



March of hope as volunteers arrive to build African dream

Shane Hickey

IT WAS quite a sight yesterday for the residents of the Wallacedene township.

A cheery procession of almost 1,000 Irish builders trooped past their homes with a banner proclaiming "C'Mon Ye Boys in Green" as they set about the task of throwing up 200 new houses over the course of the next week.

The massive group of chip-pies, sparks, roofers, plasterers and labourers has descended upon the South African city for the eighth expedition from the **Niall Mellon Township Trust** to build homes in the township of some 21,000 people.

Yesterday marked the official entrance of the volunteers to the area, which they aim to partly regenerate by the end of this week. However, severe weather conditions hampered construction in the intensive project and workers had to return to their hotels by noon.

This is the latest **"Building**

Blitz" by the Dublin-based charity headed up by social entrepreneur **Niall Mellon**, who has built some 12,500 houses around South Africa since the charity was established seven years ago.

Expedition

The group of 950 volunteers, who each had to raise €5,000 to travel on the expedition, have until Friday to complete their goal of building 200 houses for families who are otherwise confined to makeshift shacks with corrugated iron roofs.

The residents gave a warm greeting to the procession which drifted by them early yesterday morning, some brandishing signs saying "Feel at Home"; while a local school majorette band performed in their honour.

There was some concern among organisers that the rain would force the teams to work later in the week due to the lost time yesterday.

"Despite much uncertainty at home, our volunteers have

once again proven that no obstacle is too big to keep them from helping others," said Mr Mellon.

"We brought our hearts, our skills and our traditional Irish weather, but the rain will not dampen our determination."

About 6,000 families live in the Wallacedene township and the new houses will be divided up based on need, decided by local government in the area.

Zoleka Rhithilili, who lives with her husband Luthando and son Thabiso (7) in a one-room shack where water drips onto the bed from holes in the roof, said she would be "very glad" when her new home was completed. A simple candle provided light in their room, outside of which is a single toilet shared with 50 other people.

Across a dirt track, her neighbour Sera Flecks (26) lives with her two children Charlene (10 months) and Eugene (3). "I am very excited to be getting a house. It will give some privacy

for the children; they don't like it any more," she said.

The volunteers have all been divided up into teams of 70 and will complete different sections of the project, which will also include a school and a garden area. A number of those present have been on the expeditions since the start, including Denis O'Riordan from Enniskeane in Cork who is on his eighth trip.

"As the rain pours down through the leaking makeshift tin roofs, it brings home to all of us Irish volunteers the sheer awfulness of living in a shack and makes us more determined to continue our building here in partnership with the South Africans," he said.

"The people are so resilient and always smiling even in these most trying circumstances. The welcome they have shown to all the volunteers is overwhelming."





Irish volunteers (above) arriving in Wallacedene. Cork volunteer Denis O'Riordan meets Faith Kwaza and her family (far left) and two men get down to work. ROGAN WARD & NIALL CARSON