

MEDIA RELEASE

SWEDISH REALITY SHOW CONSTRUCTED SCHOOL FOR ORPHANS AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN INAUGURATED IN AWASSA

AWASSA, Ethiopia, 1 February 2007 – UNICEF Ethiopia today inaugurated the Berhan Guzo Youth Anti-AIDS Club Non-Formal School for orphans and vulnerable children in Awassa, capital of the Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples' Region (SNNPR).

"Today our dream of having four solid walls and a rain-proof roof over our heads in which we can educate the children that keep coming to us for free education has come true," said Zegeye Woldesenbet, chairman of the Berhan Guzo Youth Anti-AIDS Club.

"We no longer have to worry about rain flooding our classrooms and washing away our books and pencils or that we will catch cold whenever the wind sweeps through plastic walls of our old school," added 11-year-old Ethiopia Tadesse, an orphan student at the Berhan Guzo School.

The inauguration of the school marks a climax in the journey begun by seven young volunteers six years ago when they established the Berhan Guzo Youth Anti-AIDS Club and the non-formal kindergarten in a make-shift shelter where they began providing free lessons for 30 orphaned and vulnerable children from among the poorest neighborhoods in Awassa.

"A staggering six million children have lost one or both parents in Ethiopia today," said Bjorn Ljungqvist, UNICEF's representative in Ethiopia. "The number of children who have been orphaned as a result of HIV and AIDS is estimated at one million and keeps growing every day.

"Caring for orphans is an integral part of Ethiopian traditions and culture, however what we are seeing with HIV and AIDS is that extended families and communities are unable to cope – hence the rising numbers of children living on the streets of urban centers and in other difficult and unacceptable situations.

"UNICEF believes that the most effective way to respond to this situation is to empower communities to continue with their age-old tradition of caring for orphans within extended families and without departing from the comfort and security of a familiar and caring environment, by providing the support required to overcome the added stress being inflicted by the HIV epidemic. This school and Berhan Guzo's achievements are proof that this strategy works."

During its six years the Berhan Guzo school has benefited 355 children. Today the kindergarten serves 185 students.

The Berhan Guzo non-formal school was constructed with the support of the Swedish National Committee for UNICEF in collaboration with Sweden's Channel 5 Reality Television show 'Hello Africa!' at a construction cost of US\$ 110,000.

The new school is designed to serve 300 students and has been recommended as a model for the construction of child-friendly schools in SNNPR.

"This school is not just any school. It is a school for the poorest of the poor; a school for the orphans and vulnerable children of Awassa," said Veronique Lonnerblad, Executive Director of the Swedish National Committee for UNICEF. "I am grateful to the people of Ethiopia and the national, regional

and local authorities. It would never have been possible in Sweden, nor in many other countries to build a school, get all the permits and all that is needed in eight weeks.”

‘Hello Africa!’ featuring Swedish television celebrities ‘Johnnie and Mattias’, will air on Sweden’s Channel 5 beginning on 15 February. The ten week series will follow the ups and downs of Johnny and Mattias’ efforts to complete construction of the school, with the support of UNICEF and local authorities, in eight weeks.

“We have made great progress in advancing primary school enrolment in Ethiopia over the past few years, however this school has shown us that we can move even faster,” said Redwan Hussein, head of the SNNPR Bureau of Education. “It usually takes us six months to one year to build a school but with this school Johnnie and Mattias have shown us that it can be done in eight weeks. That means that we can fulfill our dreams of achieving universal primary education by having a school in every village much faster than we had imagined.”

In 2005 the primary school enrolment rate in Ethiopia was 79.8 per cent, up from 57.4 per cent in 2001. Ethiopia is on track to achieve the millennium development goal of universal primary education by 2015.

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