

Week ending 27.3.10

As I hear the north-east had another dropping of snow I'll start with the weather. A bit hazy this week, the grey skies carrying dust from the Sahara were a bit breezy but now that's dropped we're in the forties.

Sunday was a quiet at home day as Bradley had the opportunity to wind down after his birthday. In the latter part of the afternoon I had an exhibition rugby match to officiate; the stakes had been raised as we were supposed to play before and during the half time of a higher profile league game. The half-time exhibition was cancelled after our first performance as the local football association required the time for the delayed presentation of a trophy. I was actually quite pleased to get away; the trophy hadn't been awarded in December, when it was due, as the game was abandoned with 15 minutes remaining due to crowd troubles (stone throwing resulting in riot police charges, etc – visiting supporters had been incited and I didn't really fancy being around if they 'visited' again to demonstrate their disappointment).

Monday morning, after such a great week, started with further low feelings following a visit to the VSO office to review emails. The main disappointment was the news that a parcel from Denise's family containing kids Christmas presents, and various other items had been confiscated by customs because it contained mosquito repellent (a DEET brand). Do the Gambians love their mosquitoes so much that we are not allowed to try to stop ourselves from being available to be bitten? I asked the VSO driver, who collects post, whether he was aware of the situation; he asked for a copy of the extra items to investigate and when this was printed out his boss stated no help was possible. My morale dropped, my personal interest was a usb stick with 5 years worth of professional work that I had asked to be sent out, and to think that had gone was too much. I reflected that the confiscated items would probably be sold off through family and friends in the local market and if this was the way my family were to be treated there was no future here; I was tempted to place my name on the long list of proposed leavers over the next 5 months. I subsequently realised my departure would only allow Nuha, Education programme manager, a carte blanche to anaesthetise any progress and continuity I might achieve by remaining. He reprimanded my circulating of a warning to volunteers about packages including DEET suggesting the content 'was not good for the Gambia'.

The Head of the school of Education asked how I had found the week away. I expressed enjoyment but felt I had a professional comment to make after I had conferred with Anne, veteran VSO. She said I would not be sent such great distances again, but answered I would be very disappointed if the opportunity would not recur in the five potential further treks available to me.

Professionally the week was disjointed; the majority of lecturers cancelled lectures to mark their assessments so attendance for the students was similarly lackadaisical. I think the problem is again institutional; Abi & Bradley were bored stupid at school this week and begged to stay off because they were taught nothing, and they were left to sit around to their own devices while the teachers wrote reports based on the tests from the week before (when they were sent home two hours early each day and had Friday off to allow for marking!). I had 200 test papers to mark and grade. I did hold 4 ½ of my 6 classes but importantly had some evaluation forms completed. The responses varied from complaints about my insistence on punctuality (I always wait 10 minutes for latecomers but apparently I should wait an hour!) to appreciations that brought a lump to my throat (so teaching is its own reward).

I have been asked to attend a workshop to create a policy on Early Childhood Development over the Easter break – the college term has ended but government employees are only supposed to rest on bank holidays. ECD(3-5/6 yr olds) is not a field I would profess to have any expert

knowledge but I know I have far more to input than the majority of the Gambian lecturers here – a recent course ensured it taught ‘Grammar’ to the students in favour of Methodology and Play, etc. My goal will be to get the removal of the phrase “Toubab, give me minti/ 5 Dalasi” from the home life training they receive; it underlies the assumption that the Gambian/ African can rely on foreign aid to provide sustenance. This maybe something of a rant but it is rife. Three boys approached fellow walker, James and myself recently – their heads appeared above a wall - and after pleasantries asked for 50 dalasi for a football, James asked “why” and got some sob story about an important game they had to play, I asked “What is wrong with the one by your feet?” which I had seen in its string bag that they had hidden on their approach. They tried to suggest it belonged to someone else so we suggested they should borrow it instead of begging.

The other disputes I have found myself in this week involved our landlady and her employer. Our accommodation is attached to the landlady’s property and previous volunteers had complained about the expectations of a shared electricity bill so a separate prepayment meter had been installed, only it wasn’t wired up correctly and the error was found in January. It was then rewired appropriately, and we have since carefully monitored our electric usage so that we could pay her back an amount we considered appropriate. She asked for 700 dalasi per month, my first calculation had reckoned on 100 dalasi as we had been paying for the greatest consumer of electricity, our fridge - which had been wired up correctly. We are using about 400 dalasi per month (£10 but no TV, washing machine, tumble drier etc) so her request was unreasonable whatever, but that is ‘standard’ practice here, that where shared bills exist the white man gets ripped off. When I discussed matters with veteran Anne, she recounted a tale when she had informed the bill payers that she was going away for a month so wouldn’t be contributing as she would disconnect everything including her fridge they still demanded 800 dalasi, (instead of the occasional 2000 dalasi!) she refused so they cut her wires with a pair of scissors!

On a different tact, but with the landlady’s employer, I challenged the long arm of Uncle Sam. Having been ‘moved on’ some time ago for daring to stop to have a chat on the opposite side of the street to the US embassy I decided to take a slow walk along the pavement directly outside the embassy, stopped to empty my shoe, check some foliage, etc all 5 metres away from the 2m fence denoting ‘American’ soil. It was enough to be taken round the back for a lecture and to have my details taken down, for use against me in the future if I persisted in such flagrant threats against imperial powers. Guantanamo Bay here I come! This may be a diversion from the role I am supposed to have here but I do consider it a moment of advocacy, one of VSO’s paradigms.

Saturday was another *sett-settal* we realised at nine; we had asked a Gambian the evening before, but had been told it wasn’t anticipated 2 weeks after the last one. I used the time to continue practicing my lumber jack skills – or heavy pruning of the fruit trees in the garden. In the afternoon I refereed another exhibition rugby match, 9 v 10 (the biggest so far) and was consequently interviewed by a local paper, again. We had a leaving party in the evening for departing volunteers; the theme was a Murder mystery where I had to play out my alter-ego (not the Tom Jones karaoke star) of Matt Bond, British secret agent, *debonair and devilishly handsome*,(their words, not mine) – it was the hardest part of the week!