

## Stewart Sutton

# Unwelcome Labels on the Blankets

■ One of the first Canadians to take a field posting with a UN agency was a social worker, Stewart Sutton. He had been director of the Children's Aid Society in Toronto for about 10 years when he was phoned up by Maurice Pate of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and asked if he would go to Africa for UNICEF. "My reaction was, I'd go to Africa for anybody, provided that it is an interesting job and I can take my wife and children." That was in the autumn of 1954, and Sutton was posted to the agency's small office in Brazzaville, where a European colleague made him welcome with the words, "I didn't ask for you and I don't want you!" They sorted matters out by dividing the continent, Sutton concentrating on eastern Africa. It was several years before countries in sub-Sahara Africa began gaining independence, and he was dealing with colonial governors, as one anecdote that follows makes clear. He also tells about his years as director for the Eastern Mediterranean region, including emergency operations during the 1956 invasion of Suez:

"During my first months I learned most from the Africans 'round the office. They were curious about me and asked me questions, so I started asking questions back.... There was only one plane a week across Africa in those days, a Sabena flight from Leopoldville. The only type of flight you could get was a first-class flight, which meant the lowest form of third-class travel, and the rest of the aircraft was filled up with animal carcasses....

"Some French governors were quite suspicious of UNICEF, but I met some wonderful people in eastern Africa: Andrew Cohen in Uganda and Evelyn Baring in Kenya. They took the position that 'if there's anything you can do for the people, then do it.' One opportunity to test this out soon came up in Kenya.

"It was the height of the Mau Mau troubles in Kenya, and I got a letter from UNICEF in New York saying they had heard that the children of Mau Mau detainees were starving. So I went over and talked to my usual contacts, medical and education people, English big-shots; there were no senior African officials to talk to in those days. I was given quite a runaround. They showed me Mau Mau prisoners in prison, where their arms were tied to the walls with thongs, and their feet to the floor, and they were sitting on the concrete floor. Then, when I asked to see children, I was taken to a children's camp where they looked as if they were all right. I really didn't know what to do, because I was assured there was no problem. I thought there probably was a problem somewhere, but I just wasn't seeing it.

"The Governor was putting on a lunch for an American film crew who had just made the movie *King Solomon's Mines*. I was invited to come to this lunch, a modest affair, and here were all these Americans and I was seated at the bottom of the table with the lowest in the crew. I didn't belong at the lunch and wondered why I had been invited. Afterwards, we stood around having our coffee, and I felt completely out of place. Eventually, the Governor walked over and backed me into a bay window where nobody could hear us.

"He looked at me and said, 'Can I trust you? I understand you are Canadian and I hope I can trust you. I wouldn't say this to any old national.'