

Week ending 9.1.10

The return to 'work' has meant fewer events this week and this brief should be brief. It started with a visit to the VSO office, here in Fajara, to start to get my papers in order- after the trouble I had recently had with policemen and the car I am not prepared to tempt fate by giving them an opportunity to question any indiscretions. Unlike UK systems of ongoing licences, taxes, passports, etc everything here expires at the New Year so I need a new Alien (ID) card, driving licence update, car tax and residential permit to keep my nose clean. The police are supposed to give consideration for the enormous backlog of administration this creates for the civil servants, and so allow things to pass until the start of March, but with the "we must apply the law equally to all" lectures I have been getting I expect there will be more hassle created for me. I now know how the black and Asian population in London feel about the "stop/suss" law applied by the Metropolitan Police.

Our home also suffered its first 'racist' attack staged to appear as an 'accident'. Some building and decorating work has been completed in the adjacent compound and somehow white paint was splashed over a seven foot wall to land in front of John's veranda and 10 metres away on the steps of our own front door. John confronted the neighbour - who suggested an accident but his attitude suggests otherwise.

I had been warned to expect a slow return to college by the students, from our veteran volunteer, Anne, and so it proved. Monday's lectures were officially cancelled but students cancelled Tuesday themselves. I used the time to check out my *field of dreams*; the crops have been harvested so some local lads have made another football pitch on my intended plot (including Gumbar tree posts and rope cross bar) and the locals have found a new site to dump their rubbish! Slash and burn, I fear, is my next step before I get the tractor to level the field; but I just hope that the site's 'security' staff will make more effort to move away from the shade of the mango tree to create anything sustainable. The free time has also given me more time to catch up on emails – so what? you say – well it was a time to treasure as the internet connection was working so efficiently, a rare treat!

I also checked out alternative accommodation on Jinack Island in case we choose to return. Whilst we had been on the island I had taken the children out for a sunrise walk along the beach hoping to see new birdlife and dolphins (suggested in the guide book), we walked through another closed, but developing, lodge resort. Our thoroughfare woke the security guard, who then got on his bike and rode home, but the site was deserted and a banner promised future benefits c/o a website. I checked their website; following a *latest news* link, the article boasted one of the co-owners had been swimming with 10-15 dolphins that same day that we had been ½ a kilometre up the deserted beach! The island has at one time been dubbed *Paradise Lost* – it's definitely lost if such extravagant claims are being created by absent owners.

My rugby plans received a sudden fillip on Wednesday evening, the vice president of the local association- who had done nothing since our meeting in October called to say "we are training now, could you come along?" I asked for the venue; it was somewhere unfamiliar to me so while he was giving me outline directions we became cut off – for the second time. I took the plunge and set off with a general plan to find a football pitch in a suburb of Serrekunda, aware that the sun was sinking so time was against me. Five pitches later, and another confusing phone call (with his non-English speaking wife), I found the correct field and watched actual training drills with a rugby ball. Having met my contact again it was apparent why there had been so little communication; his involvement is so minimal – probably worse than the 'old farts' of the RFU. The session was a 'one off' for the officials to make their faces shown; the other lads have been training twice a week in Serrekunda for a while but the vp didn't even know the venue. The upshot of the encounter was to get

‘approval’ from the committee members and I have been roped in to helping the most experienced player, Bayo, to start coaching on a Tuesday evening (can’t make the other session as it clashes with College lectures). The challenge will be huge; the President suggested a game may be possible in April against Dakar, and future glory in the sevens tournament of the 2016 Olympics! The lads stretched off, then prayed; it’s going to take an awful lot of prayers – of the dozen there, three have played the game, I’m told, but the one with the most suitable build (unfortunately a policeman!) who tried to lead the line was causing most problems with direction and handling (his aspirations to be Johnny Wilkinson will certainly need redirecting). None of the others were taller than myself; I think the Japanese team would tower over them – I have seen some huge soldiers, I hope they can be encouraged to become involved if they are to stand any chance against any forward play at whatever level. Anyway, it’s a start and I’ve got to grasp the opportunity if I am to get to play myself over the next couple of years, and if any Junior team from Middlesbrough fancy an exotic tour destination this is a good opportunity to play an ‘international’; I’d also appreciate a few coaching tips.

Other developments this week have included an invitation to be part of the ‘In country training’ committee. New volunteers arrive in about a month and they will need the guidance we received (or didn’t) from the old heads. Most of the volunteers who arrived with us also face a ‘leaver’s workshop’ as they approach the half way point in their placement; which in turn means we are a quarter of the way through our term. The weather couldn’t be nicer, compared to your suffering, and to indulge in freshly picked sweet tasting fruit is outweighing the ignorant hustle this week; even if I’m still getting Christmas wishes instead of tidings for the New Year, so I can face some more of this life.