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AFRIQUES: COMMENT CA VA AVEC LA DOULEUR?

(FRENCH — DOCU)

A Gemaci release (in France) of a Palmarie & Desert/Canal Plus production. (International sales: Canal Plus, Paris.)

Directed, written by Raymond Depardon. Camera (color), Depardon; editor, Roger Ikhlef; sound, Depardon, Claudine Nougaret. Reviewed at St.-Andre-des-Arts cinema, Paris, Nov. 6, 1996. Running time: **168 MIN.**

In the course of three years, award-winning French photographer and documaker Raymond Depardon spent five months traversing the length of Africa, from the Cape of Good Hope to Alexandria, armed with only a movie camera, a tripod, a tape recorder and his own sensibilities. Visually engaging result bears the personal stamp of its author, who uses lengthy takes to communicate the scale and human drama of a struggling continent. The docu's cumulative impact is both touching and informative, although its length may make it a hard sell to audiences not predisposed toward leisurely cinema, however revelatory or well lensed.

Depardon's relationship with Africa goes back more than 30 years. With a grant from the Fondation de France, he improvised his travels, returning to spots, visiting new countries and taking in a few sites that had been unreachable on former visits. He ends up back in the courtyard of the family farm where he grew up and from which he set out to cover the world, particularly its political hot spots. (Depardon is a founder of the Gamma Photo Agency and a two-time Cesar winner for best docu.)

Helmer's outstanding 1994 documentary, "Caught in the Acts," about petty criminals being questioned by Paris police, brimmed with irony and humor as well as poignancy. Here the tone is reverent, sometimes melancholy, and always respectful of current realities and the burden of personal and national history.

Depardon's offscreen commentaries range from personal reminiscences to more traditional narration, taking in subjects like the colonial roots of genocide in Rwanda, the estimated 10 million land mines in Angola, the spread of AIDS and the travails of displaced and abandoned populations subsisting on whatever international humanitarian aid isn't diverted en route.

Helmer frequently offers stately 360-degree pans of his locations, which, though often bleak, strangely menacing or majestic, are never pedestrian or dull. Great light and impressive faces abound. But it could be argued that a 360-degree pan of a garbage dump outside Paris would be as misleading a representation of France as a similar image of Africa here.

Title, which translates literally as "Africa(s): How's Your Pain?," refers to an affectionate greeting the director heard in Chad some 20 years ago. Meaning is something like "How goes it, despite our region's inconveniences?"

—Lisa Nesselson