

# Olympic Aid



OLYMPIC AID



## Human security for children

Scarred physically and psychologically, war-affected children are often deprived of the very thing that can help heal the scars: play. To fill that gap is the aim of Olympic Aid, a humanitarian organization established by athletes and supported by DFAIT's Human Security Program, the Australian and Norwegian governments, and the International Olympic Committee.

It defines play (including sport) as a physical activity that promotes fun, the empowerment of children and participation. "Children's freedom to be children is important to their mental and physical development," says Silken Laumann, Olympic and world champion rower and Olympic Aid's Canadian ambassador. "Play is not a luxury, it's a right recognized by the UN in the Convention on the Rights of the Child."

"Sport is a development tool for both children and communities," adds Olympic Aid Chair Johann Olav Koss. As the organization's first athlete ambassador, just before the 1994 Winter Games Koss travelled to Eritrea, where Olympic Aid sought to rebuild schools in the refugee camps. He returned to Norway in time for the Games, held that year in Lillehammer. There he took three gold medals, and challenged fellow Norwegians and visitors to the Games to contribute to Olympic Aid. The effort raised a heartwarming \$27.5 million. Says Koss, "The support funded the building of 1000 primary schools and a teachers' education centre in Eritrea, where we trained 600 teachers over three years."

The success at Lillehammer set the stage for 1996 and the Atlanta Summer Olympics. Before the Games, the International Olympic Committee came up with the idea of the "Olympic Truce," which was ratified by the United Nations. During the Games, temporary cease-fires were declared in war-torn areas. UNICEF and Olympic Aid seized the occasion to organize sports festivals at which children could play and people were vaccinated. In Afghanistan alone, 2.2 million children and 800 000 women were immunized.

In 2000 Olympic Aid organized activities in connection with the Sydney Olympics, and it is preparing for the 2002 Winter Games in Salt Lake City.

Its focus now is on developing sustainable sports and play programs. Under the programs, children learn skills that they can retain for life, and sports and play become permanent features in the community. This year Olympic Aid is sending volunteers to train local coaches in refugee camps in Angola, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and, possibly, East Timor. They show how to give children constructive, positive guidance.

"Olympic Aid makes so much sense," says Silken Laumann. "Through sport and play, children improve their self-esteem, their self-confidence. They learn to resolve conflict and to accept each other as equals." Laumann visited refugee camps in Eritrea and Sudan last summer, seeing first-hand the need for Olympic Aid projects. She recalls, "Once, when we were playing soccer, a young boy stopped and told me, through a translator, that it was the first time in two months he hadn't felt angry." That is the beauty of play. ●

photos: Olympic Aid

Silken Laumann plays soccer with girls at the Laffa refugee camp, Sudan. Ethnic differences had stopped some of the girls from ever speaking to each other until this game began.

For more information, visit the Olympic Aid Web site:  
<http://www.olympicaid.org>