

Sr Cathy Solano RSM, a former staff member of St Joseph's College Mildura and the last Mercy Sister to take her vows in Mildura, is currently working in Sudan, where she has set up schools, boarding accommodation and teacher training facilities. Sr Cathy's work is with the Nuba people. The Sudanese government are trying to ethnically cleanse Sudan of these people and the area is constantly bombed. Last year the library and classrooms were strafed with shrapnel from one such bomb, with the library roof being completely destroyed.

During another raid, one of the cooks of the compound, and Cathy's friend, was badly burned when her home caught fire. Cathy's brother, Michael is a doctor and in January he went to Sudan to see if he could help her. Here is an extract of the letter he sent:



The Nuba are (a collection) of tribes here and they continue to fight for their independence from Sudan and Arab dominance. The fighting, as usual is about resources and tribalism more than religion, but its Muslim vs Christian as well. Isaac the operations manager sleeps with an AK47 under his pillow.



I'm in Kauda about 200 km from the Sahara desert. Cathy runs a number of schools and teacher training centre from here. It's so hot. 51.5 in the sun and 36 in our rooms. There's a breeze in the evening but it builds up to a gale carrying dust as fine as talc. So you have to close your windows and fester!!! Some of the "schools" are small rooms of mud brick walls and floor and grass roof. There will be over 300 children hoping to get one of 70 places. Registration for primary school is tomorrow and the fight getting into these good schools is happening all over this region.

There's no respite from Cathy. I'm a removalist, store man, solar technician and a cleaner. She is a dictator and a saint and does ten times more than everyone. The roads are ridiculous and every cell in my body has been through a heavy duty rinse and wash cycle. Every day you pump out water from the bore hole and carry it back to your room and wash yourself and your clothes. Beans and corn and sorghum are our staples.

The work done by the different religious groups here is humbling. Comboni, Samaritans, Mercy.... and they're not here to convert, they're here to serve and build and educate. They love and respect the Nuba people because they are gentle and generous. The music and harmonies have been playing over and over in my head. Sticks and rocks and seed pods as musical accompaniment and voices. I've recorded heaps and I'll share little snippets when I get back.

Cathy is driving me to Yida on Thursday. It's only 150 km and will take about eight hours. She won't let me drive again. Yesterday I drove 80 m total. Straight into a creek bed and bogged. It took ten people, a winch and another 4 wheel drive to get us out. People kept pointing at me and laughing. Infamy follows me in Africa.

Michael Solano