave this camp and return to their homes.

Father Michael Bassano