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Rapid response saving lives,
opening doors to Somali refugees

By Craig Bird

N. EMS

MOMBASA, Kenya (BP)--Thousands of refugees from Somalia, most severely malnourished and many ill, are being fed and warmed by missionaries in Kenya while United Nations and Red Cross relief programs work through red tape.

The Somali refugees, escaping the apparent final stages of a lengthy civil war in the northeast African country, swarmed aboard rescue boats as the capital city of Mogadishu fell to a coalition of rebel groups in late January.

Southern Baptist missionaries in the Kenyan port of Mombasa heard rumors the weekend of Jan. 20 that boatloads of refugees were sitting in the harbor with little food. Less than a week later, \$45,000 from the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board had been sent and 5,000 people were eating, sleeping under warm blankets and being offered Bibles and Christian tracts.

"What God is doing here impresses me the most but I also am really impressed by how quickly we were able to move to help people in need," said missionary Ralph Bethea, a church developer in Mombasa and head of the relief project. "It showed the strength of our cooperative way of doing missions. Muslim imams and mullahs who really resisted us doing anything for their people at first because we are 'infidels' keep coming up and asking, 'Why are you Christians doing this for us?'"

Somalia is an overwhelmingly Muslim country long hostile to Christianity. Mission researchers estimate there may be no more than a few hundred Somali Christians in a population of more than 8 million people.

But the relief ministry is not an attempt to trade food for conversions, Bethea stressed.

"We have handed out Bibles and tracts to those who want them but our evangelism approach has been very, very soft-sell," Bethea said. "First we just want them to see that Christians care about them and love them. That's an important start."

Missionaries in the camp have met 12 former ministers in the just-fallen government of Somali President Said Barre. They also discovered 22 children from a Somali orphanage who had slipped aboard one of the ships.

Food and blankets are being distributed to 79 groups of refugees temporarily housed at an agricultural fairgrounds and another 45 groups scattered around Old Town -- the section of Mombasa built on an island. Blankets might seem unnecessary in a seaport near the equator, but the weak, often feverish refugees are used to 120-degree temperatures in Somalia.

The original relief plan had included carrying food onto the ships, but the Kenyan government authorized the use of the fairgrounds and let the refugees come ashore. Bethea said one or two small fishing boats a day are still coming in loaded with refugees. The Red Cross has begun medical work on a small scale and the United Nations has announced a major feeding program, but it has not yet begun.

"Most of the people had not eaten in 10 days or longer when we got to them," Bethea said. "There was not much food on the boats and Mogadishu had been under siege for a long time so food was scarce there too. There have been about 40 deaths even after we started feeding, so we feel there are a lot of people alive now who would not have been if we had not been able to respond so quickly."

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Two trucks a day loaded with beans, rice, carrots, kale, pineapple, bananas, tea, sugar and milk are delivered each day by Kenyan pastors and missionaries. "We could contract for drivers but we think it is important for them to see us caring about them," Bethea said. "From day to day you can see the change in their attitude toward Christians."

"There haven't been large numbers of people suddenly becoming Christians, but we feel this is a significant thing God is starting here with the Somali people, and we're grateful to get to be a part of it."

More than 20 Mombasa Baptist churches and the students and faculty at Mombasa Baptist High School also have been involved in the project, either by collecting special offerings or visiting in the camps.

The program is scheduled to end when other aid projects begin.

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Southern Baptists suffer
from 'rurbanity,' says O'Brien

By Betsy Whaley

F-00
SBTS

Baptist Press
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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (BP)--Southern Baptist mission efforts in large cities often suffer from "rurbanity," emphasized a denominational missions strategist.

"We live and work in urban areas, but we still have a rural mindset," said William R. O'Brien, executive director of public affairs for the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. The rural mindset has made Southern Baptists slow to apply effective ministry techniques in urban settings, he said in an interview at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

"By the year 2000 over 50 percent of the world's population will live in urban areas," noted O'Brien who taught "Current Issues in World Missions" during a January term at the Louisville, Ky., seminary. Thus, Southern Baptists face the task of reaching the various community groups and "towns within the towns" in major urban areas, he said. O'Brien will retire from the FMB March 5 to become director of the newly-formed global strategies center at Samford University's Beeson School of Divinity in Birmingham, Ala.

In addition to the urban challenge, Southern Baptists must contend with political obstacles that do not allow traditional missionaries within the borders of 104 nations, he said. O'Brien sees an expanded role for such FMB programs as nonresidential missionaries, tentmakers and Cooperative Services International to help reach these countries.

Nonresidential missionaries attempt to evangelize people in closed areas from bases outside those areas. Tentmakers have secular employment in foreign countries and also minister there in conjunction with the FMB. Cooperative Services International works with the governments of closed countries to send people with technical skills to those nations.

While the board's priorities are evangelism and church planting, O'Brien said there may have been some miscommunication about the FMB's willingness to appoint missionaries in other roles.

"We continue to appoint missionaries in over 80 capacities," he said. However, he pointed out that the board has anticipated having 70 percent of the mission force spending 50 percent of its time in evangelism and church planting for several years. Increased emphasis on evangelism and church planting was precipitated by Bold Mission Thrust, the Southern Baptist plan to reach the entire world with the gospel by the year 2000, he said.

Questioned about the impact of the denominational strife on Southern Baptist mission efforts, O'Brien said he detects no lessening of support for the board. However, he believes the missionaries themselves have been impacted.

"In spite of consistency of concrete support, missionaries are looking over their shoulders more," he said.

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Betsy Whaley is a staff writer for The Towers, campus newspaper of Southern Seminary.

Home Board seeks to accept
Utah Missions as subsidiary

By Mark Wingfield

N-HMB

ATLANTA (BP)--Trustees of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board have asked the SBC Executive Committee for permission to add Utah Missions Inc. as a subsidiary corporation.

Utah Missions is an evangelical, non-denominational ministry related to Mormons founded by John L. Smith, a Southern Baptist pastor who currently resides in Marlow, Okla.

During the Feb. 12 meeting of the HMB executive committee, trustees approved a resolution requesting action by the SBC Executive Committee and elected four trustees to serve on the board of directors of Utah Missions. The action came in response to an offer by Smith to transfer the ministry to the HMB upon his pending retirement.

The proposal is for Utah Missions to be owned and operated by the HMB as a separate entity. According to HMB bylaws, addition of such a subsidiary requires approval of the SBC Executive Committee, which will meet in Nashville Feb. 18-20.

HMB trustees named to the board of directors for Utah Missions are chairman Ralph Smith of Austin, Texas, and the three trustees from Oklahoma: Brad Allen of Duncan, Jackie Ingram of Oklahoma City and Keith Russell of Anadarko.

If approved, the ministry of Utah Missions would be supervised through the HMB's interfaith witness department.

Utah Missions currently has headquarters in Marlow, Okla. Its ministries include two periodicals, Evangel and Inner Circle, both aimed at educating readers about the differences between Mormonism and Christianity.

Smith and his wife, Inez, started a Southern Baptist church in Clearfield, Utah, in 1951. During 17 years of ministry in Utah, Smith began writing books and columns that led the founding of Utah Missions in 1972.

In other action at the February HMB executive committee meeting, trustees:

-- Elected Ron Lawson, former director of media production, as director of the media department, replacing Jay Durham, who recently retired;

-- Heard a report from HMB President Larry Lewis, in which he expressed delight over record gifts to the 1990 Annie Armstrong Easter Offering and a nearly 10 percent increase in baptisms in the SBC last year;

-- Approved lowering the interest rate for church loan funds to 10.75 percent;

-- Accepted the resignation of trustee Thomas Kyzer of Spanish Fort, Ala., who is moving to another state.

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Sanctity of life lesson
set phones ringing at HMB

By Mark Wingfield

N-HMB

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ATLANTA (BP)--A Sunday school lesson on the sanctity of life set phones ringing incessantly at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's office for alternatives to abortion ministries.

All quarterlies produced by the Baptist Sunday School Board featured a lesson on the sanctity of life Jan. 20. That lesson prompted a flurry of phone calls to the HMB, said Sylvia Boothe, director of alternatives to abortion ministries.

To the old saying that "the phone rang off the wall" could be added a modern corollary, "and the answering machine ran out of tape."

"I don't think both our phones ever stopped ringing," Boothe said. "And the answering machine we put on after hours repeatedly ran out of tape."

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Calls were heaviest the week prior to the lesson and the week after the lesson, but the volume of calls remained high through the middle of February, Boothe said. "We're still getting calls every day as a result of the lesson."

The HMB toll-free number for alternatives to abortion information was printed in the quarterlies. The number is 1 800 962-0851.

Callers requested materials and information about crisis pregnancy centers. "So many people thanked us for offering help in a practical way," Boothe reported.

The HMB offers instruction on how to establish crisis pregnancy centers as well as literature on abortion issues and suggestions for practical ministries related to abortion. Callers also may be referred to resources in their area.

Callers to the toll-free number will soon be able to receive a new video, "Help, I'm Pregnant," which is intended for educational use in churches and church-related meetings.

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1990 Vacation Bible Schools
result in prospects, professions

By Ginny Whitehouse

N-5513

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NASHVILLE (BP)--Vacation Bible Schools drew more than 3.5 million participants in 1990, including more than 500,000 prospects for Bible study and church involvement, according to records compiled at the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

Many churches holding Vacation Bible Schools and Backyard Bible Clubs were particularly effective during 1990 in discovering and following up with prospects, according to Willie Beaty, VBS consultant in the Sunday school division.

A total of 526,878 prospects were discovered through VBS, mission VBS and Backyard Bible Clubs in 1990, an increase of 5,792 over the 521,086 identified in 1989.

Though the number of Vacation Bible Schools dropped from 33,620 in 1989 to 33,101, a decline of 519 in 1990, the number of people attending them jumped by 89,856, from 3,443,676 to 3,533,532.

"Churches are doing a better job of following through," Beaty explained. More than 275,700 VBS prospects became prospects for Sunday school, and another 62,000 became Sunday school members.

Promoted as a vehicle for starting new Sunday schools, mission VBS and Backyard Bible Clubs led to the formation of 246 new Sunday schools in 1990, an increase of 61 over the 185 started in 1989.

Backyard Bible Clubs helped West Roswell Baptist Church in suburban Atlanta lay the foundation for becoming one of the fastest growing church starts in Georgia.

The clubs held in June 1990 by youth from Parkwood Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla., were part of a comprehensive plan to get the church's name into the community, according to Pastor Mike Deese. More than 340 attended West Roswell's first service in September 1990, and attendance averaged more than 110 by February.

"We'll have up to 15 different Backyard Bible Clubs this summer," Deese said. "We now have people in the church who are willing to wrap their arms around prospects."

Dan Warren, minister of music at Parkwood Church, said youth came home from Georgia "feeling like they had been missionaries, not just functionaries."

Beaty noted that VBS also is an important vehicle for evangelism. In 1990, 63,061 professions of faith were registered through VBS, an increase of 3,741 from the 59,320 reported in 1989.

In another area, VBS helped sustain mission efforts worldwide as participants gave \$1.14 million to the Cooperative Program in 1990, a decrease of \$40,721 from the \$1.61 million contributed in 1989. Another \$500,000 was given to other missions programs.

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Though the dollar amount of all missions offerings has steadily risen over the last 10 years, the percentage of schools giving to the Cooperative Program has gradually declined.

In 1990, 72.8 percent of schools directed contributions to the Cooperative Program, a decrease of 1.1 percent from the 73.9 percent in 1989.

"In Vacation Bible School, we teach missions education. Supporting the Cooperative Program becomes a way to support the missionaries people have learned about through VBS," Beaty said. "On a percentage basis, we are losing in the number of churches giving to the Cooperative Program, but we are not dropping in the dollar amount of gifts."

In terms of schedule, many more churches -- about 50 percent -- are opting to hold VBS at night as the women's work force grows. Women have long been the "mainstay of VBS," Beaty said.

But the trend toward night schools concerns Beaty because evening programs generally do not draw as high a number of prospects, and overall enrollment tends to be lower.

"Evening schools are advertised as 'for the family.' That gets translated to 'for the church family,' and some members don't reach out like they otherwise would," Beaty explained.

Many churches are also reporting holding larger schools for shorter lengths of time. Just over 110 people enrolled on average in each school. More than 90 percent of schools held five sessions, rather than eight or 10.

Churches are already preparing for the 1991 VBS program under the theme "Celebrate Jesus." Baptist associations throughout the country will be conducting clinics on the material in April and May.

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'Desert Calm' targets needs
of Florida's military families

By Barbara Denman

F-10
(Ma)

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JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (BP)--As American soldiers go to war against Iraq, the Florida Baptist Convention is looking for ways to calm the hearts of loved ones back home.

In response to a growing concern, the convention staff has begun making plans for Desert Calm, a conference designed to equip churches to minister to the unique needs of military personnel and their families.

"This will be a conference on how to do ministry in times of war," said John Sullivan, executive director-treasurer of the Florida Baptist Convention, who initiated the concept after speaking to several military families.

"War has never been closer," Sullivan said. "We are exposed to it on television day by day. We see death, destruction, fighting and even the battered faces of prisoners of war."

"What does this do to a little child who sees all of this and thinks, 'That's where my parent is'?"

As he has traveled to churches throughout the state, Sullivan noted, almost every congregation has a list of family members serving in support of the war. "I'm afraid there will come a time when every church will have to face this issue.

Pastors and lay ministers will have to know how to respond."

The one-day conference will be held in two locations in the state.

Information will focus on four areas: loneliness and the stress of separation; ministering in times of grief and disaster; how to build a support system around families; and ministering to the special needs of children and youth.

The conference also will outline support services available to military families through military bases.

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Challenges of freedom
still abound in Romania

By Art Toalston

N-EMBS

RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Romanians still are struggling for freedom -- and with freedom -- according to the Evangelical Alliance president of Romania.

"There was a revolution, a lot of things were changed and the process of change is going on," Paul Negrut said. "But not everything is well and good in the country."

The new government has not yet committed itself to full religious freedom, said Negrut, leader of the evangelical coalition formed after the overthrow of communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu in December 1989. Negrut also is co-pastor of the 4,000-member Second Baptist Church of Oradea, the largest Baptist congregation in Europe.

Romanians face an array of social problems stemming from the freedoms gained to date. Freedom has permitted "all kinds of philosophies and cults" to flood the country, along with drugs, immorality, pornography and guns, Negrut said.

"We need to have a new perspective on what's happening around us, to know who is who and what is what, to have a clear understanding of the different religious groups, philosophies and social problems that arise with freedom," he said in an interview at the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in Richmond, Va. The pastor addressed two committees during the agency trustees' Feb. 11-13 meeting.

Abortion, for example, was outlawed under the Ceausescu regime, Negrut noted. Now an abortion can be obtained in Romania for the equivalent of one U.S. dollar. "We need to learn now what is the biblical perspective on human life," he commented.

Christian leaders also need to be trained in helping young Romanians overcome the lure of pornographic movies and magazines, he said.

The Evangelical Alliance, encompassing Baptist, Pentecostal, Brethren and Lutheran churches as well as the Greek Orthodox evangelical movement known as the Lord's Army, is at the forefront of the continuing battle for religious freedom in Romania.

A key sore spot is the government ban on radio and TV broadcasting by religious groups, Negrut said.

Under a proposed law on religious affairs, he added, denominations must register with the government -- and the government would be able to withdraw its recognition of a religious body. "That means that a denomination can exist only if the state approves," he warned.

And the current draft of a proposed constitution provides for religious freedom -- if religious activity does not harm the public order, state security or the country's moral standards. The state could have great leeway in "checking the activities of the church and approving them," Negrut said.

"That is not religious freedom," he stated. "That is religious control by some state institutions."

"The revolution changed a lot of things, but the structures that were in the society for 45 years have very deep roots and it's very difficult to get rid of them. They still want the power. They still want to come back in one form or another."

Further debates over religious freedom before various government committees lie ahead, Negrut said. Evangelicals are represented on these committees, he said, but they face opposition from others linked to the Greek Orthodox Church.

"The Greek Orthodox Church is not in favor of religious freedom because it was doing very well under the communist regime," the Baptist leader charged.

"It had a very happy relationship with the dictatorship."

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Negrut said Orthodox leaders even wrote an open letter backing Ceausescu after his troops shot at and killed demonstrators calling for his overthrow in December 1989.

Orthodox antagonism toward evangelicals is akin to the centuries-old persecution aimed at "those who came to know Christ in a personal way and tried to live a committed, holy life," Negrut said. "The Orthodox Church wants to have the monopoly, the dominant position in society." It claims to be Romania's "mother church" and labels others as heretics, he said.

On any given Sunday, however, only 10 to 15 percent of Romanians attend Orthodox services, roughly equal to the combined total of evangelical worshippers, Negrut reported.

Romanians are keeping a close eye on the Soviet crackdown against independence movements in the Baltic republics, Negrut said.

"We want to see how far those new waves of communism are going. But, historically speaking, I believe that communism has reached the deadline," he said. "There is no way for the communists to come back as a strong military block or a strong ideology." He predicted "a time of transition that can be long and painful in some countries and peaceful and quick in other countries.

"I hope in Romania it will be peaceful and quick."

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(BP) photo mailed to state Baptist newspapers by Richmond bureau of Baptist Press