

# Changing the face of poverty

■ By Kirubel Tadesse

It is a terrible look. Simply terrible. Faces of young children at an age when they usually look like angels are massively disfigured by this merciless disease. I could barely watch patients affected for more than 10 seconds.

According to experts in the field, the infection, Noma, is basically caused due to poverty, leading to its common name: 'face of poverty'.

Noma occurs in young children who are malnourished and debilitated by diseases like measles and malaria, according to Facing Africa, a London based NGO engaged in mobilising support for those affected.

The symptoms of early stages of the infection are typified by a swelling of the cheek or lip, or both, and excessive pain. Within a few days the cheeks and lips discolour and the mouth has a foul smell. The disease worsens in a relatively short span of time - just a few days - and around 90 percent of sufferers die.

Agonisingly, fatalities could be avoided with relatively simple and inexpensive treatment: antibiotics at an early stage would save thousand of lives.

The estimated 10 percent of children fortunate enough to survive thanks to treatment,

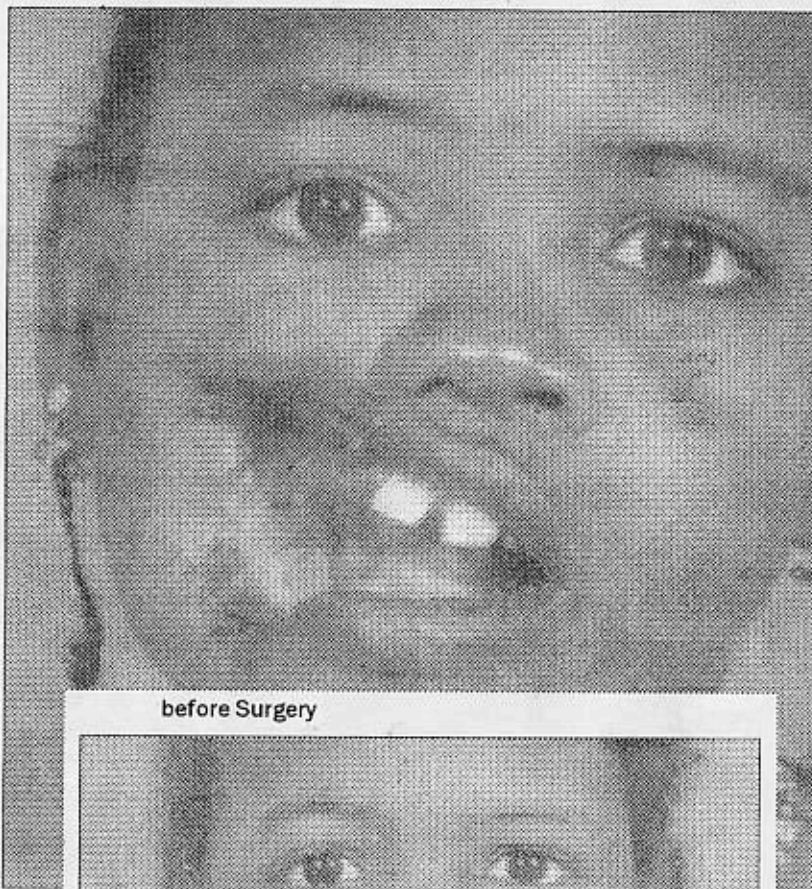
however, are left with severe facial disfigurement.

The disease does not only result in speaking and eating problems, but sometimes leads to victims becoming outcasts. In some Ethiopian cases sufferers have been dumped in the middle of nowhere by their own families. Some parents regard what is happening to their children as a sign of a curse and abandoning them is a common reality.

The disease is hardly a concern for the wealthy nations. It exclusively attacks poor nations, such as those in South East Asia, South America and Africa. According to a study quoted by Facing Africa, 140,000 new cases every year are seen, most of which are in sub-Saharan Africa in what they call the Noma belt in nations, such as Mali, Niger, Chad, Nigeria, Ethiopia and others.

"There have been no studies locally that can be used to accurately estimate how many children are affected by the infection in Ethiopia," Dr. Taye Hailu, an Ethiopian plastic surgeon, says.

"But from the number of patients who are coming for the treatment we can deduce that a great number of children are affected," he adds.



before Surgery



After Surgery

Starting from last week, for two weeks in a row, two Ethiopian surgeons, including Dr. Taye and a team of doctors and assisting professionals flown in from London, were jointly operating on a total of 50 children at the Myung Sung Christian Medical Center, or Korean Hospital, in Addis Ababa.

Facing Africa mobilised the funds to bring British anaesthetists and nurses with eight reconstructive and plastics surgeons skilled in complex surgeries from the acclaimed Great Ormond Street Hospital in London.

"The facility here is well-equipped and the staff have been very cooperative," Dr. Neil Bulstrode, one of the surgeons, said, expressing joy that their efforts are being warmly supported locally.

The initiative was also assisted by Cheshire Services Ethiopia which took in the children for pre- and post-operative care.

Facing Africa has been in operation for 12 years and for six years it has been bringing surgeons' teams annually to Ethiopia. There is a plan to double the frequency of visits.

Often the visiting surgeons not only share expertise with the scarce plastic surgeons - there are only a handful in the whole country - but other facial victims also get treatment they otherwise would not have received.

Konjit, 27, who lives in Addis Ababa, was bitten by a dog when she was only 7, resulting in the loss of most of her nose. After years, last October the Facing Africa surgical team that was operating in the local Yekatit 12 Hospital operated on her. LeRoux Fourie, a surgeon who works with Facing Africa, was able to perform facial reconstruction surgery for Konjit alongside the numerous Noma operations performed.

It is these kinds of success stories that encourage Facing Africa donors to keep assisting its efforts. The group hopes a scheduled BBC TV programme will encourage more to contribute to its worthy cause.