

Pope John XXIII Community

Sharing Among Peoples

A non-profit NGO recognized by the Italian Foreign Ministry

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Getting to Know the Association

The "Pope John XXIII Community" Association was instituted in Rimini (Italy) on March 28, 1989 with the aim of cooperating with peoples from developing nations so as to aid them in attaining their cultural, social and political autonomy through development programs and related awareness raising education programs in Italy (in accordance with Art. 3 - Acts of Constitution). The Association's activities received official recognition from the Italian Foreign Ministry in 1999.

Our activities abroad are the result of experiences in Italy by the Pope John XXIII Association (founded by Father Oreste Benzi) which has for over 40 years laboured among societies marginalized . Through this contact with the poor the Association progressively saw the need to act in other areas and currently assists those with physical and mental handicaps, children who have been abandoned, drug abusers, the homeless, young mothers, gypsies, immigrants, the elderly, prisoners, and youths forced into prostitution.

The Association is present in 14 of Italy's regions while its presence abroad is being expanded through projects or through partnerships with local organizations in 20 countries: Zambia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Brazil, Chile, Bolivia, Venezuela, Israel, Palestine, China, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, India, Australia, Albania, Croatia, Kosovo, Romania and Russia.

Projects within Italy

The association's efforts within Italy have been directed towards the promotion, whether direct or in collaboration with other associations, of awareness raising initiatives on themes of internationalization, underdevelopment and economic inequalities between the Northern and Southern hemispheres. In particular, seminars have been organized by volunteers within the school system to educate students on themes related to international relations, peace and development as well as sessions to prepare volunteers for concrete experiences in the field of international cooperation. Furthermore, the Association has organized conferences and meetings in Italy dealing with the following concerns: The fight against Aids, Africa, non-violent interventions in zones of conflict, the promotion of human rights, and civic service on the part of youth abroad (also known as the "white helmets"). The Association has also participated in campaigns aimed at pressuring and sensitizing national and international public opinion, e.g., that for the fulfillment of the Millenium Objectives.

Projects Abroad

The Association's projects abroad take place in a variety of fields and sectors but in only one method characterizing all of its action; a concrete sharing of one's life with the poor and marginalized in the various settings so as to, in the short term, relieve their suffering and, in the long term, eliminate the causes which provoke marginalization and injustice.

The primary beneficiaries of the Association's efforts, whether carried out independently or in partnership with other local or international organizations, are minors (child soldiers, street children, children with handicaps, and those orphaned by Aids), women, the handicapped, victims of violence and sexual exploitation, the homeless, populations in the midst of armed conflict, and groups promoting human rights. The Association has in the past cooperated with international organizations including UNICEF, PAM, UNHCR and the European Union.

The services and projects carried on by the Association throughout the world can be resumed through the following list:

- 32 Family Homes (small communities offering long-term care and community)
- 4 health projects
- 3 projects in aid of child welfare
- 14 "Open Families" (Similar in function to the Family Homes but on a smaller scale)
- 6 therapeutic communities
- 8 centres for emergency housing/services
- 9 centres for street children
- 25 food distribution centres
- 11 schools and kindergartens
- 30 projects supporting small business cooperatives
- 20 cooperative groups offering alternative finance.

Alongside these services and structures providing aid and development opportunities to the weakest elements in society are the Association's non-violent actions in zones of conflict and post-conflict (Palestine, Kosovo and Uganda), and its support projects for groups promoting human rights (Chile, Israel and Palestine).

Within the Association's projects, whether administered independently or in cooperation with other associations, are a group of youths undergoing their national civic service (aka. The "White Helmets") in accordance to national law (N. 230/1998 and N. 64/2001). The number of these volunteers for the year 2004 was 41.

OPERATION DOVE

In communion with their experience within the Pope John XXIII community, a group of youths and conscientious objectors felt questioned by the conflict in neighbouring Yugoslavia

in 1992. They thus established a presence within the refugee camps in Croatia. Initially, these young, and not so young, Italian volunteers would spend their "holidays" among the war's refugees. They were present on various fronts and would labour to re-unite families, protect ethnic minorities through their presence, and endeavour to foster dialogue among the warring parties. However, they soon realized that these efforts were insufficient. They accordingly sought to establish a *continuous* presence beginning in the Croatian sectors, and then moving on to Serb and Bosnian enclaves. The result was Operation Dove. This experience has since been exported to other conflicts: Sierra Leone (1997), Kosovo and Albania (1998-1999), East Timor (1999), The Chiapas Region of Mexico (1998-2002), Chechnya (2000-2001), The Democratic Republic of Congo (2001), and in Israel/Palestine (since 2002).

Operation Dove is open to all people. Believers and non-believers alike who wish to experience within their lives the power of non-violence as the sole means by which to obtain lasting peace founded upon justice and truth. Its members are all volunteers and fall into two categories: Those who offer themselves for extended periods of service, i.e., two to three years on a full-time basis, and those available for more limited durations (usually two to three months). Over 1000 volunteers have loaned their efforts to Operation Dove since 1992. There are currently 10 full-time volunteers in Italy and abroad with a further 20 serving for shorter periods.

There are three main characteristics to our work:

- **Non-violence:** Confronting an adversary with tools which allow you to understand the other rather than destroy him. The objective of non-violence is to liberate both the oppressed and the oppressor.
- **Fully sharing** their lives with those undergoing the consequences of conflict.
- **Neutrality** with respect to the warring parties but not with respect to the the concomitant injustices.

Here are a few of the concrete actions carried out by Operation Dove in areas of conflict:

- a) Living among the poor and seeking to help them meet their basic needs, and sharing the discomfort, risks and fears brought about by the conflict.
- b) Protection of the civil population through a neutral and multi-national presence serving to deter the use of violence.
- c) Promoting dialogue and reconciliation based upon the goodwill and trust created by our having already shared their situation.

Operation Dove is today a Civil Peace Corps belonging to the Pope John XXIII Community which intervenes within armed conflicts by sharing their lives with the victims on three fronts: Israel/Palestine, Kosovo and Northern Uganda.

OPERATION DOVE IN NORTHERN UGANDA

In November, 2004 and in May, 2005 Operation Dove undertook two exploratory missions wherein initial contacts were made. The Association had numerous meetings with local and international NGOs, UN agencies, and Father Carlos Rodriguez Soto who has been at

the centre of local efforts to promote dialogue, and who authorized the presence of our volunteers in his parish (Minakulu) for the months of July, August and December of 2005. Our volunteers were thus able to experience sharing their lives with the innocent victims of the conflict between the LRA and the Ugandan government. They were also able to support existing projects for emergency humanitarian aid.

Operation Dove volunteers have contributed to:

- The building of a health clinic in Minakulu that now offers basic and emergency health services to a local population of over 35,000.
- The digging of two wells allowing the local population access to water supplies for consumption and hygiene.
- Educational support for some of the former child-soldiers so as to ease their re-integration into "normal life" after their brutalizing experiences among the rebels.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The project has set for itself the general objective of assisting the efforts of the local community, various Churches, the NGOs and the civil population to return to peace and dignity within Northern Uganda, and for a peaceful end to the conflict in light of the political and military failures of the last 20 years.

For a six month period our volunteers intend to evaluate the possibility of establishing a permanent presence within one of the refugee camps so as to carry out the following:

- Monitor the adherence to, and promotion of, human rights with particular attention to those most vulnerable and exposed to violations and abuse, e.g., women and children.
- Assistance to the camp population with regard to other local and international agencies so as to exchange information with a view to resolving specific problems of a humanitarian nature alongside the more immediate difficulties encountered by the volunteers in the camps' daily life.
- Accompanying the camps' residents into the neighbouring countryside and villages to ensure their safety and guarantee their return.
- Recreational projects/activities with the children of the camps.
- Monitor and outline the immediate needs of the camp population so as to suggest appropriate measures by governmental and non-governmental agencies that can also involve fund raising projects in Italy.
- Support for efforts by the local civil population at fostering dialogue and reconciliation.
- Advocacy projects attempting to bear pressure on authorities to respect of human rights, the search for peaceful solutions to the conflict, and the safe return of the camps' population to their home villages.
- The documentation of information and statistics on the conflict, and the implementation of a feasibility study for the long-term prospects of the project.

Other specific project objectives include supporting the local population's pressure tactics and awareness raising for the re-establishment of general security within the area, assuring the protection of the population within the camps, to support efforts allowing the civil

population's safe return to their villages, and to strive to bring about an end to the armed conflict based upon a common road to reconciliation.

METHODOLOGY

Sharing the Lives of the Victims of Conflict, a Civil and Non-Violent Presence, and Emergency Humanitarian Aid.

The methodological approach of Operation Dove to reconciliation in situations of conflict and widespread violence is multithreaded.

On the one hand there is the direct sharing of daily life with the victims of conflict permitting us to cultivate the goodwill of the local population by having shared their risks, fears problems and hopes. This sharing of the daily reality, characteristic of all the Association's efforts, allows us to cultivate relations based upon a mutual trust and an intimate knowledge of the parties involved, and therefore, lays the basis upon which to formulate projects adapted to the specific local situation without recourse to existing aid models which fail to consider the local realities of those most exposed to the conflict's violence.

At a second level is the mode of operating in a non-violent manner to promote the dignity of the person through the promotion of internationally recognized human rights, and the formulating of radical alternative proposals aimed at dismantling the mechanisms which generate conflict. This occurs in conjunction with the experience of the local civil population and allows us to experiment in the field with instruments and tools for the peaceful resolution of conflict, and to guarantee that the human right to security be always at the heart of the international judicial system.

The right to protection and security is in fact the first to be guaranteed and promoted in situations of conflict since it is indispensable if other fundamental human rights are to be assured to the local population.

International agencies are increasingly aware of the need to promote new players, abilities and mandates allowing for a more effective capacity for response to situations that represent a threat to the right to safety and the protection of the civil population. This is precisely the role played by civil bodies, which free of governmental mandates, are able to act as third parties constituting credible alternatives in conflicts (as is the case with the Peace Corps proposed and represented by Operation Dove). Aid to local population alongside the monitoring and promotion of human rights (with particular attention to the right to security) carried out by Operation Dove is best understood given the above context which tends to ensure an importance and juridical standing to the activities of international civil society in situations of conflict and humanitarian emergency.

Naturally, this type of action is all the more effective when ties to the population are intimate, and an approach based upon sharing one's life with the population so as to acquire direct experience of conditions allows us establish such essential ties.

Finally, to these two levels of action has to be added that of realizing humanitarian support so as to adequately confront particularly severe emergency situations.

The humanitarian value of our presence (in this case within the refugee camps), and the monitoring of human rights cannot precede the need to guarantee, where manifestly a priority, basic services including health care and access to water. Some of these basic services are addressed directly by our volunteers (especially when it comes to aiding the camp's population with small daily tasks and needs). In other situations the volunteers

cultivate relations and serve as go-betweens with other relevant agencies. In serious emergency situations, however, volunteers seek to assemble and organize the needed resources so as to confront the emergency.