

On behalf of the Swiss foundation "Aktion Lichtblick" (<http://www.aktion-lichtblick.ch>) Com-m is supporting Abraha Bahta School for the Blind in Asmara, Eritrea.



The entrance gate of Abraha Bahta School for the Blind

The Early Beginnings

In the summer of 2016 we were approached by the Swiss foundation "Aktion Lichtblick". They asked us to deliver a Braille embosser to Abraha Bahta School for the Blind in Asmara, the capital city of Eritrea. Mr. Paul Loosli of the "Aktion Lichtblick" foundation who is an experienced Eritrea expert has visited the school in the past at different occasions, and he could inform us about the manner in which Information Technology (IT) was done there at the time. It was him also who could establish the necessary contacts with the Ministry of Education of Eritrea, upon the invitation of which our activities take place.

Pretty soon we found out that the problems of the school in order to emboss Braille material could not be solved with the delivery of an embosser alone. A fundamental knowledge transfer would be required without which the delivered printer soon would mutate Missinvestment.

At that time we were not familiar with the mentality in Eritrea at all. It was therefore Mr. Paul Loosli, who has disposed of profound contacts and relationships in the country for many years who prepared our first mission which was given the project title "Train the Trainers". The school director at that time, Mr. Ainalem Tezare Solomon, then established a precise and fine-tuned concept of demands that had to be met. This was indispensable, because neither the Aktion Lichtblick Foundation nor Com-m would ever want to present to the school a concept of our own and then implement it, but it was a crucial precondition for us that Abraha Bahta School itself would formulate their needs and requests. This is by the way in full accordance with modern development aid.



The school yard of Abraha Bahta School where the kids, as the weather is nice most of the time spend a lot of their leisure time.

The Conversion

Our operational manager, Mr. Martin Mischler who is completely blind himself established 2 learning concepts in English: One is entitled “Mouseless Windows”, the other is called “Mouseless Office”. Both guides empower the student to use Windows and Office completely without the use of a mouse or trackpad. All steps of operation are exclusively executed via keyboard shortcuts. Both concepts were worked out as learning material and handed out to the teachers at the school, so that they could also pass them on to their future students. All the material was produced by us in both black print and Braille and taken to Asmara.

An additional training module was exclusively directed to the Braille Production Center of the School. Three ladies work there. They are producing Braille material for the students of Abraha Bahta School as well as for Braille readers in the entire country.

Our mission was accompanied by the delivery of 7 new pc systems and 7 new, 40 character Braille terminals. Both PC-s and Braille terminals were as well donated by “Aktion Lichtblick” as well.

Mission # 1 – February 12. To February 23. 2018

My wife Claudia, the owner of Com-M, our son Thorsten and I were escorted at the best by Rahma Loosli, the Eritrean wife of Paul Loosli.

On our arrival to the school we found three Braille embossers: The Index Everest D V5 model donated by ALB, as well as two Index Everest D V4 models sponsored by another organization, and a few very old computers.

Our first activity was to configure all the printers according to the needs of the Braille Production Center. We made the old pc-s ready for processing Braille as best as we could. After that we trained the personnel in producing Braille with the new machines.



Brailleprinter and Brailledisplays in use

We were very delighted by the fact that the employees of the Braille production Center were not only highly motivated, but also disposed of useful knowledge in producing Braille. 2 of them, both sighted are perfect Braille writers also in Tigrinya, one of the country's official languages. After 5 work days the Braille Production Center was up and running with all 3 Braille embossers. By no means there was shortage of material to be embossed, for the only embosser that had been at the school so far had been defective for more than a year.

During the remaining time we intended to teach 5 blind teachers on the basis of the learning material that we had with us. We soon had to find out that none of the candidates ruled the 10 finger typing system. This empowerment is crucial for a blind person in order to use a computer efficiently. It became obvious that in the course of our next mission a training module would be needed during which this empowerment would be acquired. Only then computer training would really make sense.

During the entire mission my Wife Claudia, a certified teacher for blind children, provided indispensable and appreciated assistance.

Second mission: April 23. To April 29. 2019

Back in Europe we went into planning the next Eritrea mission. Again on behalf of "Aktion Lichtblick" we worked out a training module in the course of which the blind teachers were to learn the 10 finger typing method. We entitled it "workshop 19". During this course the position of each key is being taught as well as which finger is to be used in order to press a certain key. In Germany and Switzerland such trainings are worked through within 1 week. Our students managed to do it in 4 days.

Now learning to use the computer keyboard is one thing, training and practicing is another? In this respect we now really completely on the efforts of the leadership team of the school to motivate their teachers to keep practicing.

In addition, during this second mission, at which by the way Paul Loosli, President of ALB, took part, necessary maintenance measurements were taken. The 7 PC systems donated by ALB were now present, yet they had to be configured in a blind proof manner.

Preview

With the empowerments that the teachers have acquired during this second mission we are now in a position to begin the actual pc training, with special attention directed to the use of the 7 Braille displays. The use of a Braille display is indispensable for a blind computer user when working alphabet-based. Thus for 2020 the next mission is as good as programmed. However, already at present knowledge that we could transfer is being applied in every-day teaching.

Eritrea – the Country

Eritrea is located in the northeast of Africa. In its northern part it has a long border with Sudan, in the West and northwest it is adjacent to Ethiopia and in the east to the Red Sea. Surface: 121 square km, population: About 5.2 million.

The country was an Italian colony until World war Two. After that it was administered by Great Britain shortly and in 1960 was handed over to Ethiopia. From 1961-1991 an underground army with extremely great Support by the population fought a long liberation war with high losses. In 1991, along with the end of the eastern bloc, the regime of Ethiopian president Mengistu Hailemariam had to resign. The transitional government of Ethiopia allowed Eritrea to gain independence. Finally in 1993 a referendum on independence was held and observed by the UN, with over 90% approval by the Eritrean people. International observers judged the vote as fair.

From 1998-2000 an armed conflict on border issues with Ethiopia hit the country. Since then Eritrea saw itself in a situation of permanent military threat. It was only in 2018 that the Ethiopian Government recognized the course of the mutual border which was negotiated under international mediation. This lead

to the immediate ratification of a peace agreement by both countries. Embassies were opened mutually, telephone lines and airline traffic followed.

After independence was reached one of the two liberation organizations was elected into power. Since then no further elections were held. The head of state is President Iseias Afewerki.

The Trip

We knew ahead that we would visit a poor country. We were thinking of settlements made out of corrugated iron, favelas, screaming poverty. Excited we were as we got off the plane in Asmara coming from Istanbul in February 2018 at 1am. An old bus took us to the terminal. It was cold, and in our winter clothes we were by no means overdressed. This was not astonishing, since Asmara is located at about 2300 m. above sea level.

Handling went down very slow, but after about 1 hour we were taken aside and managed to pass customs very quickly, and therefore we sat in our taxi to the hotel at 2am.

The next morning Asmara presented itself at its best: Top temperature to be expected: 25c, with sunny skies and a light breeze. The atmosphere in the city took me back to my small town childhood in the 60-s: Moderate car traffic, people coming home from church or prowling through town, children playing in the streets, the smell of Sunday supper. The buildings, the cars all that provided us with a feeling as if time had stood still. For the restless traveler from Germany this was a soothing way to deaccelerate.



The donkey a current means of transportation

Most blind people are working

As many, mainly elderly blind Eritreans lost their eyesight while fighting in the liberation wars; the state of Eritrea does its best to keep them in jobs. We were told that a lot of them are working as teachers in schools for sighted children. This is possible in a country where the teacher is lecturing in front of the class, knowledge transfer, not painting little pictures like in Europe. We were also informed that there are a few blind professionals working at legal or other academic jobs.

The blind employees of Abraha Bahta whom we have met all feed a family.

The infrastructure of Eritrea

It has to be considered in a differentiated manner: From a documentary on Eritrean television we could learn that the landline-based telephone network is not being enhanced with a high priority, because this would be too costly. Instead the focus is being directed to the cellphone network, which indeed is remarkable. Many Eritreans have a cellphone. In Asmara coverage is available almost all over town, mostly with a 3g signal. During our trip to the Red Sea I noticed that there was coverage all the way between 1 and 3 bars. In the Black Forrest, where we live, this isn't the case by far.

It is possible without any problem to call abroad out of the Eritrean cellphone network and to be called there from abroad. Foreign SIM cards however cannot be used yet.

Electric power supply has been and still is a challenge, although in the course of the last 2 years major improvements could be made possible. Before that power cuts in Asmara were absolutely normal and occurred daily. During our 2 weeks stay in 2018 we experienced 2 power cuts of about 30 minutes each.

The internet is clearly the weak point of Eritrean infrastructure. The opening of a website takes up to 20 minutes, normal e-mail traffic is not possible. Whoever needs fast internet must get it via satellite, which however needs governmental authorization.

Water supply is an issue that requires permanent care, as everywhere in Africa. In Asmara there usually is no shortage of water. The city disposes of huge basins that store the rain coming down during the rainy season. This water is being used to supply the whole town. In the country, however, the government is taking permanent efforts to provide new wells and to improve the pipe network, with the objective of a stable water supply system. One must not forget that the low land of Eritrea is very hot. In Massawa on the Red Sea temperature rises up to 50 degrees in the summer. One of the hottest deserts worldwide, the Danakil desert, is situated in the southeast of the country near the city of Assab.



Donkey carrying water

We further noticed...

In the course of private visits as well as during our trip to Massawa we saw a differentiated picture of the country. Yes, there is much visible poverty; however it is not the screaming poverty in the sense of slums or favelas. We have seen houses made of corrugated iron, which however was exceptional. Most Eritreans live either in very small city apartments or simple houses with no running water. Most of these have 1 or 2 barrels in the yard in order to collect rain water for use. Despite these living conditions which for us were very special all Eritreans we met were very hospitable, which we appreciated to a high extent and which touched us to the deepest, because they were more than happy to share the little wealth they had.



One of the few cabins made out of corrugated iron we came across

Security

We were told before our first trip that Asmara was the most secure capital of Africa. We saw this confirmed soon: Me and my family could go out at 8pm without any problems. There were quite a few people out in the streets, and the cafes were moderately frequented.



A typical appliance store

We left Eritrea with a whole bunch of impressions. I was happy to put my feet on African soil for the first time in Asmara instead of Karthum, Cairo or Cape Town.

We do declare that Eritrea has, to some extent, become dear to our hearts. I want to help my blind fellow sufferers there to catch up with modern information technology. As a consequence to that further visits are very likely.



A Camel



The beach of Massawa, with 28 degrees of water temperature