

Shunned by their families, HIV sufferers find refuge, hope and a new lease of life in Entoto Mountain in Ethiopia.

A mountain of hope

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By REVATHI MURUGAPPAN

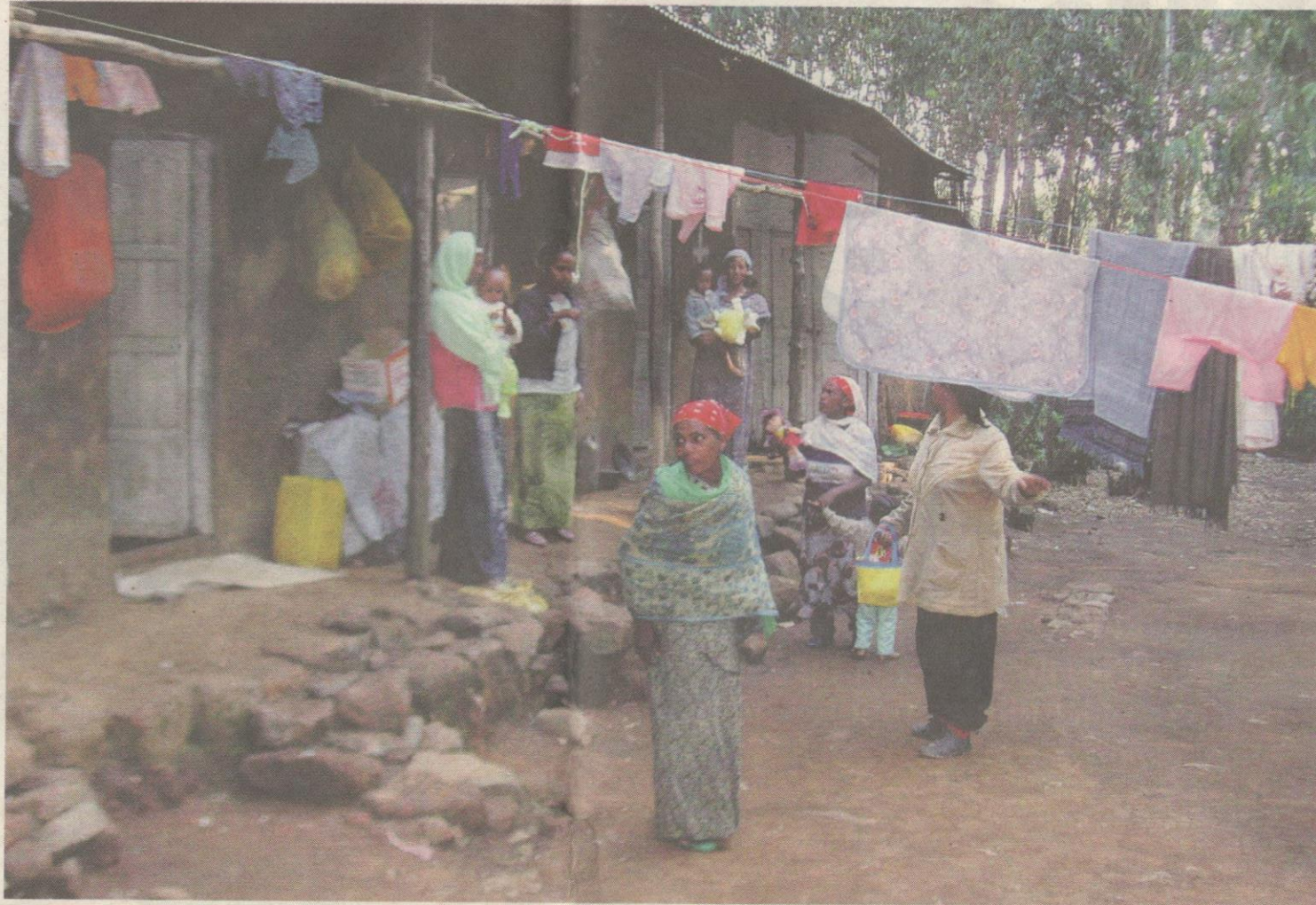
EVERY morning at St Mary's Church in Entoto, north of Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, hundreds of men and women line up naked in a natural pool. A priest recites some biblical verses, clutches a cross and using a hose, sprinkles them six times with water from the spring. These people then take home the water in a jerry can and drink a gallon a day, as tonic.

These are ordinary, mostly uneducated Ethiopians who have been diagnosed with HIV. Shunned by their families, they seek refuge in Entoto Mountain. Sadly, many die along the way but with the introduction of free anti-retroviral pills, educational campaigns and clinics, the death toll has been reduced in the last five years.

"People in Entoto Mountain are just counting down to death because they are a stigma to their families. There are 5,000 people living in the mountain and half of them are HIV-positive. The women probably contracted HIV from their husbands or the military men," says social worker Biruktawit Tagessa from Beza Community Development Association, who acted as my translator.

Statistics reveal that about 1.2 million people in Ethiopia live with HIV/AIDS. The country's traditional and superstitious views towards AIDS led to exile for HIV sufferers.

In a country of predominantly Orthodox Christians, locals believe in the power of the holy water. Initially, the locals were reluctant to take drugs for the treatment of HIV. However, in 2007, the archbishop of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church called for the simultaneous use of drugs and holy water to combat the disease and the people slowly relented.



Refuge: Up in the Entoto Mountain, HIV carriers have found a place they can call home. — REVATHI MURUGAPPAN/The Star

"The carriers come from all over Ethiopia and hide in shame. When they die, their

the demons caused him to leave," says the mother-of-one, adding that she felt a lot bet-

I found out I have HIV. My husband took the twins and left, and I never heard from him



families don't know so the city administrators come and claim their bodies. Now we teach them to reconnect with their families," says Tagessa.

Orphan Samrawit, 25, is among the hundreds who rise at dawn to take part in the water baptism daily, in the hope that she will be cured of HIV. She does not know how she contracted the disease but found out about the healing powers of the mountain and moved there four years ago.

"I came here because I believe I was possessed by demons. I had no appetite, got depressed and started losing weight. My husband left me because we were always bickering. I believe

Every child deserves a fair chance in life, and the children of Entoto Mountain are no exception.

er after the baptism sessions.

She lives in a square mud-and-tarp hut with a single bed, and begs around the church for a living. Her rent is 150 bir (RM30) a month.

Samrawit laments: "People don't always donate to me because they prefer to give to the handicapped. If I don't have money for food, I don't eat. My son is still being breastfed, so his meals are taken care of."

Despite being a destitute, Samrawit insists on making us fresh coffee, fried barley and popcorn. The aromatic Ethiopian coffee fills the cramped hut as she pours us a cup. I am humbled by her hospitality.

Next door, Mulualem, 30, is roasting coffee beans and welcomes us with a hug.

"Sit, sit!" she pleads, leading us to a wooden stool. "You look like an Ethiopian," she comments, looking at me while curious children steal glances as well. The walls of her hut are lined with newspapers and for a matchbox quarters, Mulualem's place is tidy.

Her story is a tear-jerker. Originally from the countryside, she was working for a family in Addis Ababa and was raped repeatedly by her employer. Married with twins then, she could not take the torture, and ran away.

"I wanted to work with another family and was required to do a blood test. That's when

again. I moved in with my in-laws, but they often beat me."

"They even broke my tooth," she says, showing me her chipped front tooth. "I did not know what to do and I had no job, so I moved to Entoto Mountain four years ago. With the holy water and medication, I am stronger now."

Mulualem makes ends meet by washing clothes and selling injera (Ethiopian bread). She earns about 15-30 bir (RM3-RM6) per family per month. However, she is one of the luckier ones. She found love again in the mountain and is married to a fellow HIV carrier. He works as a guard and walks four hours to work and back daily.

"His love keeps me going. Whatever extra money he has, he buys me presents. When I get better and can afford it, I'd like to go back to Addis Ababa and look for my children," says Mulualem.

The couple hope to have kids one day, though the husband is pretty frail now as he has just started on the anti-retroviral.

Meanwhile, Yeshe, 28, contracted HIV from her hubby, who eventually left her. Pregnant, penniless and illiterate, she went to stay with a friend.

Changing lives

"EVERYWHERE, women and girls are at risk. Poverty and cultural practices often prey upon their vulnerability. Together, we connect, educate and empower women to impact their world with God's love by addressing issues of injustice affecting women and girls," says Emily Voorhies, president of Tirzah International, a non-profit network of national movements which encompasses over 150,000 women leaders worldwide.

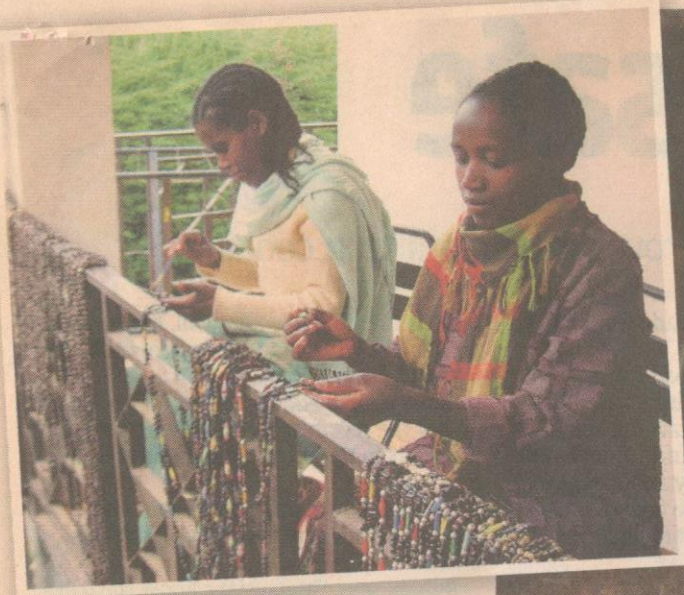
Tirzah champions the eradication of poverty among women, education for girls, and prevention of AIDS. It also creates awareness of modern-day slavery and violence against women – including female circumcision and forced early marriages – and provides assistance to AIDS widows and orphans.

"It doesn't mean poor people have no dreams and aspirations. So often the word 'dignity' comes up and they don't want to rely on handouts. Many of them are AIDS widows and genocide victims. Many kids are born out of rape and abandoned. Some of them end up on the streets; most have never lived in a home, have no hygiene or social skills, and do not know who their parents are," says Voorhies.

Tirzah has a lot of projects in Africa because Voorhies has a special interest in that continent, having lived in Kenya for a number of years. Tirzah provides the funds and technical expertise, while its local partners have a team of voluntary workers who provide computer skills training, reading skills and bead-making lessons.

For the Entoto project, US-based design group Raven + Lily sells the jewellery online but pays the women a salary. Founded by Kirsten Dickerson and Sophia Lin who share a passion for fashion and ethnic design, Raven + Lily was created as a platform to alleviate poverty among women.

In addition to creating sustainable economic opportunities for marginalised women, Raven + Lily donates part of the profits to their partner communities to fund education and healthcare programmes, and provide micro-loans



The women are taught skills such as jewellery-making to enable them to earn a living.

"How could I go back home?" she asks. "I'll be an embarrassment to my family."

Alas, the friend's husband found out about her condition and she was asked to leave. Her friend then sent her to the mountain where she delivered her baby. Thankfully, he does not have the virus.

"I'm taking the drugs, and learning how to take care of my seven-month-old baby. I owe a lot to my friend who is paying for my rent here because I have no job."

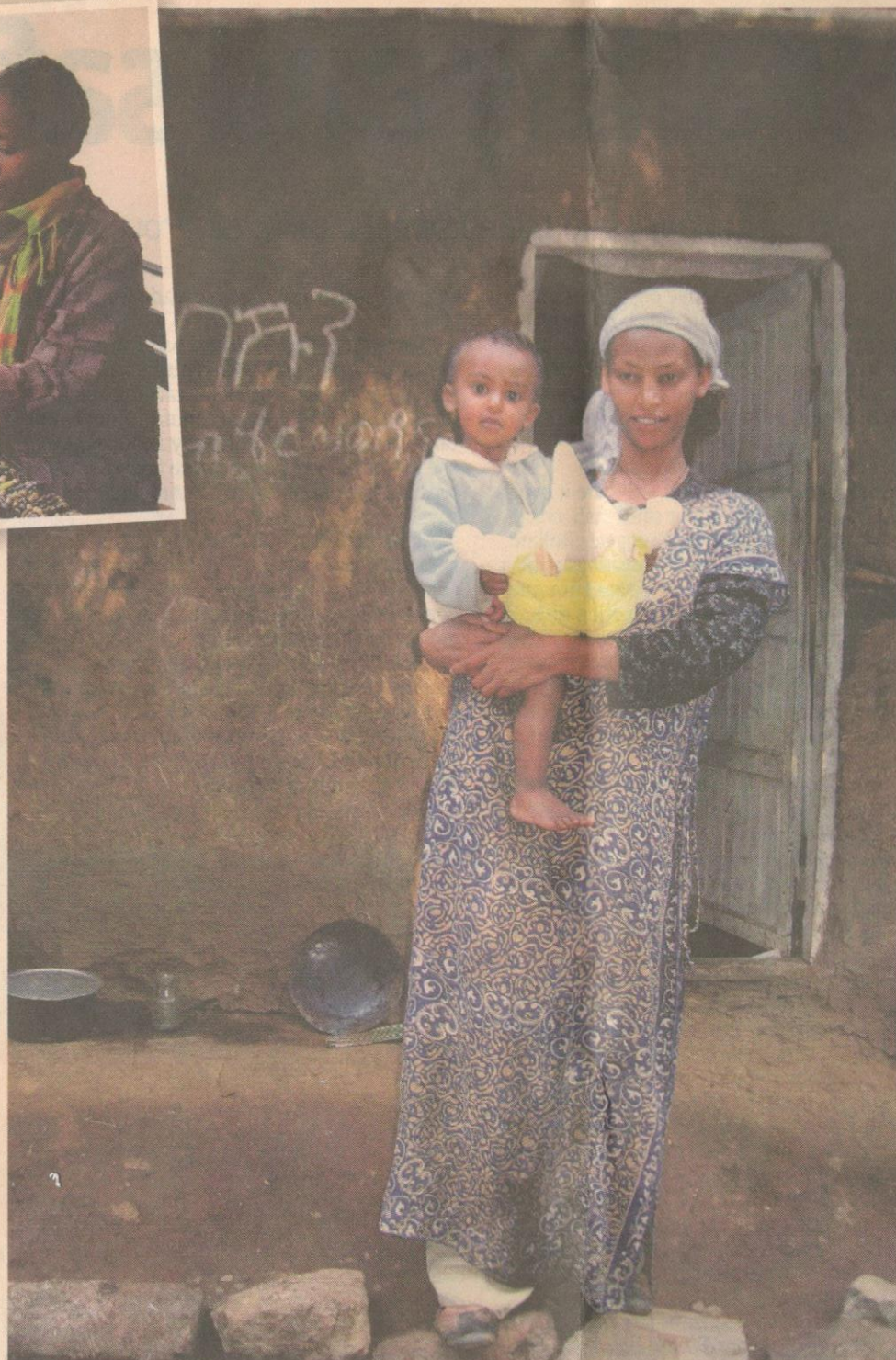
As these women grow stronger, they are taught skills such as jewellery-making, sewing and making recycled paper brochures to enable them to earn an income. This initiative by non-profit group Beza Entoto Outreach – through financial support by Tirzah International, another non-profit network – provides the women with a chance to stand on their own two feet.

Beza is led by Dr Betta Mengistu, 67, and his wife Sophie, 64.

"Poverty is not only on the streets. It's also in the words used here. The main problem in Africa is corruption, which is a sickness of the heart. We are convinced nations can be redeemed through righteousness," says Dr Mengistu, who started Beza International Church six years ago to transform society.

"We don't need your pity, we need your heart to help the Entoto people and the street children," he appeals.

Dr Mengistu was diagnosed with leukaemia



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Dr Mengistu was diagnosed with leukaemia when he was 16 and was told he had three months left. He slipped into depression because he was afraid of death – until he found God and miraculously recovered, without any drugs.

Tagessa, one of the co-founders of the jewellery programme, explains: "We wanted to do something sustainable so these people can fend for themselves. We started in 2010 with 40 men and women; now have 108 employees.

"We've stopped accepting men into the

programme because they're better at doing a labourer's job like laying bricks."

The impoverished women huddle together and laughter rings out from every room as they go about handcrafting jewellery. From measuring the thread to varnishing the coffee beans to make bracelets, they clearly love their newfound job, environment and fellow workers.

These unique pieces of jewellery feature traditional Ethiopian beads made from recycled metals (nickel, copper, brass). The modern, organic designs reflect the beauty and

culture of the women behind the products. ^{MS 3} The collection, sold locally and internationally (online), includes necklaces, earrings and bracelets crafted from handmade beads, melted bullet casings and vintage silver coins.

"These women have gone from utter despair to hope. At least now they can look you in the eye and talk like a normal person. They have found dignity," adds Tagessa.

■ *If you would like to help these Entoto women, check out their jewellery collection at www.ravenandlily.com.*

ties to fund education and healthcare programmes, and provide micro-loans. Consumers can play a role in breaking the poverty cycle and help transform the lives of women and their families.

Though Tirzah was only formed last year, Voorhies is proud that the transformation has been remarkable – physically, emotionally and spiritually.

■ *For more information or to make a donation, visit www.tirzahinternational.org.*