



FAMINE

The long, dusty road

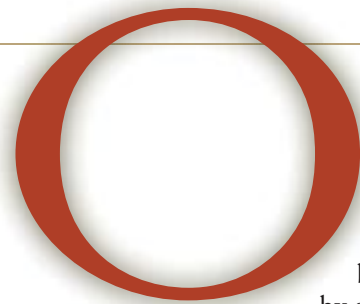
By Hal Donaldson

Photography by Gaylan Wampler

Editor's note: Humanitarian agencies have called the famine and drought in East Africa "one of the world's greatest tragedies," with more than 11 million people on the threshold of starvation. Meanwhile news bureaus have failed to sound the alarm, aid has been slow in arriving, and people and livestock are dying.

Assemblies of God missionaries and national leaders invited Africa Regional Director Mike McClafin and Editor in Chief Hal Donaldson to tour the drought-stricken region. Following is Donaldson's report.

Peter Njiri, general superintendent of the Kenya Assemblies of God (left), and Mike McClafin, Africa regional director



ur assessment team boards a small aircraft that will fly us from Nairobi to northern Kenya. Twenty minutes into the flight — without warning — the color of the earth below fades from green to brown. Creek beds, trees and animals have been swallowed by sand. There is no sign of life.

Peter Njiri, general superintendent of the Kenya Assemblies of God, is among the passengers. He points to what was once a large lake but now resembles a rock quarry.

Mike McClafin, who spent 20 of his 33 years as a missionary in this region, peers down at the parched land and shakes his head with mounting concern.

Greg Beggs, East Africa area director, visited northern Kenya several weeks earlier and is traveling with us. “We’ve gone three rainy seasons without adequate rain,” he says, “and the situation just keeps getting worse.”

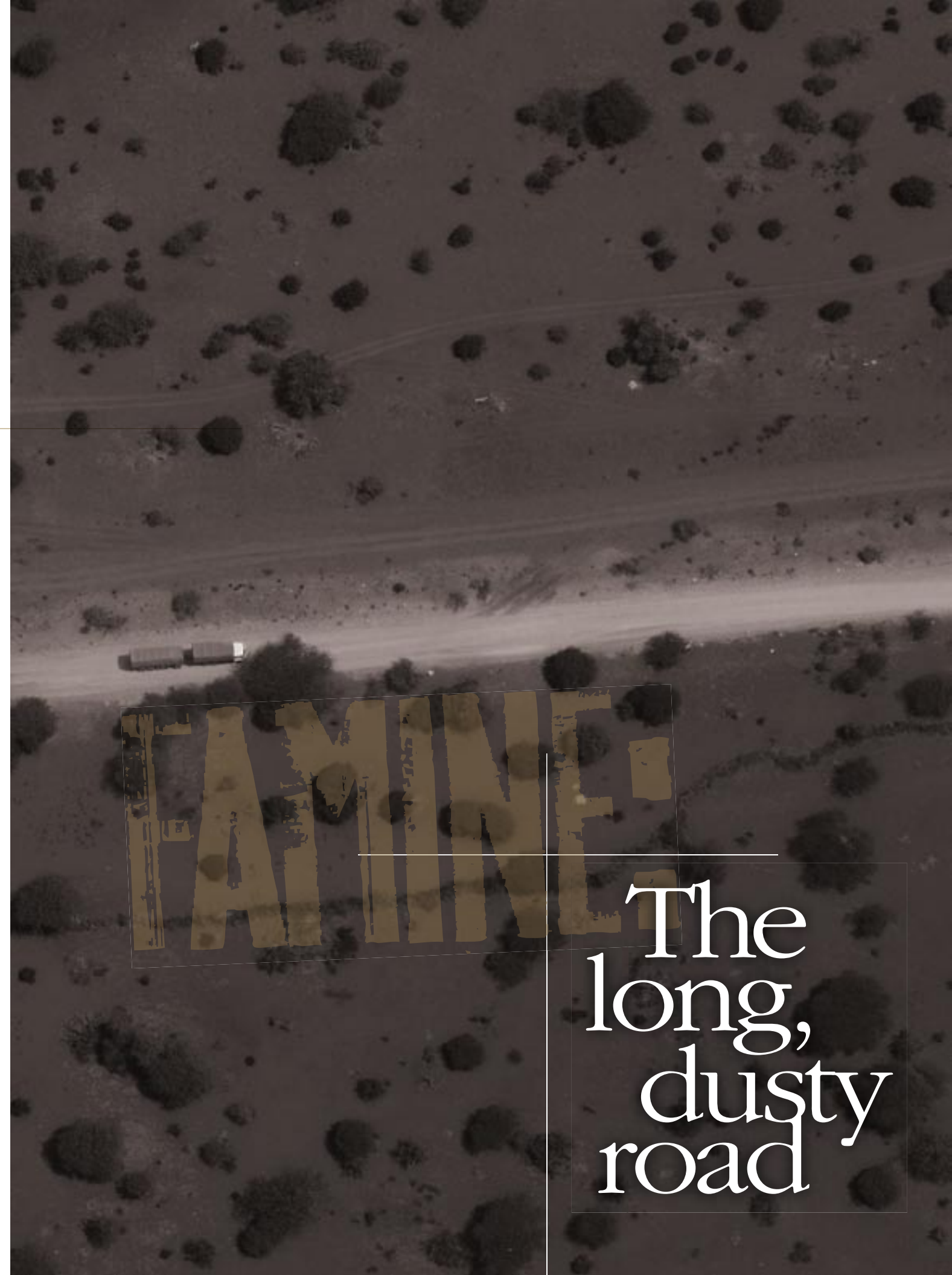
The front page of Kenya’s leading newspaper bears this headline: “Drought in north likely to get worse — 3.6 million at risk in northern Kenya alone.” According to the article, the drought-devastated region extends to Tanzania, Somalia, Sudan, Uganda and Ethiopia.

Pastor Njiri tells us that about 70 percent of the cattle and 50 percent of the camels, goats and sheep have died. Without animals, people have no livelihood or agriculture. Many families have been forced to eat next year’s seed to even survive, he says.

“Without help, within months all the livestock could be dead,” Mike says.

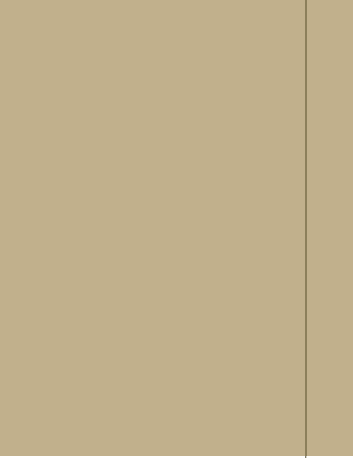
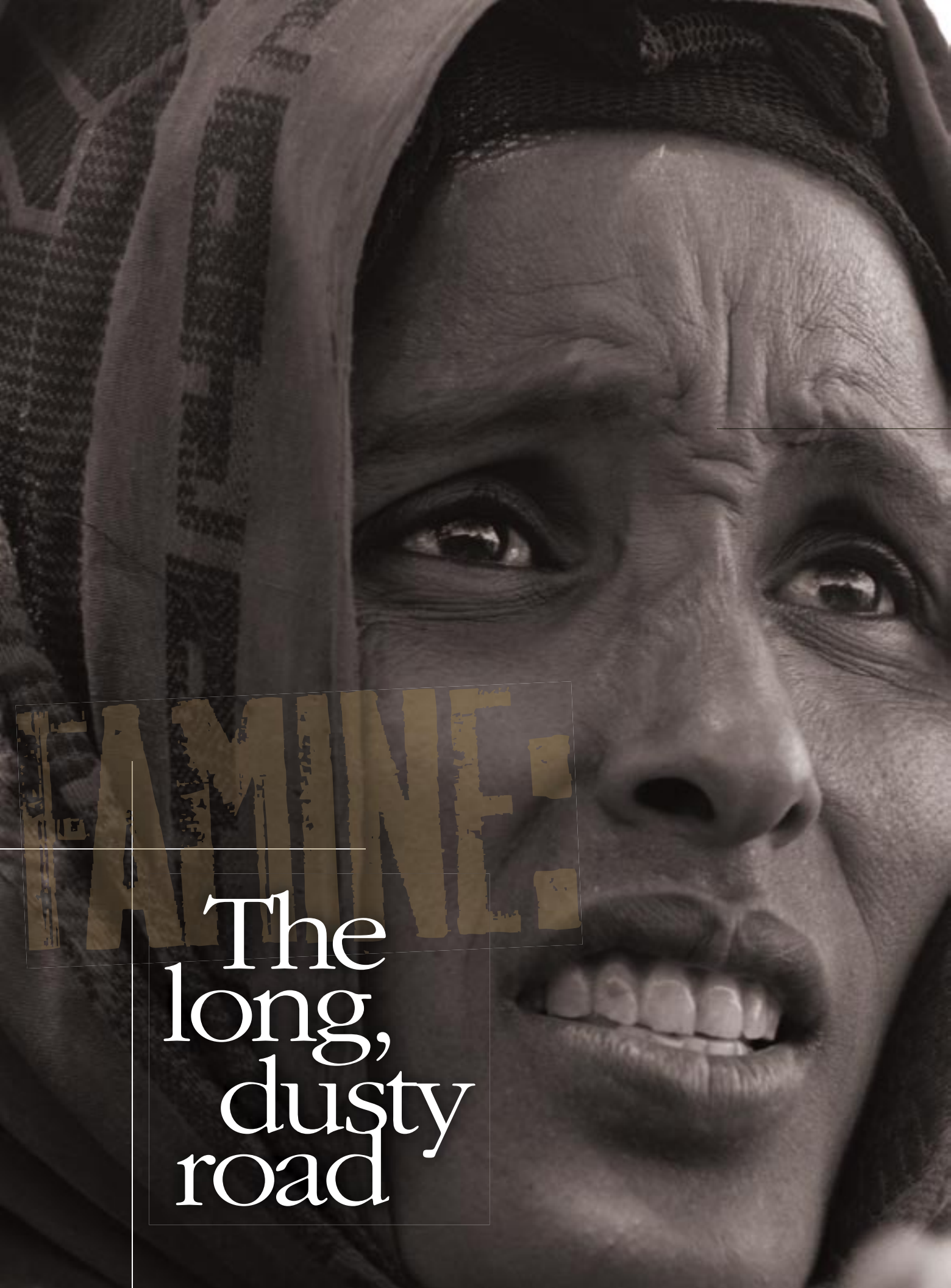
“When I was here a few weeks ago,” Greg says, “I saw animals collapsing along the road, so weak they couldn’t even lift themselves.”

continued on page 11



FAMINE

The long, dusty road



HAMINE!

The long, dusty road

When our plane finally lands at a remote runway in Wajir, a convoy of military Land Rovers meets us. Armed soldiers will accompany us on a two-hour journey to Reba, a small village that has suffered terribly from the drought. Because food and water are like gold in the region, bandits have been robbing vehicles at gunpoint.

As our Land Rovers barrel down the long, dusty road to our destination, Pastor Njiri says, “These people have lost everything. Many women and children have died. We’ve responded by collecting food and water in our churches and transporting it to the areas in need. But we must do more to get them emergency food and supplies.”

“What can the American church do to help you reach out to these suffering people?” I ask.

“First we must understand that we are on a rescue mission,” he replies. “Time is precious. We need more resources immediately. Without help, these people will starve. For only \$25 we can feed a family for a week. We can keep a person alive for less than \$1 a day. If people in America will give to this relief effort, those who are suffering will experience the love of God.”

In response to the desperate need for pure drinking water in Africa, missionary Steve Evans was recently appointed coordinator of Africa Oasis Project, which was established to coordinate water solutions for the continent.

“We have an opportunity,” Steve says, “to help churches across Africa play a significant role in bringing fresh drinking water to their communities. For example, we are partnering with Majitech, a water drilling company, to drill seven wells in strategic locations in Northern Kenya.”

“We have a God-given network with distribution points across the continent that can be used to meet human



need,” says Mike. “These churches are located in communities; they know the people and the needs; they have access; they don’t have the barriers. The church is the best relief distribution network in the world.”

In 1990 there were 11,000 Assemblies of God churches in Africa. That number has grown to 40,000, with an estimated 15 million constituents. In Kenya, five to 10 churches are being planted every week.

“The church *is* Africa’s hope,” says Greg. “Other development agencies have failed because they do not have an indigenous, local network in place. Our job is to empower and enable these churches with training and tangible resources so they can meet the needs of the people in their communities. Every time we go into a village to plant a church, we need to assess the spiritual needs and also ask the Lord for ways to proactively meet physical needs.”

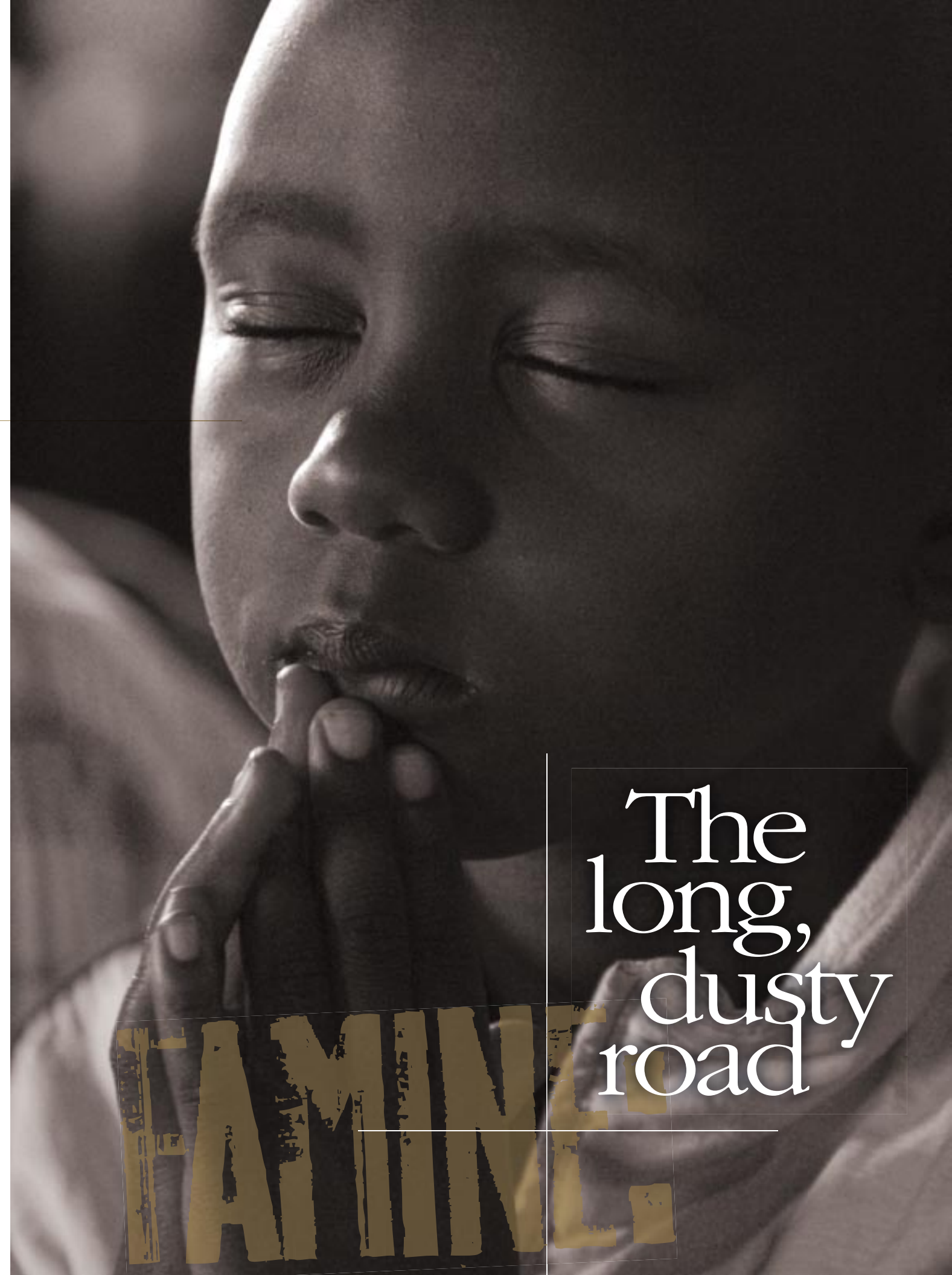
My eyes are abruptly directed away from Greg to the skeletal remains of a camel on the side of the road — the first of many remains we will encounter this day. The few living animals we come upon are bony and near death. Colorful birds that once filled these skies have migrated to places where water is more plentiful. Now only vultures abound.

To collect rainwater, villagers have dug hundreds of large cisterns by hand. But without rain they resemble moon craters. Military personnel, we learn, collect animal bones and carcasses and bury them for fear the remains will poison precious rainwater that runs off into the cisterns.

“Many people have contracted typhoid from poisoned water,” Pastor Njiri says.

We pass through a tiny village, but many of the huts are abandoned. Although *The New York Times* reported

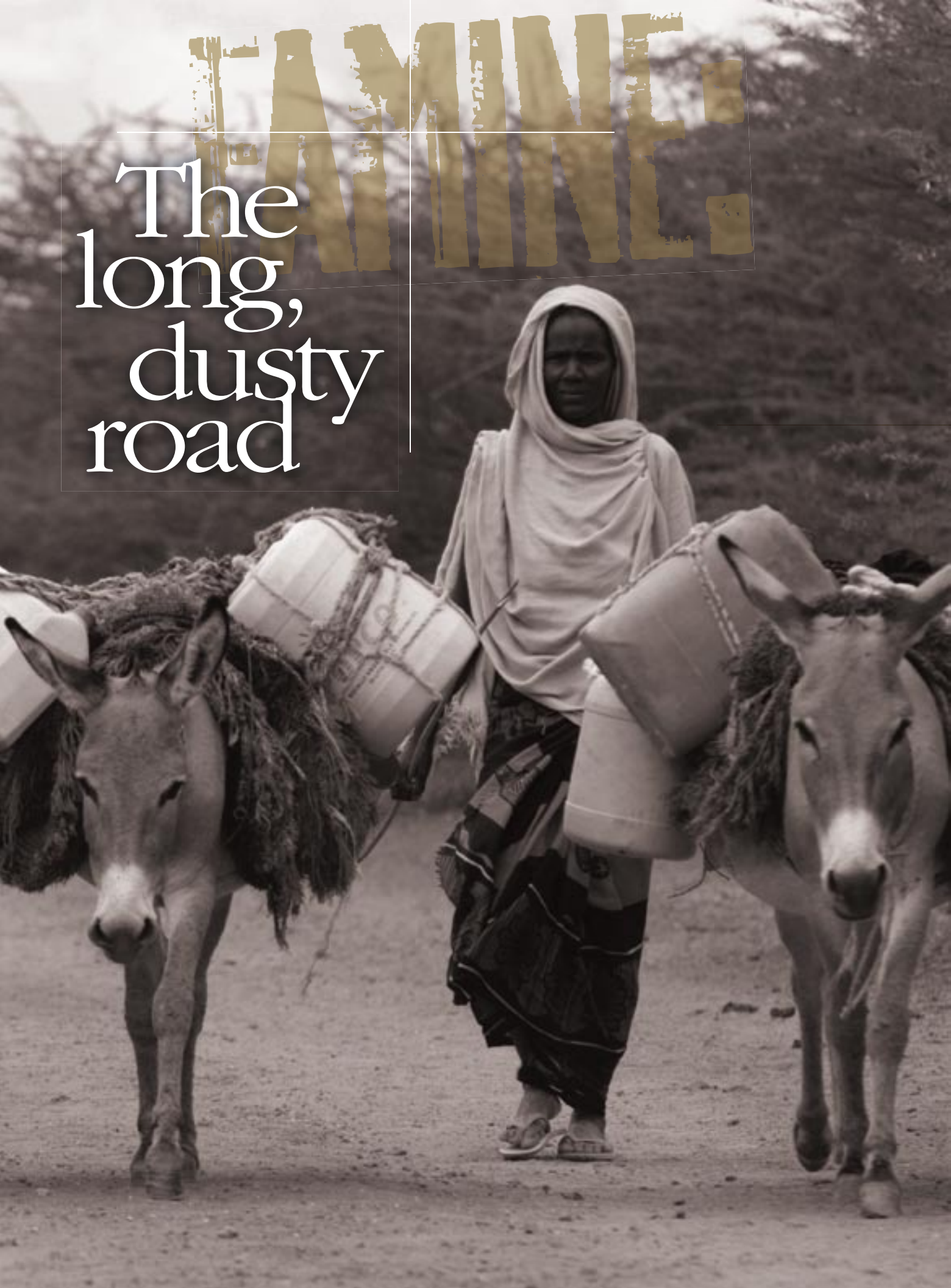
continued on page 15



The
long,
dusty
road

FAMINE

The long, dusty road



weeks earlier that Africans are among the most resilient and hopeful people, these villagers have only desperation in their eyes. Everything within me wants to stop and help them with food and clean water.

An elderly man, squatting alongside the road, stretches out his hand toward our speeding Land Rover. Our eyes meet only momentarily — though it feels like an eternity. Stopping to help the man isn't a consideration for our Kenyan driver who says we are behind schedule. The elderly man's gaunt face and lifeless eyes continue to haunt me.

"Lord, if that man is still there on our way back I promise I'll give him food and a bottle of water," I pray.

Thirty minutes later, a Land Rover in our caravan has a flat tire, so we pile out to stretch our legs. It's only then I understand how dry and dusty this land really is. The powderlike sand fills my throat and nostrils. A swallow of water is the only relief.

Wiping perspiration from my brow and sunglasses, I notice the trees and bushes slumping like weary soldiers after a prolonged battle. The sun hides behind one huge dark cloud. But my hopes of rain are dashed when I discover it is only a dust cloud.

Like a mirage, a caravan of families and camels laden with empty water receptacles approaches from a distance. Through an interpreter a young man tells us they have traveled three days without locating water and their food supply is running out. The cattle groan incessantly as if pleading for an oasis or an unpolluted puddle of water.

A member of our team hands bottles of water to one of the nomads. He smiles and bows his head as if given a new lease on life. Nevertheless, he cannot waste any more time talking with us. He must press on, knowing time is running out for his young family and cattle.



In contrast, my mind flashes back to the nutritious meal, bottles of chilled water and long soothing shower I took the night before in Nairobi. Those simple privileges are beyond reach for millions in Africa.

Peering at the camels and families as they kick up a wake of dust, Mike says, “Over a period of time, when they get less and less rain, people’s capacity to rebound is lowered and they finally reach bottom. They die or just give up.”

As tears well up in his eyes, he adds, “These desperate people, on a daily basis, have to decide how they’re going to win the battle against poverty, famine and disease. This is an urgent hour. I believe in long-term economic development, but we can’t tell these people we’ll build a boat to save them and hope that it gets to them before they drown. Jesus wants us to meet their immediate needs first, then help them develop long-term solutions through training and other areas such as water systems.”

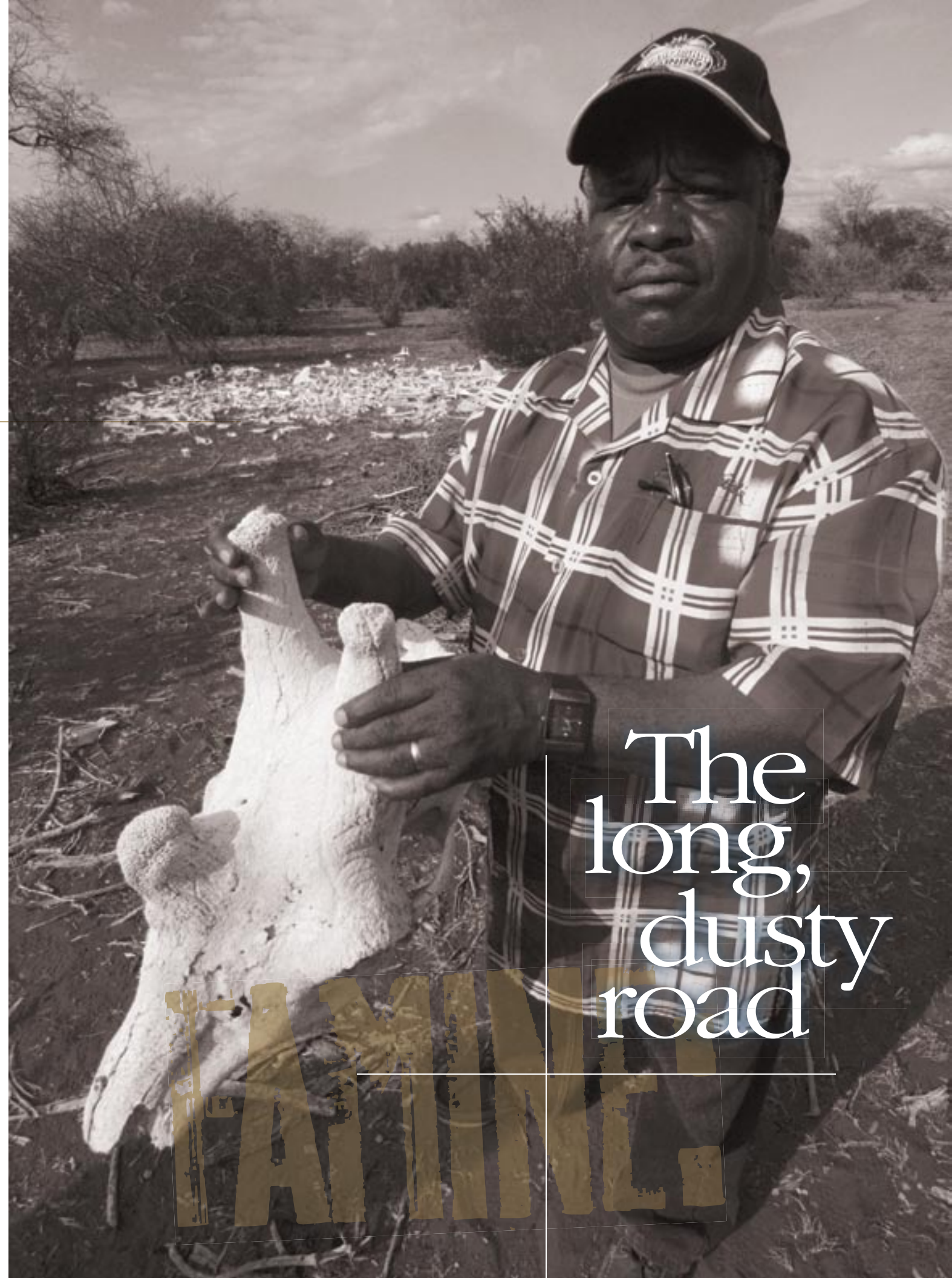
According to Greg, we have the ability to help many of these villages combat drought through water interventions.

“In communities where we can’t drill a well, we can help harvest water with guttering cisterns,” he says. “We can also help them with water purification, producing clean water from existing water sources.”

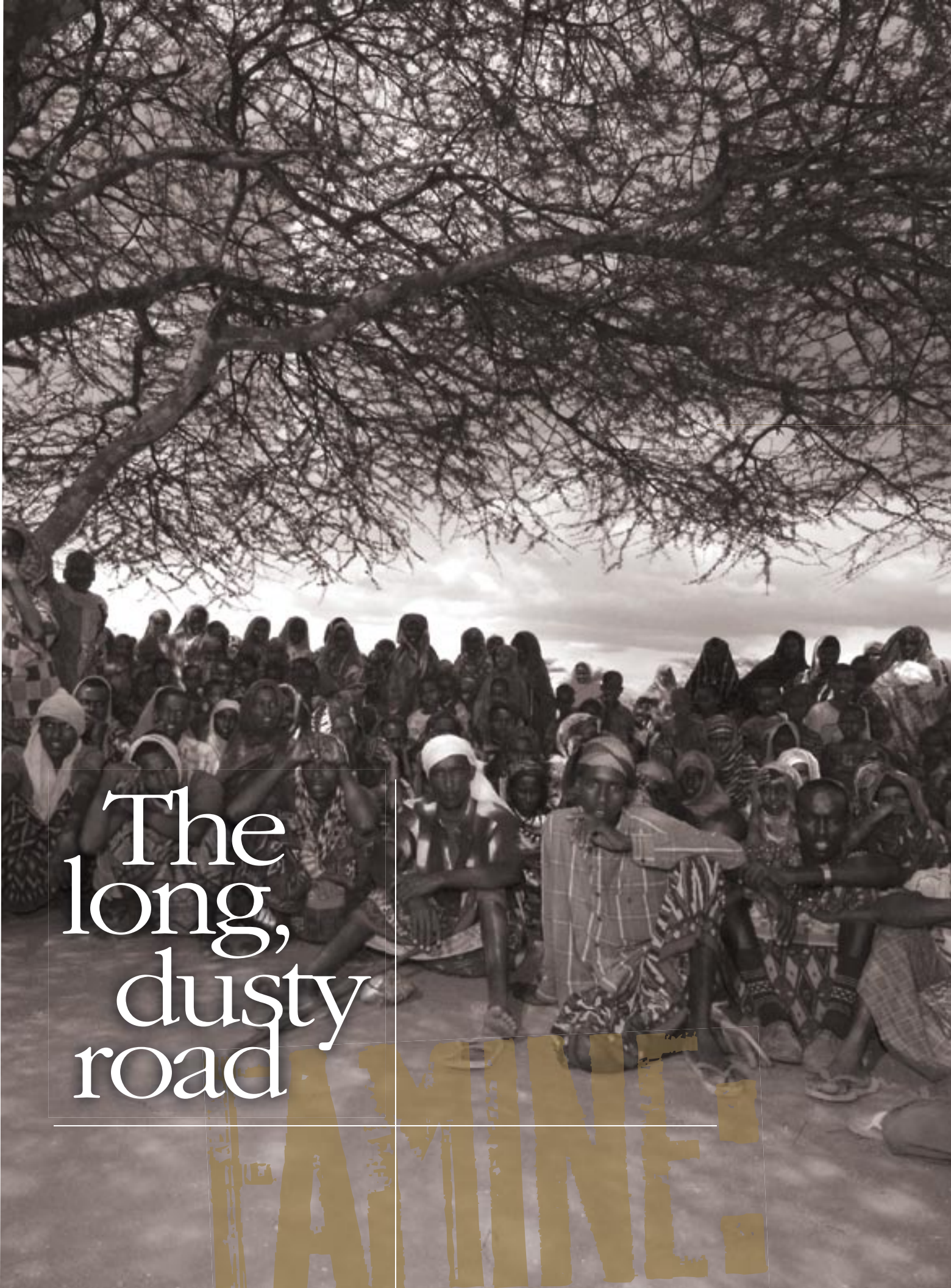
Tragically, Pastor Njiri says, many Kenyans have died trying to dig their own wells. Lowered by ropes, they dig by hand only to have the walls cave in on them. Others have died from methane gases in the wells. And even when water is found, there is no guarantee it will be fit for consumption.

Our caravan finally arrives at Reba, and a celebration commences among the villagers. Men and children dance. Women sing. Two men are blowing horns.

continued on page 19



The
long,
dusty
road



The long, dusty road

AMINE!



We are ushered to a head table stationed under a thatched canopy. A young boy rushes to the table, begging for a morsel of food or something to drink. I reach into my pocket to retrieve my cassette recorder, not realizing he thinks I'm rifling my pockets to find something for him to eat. He dips his head in disappointment before being whisked away by a village elder.

Mike leans over and whispers, "Hal, these people don't understand what is compelling us to help them. They're seeing something different in us. Before the drought, they never would have invited Christians to come here for any reason."

The chief rises from his chair to speak. Instantly and respectfully, all the dancing ceases. The chief extends a welcome and thanks us for helping to bring food and water to his village. Then he introduces the government official who accompanied us.

In the indigenous language, the official says, "These friends have come very far to bring you help. Water is on its way. Food is on its way. We promised to bring these men who could help you. That day is here."

The villagers erupt in cheers.

A member of the tribal council steps through the crowd and speaks on behalf of the people. "We have many needs," he says. "Some of our people and much of our cattle have died. Will you help us restock our animals and provide food and medicines? Will you help us start a school?"

The eyes of the villagers are fixed on us, anticipating our response.

The spokesperson then delivers a letter to Pastor Njiri containing a list of their needs. In response, Pastor Njiri addresses the village: "We have seen and heard your needs and will work hard to help you. We want to share with

Editor in Chief Hal Donaldson in Kenya



you what God has shared with us. We have brought food and bottles of water with us.”

He points to a large truck filled with supplies provided by Assemblies of God World Missions and Convoy of Hope.

“This is just a beginning of what is to come,” he says.

Again the villagers cheer.

Pastor Njiri introduces Mike and Greg, who reiterate the general superintendent’s commitment to bring aid. Mike says, “With the help of God, the Kenya Assemblies of God and others, we will help you.”

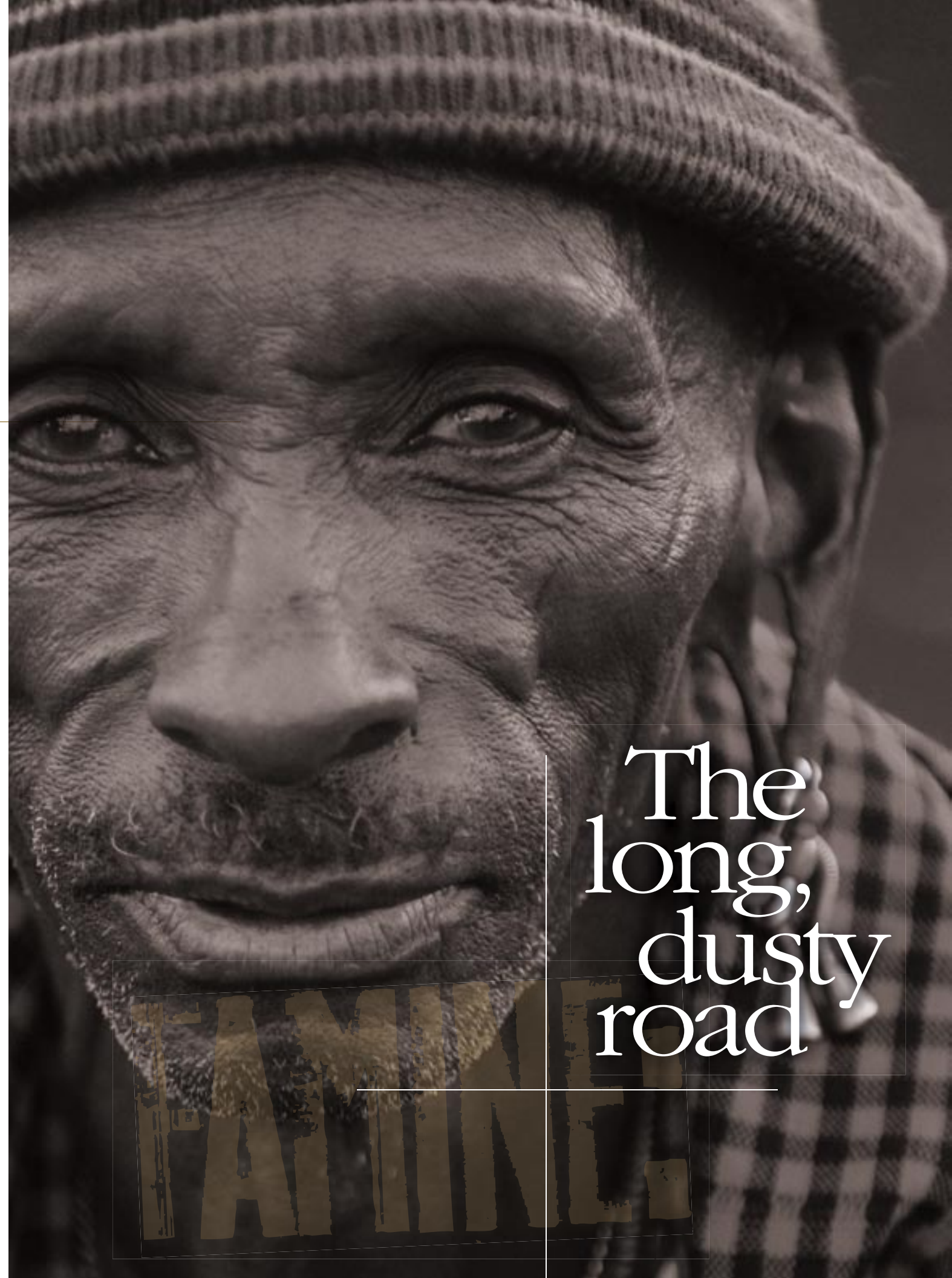
The chief instructs his people to form a line behind the relief truck to receive food and water. Immediately villagers press in around the vehicle, and wary soldiers step in to ensure a civil distribution of supplies.

Once the task is complete, the chief leads us to their lone water source — a small, stagnant, receding pond. Cow dung near the water’s edge suggests that animals drink from the same pond. Mosquitoes are plentiful and it’s obvious that malaria is a real danger.

A short distance from the pond is the Majitech drilling rig. As it pounds through rock, the village chief looks on with anticipation, hoping it will soon strike water and ease the suffering of his people.

We load into the Land Rovers and start our return trip down the long, dusty road. We enter the village where, hours earlier, we had sped past the elderly man with an outstretched hand. Now he is nowhere to be found. Sorrow overwhelms me, and I try to swipe away the tears. I grieve — not just over one elderly man and a lost opportunity, but for millions of Africans on the edge of starvation. **tpe**

HAL DONALDSON is editor in chief of *Today’s Pentecostal Evangel*. E-mail your comments to tpe@ag.org.



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