

Debt's not dead, but people are dying

Edwin Phri – aged 22 months – died of malnutrition in Lusaka, Zambia, on July 10. He is one of the 19,000 children who die every day because of debts their countries owe to the so-called developed world.

The Jubilee 2000 campaign has long claimed that debt is killing people so I went to Lusaka last week with two journalists and a photographer to find out if that is true.

The mortuaries in Lusaka are overflowing. We went early in the morning of July 12, and there was already a crowd of people waiting. The system is very simple. You drive up in your pick-up truck and unload your empty coffin, which keeps your place in the queue until it's your turn to go inside and fill it.

As empty coffins are unloaded, full coffins are hauled onto the back of pick-ups and the grieving families pile in beside them, sometimes crying and wailing, and the trucks move off, leaving space for new-comers.

There were all kinds of coffins in the queue, from solid wood with ornate handles to hardboard boxes bashed together with nails and stained brown to look more expensive. Perhaps one in four of the coffins I saw was for a child.

We spoke to a small man with greying stubble, who had just loaded a tiny coffin into the back of a pick-up. Who was he burying? My grandson, he told us. Our Zambian guide Sampa explained what we there for. He nodded and listened to them calmly before answering.

His name was Elias Mwila, he told us, and he was a Catholic. "My grandson died of malnutrition," he said. "Come with us to the cemetery and afterwards we can talk about it."

The grave was already dug when we got there. Disconcertingly small mounds of earth stretched in rows as far as I could see on all sides, until the cemetery merged with the surrounding countryside. I counted 27 empty graves, all no more than three feet long. We were told that this was the children's section of the cemetery. There are two cemeteries in Lusaka, but this one – Ngwerere – is the one where you don't have to pay.

The funeral was simple. There are too many funerals in Zambia now for a priest to attend each one, so it was led by a catechist. About thirty mourners were at the graveside. The men sat in a group on one side, and the women – including Edwin's mother, Priscilla – sat on the other.

Edwin's coffin was placed on the ground, and the lid was removed. He was wearing a green woolly hat and his baby's face looked chubby-cheeked and healthy; he could have been asleep.

The catechist led prayers and gave a short sermon. Priscilla cried in anguish throughout the ceremony. At the end, one of the men carried a shovelful of red earth round the mourners. Everyone touched it before it was thrown into the grave.

They placed Edwin's few possessions on top of the grave – a blue plastic water-bowl, some soap and some vaseline. Despite dying at the age of 22 months, with so little, Edwin Phri died in debt – he owed us £482.¹

Back at the family home in the *compound* (district) of Lilanda, Elias told us the full story.

Edwin was the youngest of three children, with two elder sisters – nine-year-old Eleanor and five-year-old Vita. His mother Priscilla is Elias' daughter and a twin, although her sister also died in infancy. She's 22 years old.

Edwin's father Godric is 33 and a machinist in a cooking oil factory. He earns 120,000 kwacha a month (about £28.50). Godric rents his house for 30,000 kwacha and spends about 40,000 a month on charcoal. To feed his family well would be another 200,000 kwacha a month.

Edwin fell sick on June 8. Godric paid for him to be examined, and the family bought his medicines – which came to 26,300 kwacha – and administered them themselves. Edwin showed no signs of improvement, but they couldn't afford any more medicine or to have him treated in hospital.

“He stood no chance,” said Elias. “It's very hard to lose someone, but especially when it's a child.

“Godric told me that he'd coped with two children, but things were getting difficult when Edwin was born. I would help if I could, but I've got ten children of my own and four of them are still in school.”

Last week, United Nations figures revealed that the average life expectancy in Zambia is now only 37, and that the average Zambian can only expect to be healthy for 30.9 of those years.

Zambia spends twice as much paying the interest on its loans every year – loans which it will NEVER pay off – as it does on its health service. The health service is so badly funded that even if for a major operation patients have to buy all their own medication, syringes, and even the rubber gloves.

Zambia's junior doctors are paid a pittance and have been on strike for the last eight months because they say they can't function in such conditions.

Jesuit Fr Peter Henriot works in Zambia on a CAFOD project that monitors the effects of Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs) – schemes implemented under the orders of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to 'help' indebted countries pay off what they owe.

SAPs force the Zambian government to use the money saved by abolishing free health care and free education to pay off the interest on their loans.

¹ Zambia's debt is 6.5 billion US dollars. \$650 per capita.

He said: "I've been in Zambia for 11 years and what I've noticed is that now there are many more clothes shops and expensive boutiques and places to buy the latest electronic gadgets, but there are also many more beggars, street children and homeless people. The gap is widening; the rich are getting richer while the poor get poorer."

The leaders of the world's richest nations are meeting in Japan this weekend and have the chance to decide whether in the future people like Edwin will continue to die of poverty.

Third world debt campaigners around the country have been organising Summit Watch vigils this week and throughout the summit. They are urging the G8 leaders to end the rhetoric and make a reality of their promises to cancel the unpayable debts of the world's poorest countries for the Millennium.

Many campaigners are saddened by the results of a recent CAFOD-commissioned MORI poll that shows that half of the people questioned thought debt had already been cancelled or would be by the end of the year.

Fr Henriot said: "Debt is not dead. People are dead."