

A PLACE he describes as 'a small, impoverished country in North East Africa' and its people have captured the heart of a former teacher from Oban High School.

Alex Hamilton swapped 25 years of teaching in Oban High School with all the security of the western world, for eight years with Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO) working mainly for the Ministry of Education in Eritrea.

It was in Eritrea that Oban High's former principal teacher of history and modern studies made many friends and trained teachers, only to find himself caught up in what he believes to be the current political situation and was expelled.

Alex, who was born and brought up in Campbeltown, told *Lorn Life* about his time in Eritrea when he was home for a few weeks, before setting off to help teach and educate in Orrisa, in North East India.

'I realise that Eritrea is almost an unknown country but 100,000 died in the last conflict there between 1998 and 2000. The human environment of the country, while continuing to be what must be the most hospitable and safest countries in Africa, is in the midst of an awful crisis as the border dispute with Ethiopia edges closer to all-out war.

'After the fighting ended in 2000 the International Court ruled on the position of the border but the international community has been unwilling to persuade or force Ethiopia to withdraw its troops from Ethiopia. Eritrea has thus been forced to use whatever measures it can to put pressure on the international community to even notice there is a country called Eritrea.

'I think that I have been caught up in that general process and so I have been forced to leave a country that I had come to view as my home and so many people who had become my brothers and sisters. However, my difficulty is as nothing compared to the economic and social disaster that is enveloping Eritrea and the human tragedy that could be another war.

Oban teacher's African adventure



Alex Hamilton

'Everyone does what they can to get on with their lives and regardless of the war I continued working as a teacher training in one of the more remote provinces of Eritrea travelling round the 122 elementary and junior schools that are providing for the 55,000 young people who are the hope and the reality of the future.'

Alex's friends at home in Britain and in Canada helped to raise money to install clean water in schools for the first time, provide sports and build a library and print thousands of school books.

'The local community always initiated and very actively supported these projects, sometimes with scarce money but more commonly with hundreds of man-hours of voluntary, unpaid labour,' said Alex. Just before Christmas Alex went to Keren, 90 km north of the capital Asmara, to discuss the publication of a text book and a supply of

drinking water for a school.

The following day he was arrested and interviewed for five days by the country's national security service.

'After five days my interviewer politely thanked me for my co-operation and said I was free to go. They'd had some concerns about my being in Eritrea but were satisfied I was there legally and I would be most welcome to visit Keren and other places in the future.'

Alex went to visit friends in South Africa for Christmas and while in Cape Town received news that he would not be allowed to re-enter Eritrea. Friends in Asmara persuaded the authorities to allow him to return to collect his belongings and say goodbye to friends.

'I remain moved at the memory of tears flowing from the eyes of good friends who were former soldiers and who had endured so much hardship and pain to fight for the independence of Eritrea, won in 1991 after the 30-year 'struggle'. If such people wept for me, I must have done something right.'