

Mission in Ethiopia

Dear friends,

How beautiful it was, this handover of the "Scout & Guide Spirit Flame" by Ethiopia (village of Metema) to Sudan (village of Gallabat), from the Scouts of Ethiopia to the Scouts of Sudan. What a lot of joy, what a lot of pride, what a lot of emotion emanated from the faces of one to another! What happiness in the celebration which surrounded this symbolic act! How beautiful it was, fluttering in the African breeze, the flag of ISGF which had already travelled nearly 3000 kilometres. How happy I am to have implemented this mission as the ISGF representative, after many hesitations.

Ethiopia is a little-known country; we know only that it is one of the poorest countries in the world –unhappily I have seen in some places that it is a country with some borders being unstable regions, as the recent news has shown. However, this is a country of fascinating contrasts: its deserts and its woods, its cultivated plains and its mountains, some of them reaching more than 4000 meters, its wonderful canyons, its extremely traditional areas of population contrasting with some very modern areas of population, both poverty and affluence which are not far from each other particularly in the towns, and also the richness of its very old cultural treasures; Ethiopia will celebrate its 1000 years, this year.

But I did not come to Ethiopia for tourism, even if, thanks to our friends Scouts of Ethiopia, I had the opportunity to visit some superb places particularly in Gondar and on the road going to the border of Sudan.

Although I am very grateful for that, I came to meet our brothers and sisters of the "Ethiopian Scout Association", a member of the World Organisation of the Scout Movement (WOSM) and of its Africa Region; I also met the "Scout & Guide Spirit Flame". These meetings have been firstly very interesting, and secondly marked, once more, with great emotion, as in Kenya.

Accompanied by Captain Paulos, project coordinator in the Association, who never left me until the return to my hotel, I spent the first two days of my stay (Wednesday 28th and Thursday 29 March 2007) in Addis Ababa, "the new flower"; physically it has been a bit difficult as I had to get acclimatised to living at a height of more than 2000 meters. Meetings had been fixed with the Chief Commissioner of the Movement, Mr Costantinos, and with the Chief Scout, Mr Berhan, renown persons in their country. Meetings of courtesy, indeed, but they never forgot to phone me during my travels. It was during a dinner that I met Mr Esayas, International Commissioner, charged for some time by the President of Ethiopia himself, Mr Girma, to create a structure for adults in Scouting. I also had the opportunity to meet, during meals or having a drink, or in the office (a room in a rather dilapidated building) other very interesting persons still having or having had responsibilities in the Association.

ALL OF THEM TOLD ME HOW IMPORTANT THIS ROUTE OF THE "SCOUT & GUIDE SPIRIT FLAME" HAS BEEN IN THE PROMOTION OF SCOUTING IN ETHIOPIA.

All these meetings taught me that Scouting was first introduced in Ethiopia in 1933 by a Canadian living in Addis Ababa, that it has always welcomed boys and girls and that it can be found in schools, without being governmental. Scouting enjoyed happy days until 1938, after the invasion of the country by Italy.

In 1948, the activities re-started in the schools teaching the children to become good citizens. But, in the late 1960s, the Marxist regime dissolved the Association and confiscated all its properties. The reason being that the religious values in the Scout Promise were incompatible with the philosophy of the regime.

After 20 years of untiring effort and with the emergence of the democratic system, the scout movement was re-established in 1995, and it was only in 2002, during the WOSM World Conference in Greece, that the Association was re-admitted to the World Organisation of the Scout Movement. Today, the Ethiopia Scout Association has more than 8000 Scouts (70% boys and 30% girls). In spite of the everlasting efforts of each one, the Association still faces many difficulties.

During all these discussions, we thought of the numerous ways ISGF members could act. I myself spoke long and often of concrete projects which could be introduced by the Association and put into the "Catalogue of projects" which will very soon be on our ISGF website (in the plan of the recent decision of the World Committee).

This catalogue will allow National Scout and Guide Fellowships who wish the opportunity to work on projects proposed by the developing countries, including Ethiopia, either by financial means or human means, or both, of course.

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I also evoked the partnership with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; there is a lot to do in this country. I also spoke of humanitarian projects with the « Lions Club International » and the « Rotary International ». But the ball is now in the court of the Ethiopia Scout Association which should conceive concrete projects, really sure visible means which may help a scout organisation progress and make it credible.

Going to meet the “Scout & Guide Spirit Flame” was the real aim of my mission in Ethiopia.

What a meeting! The third day of my travel (Friday 30th March) took me to Gondar, capital of the Ethiopian sovereigns from the XVIIth to the XIXth century. My guide, Paulos, and I took a plane, a Fokker 50, two propellers, for a little more than an hour with a stopover...taxi plane!... On the tarmac of the small aerodrome of Gondar were waiting for me about 20 scouts, boys and girls, from a very well organised group from a private school which should be a model for the other Scouts of the town; they were wearing orange jackets with the logo of ISGF, some with the “Flame”, some brandishing the lit “Torch” and others the flag of ISGF. What a joy and also what an emotion! They were with their local Scout leaders together with those who accompanied the “Flame” during its crossing of Ethiopia from Moyale (border of Kenya). Aniley Haile and Siefu Berta were there; the Mayor of Gondar and his Deputy Mayor were there too, with a priest: flowers, a few welcoming words and the police opened the way up to the hotel where I stayed.

Gondar is more 2000 meters above sea level.

The “Flame” again on Saturday 31st March; the same Scouts, their leaders and I marched in the town in spite of the difficulties due to the traffic on a market day: cars, pedestrians, trucks, carts pulled by horses, many donkeys holding heavy packs, goats and cows were causing a curious traffic jam. The procession walked proudly behind the ISGF flag, towards the most outstanding places of the town which are the Imperial City and the palaces of the kings who succeeded one another (classified in the UNESCO World Heritage).

During my free time in Gondar, I talked with many tourists of different nationalities who were very interested, mainly those who had been Scouts or Guides, telling them the objectives of the project of the “Scout & Guide Spirit Flame”. Part of the work on Sunday 1st of April was dedicated to arrangements for the very difficult handover to the Sudanese. We also had a working meeting with the three representatives of the Ethiopia Scout Association to discuss << **the “Flame”, it is excellent but after?>>.**

On Monday 2 April, we left for Metema, on the border with Sudan, on the West of the country. Two 4x4 vehicles were necessary for 6 of us (2 drivers, 3 Ethiopian leaders and me); one does not know what may happen! And indeed it took about 4 hours to travel 180 kilometres. The road was very difficult, often undulating, going through a savannah with trees becoming dryer and dryer and dusty, and along which donkeys and people walk with very heavy loads on their back under an oppressive heat. Among wonderful landscapes of canyons, we drive slowly down to 700 meters in Metema. The villages are less and less frequent and become miserable settlements. How do people find water? What do they eat? How do they live? They do not live, they survive.

The next day, April 3rd, we achieved the handover of the “Flame” from Ethiopia to Sudan of which I spoke at the beginning. I decided to be part of the procession of 15 Scouts with their leaders, on foot, despite the reluctance of the Scout leaders fearing the effects of the temperature of 50 degrees C on me. It was just great.

It is in our Mission of ISGF to actively support the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts and the World Organisation of the Scout Movement. It is in our Mission of ISGF to promote the spirit of the Scout and Guide Promise and Law.

I have the real conviction that the “Scout and Guide Spirit Flame” project in Ethiopia will have perfectly well allowed this Mission to be implemented.

Martine Levy,
ISGF World Committee Chairman

