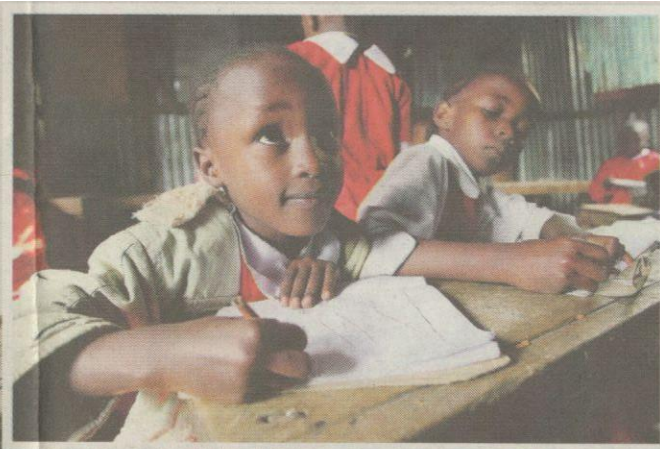


Beacons of hope

Star 31/12/12 MS 2

Overcrowded classrooms and a shortage of teachers, funds and facilities pose a serious challenge for Kenya's educators.



Despite the bare facilities, school is a great place to be for thousands of poor Kenyan pupils.

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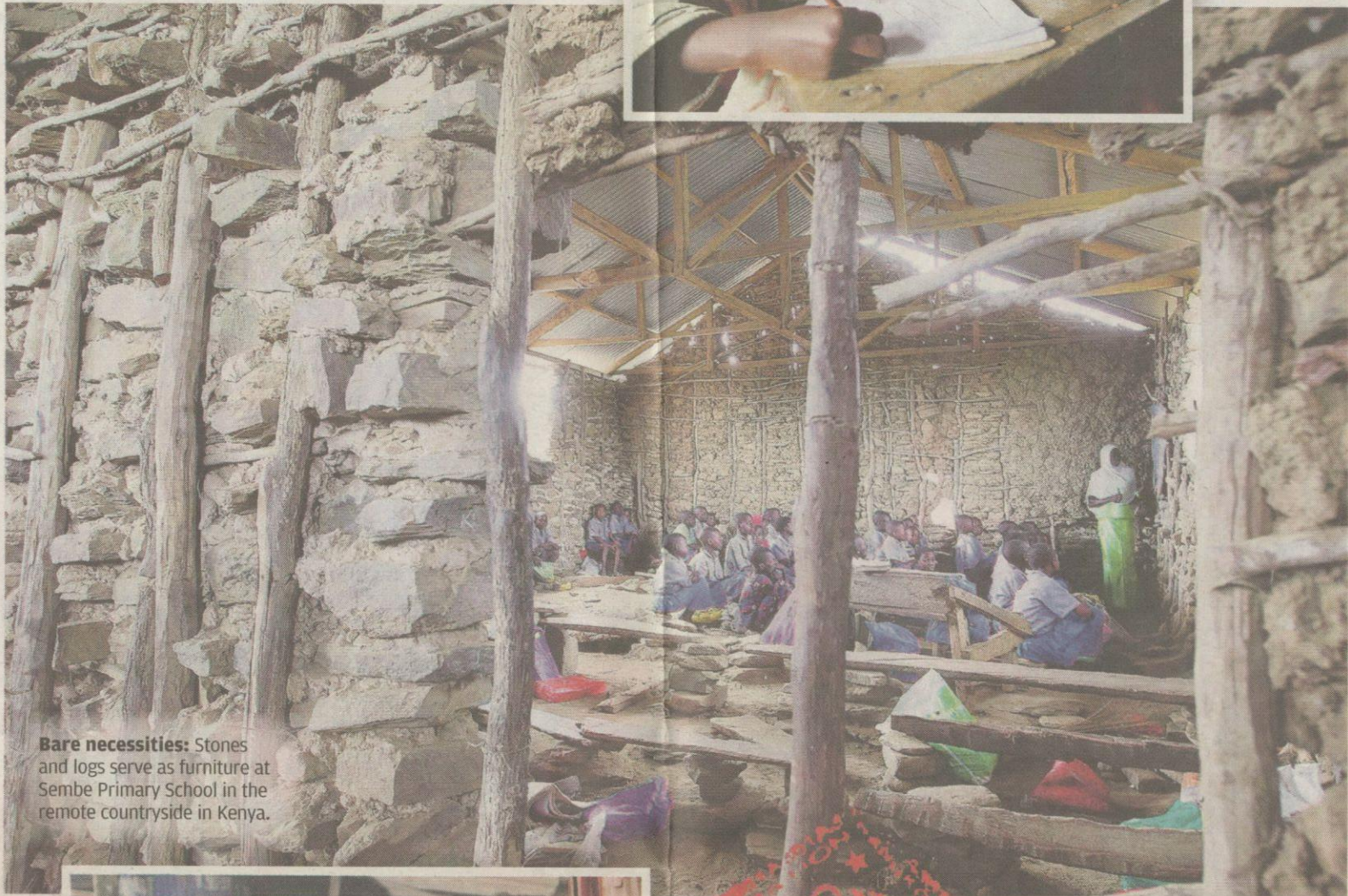
SCHOOLTEACHER Judith Oloo recalls how one of her six-year-old pupils cried uncontrollably when school ended.

"He was terrified of being touched; later we saw cigarette burns all over his body, inflicted by a relative he was living with," says Oloo.

"The week before, another pupil was bleeding from a head wound; his relative had beaten him. He is only seven, but he cooks, fetches water, babysits his younger siblings and collects scrap metal after school to earn his keep. This is life for many children living in Kibera, Kenya. Many have no family or security."

These children are among the thousands of orphans who have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS which is rampant in the slums. For some, their parents were killed in the 2007 post-election violence when armed youths ran riot through Kibera, Oloo explains.

"Many children are reluctant to leave when school ends at 4pm



Bare necessities: Stones and logs serve as furniture at Sembe Primary School in the remote countryside in Kenya.

leave when school ends at 4pm. They'd tell their teachers, 'We just want to stay here with you'. As cramped as our school is, home is worse for them. Many have to sleep in the kitchen or on the doorstep."

Teeming with one million inhabitants, Kibera is the largest slum in Kenya, and the second largest in Africa after Soweto in South Africa. A mass of humanity fills the narrow lanes lined by ramshackle structures of tin and plywood plastered with gaudy advertisements.

Human faeces, thrown out in plastic bags, litter the muddy roads. Children as young as three play amidst the filth, sifting through garbage or just staring with glazed eyes, fingers clutching empty bottles of solvents which they have been sniffing.

The children of Kibera face a constant threat from the slum's unhygienic conditions as there are no hospitals, no proper sanitation system, and no electricity and piped water supply. Criminals live here alongside villagers who earn US\$1 (RM3) a day and can't afford a



Happiness is ... a chance to go to school. The joy on the faces of these two boys says it all, as they head to school in Kibera, Kenya's largest slum.

home anywhere else.

Oloo recalls a youth who wandered into another section, and was caught stealing food. He was promptly lynched by a mob.

During the rainy season, residents worry about violent break-ins.

"With the raindrops pelted the tin roofs, nobody will hear your screams for help," says Oloo.



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Amidst this squalor, the Oloo Children's Centre beckons with its bright, yellow walls.

Oloo, 29, opened her school last September. She bought an

ON LOCATION In Kenya

abandoned building with 120,000 Kenyan shilling (RM4,280) earned from leading slum tours, plus donations from friends and tourists.

It is stiflingly hot beneath the tin roof. Jute sacks are recycled as alphabet and number charts, and grace the mud walls of the classroom.

"We opened our doors on the first day to find over 200 children queuing outside. We couldn't fit everyone in and had to turn many away," says Oloo.

There are 110 children between the ages of five and 10, enrolled at the school. Classes are from 7am to 4pm. At noon, the children are fed oatmeal or rice with beans. When funds dry up, there is no food. Money is a major concern for

Oloo; she needs about 30,000 shillings (RM1,070) monthly to run the centre.

Oloo's school is one of many community schools that are springing up in Kenya's massive slums which are home to over two million people.

The Kenyan Education Ministry estimates there are over 2,000 such schools throughout Kenya. Funded by parents who can ill afford to, these schools are struggling to stay afloat.

In January 2003, the Education Ministry announced the introduction of free primary education in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states that "everyone has the right to education."

Following the move, primary schools saw a surge in enrolment. Numbers rose from 5.9 million in 2002 to 7.6 million in 2006, and 8.6 million in 2008. Classrooms were packed with as many as 100 students.

Every child deserves an education

"SOME 1.1 million Kenyan children between the ages of six and 18 are not in school," says Mark Rotich, Aga Khan Development Foundation (AKDF) programme officer.

"Over 30%-40% of them live in slums and Kenya's remote north-eastern region. The dropout rate is around 10%; in the coastal areas, 60% of girls drop out of school at various stages."

NGOs started setting up faith-based schools in slums more than 20 years ago, while community schools have sprung up over the past decade. Although they meet a need, many of these schools are unsustainable as they depend on payments from parents who do not hold permanent jobs.

"Kenya needs some 60,000

teachers," says Rotich. "Many trained teachers are being recruited by neighbouring Tanzania, Uganda and South Sudan, as salaries are double over there."

"Community schools often hire untrained teachers; this is cheaper but the teachers are more dedicated and committed to their job," says Rotich.

A Unesco National Education Sector Support Strategy for Kenya 2010-2011 report states that the underlying causes of Kenya's educational challenges are inadequate resources or allocations, low teach-

er and classroom supply, distance of schools from residences and insufficient teachers. There is currently a dire shortage of teachers in primary and secondary schools.

Since 1974, the AKDF has had an office in Nairobi to render development aid. AKDF agencies conduct their programmes without regard for religious affiliations, origin or gender as seen in the various schools which are benefiting from the Education for Marginalized Children of Kenya (Emack) initiative.

Emack works in close partner-

ship with community-based organisations to implement education programmes which will run until 2014. Some 2,900 teachers have been trained under this programme.

"Youths form 60% to 70% of Kenya's population. Education greatly increases their employability. The large population of youths can be a huge potential, yet it's this group that is also prone to violence.

"They are susceptible to drug abuse and being used by unscrupulous politicians. Those around the

coastal regions are vulnerable as recruits for terrorist groups," says Rotich.

Evalyne Andusi, Christadelphian School headmaster, says children enjoy classes more with the new methodologies taught under Emack.

"Classes were previously conducted without interaction between pupil and teacher; this can be boring," she says.

"Now classes are fun and participative. Parents are more enthusiastic about sending their children to school as they can see the difference. It's vital for parents to send their kids to school early. Those who lost crucial developmental years have difficulty following classes and eventually drop out."

Considering that more than 40% of Kenya's 43 million population is below the age of 14, the need is simply overwhelming. Many students are denied a place in school.

Adult literacy remains low. According to a 2007 National Bureau Survey, up to 38.5% of Kenya's adult population or 7.8 million people have not acquired a minimum literacy level.

It is not just children who value education. In January 2004, Kimani Nganga Maruge, 86, made headlines when he enrolled at the primary school in his village outside Eldoret in Western Kenya.

The former Mau Mau guerrilla fighter felt he was denied the opportunity to have an education when he was young. Maruge was determined to get an education to improve life for his family. Besides, he wanted to read the Bible for himself.

At a more "affluent" part of Kibera, the 90 pupils at the Christadelphian School enjoy classrooms decorated with brightly coloured posters, while the grounds



Children at the Rahma Preschool are taught to respect diversity and pluralism from young.

and cardboard," says teacher Leah Myamvula Tsuma.

"There is no money to provide food, so many students struggle to concentrate as they have not eaten all day."

The Sembe Primary School is in a worse situation. Two classes have to be held concurrently in one classroom as there are not enough classrooms for its 366 students.

Children sit on the floor or on stacked stones that double up as desks. The wind sends clouds of dust through the bare classrooms. The next school is a 10km walk away for the children whose families are so poor they cannot even afford basic necessities.

"The school was started by a church in 1991. When the building collapsed in 2004, classes continued underneath a tree until the community was able to collect enough funds to construct the present building," says retired schoolmaster Mkuba Nzole, 62.

Dropout rate

During the 2004-2005 school year,

are clean with a swing set on the grassy patch.

In Lydia Ajiambo's class, the children are happy and excited. That's because Ajiambo has been trained in active learning methodologies which encourage student participation. It is part of a USAid-funded training programme under the Education for Marginalized Children of Kenya (Emack) initiative by the Kenyan Education Ministry and the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF).

The foundation provides training for teachers and a grant of 60,000 shillings (RM2,140) for participating schools to kick off the programme. The Christadelphian School used the money to buy meals for the children and a water tank to store up clean water. Feeding programmes are a big draw for parents who have to fork out 2,000 shillings (RM70) a month for each school-going kid.

"The children fall sick often due to poor sanitation in the slums. The classrooms are not conducive for learning. Some kids move from school to school, seeking feeding programmes. Absenteeism is high as parents can't afford to send their kids to school when money runs out," says Fridah Mathembe, Emack project communications specialist.

Such is the case at the Imara Daima Primary School in Mathare, one of Kenya's oldest slums cramped with 700,000 people.

The stench of raw sewage is overwhelming in the mud-floored classrooms which are partitioned by wooden boards. Teachers could hardly hear themselves speak when pupils from neighbouring classes are reciting. The school has a small mud field and two toilets to serve 300 pupils.

"Our school was born out of necessity," says principal Ferdinand Mbuka. "It is impossible to meet the Education Ministry's conditions to register our school for funding due to requirements like a permanent structure, toilets for every 25 kids and two acres of field. We are registered as a charity but we follow the same national curriculum and examinations."

In an interview with *Voice of America*, Susan Munuhe, assistant director with the Education Ministry, was reported to have said: "Mathare has over 300,000 school-going children but there are only two primary schools and one secondary school in the area. Together, they can accommodate at most 2,000 students."

Challenges

Kenya's educational challenges extend beyond its crowded cities. In the Mount Kenya area in the Central Highlands, Burguret School principal Jane Kagendo says the dropout rate can rise to 70%, depending on the season.

"This is a farming community and the villagers depend on nature for sustenance," she explains.

"During droughts, there are no provisions for school. The yearly school fees of 15,000 shillings (RM535) can be used to buy three to five goats to provide milk. Nobody chooses to skip school, given the choice. For some children, school is an 8km walk away and they can't afford the more expensive boarding school."

The students have humble dreams.

"My mum is a single mum of five," says Mary Nungani, 14. "I'm sad to see her going into the forests at dawn to collect firewood to sell, as wild animals have maimed and killed villagers before. I want to be a soldier when I finish school. I love my country. I want to help Kenya to address corruption and crime and become one of Africa's best countries."

Kagendo adds proudly: "We have produced four students who have gone on to university. If they could get jobs as teachers, bookkeepers or clerks, they'd earn much more than their parents ever dreamed of."

The lack of educational opportunities may serve as a breeding ground for a more sinister problem in Kenya's volatile coastal area. With over one million people, Mombasa is Kenya's second largest city and East Africa's largest port.

The country's famed beachside resorts are a stark contrast to the surrounding poverty. Jobs are scarce and locals speak angrily of job bias based on which tribe you're from. The city's large population of idle youths without jobs or income, are an easy target for recruiters from militant Islamic groups in neighbouring Somalia.

The Madrasa Resource Centre plays a key role here. The centre promotes the Madrasa Early Childhood Programme under the Aga Khan Foundation which is funded by USAid.

Four pilot Madrasa preschools were set up in Mombasa in 1986. Today, it has expanded to 200 schools. Secular preschool activities are integrated in traditional Quranic schools or madrasa.

"The curriculum is based on the belief that early childhood education should involve active learning alongside developmentally and culturally appropriate lessons. The integrated curriculum provides children with a foundation in early language, literacy, numeracy and problem-solving skills," explains Masoud Ali, programme director of the Madrasa Resource Centre.

Alongside Islamic teachings, the students are taught to respect diversity and pluralism.

"Children are taught about the different places of worship and understand the culture and practices of other faiths," says Zainab Yusuf, principal of Rahma Preschool which has 43 pupils, aged three to eight.

"A more thorough education means learning about world religions so that knowledge, understanding and respect for diversity start from young. Children learn about God, multi-culturalism and mutual co-existence; this is the start to ending terrorism, from the earliest entry of a child's school life."

A two-hour drive out of Mombasa into the countryside brings us to the Vishakani Primary School in Kaloleni which is among Kenya's poorest districts. With 964 students and 12 teachers, the ratio is 80 pupils to one teacher.

The grossly insufficient funds barely cover salaries. Children sit on the dirt floor and textbooks are shared among three to four students and must be kept in school.

"Most of us manage with what we have, but it would really help if we could have exercise books, pens

Out in the Bobolulul slums along the Mombasa-Malindi highway, Victory Junior and Senior School headmaster Ben Okeyo is stressed out by the shortage of teachers.

"Sometimes the teacher dropout rate is higher than the pupils," he says. "Schools like ours are unable to offer a stable career. Students see a different teacher every week, as teachers come and go," he says. "We have to walk by faith, not by sight, whenever funds dry up."

Victory school charges 2,800 shillings (RM100) per term. Most of the funds go towards sponsoring deserving children like Elisha Karisa, 10, and Tunny Odera, 11, who excel in their studies.

Elisha's father is a coconut plantation worker, while Tunny's 69-year-old father is a factory watchman. Without a scholarship, both these children would not be able to attend school.

One parent who is adamant about putting his children in school is Jacob Ongombe, 38, who runs a food kiosk. Most of his salary goes to his children's school fees.

"I supplement my income by selling charcoal and water," says Ongombe. "We do what we can to ensure our children stay in school. What future do they have without an education?"

■ To watch a video, go to: http://youtu.be/SSrP_IdGQXw



Soaring above the squalor - P10