

AIM AIR



March 2007

field report



From the Manager...

Dear Friends of AIM AIR,

Whenever I am asked to write or speak about AIM AIR, I usually don't have to go back very far to remember an interesting story or event. This is an exciting place to work and there is always something happening. Always.

* In February, former US Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and Franklin Graham, President of Samaritan's Purse (SP), were here visiting Heads of State, touring SP Projects, and seeing the horrors of Darfur firsthand. We flew them for ten days.

* The World Health Organization declared a meningitis outbreak in Sudan an epidemic. The disease (an infection of the brain), hits small children and the weak the hardest. So far, we have flown 7000 pounds of medicines to the worst hit areas.

* Six expatriate missionaries called us late one Friday evening from Sudan. The local soldiers were threatening violence and things were very tense. As the sun arose the next morning, we landed one of our Grand Caravans, kept the engine running, and with a total ground time of two minutes, had them safely out.

The above and many other recent flights can really be thrilling. However, sometimes it is the uneventful, routine flight that makes a lasting impression. Not long ago I made a trip from our home base in Nairobi, with nine short-term Norwegian missionaries bound for the Congo – home of the second largest jungle in the world. For literally

hours, we flew over the thick green carpet of the Ituri Forest. The only gaps in the landscape were the broad, brown rivers of central Congo, teeming with crocodiles and temperamental hippos.

As I stared out the cockpit window, looking at the end of the earth, I began to see a few open spaces in the dark forest canopy that hung over the land. People. It was startling to see signs of humanity this far from the known world. How did they get here? My destination was a sizeable village named Likati, but there are no roads in or out of Likati, only footpaths. I landed on an isolated grass strip cut out of the forest. An aircraft comes here once or twice a year.

It had been a long day. I was tired, and I took my time securing the airplane for the night while the missionaries went ahead. As the sun was setting, a local church member led me into the jungle down a small trail. We didn't go far when several imposing buildings came into view. They were built by the Norwegian church many years before but were abandoned during the war in the late 1990's. As I took this all in, it hit me square in the chest. Yes, these people were at the end of the line, as far from civilization as you can get. But the Gospel had come to them. It was here, not just with the buildings, but in their hearts. The love of Jesus Christ had come looking for them, seeking them out, even here. Our Lord has commanded us to "Go and make disciples of all nations." It is happening.

~Matt Olson

AIM AIR is a ministry of Africa Inland Mission ~ International Services

Lost and Found in Sudan



Panther Bior tugged at my elbow. "How many more miles?" he asked. I looked at the GPS, turned back toward him and shouted above the roar of the airplane engine, "Fifteen." "Fifteen," he said and paused thoughtfully, "that is good." He looked down out the passenger window, transfixed on the barren, tortured terrain of Southern Sudan, and recognized it. Driven from this place as a child some twenty years ago, he never thought he would lay eyes on it again. But Panther's story is interlaced in the bigger picture of a sovereign God. He is somewhat like the Biblical Joseph, lost and left for dead, yet one who God did not forget. And like Joseph, he would have a day of revelation, when it would all come around full circle and there would be tears, and God's hand would be seen and understood. As the airplane descended, and his home finally came into view, he hoped today would be that day.

Home is a concept difficult for Panther to frame. He is one of Sudan's "Lost Boys" – children separated from their parents or orphaned in the onslaught of Sudan's civil war. These children fled their villages in small groups and eventually converged into an exodus of thousands. They ran for more than a decade, grew up in the bush as refugees, and were witness and victim to every kind of horror imaginable. Their story is both remarkable and terrifying. It has been publicized in books and articles through the years, and recently documented in a feature film by National Geographic entitled "God Grew Tired of Us." The title seems fitting to describe these boys who became men without a home or family, without a country, and sometimes without a prayer.

A few hundred survivors eventually ended up in a refugee camp in Kenya's northern wasteland, and from there, all over the world. Scores of them came to America, on invitation, to begin new lives. In some of the destination cities churches stepped in to "adopt" the boys, becoming a refuge in the purest sense of the word – taking in refugees – and in the act becoming unwitting ambassadors to the Sudan. After a decade of guiding the boys through the strange landscape of America, the roles would be reversed.

Settling in New York, Panther's life had taken a turn toward the surreal. But he kept in close contact with some of his fellow "Lost Boys" and together they fostered a vision to go back to Sudan – to bless their people as they had been blessed. In the wake of this boyish, and contagious dream were a mixed assortment of Americans whose eyes had been opened to a world beyond the one they knew, and who were driven to follow these boys home, however reluctantly, by their restless hearts.

And so, as I steered the Caravan toward the coordinates handed to me on a scrap of paper, Panther wasn't the only one peering out through the haze. Four middle aged men, engineers and builders from North America, strained to see. The nearest usable airstrip to Panther's home sits at an abandoned outpost on the waterless Jongeli canal – a massive, unfinished project to bypass a length of the Nile river lost in the Sudd, one of the world's largest swamps. The town and the impressive fleet of rusting, heavy equipment scattered throughout it are a telling picture of Sudan's stunted growth. During the war, both national development and individual lives stopped moving forward, and in fact, began to move backward. Ironically, these "Lost Boys" were returning to a Sudan that, in some ways, predated their departure. We landed on a dusty strip set between a thatch village and a thousand grazing cattle. The men stepped from the plane and Panther, dressed in a new suit, melted into the waiting crowd.

I caught glimpses of him every few moments, bobbing in and out of a sea of excited people. His expression was sometimes joyous, sometimes pensive. But the instants of recognition or disbelief over the faces of his fellow Sudanese were the moments when I saw a man like Joseph. Panther, like Jacob's favored son, was found, and he had a story to tell of God's goodness and divine intervention – and a captive audience to hear it.

Panther Bior fled his home village when he was seven-years-old, naked, and afraid. He returned twenty years later in a modern airplane, a man with a miraculous story. The tale is wrought with danger and amazing good fortune. It carries legends of the big city and a new world in America. But it is also a story of a God who did not abandon him in his darkest days. Of all the elements in Panther's story, it is the grace of God he talks about most. For the myriad of people caught up in his remarkable life, from the First Presbyterian Church of Skaneateles, NY to the reunited family in southern Sudan, it will likely be an enduring theme.

He will undoubtedly tell his story many times over. The American missionaries along side him will build the new medical clinic they came to raise. And they will do what they can to encourage the church in that remote village. But as I watched Panther from my place crouched down at the rear cargo door, I believed that his greatest testimony would come from simply being there again. What men and wars and the harsh and heartless land of Sudan meant for evil, God meant for good.