

New goal: Lauren McMahon, left, and Libby Wann are off to climb Mt Kilimanjaro to raise money for the Kenya Children's Fund. Picture: ANDREW GORRIE

Charity pair take raising funds to icy extremes



Two women head to Africa to climb Mt Kilimanjaro – to help Kenya's orphans, writes **Paul Mulrooney.**

CHARITY workers Lauren McMahon, 29, and Libby Wann, 28, are used to living life on the edge – a sensation the pair will get to experience again as they head to an unstable Kenya.

The two women, who moved to Wellington last year from Melbourne and Colorado respectively, left yesterday for Africa as trek leaders for a fund-raising hike up Mt Kilimanjaro.

A week ago the trip to raise money for the Kenya Children's Fund would have been viewed as bold, but with reports of violent political unrest there grabbing the world's headlines, it is also brave – they deny it's foolish.

The pair work for the Global Volunteer Network, which offers volunteers opportunities in 28 community projects throughout the world. Its catchment includes Kenya, where it has organisers who have assured the trekkers that tensions have eased after the turmoil sparked by allegations of rigged elections.

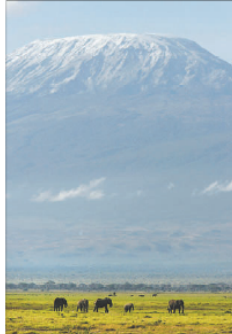
It is an assurance the pair, with 16 other global volunteers, have taken on trust as they seek to distribute up to US\$35,000 (NZ\$45,900) raised for orphaned Kenyan children.

A visit to one of the world's biggest slums, at Kibera in Nairobi, has been changed but an otherwise busy schedule, first climbing Africa's highest peak then visiting charity projects including orphanages, will continue as planned.

"It is unnerving," Ms McMahon said of the unrest.

"But speaking with our partner on the ground, she does paint a slightly toned-down picture, saying the incidents have been more isolated than what has been on television."

The Foreign Affairs Ministry here advises against non-essential travel to Kenya, describing security as "high risk" throughout the country.



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Lauren McMahon

Ms McMahon said that though not ideal, the circumstances did not warrant cancelling the trip.

"The fact is all the volunteers [in Kenya] have gone back to working on their projects."

Each volunteer had to raise US\$2000 toward the orphans' cause in a country where 1.7 million children are classed by the government as not having any parents.

Both trek leaders raised money through activities such as photo exhibitions, selling calendars and hosting work functions.

They have prepared for the assault on the 5895-metre (19,340-foot) snow-capped Kilimanjaro, on the border of Kenya and Tanzania, with regular climbs in the Rihutakas and the Hutt Valley hills.

The height of the peak is something the adventure-seeking Ms McMahon finds more imposing than any reports of political instability.

"I went skydiving a few weeks ago and that was at 15,000 feet. I think this mountain is higher than the [altitude of] the plane."

▶ UNEXPECTED UNREST

■ About 370 people have died and 250,000 people are homeless in post-election violence in Kenya. The unrest began after supporters of opposition leader Raila Odinga accused President Mwai Kibaki of rigging the December 27 vote.

■ Kenyan politics is entwined with tribalism. Mr Kibaki is a member of the Kikuyu tribe and its traditional enemy is the Luo tribe, which includes Mr Odinga. There has never been a Luo president in Kenya's 44 years of independence from Britain.

■ Luo believe their chance of having one of their own in charge has been stolen from them.

■ The outbreaks of violence, characterised by bloodletting between the two tribes, puts at risk Kenya's image as the stable state



of Africa. It is a key Western ally in the war on terror, with capital Nairobi a hub for the UN and aid agencies. It is also one of Africa's biggest tourist destinations.

