

***A tent of sticks for a school, The Nova Scotian, Sunday Herald, 13 November 2005.***

*Tirikene, Mali. Twelve-year-old Baba Cissé stands to respectful attention as if I were a VIP and not just a foreign journalist making my way towards him across the sand dune, where he and a group of boys have been hacking away at a hearty desert shrub. His voice is tremulous as he shyly but proudly tells me and my colleague that he has finished six years of school. He says that when he grows up he wants to be a soccer star in Europe, but no, he has never seen a European soccer match on television because there are no TVs in his village. Young Cissé explains that he and his classmates are out here in the raging heat and blazing sun cutting down shrubs because they need the branches to construct a frame they will cover with old clothes to make a tent. This tent, he says, will be their school in Tirikene, a tiny and desolate village of just a few hundred people in the Sahara desert, about 25 kilometres of sandy track north of the fabled city of Timbuktu in northern Mali.*

*Mali, with an average annual income of less than \$300, is one of the world's least developed countries. But even by Malian standards, the poverty in Tirikene is right off the scale. There is no electricity here, no running water, no sign of anything electronic, no motorized vehicle. The only thing even remotely reminiscent of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a two-metre high water tower, and a water pump powered by solar panels that the chief of Tirikene, 70-year-old Mouzaer Ag Mohamed Ali, paid for himself by selling off some of his camels.*

*Striding through the sand towards his village with his blue robe billowing behind him, his rapid pace that of a man half his age, Mouzaer Ag Mohamed Ali tells me that the Tuaregs who dwell in Tirikene are victims of climate change over the past three decades, which has put an end to their traditional way of life. He says that when he was young, all Tuaregs were nomads who traversed the desert from oasis to oasis with their camel caravans. But after two huge droughts, pastureland and oases dried up, animals died and the once proud nobles of the Sahara Desert have had to settle in permanent villages in areas where farming is impossible.*

*The only advantage to this new lifestyle, he says, is that children can attend school, to "escape from the darkness of ignorance." Although schools in Mali are supposed to be funded by the government, the legacy of two decades of structural adjustment programs prescribed by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund have struck hard at government budgets, and today many village schools in Mali are built entirely by the people of the communities without any government assistance at all. Here in Tirikene, it was the chief who rallied the funds and materials to have the school built from locally-made mud bricks. Blackboards are painted on the interior walls. The only obvious support from the government in the Malian capital Bamako, far to the south, are the few books on math, history, science and French that the teachers show me.*

*The school has attracted 255 children, some orphans and all from extremely poor families, and is run by seven teachers from the area who work as volunteers, accepting small gifts of food from parents who can afford to offer them something. "The only goal these parents have today," says Mouzaer Ag Mohamed Ali, "is to educate their children."*

*Unfortunately, he says, this past August, after three years during which not a drop of rain fell in Tirikene, a heavy storm struck the desolate little village of tents made of rickety frames covered by rags and carpets. The only three mud structures in the village – the school, an artisan workshop that produced trinkets for tourists, and the health post – crumbled in the downpour. All three were deemed unsafe and closed down.*

*The director of the school, Mahmoud El Moubarak, disconsolately shows me the fallen roof and walls. He says that normally, when the school is functioning, he is able to offer the children at least one basic but solid meal a day – between 200 and 250 grams of millet or maize and 15 grams of oil. These are supplied by the United Nations World Food Program (WFP), which normally buys up food stocks in the south of Mali to distribute to those in need in the north. Unfortunately, he says, the harvests of 2004 in West African countries of Mali and Niger were decimated by swarms of locusts and drought, so foreign donors have had to step in to help replenish WFP food stocks.*

*Canada is one of these. It sends soya oil and peas from Canada and finances a WFP program to buy up millet produced in Africa to support a school canteen program in the region. This program was designed to ensure that 20,000 school children in villages around Timbuktu have at least one meal a day to keep them from starving. Tibou Sawadogo, who heads WFP in the region, says that each girl pupil is given an additional 8 litres of Canadian soya oil every three months in an effort to encourage parents to keep their daughters in school. He says that in one case, this small incentive of soya oil was enough to convince the parents of a 14-year-old girl to allow her to go into grade seven rather than accepting an offer of marriage. However, because of the widespread crop failure in the region in 2004, the program is stretched very thin as it tries to combat the high rate of malnutrition. Mr Sawadogo says the WFP is now trying to provide 41,313 children in the region of Timbuktu with oil, enriched flour and nutritional supplements and there simply aren't enough supplies.*

*According to Christiane Vekeman, First Secretary at the Canadian embassy in Mali, this is part of a project of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to finance WFP programs in the impoverished Sahelian countries of West Africa in areas where there is a food deficit. Apart from the school canteen program and promoting education of girls, this \$15-million WFP-run program financed by CIDA also supplies malnourished children up to five years old and their families with enriched porridges.*

*The trouble is that here in Tirikene, the school has not been open since the rains pummelled the mud bricks to rubble in August, and as a result it no longer qualifies for the school feeding program. "We have had no food from WFP," says Mahmoud El*

*Moubarak, "so the children are hungry. We are all hungry here. Without the school, the children are suffering."*

*He hopes that once the pupils — Baba Cissé and his enthusiastic classmates — have collected enough branches from desert shrubs to construct a frame for a tented school in the sand and classes start again, so will the school canteen program.*

*The chief of Tirikene is philosophical about the changes affecting the climate and their lives of incredible hardship on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert. "Life is difficult," says Mouzaer Ag Mohamed Ali. "But you know, it is not hunger that kills. It is the desire to own things that is really killing people in this world."*

**PHOTOS: caption info**

*JB MALI 01 girl pupils in Tirikene*

*Small girls in Tirikene (a small Tuareg settlement 25 km north of Timbuktu in Mali), Canadian-funded school feeding programs encourage parents to keep daughters in school*

*JB MALI 02 pupils tirikene cut bush for school tent tirikene*

*Pupils from Tirikene head to the sand dunes searching for shrubs to cut for branches to frame a new school tent to replace their crumbled mud brick one.*

*JB MALI 03 mother with baby Tirikene*

*Some of the Tuareg who have settled in Tirikene in tents like this one, have done so because they want their children to attend school. Here, a mother with a small child and her 48-hour old infant in the family tent.*

*JB MALI 04 Tirikene school hit by rain*

*After 3 year with no rain, this year in August a heavy rainstorm destroyed the walls and parts of the roof of the Tirikene school (shown here), the health post and the artisan workshop, where local crafts people produced goods to sell to tourists who make their way to TImbuktu and into the surrounding desert.*

*JB MALI 05 Small girl cook pot Tirikene*

*Canadian-funded WFP school feeding programs and enriched porridges for malnourished children and their families, help stave off starvation in northern Mali*

*JB MALI 06 Tirikene chief Mouzaer Ag Mohamed Ali*

*JB MALI 07 Tirikene chief sitting Mouzaer Ag Mohamed Ali*

*JB MALI 08 Baba Cisse pupil Tirikene*

*12-year-old Baba Cisse says he wants to be a soccer star in Europe when he grows up, but for now he is helping to collect branches to try to build a frame for a new tent that will be his school*

*JB MALI 09 Tirikene teacher Mohamed Ag Attaher*

*Teachers in Tirikene come from the village and are paid only in gifts that the local population can afford to give them, there is no official salary*

*JB MALI 10 Tirikene tent of rags*

*Some of those settled in Tirikene are women whose husbands have gone off to seek employment in the south of Mali, and they are hard-pressed to even make a tent shelter, sewing together old clothing to do so.*

*JB MALI 11 Tirikene village north of Timbuktu*

*A view of the village of Tirikene, 25 km north of Timbuktu on the southern edge of the Sahara Desert in northern Mali*

*JB MALI 12 Tirikene camels of Tuaregs*

*The Tuareg were once all nomads who traversed the desert in camel caravans, but climate change and loss of pasture and oases have forced them to settle in places like Tirikene*

*JB MALI 13 Canadian food aid Timbuktu port*

*Canadian soya oil and Canadian-funded millet (in the large white sacks) stacked at the edge of the Niger River, near Timbuktu in northern Mali. It will replenish World Food Program stocks of essential food staples for school feeding programs*