

# aCommon Place

NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2004

A PUBLICATION OF  
MENNONITE CENTRAL COMMITTEE



PROFILE: BANGLADESH

## Against the tide

Near the Bay of Bengal,  
farmers persist despite salty soil,  
deadly storms and floods.



FROM THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE

## Christmas gift exchange

By Ronald J.R. Mathies, MCC Executive Director

**P**alm branches had been carefully cut into narrow strips, then crisscrossed to form a dove. The women who presented this Christmas ornament to me when I visited Bangladesh are part of an MCC job creation program. Their handmade Christmas ornaments and other crafts are sold in Ten Thousand Villages stores across Canada and the United States. An exchange of creative artistry for employment remuneration.

The impact of this exchange gives substance to the meaning of Christmas. The women explained it this way: This was the first time in their lives that they had received wages. Because they received money, they were able to buy food, clothing and medicines for their children and could send them to school. Because they received money, they had access to credit. Because they had access to credit, they had a voice in the village. And, because they had a voice, they had dignity.

The celebration of Christmas is a cosmic exercise of giving. It originates in a generous God who becomes incarnate, “Emmanuel — God with us,” in the person of Jesus (Matt. 1:23). Surely this remarkable claim — that God assumed human form, restored the human race and incorporated human experience permanently into God’s own being — is the highest motivation for ascribing dignity to humans.

In his book “Suffering and God: A Theological Reflection on the War in Sudan,” Sudanese church leader Isaiah Majok Dau says that God’s identification with suffering humanity provides a mandate for Christians to do the same. As we meet the practical needs of those who suffer, we demonstrate the message of Christ. Our provision for the needs of hurting people assures them that God has not abandoned them. Our assistance tells of God’s presence and identification with them.

Consequently, service “In the name of Christ” becomes an act of gratitude, which is the essence of Christian practice, the human counterpart of the grace of God.

The pages of this issue of a Common Place give powerful testimony to how this gratitude is put into practice in North America and around the world. Annually, MCC supporters provide more than \$1.3 million Cdn./\$952,000 U.S. for job creation, agriculture, health and community development programs that help Bangladeshis overcome grinding poverty. Because of violence in Sudan, MCC is providing \$6.1 million Cdn./\$4.6 million U.S. for food and relief supplies to help alleviate suffering.

MCC strives for the peace, justice and dignity of all people by sharing our experiences, resources and faith in Jesus Christ. It’s an act of gratitude.

Come, celebrate and participate in this cosmic gift exchange! ■

Ron Mathies’ e-mail address is [rjm@mcc.org](mailto:rjm@mcc.org).

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PROFILE: BANGLADESH

## 8 Against the tide

Farming is a daily struggle, especially on land formed by silt deposits from the Bay of Bengal. Since 1970, MCC has helped more than 100,000 farmers, including Sirajul Hoq (pictured above with his son), make their small farms more productive.

16 First person: Assia Begum    17 For kids: Play kut-kut    17 Recipe: Okra Bhaji



### DEPARTMENTS

20 **MCC notes**

22 **Make a difference**

Shop at Ten Thousand Villages

23 **On assignment**

Augusta and Ron Good

MCC country representatives



### 4 **Tragedy in Darfur**

Each displaced person tells a version of the same bitter story of violence and loss.



### 18 **A safer cup of water**

Residents of Belle Glade, Fla., worry about the quality of their water.

**ON THE COVER**  
Jasmin Aktur, left, and her brother, Abdul Mannan, prepare to pick soybeans in their family's field. For more on rural life in Bangladesh, see pages 8 to 17.





**Sadik Omar Abdaraman, a 35-year-old farmer, grew up in a village named Kalik in Darfur, the westernmost region of Sudan. Now he faces life in a crowded camp and recalls how his village, his crops and his cattle became a memory.**



# Tragedy in Darfur

By Tim Shenk  
Photographs by John Robinson

**O**n a market day in March, gunmen on horses and camels rushed into the village of Kalik. They killed hundreds of villagers and looted homes. They executed the village elders and killed Sadik Omar Abdaraman's brother and two sisters. In the chaos, he was separated from his wife and seven children. He was beaten with a whip before he escaped alone.

Abdaraman's robe and turban are white, and his skin is black. He belongs to the Fur, the African tribe from which Darfur gets its name.

Both Africans and Arabs have long made Darfur their home, but for nearly two years Arab militias known as Janjaweed have been destroying hundreds of Darfur's African villages. The United Nations calls this "ethnic cleansing" and the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today.

The death toll is estimated at 50,000 and rising. Nearly 1.5 million people have been driven from their homes, usually with nothing more than their clothes.

After fleeing Kalik on foot, Abdaraman reunited with his family in a nearby town. They now live in a camp for the displaced called Kalma, a sprawling city of 80,000 people in makeshift huts of mud, sticks and grass.

Here and in other nearby camps, everyone tells a version of the same bitter story — about the violent day they were driven from their homes.

Hoda Abdella, a university student, saw her family home burned down and fled on foot for six days. Alima Siliman Abdarman, a middle-aged woman, ran when the Janjaweed attacked her village with the support of military aircraft. Ismael Ibrahim, a father of seven, knew the men who looted his village and approached them afterward, but they threatened his life.

A boy who doesn't give his name approaches a camp visitor, draws an assault rifle in the dirt and says only the word "Janjaweed."

Aid organizations are trying to reach Darfur's vulnerable, displaced people with the food and supplies needed for survival. Kalma is the largest of Darfur's camps and one of the more accessible. Due to violence and rough terrain, others can be reached only with aid dropped from airplanes. Many have received nothing at all.

MCC is responding with \$6.1 million Cdn./\$4.6 million U.S. in food, blankets and other aid, to be distributed by

the Sudan Council of Churches and the U.N. World Food Program.

The roots of the disaster in Darfur reach far and wide in a bitterly divided country that has fought a devastating civil war for most of its modern history.

The north of Sudan is mostly Muslim and Arabic with strong ties to the Middle East. It is more developed and includes the capital, Khartoum. The south is part of black Africa and is largely Christian and animist.

In the last two decades, fighting between the north and south has killed at least 2 million people and displaced many more. But unlike Sudan as a whole, Darfur was long a place where Arabs and black Africans lived together in relative peace.

A great majority of Darfur's inhabitants are Muslim, and decades of intermarriage have blurred the appearance of race. However, Africans are traditionally farmers in Darfur and Arabs are traditionally herders. Competition for land and political power brought these groups into conflict.

In 2003, a group calling itself the Sudanese Liberation Army rebelled against the government, demanding regional autonomy as the south had done. The government responded by arming Arab militias and attacking rebels and civilians.

The government blames the rebellion for the crisis in Darfur and has stationed armed men in uniform around the camps and main roads. It does not admit to attacking civilians, but those in the camps tell of attacks by uniformed soldiers, military aircraft and even from the guards assigned to protect them.

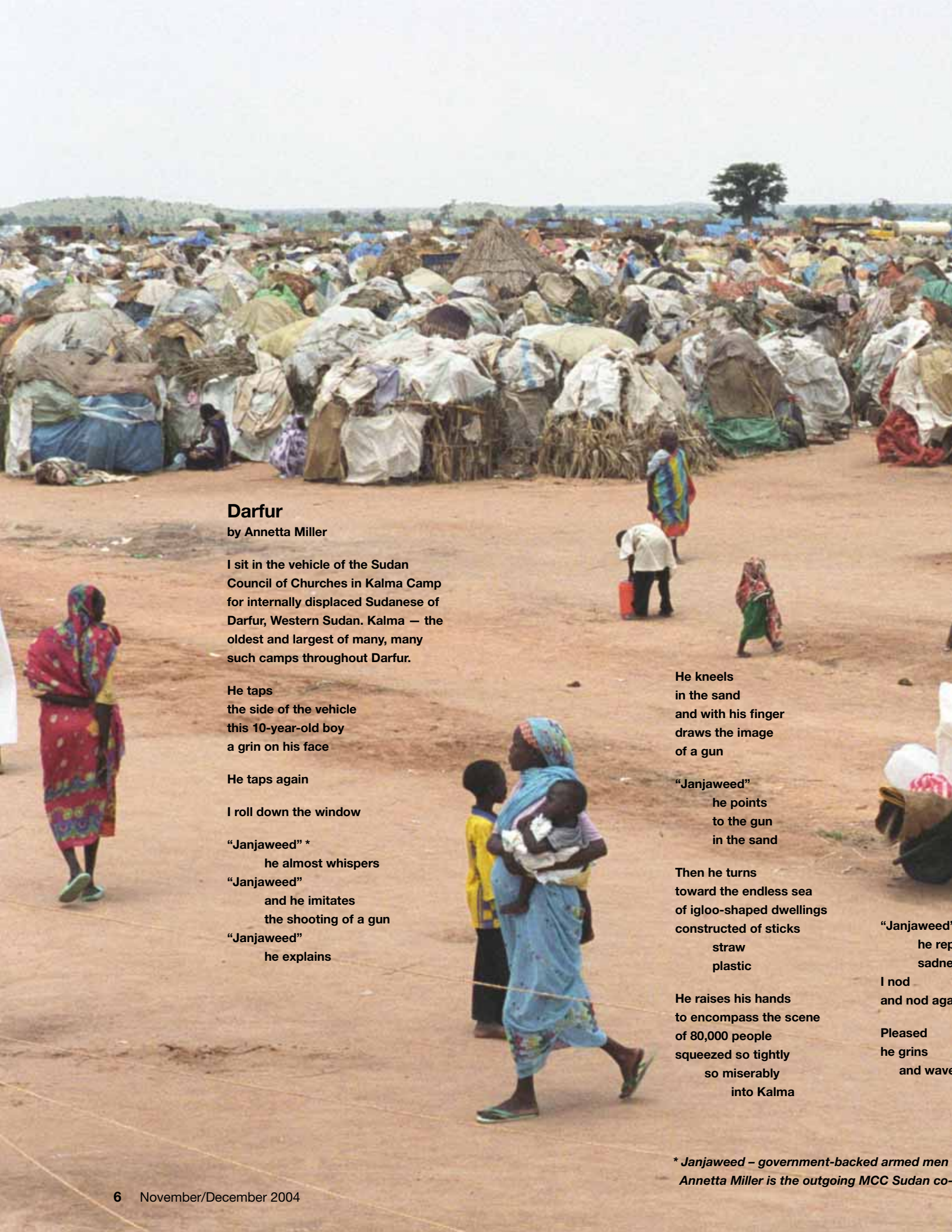
Like others in the camps, Abdaraman says he knew some of his attackers from a nearby Arab tribe.

"We grew up together with the same people that were shooting us," he says.

There is no room for private grief where Abdaraman now lives with his family in a small hut in a crowded camp. So many people have lost their homes, and Abdaraman does not like to speculate about the future.

"Now it is not secure," he says. "You cannot go back. There is no hope." ■

*Tim Shenk is an MCC writer. John Robinson is a freelance photographer from Pietermaritzburg, South Africa.*



## Darfur

by Annetta Miller

I sit in the vehicle of the Sudan  
Council of Churches in Kalma Camp  
for internally displaced Sudanese of  
Darfur, Western Sudan. Kalma — the  
oldest and largest of many, many  
such camps throughout Darfur.

He taps  
the side of the vehicle  
this 10-year-old boy  
a grin on his face

He taps again

I roll down the window

“Janjaweed” \*  
    he almost whispers  
“Janjaweed”  
    and he imitates  
    the shooting of a gun  
“Janjaweed”  
    he explains

He kneels  
in the sand  
and with his finger  
draws the image  
of a gun

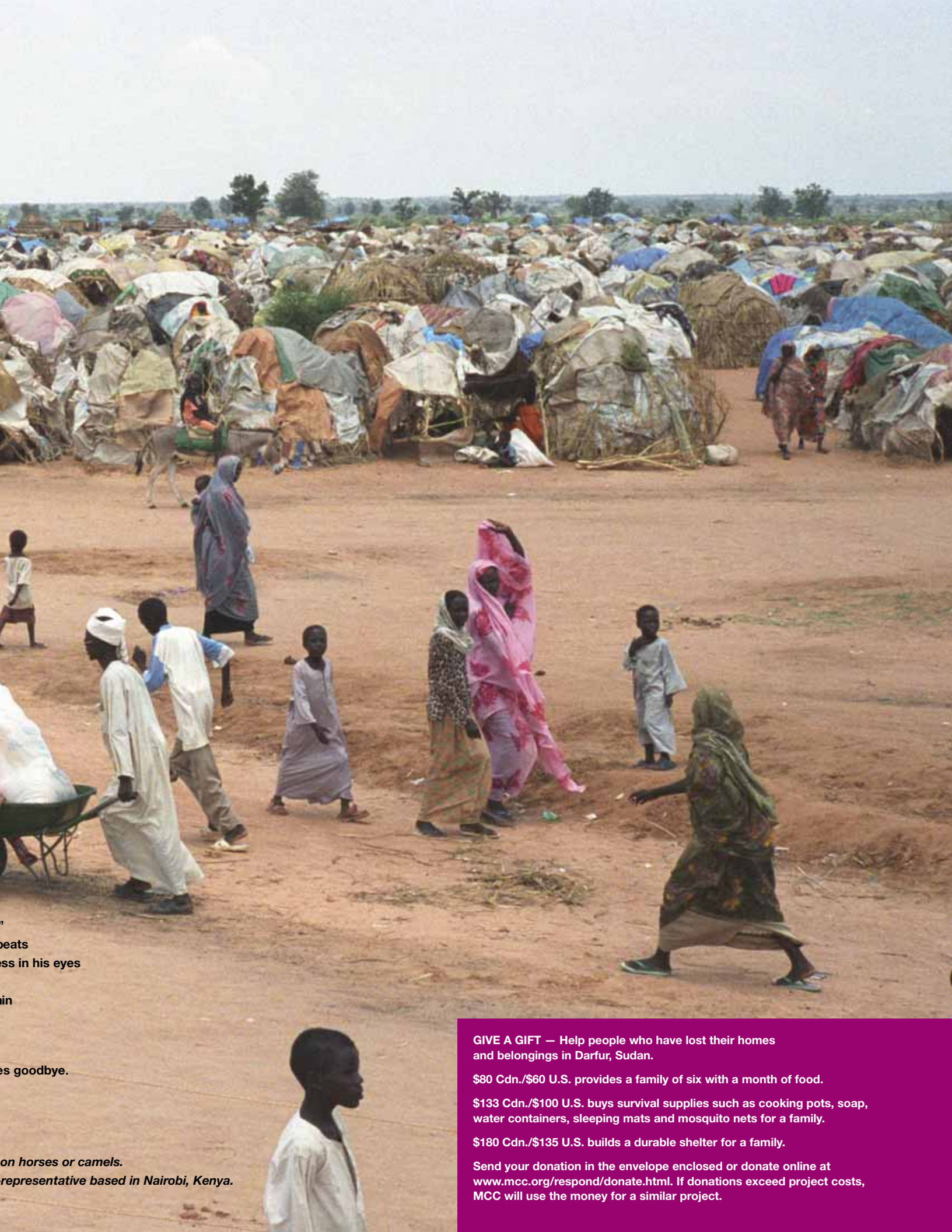
“Janjaweed”  
    he points  
    to the gun  
    in the sand

Then he turns  
toward the endless sea  
of igloo-shaped dwellings  
constructed of sticks  
    straw  
    plastic

He raises his hands  
to encompass the scene  
of 80,000 people  
squeezed so tightly  
so miserably  
into Kalma

“Janjaweed”  
    he rep  
    sadne  
I nod  
and nod aga  
Pleased  
he grins  
and wave

\* Janjaweed – government-backed armed men  
Annetta Miller is the outgoing MCC Sudan co-



...  
beats  
... in his eyes  
...  
... in

...  
... goodbye.

...  
... on horses or camels.  
... representative based in Nairobi, Kenya.

**GIVE A GIFT** — Help people who have lost their homes and belongings in Darfur, Sudan.

\$80 Cdn./\$60 U.S. provides a family of six with a month of food.

\$133 Cdn./\$100 U.S. buys survival supplies such as cooking pots, soap, water containers, sleeping mats and mosquito nets for a family.

\$180 Cdn./\$135 U.S. builds a durable shelter for a family.

Send your donation in the envelope enclosed or donate online at [www.mcc.org/respond/donate.html](http://www.mcc.org/respond/donate.html). If donations exceed project costs, MCC will use the money for a similar project.



# BANGLADESH

**Longing to establish his own farm, Sirajul Hoq took a risk. He bought flooded land near the bay that nobody else wanted.**

## Against the tide

By Marla Pierson Lester  
Photographs by Matthew Lester

**W**hen Amina Khatun first saw the land her husband had purchased, she wept. There was nothing, she recalls, but water. The fields were completely flooded.

Her husband, Sirajul Hoq, bought property in Bangladesh's Noakhali District two decades ago. All he could afford was this land in the *char*, a difficult-to-farm area of saline soil formed by silt deposits from the Bay of Bengal.

The couple slowly built their lives on these 2 acres — surviving salty soil, lean years when the land didn't produce enough to support the family and the devastating winds and flooding from a 1991 cyclone that destroyed





# BANGLADESH

both crops and animals, all challenges common to scores of families in the area.

Bangladesh, one of the most densely populated countries in the world, has 141 million people in a space smaller than Iowa or about twice the size of New Brunswick. Some 80 percent of residents eke out a living from agriculture, most like Sirajul Hoq on homesteads of 2 acres or less. Some residents don't have land at all and must struggle to earn a living from others' fields, by grueling labor in brick-making factories or by jobs such as pedaling rickshaws in the cities.

Since 1970, MCC has helped more than 100,000 Bangladeshi farmers, including Hoq, to make the most of the land they have. Agricultural staff have encouraged farmers to diversify their crops, including planting soybeans and various vegetables, and to integrate livestock, fish and plants. And when floods strike, MCC continues to provide relief for those who lose their homes or crops.

A delta land bordering the Bay of Bengal and crisscrossed by rivers flowing down from the Himalayas, Bangladesh is prone to devastating floods and storms. An estimated 30 million people were affected by severe monsoon flooding this year, and MCC is providing emergency relief and agricultural rehabilitation aid worth some \$400,000 Cdn./\$300,000 U.S.

Floods and cyclones are woven into the history of this Muslim nation that was formerly East Pakistan. In 1970, a year before Bangladesh broke from West Pakistan, the century's worst cyclone struck, killing hundreds of thousands of people. MCC began its work in Bangladesh in response to this deadly storm.

From MCC's start in Bangladesh, however, it was clear that broader-based agricultural work was needed to reduce farmers' vulnerability, particularly in the *char* areas. Over the years, MCC agricultural researchers have explored what crops farmers can grow in saline soil and researched methods of reducing salinity.

Soil in the *char* often remains saline for years. While water can offset the salinity during the monsoon season, dry weather can draw it to the surface. Disaster upsets the delicate balance. A 1985 cyclone, for instance, struck in May, when the rainy season had not begun. It brought saline floodwaters across Noakhali, leaving people and animals without fresh water.

MCC, in response, brought in pumps and drained farmers' lands, including Hoq's. As his wife, Khatun, remembers, that and funds for a goat not only helped the family survive the season, they provided a starting point.

The family then bred the goat and sold the offspring. "From that money, we made the pond. From that pond, we cultivated fish. From the fish, we developed the house and everything," she said. "Slowly, slowly, all the rest of these things came and we made all of these improvements."

But the process takes decades.

When Hoq began cultivating his land in the 1980s, one of his fields could only be used for the rice that grows during the monsoon season, when rainwater helps offset the soil's salt content. Every other crop he planted would dry up and die. Last spring, for the first time, he was able to also grow chili and okra in that field. "Many times we tried," Khatun says. "But this year, the land is fine."

In the 1960s, many farmers, enticed by the introduction of a new high-yield rice, opted to plant additional rice crops instead of vegetables or beans, a decision that depleted the soil and compromised families' nutrition. MCC has focused on helping farmers diversify their crops and diets.

In 1975, MCC began promoting soybeans, then an unknown crop to many farmers in Bangladesh, as a good source of protein. Staff held cooking demonstrations, grew gardens and worked with thousands of farmers to show the benefits of soybeans. By the time MCC's push ended in 1999, soybeans were firmly part of the Bangladeshi landscape. Although they never became common in people's diets, MCC's original intention, they are sold as a cash



## BANGLADESH AT A GLANCE

<b>Population</b>	<b>141 million</b>
<b>Area</b>	<b>144,000 sq km</b> (slightly smaller than Iowa or twice the size of New Brunswick)
<b>Per capita GDP</b>	<b>112,651 Bangladeshi taka</b> (\$2,480 Cdn. / \$1,900 U.S.)
<b>Life expectancy</b>	<b>62 years</b>
<b>Literacy rate</b>	<b>43 percent</b>
<b>Languages</b>	<b>Bangla (Bengali), English</b>
<b>Religions</b>	<b>Muslim 83 percent</b> <b>Hindu 16 percent</b> <b>Other 1 percent</b>

(Christians number less than 700,000; about half are Roman Catholics. Protestant churches have grown mostly from missions begun by Baptists, Presbyterians and Anglicans. Bangladesh has no Mennonite churches.)

SOURCE: WORLD FACT BOOK

# BANGLADESH



**Mohammed Hasan feeds and waters his family's chicks. He also helps his father sort through tilapia fish they caught in their pond.**

crop, mostly for poultry and fish feed.

Last winter, more than 20,000 acres of soybeans were grown in and around Noakhali District, providing a valuable source of income for farm families.

The impact of MCC's agricultural work has spread far beyond the farmers who were directly involved in MCC programs. Neighbors and relatives have also explored new techniques.

Hoq, for instance, noticed his son-in-law was profiting from an MCC-promoted technique for integrating poultry, fish and rice. Farmers build a chicken coop over a pond adjoining a rice field. Poultry droppings provide nourishment for the fish underneath. Fish droppings and refuse left from the poultry fertilize the rice. Hoq recently added this system to his own farm. (See "Give a gift" page 17.)

While farmers can work hard to increase yields on their small plots, not everyone in this crowded country has access to land. Monir Uddin works his father's fields and

also seeks work from other farmers. Sometimes he has to take loans to feed his five children and wife. "The problem here is there is no rich farmer. They are poor. They need a day laborer for only two or three days," explains Uddin.

Family situations such as this become even more desperate when, through death or separation, women are left to raise children alone. In response, for the past 30 years MCC has helped create handicraft jobs that give women an opportunity to earn an income and sustain their families. (See "First Person" page 16.)

Even if farmers are able to find enough land for themselves, it may not be enough for their children. Often sons, knowing they will not inherit enough land to sustain themselves, will leave to seek their fortunes in cities. Without education or specific skills, they face grueling labor and low wages. Others stick it out in rural areas, moving onto land nobody else wants, hoping it will produce.

Hoq, who had 12 siblings and no hope of gaining land from his family, took a risk when he bought his land in the *char* area. Through years, though, his choice paid off, leaving him with a lush field of okra, chili and rice seedlings, thriving trees, a pond full of fish and a sturdy home.

He walks this soil he has worked so carefully, gazing for anything that might be amiss and picking up even small branches from the ground near the pond. "When I look at my land, I feel happy," he said. "All the time I'm thinking, 'How can I develop my land and help my family?'"

In a way, Hoq's life, shaped by the rhythm of the field and the Muslim call to prayer that echoes across his land five times a day, seems timeless. Yet, his approach — the many trees he has planted, the diverse crops he grows, the chickens and fish he raises — also echoes the changes that MCC has strived for in this area, based on years of research in Bangladesh. ■

*Marla Pierson Lester is an MCC writer. Matthew Lester is a freelance photographer from Lancaster, Pa.*

## HISTORY IN BRIEF

**Bangladesh is part of the historic Bengal region. Earliest references are to a kingdom called Banga around 1,000 B.C. Buddhist kings ruled for 400 years, but by the 10th century, Bengal was primarily Hindu.**

**1199**

**Mohammed Bakhtiar from Turkistan captures Bengal, introducing Islam.**

**1576**

**Bengal becomes part of the Mogul Empire; most East Bengalis convert to Islam.**

**1642**

**British East India Company arrives; 100 years later, the area is under British rule.**

**1913**

**Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore wins Nobel Prize for literature.**





**1943**

More than 2 million die in Bengal famine. MCC opens an office in Kolkata (Calcutta), West Bengal.

14 November/December 2004

**1947**

India achieves independence. Hindu West Bengal is assigned to India and Muslim East

Bengal, now called Bangladesh, to Pakistan. The two parts of Pakistan are united by religion (Islam), but are separated geographically by India.

**1970**

Devastating cyclone strikes East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), killing up to 500,000 people.

**1971**

After years of uneasy relations, fighting erupts between East and West Pakistan. Some 1 million Bengalis are killed;

10 million seek refuge in India. India intervenes on behalf of East Pakistan. The new nation of Bangladesh is born.



Mohammed Hasan walks through okra and rice plants in his family's field in Char Baishakhi, Bangladesh. He and his father will harvest the okra first, then the rice. MCC worked with this family for more than 10 years, helping make their 2-acre farm more productive.

1983	1991	1998	Summer 2004	Today
<p>First cases of arsenic poisoning are diagnosed. Scientists discover many wells are contaminated by naturally occurring arsenic.</p>	<p>Cyclone slams into Bangladesh, drowning more than 200,000 people.</p>	<p>Torrential rains swell rivers; the water remains high for more than 70 days and 10 million people are left homeless.</p>	<p>Heavy rains flood about 60 percent of the country, affecting some 30 million Bangladeshis.</p>	<p>Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Its geography continues to make it vulnerable to storms and floods. Many people are forced to live on and cultivate flood-prone land.</p>

**A Bangladeshi woman tells how her childhood dream of having enough to eat has come true.**

## First Person: **Assia Begum**

as told to Marla Pierson Lester

**M**y mother died when I was a baby, so I lived with aunts, uncles and grandparents. I wanted to study, but my relatives wanted me to help them with housework. I rolled spices like chili and turmeric. I helped boil the rice, as well as dry it and separate it from the husk. My father remarried, but later was electrocuted. I stayed with my stepmother. Like my other relatives, she wanted me at home instead of studying.

I don't remember what I dreamed of wanting to do with my life. One thing we dreamed about was always having enough food to eat.

Before I got married, I worked as a day laborer, sorting, drying and threshing rice. I continued the job for two years after I got married. The work was very hard for me. My husband left me when my son was 1 year old. As a day laborer, I was given meals, but I was not paid. Sometimes I would get clothes.

A cousin suggested I meet with the manager at Shuktara, a project started by MCC to create handmade paper notebooks, albums, gift boxes, wrapping paper and other items. I went to Shuktara, which means "morning star," and asked for a job. I was hired and started work the next day. That was 16 years ago.

At first, I was worried about whether I could do the job. I often prayed, "Oh Allah (God), please help me so that I'm able to do anything that they want."

I started by washing jute for the paper. I learned how to press excess water out of the paper, how to mix colors for the dye and how to do the other jobs. I wanted to learn everything. If I know every task, I thought, I will have a job and I will be able to eat. Now, as I work the beater, I can watch the other women and advise them if they have questions.

I never studied before. While working here, though, I attended a literacy class. I can say the letters of my name in English. I also learned to count to 100. Now, I can help others to count or to write in Bangla.

My son is 25 years old. He works as a rickshaw driver. He did not go to school, but his children are going. I have



two granddaughters and one grandson.

When I started with Shuktara, there were nine women working. Today there are 74 producers. I have been elected to three two-year terms on the producer management committee, which helps give producers a voice in running the organization. I wanted to make sure all the women would get enough money and enough orders so they would be able to eat and have better lives.

Each day, I wake up just before 5 a.m. to the first call to prayer. I pray, then I wash and eat breakfast. I put on a *burka* (long, loose garment worn by some Muslim women) for my walk to work. I wear it whenever I'm outside the house. When I come to work, I put on rubber boots, an apron, gloves and a mask to protect me from paper fibers and begin my tasks. At noon, I pull my scarf over my head and recite my prayers. When I pray at home, I use my prayer mat. My daughter-in-law does most of the cooking, but sometimes I help with meals. I also visit with neighbors in the evening or do work around the house.

Because of my work, we can eat three meals a day. We can have vegetables every day. We sometimes have fish and chicken. I have been able to buy books for my grandchildren, and I have been able to send them to school, so I know they will have a better life.

Before I had a job, I felt so bad that I could not provide for my family. Now I feel good inside. ■

*Assia Begum works at Shuktara, an MCC job creation project in Feni, Noakhali District, Bangladesh. Handmade paper products crafted in Bangladesh are sold in Ten Thousand Villages stores in Canada and the United States.*

# BANGLADESH



## Shop at Ten Thousand Villages

Purchase handmade paper items including gift bags, boxes and lampshades crafted by artisans in Bangladesh. New this holiday season: blue and white paper products decorated with snowflakes. Find these items and other handicrafts from more than 30 countries at a Ten Thousand Villages store. To find a store, in the United States, call (717) 859-8100; in Canada, call (519) 662-1879; or visit [www.tenthousandvillages.com](http://www.tenthousandvillages.com). Ten Thousand Villages is an MCC program.

## for kids

### Play kut-kut

Kut-kut (pronounced koot koot) is a game similar to hopscotch. Children in Bangladesh start by drawing a grid of nine squares in the dirt. You may want to use chalk to draw the grid on a sidewalk or parking lot.

1. Throw a small, flat stone (a piece of coconut shell is used in Bangladesh) into one square.
2. Jump with one foot into that square, pushing the stone out of the grid with your foot.
3. Continue to hop on one foot counter-clockwise around the outer squares, repeating the name of the game — “kut-kut-kut ...”
4. When you reach the last square, jump in the center square, then onto the stone. When you land on the stone, say “kut-haa.”

Your turn ends when you: Stop repeating the words kut-kut or stand on two feet or neglect to kick the stone out of the grid at the beginning or miss the stone when you jump out of the grid at the end. Once your turn ends or you successfully complete a round, the next player goes. The person who completes all of the squares successfully wins.

### Learn more

[www.mcc.org/gallery](http://www.mcc.org/gallery)

View a Bangladesh photo gallery online.

### Child's View: Bangladesh

This new video features a day in the life of Showpaw, 12, and his sister, Akey, 10. Available from any MCC office (see page 23).



## Give a gift

You can help Bangladeshi farmers raise more fish. MCC encourages farmers to build chicken coops over their ponds. Droppings and excess feed fall to the fish below. Normally, 0.8 tons of fish can be harvested from a 1-acre pond. With this method, the harvest can be increased to 2 tons.

\$22 Cdn./\$17 U.S. buys 50 chicks for a farmer with a 0.1-acre pond.

\$46 Cdn./\$35 U.S. pays for one month of food for 50 chicks.

\$308 Cdn./\$225 U.S. covers total cost for one poultry-fish site on a 0.2-acre pond.

Send your donation in the envelope enclosed or donate online at [www.mcc.org/respond/donate.html](http://www.mcc.org/respond/donate.html). If donations exceed program costs, MCC will use the money for similar projects in Bangladesh.

## Be a Global Family sponsor

Help provide educational opportunities for children in Bangladesh by becoming a Global Family Program sponsor. Your monthly contribution of \$25 Cdn./\$20 U.S. will provide supplies for orphanages and cover needy students' tuition fees and uniform costs. Contact your nearest MCC office (page 23) or visit [www.mcc.org/globalfamily](http://www.mcc.org/globalfamily).

## MCC IN BANGLADESH

MCC entered what is now Bangladesh in 1970 in response to a deadly cyclone. In 1972, after Bangladesh gained independence, MCC helped rebuild the war-torn nation.

Since 1973, MCC has focused primarily on agriculture and job creation. MCC explored ways to increase food production through research at an MCC station as well as in farmers' field-based trials. MCC introduced soybeans to Bangladesh and marketed seeds to farmers. Today, MCC is shifting from running its own programs to assisting local organizations, including helping them develop agricultural projects by sharing MCC's development experiences.

MCC helps provide income-generating opportunities for more than 900 poor, rural women. Total export orders for MCC's job creation enterprises will likely reach \$1.1 million Cdn./\$850,000 U.S. this year. Some items are sold in North America through Ten Thousand Villages stores.

An MCC scientist is helping to find ways to combat arsenic, which is poisoning wells throughout the country. MCC continues to give blankets, towels and other supplies to hospitals, orphanages and schools, as well as provide funds to several orphanages and schools through MCC's Global Family sponsorship and education program.

MCC provides grain, some through the Canadian Foodgrains Bank, for food-for-work programs that often involve giving wheat as payment to laborers who dig ponds to be used for fish cultivation. MCC also stands ready to assist in times of natural disasters.

MCC program budget for 2004: \$1.3 million Cdn./\$952,446 U.S. (plus more than \$400,000 Cdn./\$300,000 U.S. to help victims of an April tornado and summer floods)

Personnel: 187

## A TASTE OF BANGLADESH

### Okra Bhaji

Try making this dish, and eat it Bangladeshi-style — with your fingers.

- 1 T. cooking oil (15 ml)
- 4 T. sliced onion (60 ml)
- 2 c. washed, sliced okra (frozen chopped okra can be used)
- 1/2 t. ground turmeric (2 ml)
- 1/2 t. ground cumin (2 ml)
- 1/2 t. crushed red pepper (2 ml)
- salt to taste

(If using frozen okra, fry at a high heat to evaporate moisture, then follow directions.) Heat oil in frying pan. Sauté onion. Add turmeric and cumin and fry for one to two minutes. Add okra, crushed red pepper and salt. Stir well, cover and cook a few minutes over low heat. Stir occasionally until okra is cooked and water extracted from okra is vaporized. Remove from heat and serve hot over rice.





Micheline and Cedrick Smalls and their children (from left) Cedrick, Darius and Caleb.

## A safer cup of water

By Rachel Miller Moreland  
Photographs by Matthew Lester

“Welcome to Belle Glade,” says the sign at the entrance of this small South Florida town. “Her soil is her fortune.” For generations, the region’s prosperity has been tied to its black, fertile “muck” and the crops that thrive in it.

But Belle Glade’s blessing is also its curse. The soil’s riches — especially sugar cane and the sugar-processing industry — have poisoned the region’s water. And the system of migrant labor on which the harvest traditionally depended has contributed to deeply entrenched poverty.

Working for a better environment means mobilizing residents who are skeptical that their voices will be heard. But a local MCC-supported organization has accepted this challenge. It is working on behalf of not just the region’s natural resources, but also its human ones.

Cedrick and Micheline Smalls live with their three sons



just outside of Belle Glade. They laugh when asked if they drink the water from their tap.

“Never,” Micheline Smalls replies, wrinkling her nose. “It smells like fish — or worse.”

Despite being saddled with some of the highest water bills in the state, most residents of “The Glades” — as Belle Glade and neighboring Pahokee and South Bay are known — rely for their drinking water on a combination of bottled water, privately operated “water mills” and emergency interim water stations monitored by the Department of Health.

The water in their taps comes from nearby Lake Okeechobee, the second largest freshwater lake within the United States. With an average depth of only 2.7 meters (9 feet), Okeechobee is vulnerable to phosphorus and pesticides from the sugar industry’s flood and irrigation water, say environmental experts.

One of the most serious crises in recent years was the discovery of high levels of trihalomethanes — cancer-causing

**Agricultural and industrial wastes have fouled Belle Glade's water supply. The Smalls family doesn't even consider drinking the water that comes from the kitchen faucet.**

compounds created by the interaction of chlorine and organic matter — in The Glades' drinking water. The federal Safe Drinking Water Act mandated that this issue be addressed. But problems with turbidity (cloudiness), lead levels and other contaminants remain, say community activists.

And residents remain doubtful that large agro-industrial corporations care about their health.

"Where does the waste [from the sugar cane] go?" Cedrick Smalls asks. "They put it where they see fit."

His distrust is representative of many in Belle Glade, where for decades the few who control the sugar cane industry have also maintained economic and social power. Labor for the back-breaking work of harvest has typically been supplied by African-Americans and, in more recent years, workers from the Caribbean, many of them migrants with little say in local affairs. Racial divisions run deep in The Glades, and poverty rates run high — 33 percent in 2000.

However, "the region is now at a critical point in our history," says Cynthia Laramore, director of MCC partner Active Citizens Together Improving Our Neighborhoods Inc. (ACTION). While The Glades is still sugar territory — 25 percent of the refined sugar in the United States is produced here — the mechanization of the harvest over the past decade has greatly reduced the need for migrant labor.

The Smalls are an example of this shift. While Micheline's grandfather worked in sugar cane, Cedrick works as a prison guard. Correctional facilities are among

the few employers in The Glades outside the fields, he says.

The loss of an annual influx of cane-cutters has been hard on the local economy. But Laramore sees this shift toward a more permanently settled community as an opportunity to mobilize local residents for change.

Drinking water quality — "from the source to the pipes," Laramore says — is at the top of the list of issues residents have asked ACTION to address. The organization is lobbying for a new water treatment plant, and supports projects such as MCC worker James Devasunand's efforts to research the safest options for obtaining drinking water locally. Devasunand, of Maharashtra, India, also works with ACTION to help educate students and others in the community about environmental issues.

In their modest but comfortable trailer home, Cedrick and Micheline dream of bright possibilities for their sons: college, and perhaps professional careers. Is it possible to achieve these goals in Belle Glade, where options seem so limited?

Cedrick thinks so.

"They can go out," for college, he says, "but then, I hope, they'll come back."

Back to Belle Glade, whose fortune will be determined not only by its soil, but also by its people. ■

*Rachel Miller Moreland is a freelance writer from Lancaster, Pa. Matthew Lester is a freelance photographer from Lancaster, Pa.*



**EXPLORE FURTHER**

**Do Christians have a special responsibility to care for the environment? Reflect on this with Earth Trek, a new book that uses Genesis 1 as a basis to explore how the world was created, threats to it and what is being done to protect it. The book also suggests actions that individuals, households and congregations can take to live more sustainably on the earth. It is the third book in the MCC Trek series and is available from Herald Press at [www.heraldpress.com](http://www.heraldpress.com), any Provident Bookstore or by calling 1-800-759-4447.**

**MCC worker James Devasunand helps educate the Belle Glade, Fla., community about water quality issues.**



Photo by Bjarne Ussing, DanChurchAid/ACT International

**“I fled from my village when I saw the Janjaweed attacking the neighboring village. I heard the machine guns and bombs, and I could see the light from the burning houses in the dark night. All my five children survived, but two of my brothers were killed, and my husband is not with me anymore.”**

— Asisa Ateib, 30, a displaced person from Korney in West Darfur, in her tent at Mile Camp.

## Facts and faces: Conflict in Sudan

### 1983

Year Sudan’s civil war began, pitting the Muslim north against the Christian, animist south.

### 2003

Year conflict erupted in Sudan’s Darfur region where Janjaweed militias are attacking villages.

### 4.4 million

Number of people from southern Sudan who fled their homes over the past 20 years. Most remain in Sudan, others are scattered around the world, including in Canada and the United States.

### Unknown

Number of people killed in war: likely more than 2 million. Millions more may have died due to lack of food and medical care.

### Prospects for peace

Between north and south—peace plan is being negotiated. In Darfur — little progress.

Over the years, MCC workers have seen firsthand the pain caused by Africa’s longest-running war. Whole villages have been destroyed, children orphaned and families left hungry and homeless. MCC has helped alleviate suffering in Sudan by providing emergency assistance such as food, clothing, seeds and tools. MCC has also supported local church peace initiatives. Most recently, MCC launched a \$6.1 million Cdn./\$4.6 million U.S. effort to provide food and relief supplies to victims of violence in Sudan. (See “Give a gift” page 7.)

For more: [www.mcc.org/sudan](http://www.mcc.org/sudan)

**“I went and saw the situation, and so I offered myself to help. If there is any trip out there, I am ready to go.”**

— Ebtihal Khidir Salman, 27, a volunteer with the MCC-supported Sudan Council of Churches in Darfur. Salman and other Muslims work alongside Christians to bring aid to camps. In late August, she narrowly escaped injury when the vehicle she was riding in came under fire.

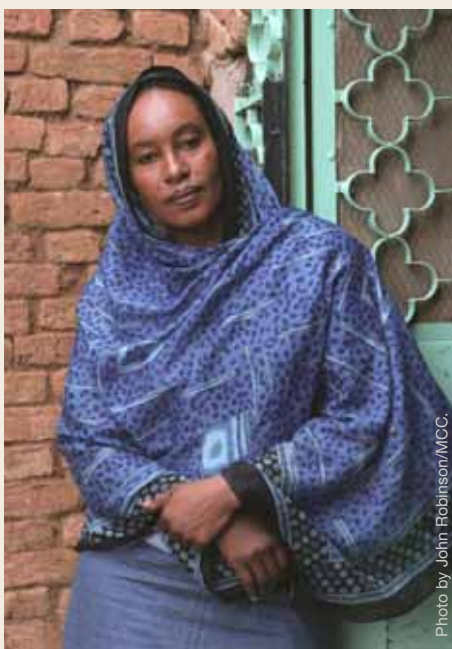


Photo by John Robinson/MCC.

## MCC NOTES



### AFGHANISTAN

**Seesaws, swings and a merry-go-round** — a new playground in Kabul offers an oasis of carefree fun for children in a country still torn by violence. The MCC-supported Le Pelican center provides some 77 children ages 6 to 12 with a safe, structured place to play and learn. Most pupils are Hazara, the ethnic group of the lowest status. The children study Dari, one of Afghanistan’s main languages, math and English, as well as learning about hygiene and peacemaking skills.

### ALBERTA

**With Christmas songs and lullabies**, Alberta musicians Kim Thiessen and Darryl Neustaedter Barg are helping raise funds for bedding for people with AIDS, food for orphans and bicycles for caregivers to ride to remote villages. Sales from the compact discs “The Light Shines: Songs and Carols for the Christmas Season” and “To Such as These: Songs and Lullabies for Children of the World” have brought in more than \$250,000 Cdn./\$189,000 U.S. for MCC’s HIV/AIDS work around the world. The CDs are available from any MCC office (see page 23).

### BOLIVIA

**A village of Guarani Indians is growing** tomatoes thanks to the advice of James Gosselink, an MCC community development worker from Silver Bay, N.Y., who lives in their remote village, Comunidad Villa Hermosa. With plenty of trial and error, Gosselink is testing crops to improve the Guarani’s basic diet of corn and beans and introducing more productive sustainable farming techniques.

### FLORIDA / ALABAMA

**MCC has provided some 25,000 cans** of meat to communities recovering from a spate of fall hurricanes. Local churches and agencies are distributing the meat. Some is going to farm laborers who cannot find work because

crops have been damaged. “When there is no work, there is no food also,” notes Andrew Bodden, MCC South Florida program coordinator. In Alabama, some meat went to rural communities where many families live in mobile homes particularly susceptible to storm damage. Jim Nelson, an Alabama food bank manager, said he has seen trees felled “as if a giant’s hand just shoved them all over in a row,” sometimes with trailers or houses underneath.

**INDONESIA**

**Mountain spring water is flowing** down into isolated Papua villages, reducing illnesses such as diarrhea, a major killer of young children. Over the past 20 years, MCC has worked with the University of Papua to design systems that rely on gravity and elevation to pipe clean water into locations where people normally drink river water. MCC helped install some three dozen systems. Now the university is taking the lead in promoting the technology, allowing MCC to phase out its technical assistance.

**UKRAINE**

**Death and grief have recently** touched children at Good Shepherd, reports Andrew Geddert, an MCC psychologist at this shelter for street children in Makeevka. One child lost her grandmother, two brothers at the shelter learned their mother had died and one boy’s older brother was killed while robbing a house. Geddert, of Fresno, Calif., counsels the children, encouraging them to talk about their loved ones who have died and to express their feelings. He explains the process of grieving and prays with them.

**“We could tell that the kit was packed by friends, not by people in a factory. Blessings traveled with it,” says Helena Vasic, refugee in Belgrade, Serbia, who received an MCC relief kit.**

**MCC MATERIAL RESOURCE PROJECT**

**Assemble a relief kit**

- **4 bars bath soap**
- **1 plastic bottle shampoo**  
(450-830 ml / 13-24 oz; place in plastic bag)
- **10 cups powdered laundry detergent**  
(double bag in 4-liter / 1-gallon resealable plastic bags)
- **1 squeeze-tube toothpaste**  
(minimum 130 ml / 8 oz)
- **4 adult-size toothbrushes**  
(leave in packaging)
- **4 bath towels**  
(medium weight, dark color)
- **1 hairbrush**
- **1 wide-tooth comb**
- **1 fingernail clipper**
- **1 box adhesive bandages**  
(minimum 40, assorted)
- **1 package sanitary pads**  
(18-24 thin maxi or ultra thin)

**Place contents in a box and deliver to nearest MCC location (see page 23 or go to [www.mcc.org/respond/kits](http://www.mcc.org/respond/kits)).**



Iraq photo by Kevin King/MCC.

**MCC relief kits shipped in 2003**

Iraq 49,963    Bosnia 1,408    Serbia 1,196    Philippines 1,000    Nicaragua 200    Haiti 27

**MCC provides relief kits to people suffering because of war and natural disasters. Each kit contains hygiene items for a family of four. MCC staff and volunteers repack each kit into a new 5-gallon plastic pail with a lid. This makes shipping easier, and recipients can use the buckets as well as the contents.**



Photo by Art Janzen/MCC.

**MAKE A DIFFERENCE:**

# Shop at Ten Thousand Villages

By Angelika Dawson

**C**hristmas and Ten Thousand Villages have long been linked for Becky Janzen of Abbotsford, British Columbia. She and her family have a rule: The gift you give must be homemade or come from a Ten Thousand Villages store.

Like homemade items, gifts purchased at Ten Thousand Villages have special meaning. They extend the spirit of Christmas giving around the world.

Ten Thousand Villages, an MCC program, markets handicrafts from artisans who would otherwise be unemployed or underemployed. This income helps thousands of families in more than 30 countries afford the basics of life: food, education, health care, housing (see First Person page 16).

More than 100 Ten Thousand Villages stores throughout North America sell these handicrafts and provide customers with information about the lives of the people who make them. Last year sales reached more than \$26 million Cdn./\$20 million U.S. (This figure includes additional retail stores that carry some Ten Thousand Villages products.)

Janzen loves everything about Ten

Thousand Villages. “It’s multicultural, it’s beautiful, I want to decorate my whole living room like Africa,” she says enthusiastically. Walking into a Ten Thousand Villages store is like entering an international marketplace — bright, hand-loomed Guatemalan textiles, blue and white Vietnamese ceramics, Mexican pottery, Indian jewelry, Philippine baskets, West African instruments and Palestinian nativities vie for customers’ attention.

But for Janzen it’s not just “the stuff.” Shopping at Ten Thousand Villages connects her to the world in a unique way and helps her to fight what she perceives as a predominant consumer mentality that values products over people. Some stores

host visiting artisans who demonstrate how they make their crafts; many have educational programs for children.

“Going to Ten Thousand Villages shows you a whole other part of the world that struggles,” Janzen says. “Shopping there is such an awesome way to help people develop their talents and be self-sufficient because you’re paying them an honest wage.”

For Janzen, shopping at Ten Thousand Villages is an expression of her Christian beliefs. “What is faith all about if it’s not to help other people in life?” she asks. ■

*Angelika Dawson is a writer and educator for MCC British Columbia.*



Ceramics crafted by artisans in Vietnam.

ON ASSIGNMENT:

# Country representatives



MCC photo.

**Names** Ron and Augusta (Gussie) Good **Ages** 57, 59  
**Hometown** Elizabethtown, Pa.

**Assignment** MCC country representatives for Jamaica, based in Kingston

**Education** Gussie — B.S. Elmhurst (Ill.) College, M.S.W., St. Louis (Mo.) Univ.  
Ron — B.S. Elizabethtown (Pa.) College

**Previous experience** Social work, community development, counseling

**Typical day** Our days involve a lot of waiting: at the bank, at the work permit office, at the airport, at the post office! We're responsible for all the administrative and supervisory details necessary to facilitate MCC's work in Jamaica. This involves supervising, managing and guiding the MCC workers here. We're also in charge of financial accounting and program planning. As well, we spend time networking with other groups and giving moral support to partner agencies. The relational part of our job is as important as the administrative. Often we have to spontaneously react, depending on need and priority. A trip to the bank, for example, might be postponed if a partner needs our assistance. Flexibility is a must.

**Joys** Being involved with partner organizations that have a direct and major impact on wider society, especially in the areas of mental health and human rights. It is a privilege to work alongside committed Jamaicans who pursue justice, sometimes even despite death threats.

**Challenge** To not make things worse by inappropriate or overzealous reactions, such as throwing money at a problem. It takes patience and wisdom to discern the best ways to carry out MCC's mission.

**FIND YOUR PLACE**  
[www.mcc.org/serve](http://www.mcc.org/serve)

MCC needs administrators with at least two years of management and leadership experience, preferably in another culture, to serve as country representatives. Country representative positions can be shared by a couple or filled by one person. Anticipated openings over the next year include locations such as Angola, Bangladesh, Congo, Haiti, Honduras and Nicaragua.

MCC has many other service opportunities in North America and internationally. For information, go to [www.mcc.org/serve](http://www.mcc.org/serve) or contact your nearest MCC office (see below).

MCC workers are expected to exhibit a commitment to Christian faith, active church membership and biblical peacemaking.

**WHERE IS YOUR  
NEAREST MCC OFFICE?**

**Mennonite Central Committee  
and MCC U.S.**  
21 South 12th Street, PO Box 500  
Akron, PA 17501  
(717) 859-1151 Toll free (888) 563-4676

**MCC Canada**  
134 Plaza Drive  
Winnipeg, MB R3T 5K9  
(204) 261-6381

**MCC Central States**  
121 East 30th Street, PO Box 235  
North Newton, KS 67117  
(316) 283-2720

**MCC East Coast**  
21 South 12th Street, PO Box 500  
Akron, PA 17501  
(717) 859-1151

**MCC Great Lakes**  
1013 Division Street  
Goshen, IN 46528  
(574) 534-4133

**West Coast MCC**  
1010 G Street  
Reedley, CA 93854  
(559) 638-6911

**MCC Alberta**  
76 Skyline Crescent N.E.  
Calgary, AB T2K 5X7  
(403) 275-6935

**MCC British Columbia**  
Box 2038  
Abbotsford, BC V2T 3T8  
(604) 850-6639

**MCC Manitoba**  
134 Plaza Drive  
Winnipeg, MB R3T 5K9  
(204) 261-6381

**MCC Ontario**  
50 Kent Avenue  
Kitchener, ON N2G 3R1  
(519) 745-8458

**MCC Saskatchewan**  
600 - 45th Street West  
Saskatoon, SK S7L 5W9  
(306) 665-2555

Call your nearest office in Canada  
toll free (888) 622-6337  
[www.mcc.org](http://www.mcc.org)



SHOP AT TEN THOUSAND VILLAGES THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

FIND A STORE NEAR YOU: [TENTHOUSANDVILLAGES.COM](http://TENTHOUSANDVILLAGES.COM)  
CANADA 519-662-1879 U.S. 717-859-8100

Product shown is block-printed gift wrap made by artisans in Bangladesh.

aCommon  
Place

Coming in  
January ...

PROFILE:  
BRAZIL