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ATHLETICS

US runner and author's desire to build Eldoret hospital stays alive



File | NATION Runners snake their way through the Iten town course last year during the annual Shoe4Africa women's run. This year's race, organised by American writer and runner Toby Tanser, takes place on Friday at the same venue.

By JONATHAN KOMEN jkomen@ke.nationmedia.com Posted Tuesday, December 21 2010 at 21:00

IN SUMMARY

- Toby Tanser back for annual Shoe4Africa race in Iten this weekend as he continues fund-raising programmes

He stood on the sidelines of the Indian Ocean bleeding profusely as he writhed in pain after two robbers attacked him and made away with his running shoes.

Despite the grievous harm he sustained from the attack, Toby Tanser, an American writer and athlete, returned to his motherland and made a life-changing decision.

And barely 10 years later, Tanser has a soft spot for the African child as he runs the Shoe4Africa charity race in the North Rift which gives cash rewards and issues shoes to all the participants.

This year's race will be run in Iten this Friday. Tanser, who is also the founder and chief executive officer of the Shoe4Africa organisation, has raised funds towards the construction of a children's general public hospital in Eldoret town, which will be the largest children's hospital in the Sub-Saharan Africa.

Terrifying situation

This Friday, hundreds of women runners will battle for honours which include Christmas gifts at this year's Shoe4Africa race.

In the Indian Ocean incident, Tanser was severely injured on the right side of his head and was covered in wounds and bruises while his wrist was lacerated to the bone.

The sand at his feet was awash with crimson blood and he was in a terrifying situation. No one was around on the deserted shore, and he had a choice – bleed to death on the beach, or try to run for help.

With one foot in the Ocean and one foot on the sand, to aid in direction as his vision was blurred and he had lost one shoe one eye, he chose to run.

He had been attacked by two men, one yielding a machete, the other a large wooden club. They robbed him his track suits and made way with one shoe.

"My eyes became open to Africa. I thought if people were trying to kill people for a pair of running shoes then let me bring shoes over from the Western countries where there is plenty! And I did it," said Tanser who is also a member of the board of directors at the ING New York City Marathon.

It was the start of a mission that has grown into one of the biggest sporting charities in Kenya, the Shoe4Africa foundation.

Two weeks ago, Tanser returned to the coast of Africa, this time not to run looking for medical help, but running for a unity of purpose, to raise money for the children's hospital in Eldoret, which will be the biggest and the first General Public Children's Hospital in the Sub Sahara region.

With his friend, Rodney Cutler, a celebrity hairdresser in New York City, and a fellow board member, Tanser led Kenyans in a race from the coastline in Mombasa to Mt Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, stretching a distance of 65-kilometres a day.

The team ascended to the peak of Kilimanjaro in a race dubbed "from the sea to the stars."

Globetrotting elite runners, among them world half marathon record holder, Kenyan-born-Dutchwoman Lornah Kiplagat, and Fabiano Joseph, the man who received his first running shoes from the Shoe4Africa programme, are supporting Tanser's cause and Friday's race.

