

Clockwise from top left: Children excitedly welcome Islamic Relief staff to their school in Oulessebege; The barren desert of Gourma Rharous, where Islamic Relief is implementing a project titled, "Turning the Desert Green"; A hut in the middle of the Sahara Desert which serves as a classroom for about 50 young children; A U.S. volunteer stands in awe of the green fields in the middle of the deserts of Gourma Rharous.
 (© Islamic Relief USA / Mohammad Mertaban)

A handful of volunteers, fellow Islamic Relief USA staff and I bobbled and bounced in the backseats of three 4x4s as our eyes scanned the dusty horizon on the lookout for vegetation.

We were on our way to an Islamic Relief project called "Turning the Desert Green" and despite the scorching sun, we were anxious to see what the desert looks like... green.

As the noon sun beamed down on our caravan of SUVs, we passed occasional huts and stray camels, but we saw very few people. I assumed they were seeking refuge from the stinging February sunshine. I could only imagine the Sahara's scorching summer—I was told it would be something to the tune of 135 degrees Fahrenheit.

But the sun wasn't the locals' biggest concern; they were used to it. The major concern in this area was the availability of water.

In the desert, water is a valuable resource. Where there is water, there is a relatively easy life. When water is absent, life becomes an everyday struggle.

Islamic Relief-Mali staff members told me they were racing against the clock to dig wells and install water pumps for villages across the country.

In Gourma Rharous, Islamic Relief had installed 22 water pumps and yet hundreds of households were still living miles away from drinkable water sources and the youngest of them were the most affected.

From the early morning, we saw dozens of children, many of them girls, embarking on their daily trek for water. A local told us these children walked miles every day to fetch water; it was their job. But they didn't earn a salary for this chore, just the right to live another day.

We all learned the value of water in the Sahara. When we would wash up before prayer or after a meal, we would have less than half a cup of water to work with. It truly made us appreciate the availability of water.

This is the difficult lifestyle of the desert. But I soon learned that these badlands buzzed with potential.

TURNING THE DESERT GREEN

In the middle of what seemed like nowhere, a large group of locals dressed in bright traditional garb and headaddresses were gathered under a huge tree when we pulled up in our SUVs. Most of them were standing, perfectly poised for our arrival.

I jumped out of the Toyota, and the stinging heat greeted me along with scores of dust-covered children who began surrounding us. They were laughing and shouting, as they jumped around us. Just like everywhere else we went in Mali, the people celebrated our arrival the best way they know how: love and emotion.

It was nice to be celebrated, but I was in awe to see a viable village in the middle of the Sahara desert.

A group of huts lined the distance, but what caught my eye was a glimmering water pump next to a big hut, which I later found out was a school for the nearly 100 children that we saw. The presence of water not only allowed the people to settle here, but also allowed the children to go to school instead of fetching water all day.

But I was even more fascinated when I noticed what most people would have probably thought was a mirage: vast greenery in the middle of the desert. Across from the school, a large field of crops reached for the sky with an irrigation ditch dividing the field in half.

Islamic Relief had not only dug wells and installed water pumps in the region, but it had also irrigated dozens of acres of land, giving more than 85 families the chance to cultivate their soil.

Now fathers didn't have to travel far away to make a living. Now children didn't have to walk miles and miles in the scorching sun just to fetch some water. To them, it was a dream come true, and it wasn't hard to decipher that judging by how excited they were to see us.

By the time I was done soaking everything in, I noticed that everyone had already begun making their way towards the crop fields, and I put my head down and ran after them, kicking up dust behind me.

Panting, I stopped just shy of the canal and put my





Clockwise from top left: A young girl drinks from the irrigation ditch set up by Islamic Relief in the Sahara Desert; A young girl pauses to suck the last drops of water off her fingers after drinking from an irrigation ditch Islamic Relief set up in the middle of the Sahara; A local desert dweller works in fields irrigated by Islamic Relief through the "Turning the Desert Green" project. © Islamic Relief USA / Mohammad Mertaban



hands on my knees. I looked up, and all I could see was green fields. It spanned for what seemed like forever.

Behind me, sand and desolate desert stretched as far as the eye could see, while right in front of my eyes I saw life, plants that made a home in the desert.

That's when I realized that I shouldn't be sad about the suffering I saw in Mali. If there could be life in the barren land of the Sahara desert, then surely there could be hope in the poorest quarters of Africa's villages and cities.

ISLAMIC RELIEF IN MALI

Mali is one of the poorest countries in the world, and that's exactly what I kept reminding myself when I visited the country with an Islamic Relief USA delegation earlier this year.

But no matter how hard I tried to prep myself mentally, there was nothing that could have prepared me for experiencing life without electricity and running water. It was a different lifestyle. Even the international airport in the country's capital and most-developed city, Bamako, didn't have running water in the airport's only bathroom.

And that was just the beginning.

We visited a handful of the more than 1,400 orphaned children that Islamic Relief donors support in Mali, and we had to step over garbage and raw sewage just to enter most of their homes because they didn't have indoor plumbing.

The sewage attracted lots of insects. Since I knew that malaria is common in the region, I was especially paranoid of any buzzing noise and the children often burst in laughter when they saw me swatting away harmless flies. But when night fell, things became more serious as the deadly anopheles mosquito roamed the sticky air. I could only imagine how the children slept at night if they didn't have a bed net.

Islamic Relief set up a malaria clinic that helps hundreds of children and pregnant mothers every day. Malaria is endemic to more than 90 percent of Mali's population, so it was very important for Islamic Relief to fight the deadly but preventable disease.

We learned how \$10-worth of medicine could save an infected baby's life, and how a \$10 insecticide-

treated bed net could help a child sleep safely at night without the threat of malaria. After visiting the clinic, our entire team left with tears in our eyes when we found out that most of the children we saw at the clinic would have died without the treatment they received.

I was appalled to see the conditions that the children lived in, but I was told that they were some of the best off in their neighborhoods. This was difficult to accept, but I was encouraged to see what the support of our friends and donors has helped Islamic Relief accomplish in Mali.

The team and I visited Islamic Relief projects around the country and learned how you are helping the people in many different ways.

In addition to supporting orphans, Islamic Relief was also helping their widowed mothers become more independent through Islamic microfinance projects. We visited several groups of widows that had banded together to start small businesses like a soap "factory" and a peanut butter cooperative.

In the rural deserts of northern Mali, an Islamic Relief team was racing around the country digging wells to help provide clean water to villages and schools.

A clean source of water meant that children didn't have to fetch water all day, and could go to school. It also helps eliminate waterborne disease, which claims more lives each year than any other cause, including violence.

We also visited schools that Islamic Relief was supporting, and I've never seen children so motivated and happy to be in school, despite broken benches, decaying desks and cramped classrooms.

But what most stands out in my mind wasn't the dismal conditions of the classrooms, but instead the bright smiles on the children's faces. They were genuinely thankful for the opportunity to learn, and I wanted to make sure to pass the word on to the people back in the United States.

The people of Mali are a resilient people. They haven't allowed poverty and disease to dampen their spirits. They don't want hand outs, they want a helping hand to help guide them out of poverty. And after seeing the work with my own eyes, I'm convinced that's exactly how you're helping them when you support Islamic Relief's projects in Mali.