

UNICEF HUMANITARIAN ACTION REPORT 2009

KENYA

THE CLASSROOM, A SANCTUARY FOR MANY CHILDREN

When Yvonne's family fled the violence that ravaged their village, the eight-year-old lost her home, her precious plastic necklace, her school uniform and her classroom. "We don't have much," she said, "but we always had our school."

The violence that swept through Kenya after the December 2007 disputed presidential election occurred when children, like Yvonne, sought to start a new school year. As UNICEF strives to provide safety and stability to hundreds of thousands of Kenyan children, education is fundamental.

By mid-February 2008, Yvonne was finally back in school – in a UNICEF tent classroom at one of the camps in the conflict-torn Rift Valley. She was elated. "I have two dresses that my mother saved from our burning house," she said. "This one is my favourite. It's my Sunday church dress, but coming back to school was special so my mother allowed me to wear it to school."

As Kenya's crisis continued in February 2008, UNICEF urgently appealed for US\$ 6.6 million for emergency services. Much of the money would go towards protection, education and assistance for more children.

"The classroom is a sanctuary for so many children like little Yvonne," said UNICEF's Representative in Kenya Olivia Yambi. "It's safe, secure and somewhere they can begin to play and learn, and move beyond the horrors that they've experienced."

In the first six weeks of the year, more than 300,000 Kenyans had to flee their homes. As many as 1,000 were killed. The number of reported cases of rape had doubled. According to UNICEF's estimates, there were 150,000 children in makeshift camps spread across the country – and more than half of these were children under age five.

So sudden was the eruption of violence that many families fled their homes with only what they could carry. Living temporarily in fields, showgrounds, schools and churches, the children played in dusty patches amidst the elderly sleeping on their mattresses and those who simply sat, reliving the terror that befell them. Families' meagre dinners burned over open fires, and toilets were overcrowded and unsanitary. These are the people UNICEF was seeking to support.

By 18 February 2008, UNICEF had provided nutritious foods to 70 per cent of the children in the camps; ensured that more than 15,000 children were going to school in UNICEF tents; provided over 50,000 people with access to safe water; and supplied 50,000 family kits, containing shelter materials, cooking pots and utensils.

"We have made real progress in a short space of time and amid great logistical challenges," said Ms. Yambi. "But we have many more children who need our help, and they need it today."

While Yvonne was back in school and talkative, her friend's fearful expression told another story. "She saw her uncle cut up and killed by youths with machetes," said one of the girls' teachers. "She hid with her auntie, but she saw it all." In response, the teacher visited the girl most nights in the camp, tried to help with her homework and gave her what food she could. It was a selfless act, like others that were being repeated across Kenya daily. Despite having their lives thrown into disarray, Kenyans are ceaselessly stepping up to help each other.

And then there was nine-year-old Anna, who went from door to door with her friends asking neighbours for any socks they could spare. She then handed them out to girls in the camps. "Socks keep your feet warm at night," she said. "Next, I want to collect shoes for them."

That would greatly please Yvonne. "Some of my friends have no spare clothes, no books, no shoes," she said. "Some are in school, but some still aren't. I just want us all to be together again, safe in school and in church."