



The Child in Dire Dawa

The trip from Addis Ababa to Harar will take all day. Harar is an old town in the region bordering Somalia and Djibouti. It's over 500 km from Addis to Harar and more than half the journey is on roads that hardly deserve the name. They're just stony tracks with scary potholes around which the car has to weave at walking pace. Not to mention the oxen, goats, donkeys, camels, lorries - and people -, none of them used to traffic.

Ethiopia is one of the very poorest countries in the world and it goes without saying that people beg. This was obvious from Day One in Addis. When you see a leper lifting his mutilated leg to cars stopping at traffic lights, you know at once what that means. During the coffee break on the way to Harar, the children – those wonderful children of Africa – pose readily for photos but shout out afterwards: “You, money!”

In Dire Dawa, close to Harar, there was a different order of desperation. We had just stopped for a “buna” black coffee and as usual, the car was immediately surrounded by children. Suddenly she was there, among all those watching, asking children's eyes. She was still so young, no more than 16 or 17. In her arms, she held a child, not quite a baby anymore. The girl, the mother, looked reasonably well fed but the child was just skin and bones, the little face a living death's head.

I watched from the car and suddenly it was as if a film had snapped. The picture rolls slower and slower until it stops. The girl and the child both hold up their hands, begging in deadly silence. The child may be no more than a year and a half but already it knows it has to hold out its hand to survive.

The frozen image chisels its way through my eyes to my heart. What once I saw on television from far away is standing half a metre in front of me. In a vain attempt to bridge that terrible gap, I put a few birr into the child's hand. Hastily, it presses the notes against its body.

Day Two in Ethiopia and now I am crying.

Peter Verschoor
Addis Ababa, 27-9-1993