

**Preliminary mission report, Atakpamé, Togo,
February 17th - March 2nd 2013**

**The Friendly Haven - R.A.G.C. (Reflection and Action Group for Cohesion)
Programs**



The Friendly Haven France and R.A.G.C. Togo programs, launched in 2008, are based on a dynamic partnership. We aim at:

- Committing ourselves to the lives and wellbeing of vulnerable children in Togo, especially orphans, children living on the streets, youngsters victims of the civil war in 2005, or children living with HIV - AIDS,
- Finding sponsors for the children we support, in order to pay for their school fees, medical care, food and everything they may need,
- Building and opening an orphanage and day care center, where the children will get physical, moral and psychological support,
- Working with widows through micro-fundings to give them the opportunity to launch their own income-generating activities,
- Supporting children and mothers living with HIV - AIDS,
- Developing a plea for non-violence and reconciliation at every level of society.

Based on the mission in Atakpamé that took place from February 17th to March 2nd, this report summarizes the recent developments and progress of our programs in the field.

During the mission, a team of The Friendly Haven coming from France and China arrived in Togo to work with the Togolese team of R.A.G.C. and to meet with the beneficiaries of our now 5-year-old programs !

It is in Atakpamé, in the center of Togo, that we all joined together.

The Friendly Haven team :

- Bénédicte-Fleur Vappereau, chairwoman, Friendly Haven, France
- Mathieu Bonaudo, project manager and technical adviser, France
- Françoise Vappereau, sponsors and donors representative, China
- Robert Persillon, professional photographer and movie maker, France,

And the R.A.G.C. team :

- Yves-Mathieu Amewu, R.A.G.C. chairman, Togo
- Clémentine Avosse, founder and leader of the Income Generating Activities Program for widows
- Victorine Sekom, director of the orphanage
- Father Séraphin Abokitse, CARITAS Togo former chairman and co-founder of our programs
- The whole team of R.A.G.C. voluntary workers and foster families.



Our teams (from right to left) : N. Amewu (voluntary worker), M. Bonaudo, Y-M. Amewu, V. Sekom, C. Avoise, R. Persillon, F. Vappereau, B-F. Vappereau

1/ Our new orphanage and day care center : Progress report and challenges ahead

A/ The Friendly Haven orphanage and day care center

Since the beginning of our partnership 5 years ago, the common aim of the Friendly Haven and R.A.G.C. has been the creation of an orphanage and day care center to welcome orphans and children living in the street, who are so many in Atakpamé. In 2010, we have been able to buy a 25 acres plot of land a few miles away from Atakpamé, on which to build our center in a peaceful environment. It is at the end of year 2011 that we got all the funds needed to build the whole complex.

The works at the building site started at the beginning of 2012. The goal was to build a structure that could welcome 30 children on a boarding basis and at least 20 more in day care only.

The orphanage currently includes: 10 bedrooms for the children (3 children per room), 3 bedrooms for the staff members, two dining halls, a kitchen, a storage room for the food, a library, a game room, a playground, the director's office, a little waiting room and last but not least, a huge central hut that will be used for children in day care, for game activities and for children's shows.

But at the end of 2012, new regulations about orphanages and children centers were published by the Togolese government: these rules imply that we need to widen the size of the children's bedrooms and that we change the location of the dining halls and kitchen to enhance safety for the children. **It was absolutely necessary that we adjust our buildings according to these regulations** in order to get the necessary approvals by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

These new requirements have resulted in a little delay in the works on the site. We also had to reassess our budget and to increase it in order to adjust to this new situation. The whole team of the Friendly Haven dealt with this issue just after arrival in Togo : our project manager and technical adviser carefully negotiated the new budget with the building company in the field. All the financial aspects of the construction will be explained to you very soon in our next financial report.

We organized a pre-inaugural ceremony at the orphanage during our mission and we were proud to affix the entrance board that specifies the name of your main donor, the late Mr. Melvin R. Seiden. Once again, we would like to express our gratitude to him and to Mrs. Janine Luke, his spouse, for their contributions ! On the building site, the works go on and should be completed over the next couple of months. **Thus we should be able to open the orphanage and day care center in August-September this year, just in time for the start of the new school year.**



Our central hut (80ft diameter) and the buildings of the orphanage

Main decisions :

1/ To follow up on the last steps of the building works within the framework of the new budget while complying with the new regulations in order to get the approval from the Social Affairs Ministry.

2/ To open our center before the start of the new school year and take in 30 children on boarding basis and 20 in day care as planned.

3/ To become a reference in terms of education on non-violence, creating a haven where children will grow in harmony both physically and psychologically.



The works progress quickly : here, the roofs of the boys'bedrooms were built in a few days only

A few highlights...

1/ **The central hut of the orphanage is its masterpiece** and can be seen miles away. Its diameter is over 80ft. It will be useful for games and shows, for sports, for the meals sometimes,... as it plays an important part in Togolese traditions, this place will be highly appreciated.

2/ During the mission, **we have defined the selection criteria for the children we will welcome into the center.** We will give priority to :

- Those who have lost *both* parents,
- Children living with handicap or health issue (not including HIV - AIDS : according to the civil society and NGOs in Togo, children affected by HIV should be taken care of in the foster families only : we are still debating this question),
- Children having difficulties adapting to their foster families, for psychological reasons, health issues, or when the foster families live in dire poverty,
- Two- thirds of the children will be in the 0 to 10 age range, and one-third in the 10 to 15 age range.

3/ We will try to keep the children in the orphanage for limited periods of time : one year in general, not exceeding three. **We wish to give the children time to heal before they join a foster family, while we also need to consider the many children who also should find a place in the orphanage.**

B/ Good news and improvements in the self-sustaining projects of the orphanage

Right from the very beginning, our aim has been for our orphanage to become self-sustaining and financially independent as quickly as possible. We cannot depend only on our donors to support our yearly operating costs. We have therefore worked on two projects to achieve this goal:

- **building a youth hostel on our land, with rooms to rent** on a yearly or seasonal basis, with the possibility to take in international volunteers,
- **developing an agricultural, breeding and farming project**, as this is very useful but not too costly.

Thanks to our donors'generosity we have been able to start building the walls of our hostel. Three buildings on a 2,500 square feet surface have already been built.

We hope to gather the rest of the funds needed as soon as possible to end this construction (roofs, embankment works, etc.) and start renting rooms. This hostel will give us the opportunity to raise our own funds and thus contribute to the sustainability of the orphanage.



The walls of our youth hostels and one of our two water wells

Main decisions :

- 1/ To complete the works for the youth hostel as soon as we will have gathered the necessary funds and to start operating asap.
- 2/ To ensure the orphanage self-sustainability.
- 3/ To use our hostel as a venue for conferences and seminars.
- 4/ To launch our agricultural and farming program and make the best use of our fertile 25 acres plot of land.

2/ Deepening and strengthening of our children fostering program

Let's keep in mind that we currently support more than 300 children through **all- inclusive programs (school fees, food, medical care, clothes, psychological support) or partial programs (school fees, books and school uniforms)**. About a quarter of our 300 children are infected with HIV-AIDS and thus need special care and attention.



Offering presents given by the sponsors to the children and visiting foster families

During our time in Togo, we have met the children we support in two different ways :

- At their schools, and mainly in the Sada and Doulassamé primary and secondary schools, where the children presented us with wonderful shows including dancing, singing, story-telling, poetry, drama,... we were thrilled by these youngsters so full of talents ! Thanks to these shows, we had the opportunity to meet with the management team of these two schools where most of our fostered children are enrolled. We noticed how useful arts (music, dance, poetry) can be for children in need of attention and recognition. Therefore we wish to deepen such creative projects both for the fostered children and for those who will enroll at the orphanage.



Dancing show at SADA primary school

- In their foster families: we have been visiting many foster families. Some of our sponsors had sent us presents to give to the children they support : that's why we started by the families taking in those children. We wish to thank the sponsors for their kindness that was much appreciated. We also thank the foster families for all their efforts and love : some of them take up to four orphans ! But we noticed that despite the help brought by our programs, the economic conditions of some of these families are alarming. We need to take a stand and act to fight such dire poverty !



Singing show at Doulassamé primary school

Main decisions :

- 1/ To strengthen our relationships with the schools where our fostered children enroll. Supporting these schools, which are often lacking everything, by sending books, games, etc.
- 2/ To bring more support to the existing foster families. To recruit new ones, with slightly higher standards of living, for our children to have a little more basic comfort. This recruitment process is far from easy, as we have very high moral criteria for the families we select.
- 3/ To develop more creative and artistic activities for the children, to help them heal from their traumas, express their feelings and feel joy and self-esteem.

A challenge :

In Togo, some of our foster families being still quite vulnerable economically, they sometimes have to move to another city or village, depending on the work opportunity they can find (seasonal work, etc.). We check that these children still attend school but the follow up then becomes quite complicated.

In such cases, when the families move for a long period of time (one year or more), should we go on supporting the child from a distance, put the child in another foster family closer to Atakpamé or stop supporting this child in order to help another one ? This issue is still being debated.

3/ Taking a stand for the income generating activities of widows

In 2009 we founded the income generating activities program to support the widows taking in children as foster families. The help of CARITAS Togo at the very beginning was very useful to launch this program and we still thank this organization accordingly.

As the widows are so many in Atakpamé and among our foster families (lots of men died during the civil war in 2005, or because of HIV-AIDS or of other health problems), this program is highly successful : starting with 34 widows, our support groups presently take in 60 of them, and even more wish to join in. **This program aims at : financing micro-projects and giving the women the possibility to launch their own business, giving the women an opportunity to get together, speak and act in solidarity.**

The women are divided into two groups which meet twice a month. At each meeting, every woman puts a little something in the common funds. This fund is very useful in case of emergency (if a woman is seriously sick, etc.). **These widows do all their best to bring their contribution each time and to be helpful to each other.** Moreover, during the meetings, they dare to speak about everything, even sometimes about subjects like HIV which are often considered as taboo in the Togolese society.

When we met these groups of women, we were stunned by their courage and strength. We also noticed that some of them still have much difficulty to survive and strive every day to eat. That means that the help we are bringing is not sufficient yet. Let's add that **most of these women unfortunately are infected with HIV - AIDS and need help for their treatment. In Togo, living with HIV - AIDS is a physical burden, but also a social and family issue.** So many people still consider this sickness as a shame. For many of these widows, living with AIDS means that they cannot take any physically demanding job. They do not have much choice on the labor market and can only develop some little trading business. **That's why we need to take a stand in order to bring a growing support and attention to these women. We need more involvement in this program to fight poverty, illness and prejudice and to nurture hope and solidarity.**

Once more, we wish to greet these women for their courage, perseverance, for their will and love. Despite all the problems they face, they always spread joy and happiness all around them !



Our widows and their children during a meeting

Considering the difficulties these women go through, we have taken the following decisions :

Main decisions :

- 1/ To create some special groups according to the respective professional skills of the women : a sewing and tailoring group, a cereals-selling group, a water-selling group, etc. We will provide funds for each group instead of for each woman individually, in order to promote solidarity.
- 2/ To bring more support to the women affected with HIV - AIDS, doing our best to help them for their treatment.
- 3/ To develop our network and contacts with the European and American hospitals, medical firms, laboratories, to gather as many anti-retroviral medicine as possible. It is extremely important that we get these medicines because the Atakpamé hospital is often short of medicines. In such cases the women have to interrupt the treatment, which is harmful to their lives. If any of our sponsor or donor works with doctors or medical firms, we thank him/her in advance for his/her help.

An important point :

One of these women has a 3-year-old son called Urbain (whose picture appears below) who has never walked nor talked. As he has never been examined in a hospital due to a lack of money, nobody knows why he is sick. Our team has decided to find the funding in order to have him brought to hospital and supported. **Our sponsors' representative, Mrs. Françoise Vappereau, has on a personal basis already provided for little Urbain's needs. We thank her very much for this !**



4/ Furthering our links with local NGOs supporting people affected by HIV-AIDS

As had been previously mentioned, we are locally part of a **Federation of Humanitarian Associations**, particularly with two main partners in addition to the R.A.G.C. (Reflection and Action Group for Cohesion) :

- the CREJe-RGYE (Reflection Group for Youth Emergence)
- Akaralé

These two structures operate in the field of support to the persons affected by HIV-AIDS. Through the Friendly Haven program, **each of these two organizations sponsors 25 children, some of them being affected by the disease**, whilst others have lost their parents because of the pandemic.

The two associations have asked the Friendly Haven to consider increasing to some extent the support to sick children, so that **more frequent health checks could be performed**. They have requested us to continue to act through sponsorships and give these as much focus as to the orphanage. This has indeed been our intention right from the beginning: the Friendly Haven sees the day care center and the sponsorships as two inseparable parts of its action.

Decisions :

- 1/ To increase the coverage of medical expenses for the children who are sponsored and who are affected by HIV-AIDS.
- 2/ To continue developing partnerships with associations locally with optimal monitoring and transparency.
- 3/ Over the longer term, to develop activities and outplacements during the summer holidays for the youngsters who are sponsored, and to allow the leaders of our federation to undergo professional training so as to strengthen capabilities.

As an illustration :

One of the girls sponsored through Akaralé, who is 12 years old and is affected by HIV, is currently in a depressed state, not only due to her medical condition but also to the economic hardship of her foster family. We are therefore considering to place her into another family, so that she could recover her joy of living and her psychological balance. As her case is not an isolated one, we will focus our attention even more on those children whose morale remains very low and propose them artistic and self-confidence building activities.

CONCLUSION



This mission has allowed us to assess **the progress achieved in only 5 years**. The results are spectacular. **We cannot be grateful enough to all our sponsors and donors**. However, the continuation and strengthening of our activities locally is crucial. **The extreme poverty of some foster families, the critical conditions of those widows affected by AIDS, the lasting influence of the moral traumas for numerous children of the 2005 civil war : all this gives us an even stronger motivation to act with ever increasing efficiency and resoluteness.**

In less than one month's time, the movie that we shot locally will be communicated to you and will be disseminated as widely as possible. You will see by yourself the usefulness of our programs and the need to develop them further, with your help.

Although this will take place with a slight delay, our orphanage will open at the end of the summer and we very much look forward to it. However, it will not be financially self-sustaining for the next one or two years, pending the completion of the construction of the hostel which will contribute to its sustainable financing. In the meantime, we need and will continue to need having our operation running, our local staff paid and the children fed...

This mission has made it clear to us that, **more than ever, we do need your help** for our day care center, children sponsorships, widows' activities and support, etc.

Many thanks for your continuous support and for staying with us in our joint endeavor !

To support us, you can :

- **Make a donation by cheque to: La Maison des Amis, 5 Impasse de la Sauvagine, 13 460 Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, France or by bank transfer. *Our banking details :***
Bank name : Banque postale, Marseille branch
Account holder: La Maison des Amis
Account number : 20041 01008 2153721R029 38
IBAN : FR 17 20041 01008 2153721R029 38
BIC : PSSTFRPPMAR
- **To become a volunteer in France or in Togo with the children, you can contact us via e-mail (fleurlea@hotmail.fr, ong_crac@yahoo.fr) or by phone : 06 09 50 44 92. All kinds of skill are welcome.**

So much love and joy to share ! Join us in Togo !



