

Week ending 21.5.10

I continued to agonise over the best form of action for the sports field development; it had been suggested, by the University Vice Chancellor's PA, that I could loiter in the environs of a posh hotel hoping to catch the Vice Chancellor during a 'down time' of the *Roundtable* conference discussing future funding of the university. I further contemplated a more disruptive approach, by petitioning the *Roundtable* funders with a view to highlight the way the Vice Chancellor behaved towards overseas support, for the Gambia's needs, while he could waste money on white elephant projects like his graduation hall. I did a little internet research by Googling *Roundtable* involvement; it appeared this was not the first occasion they had met – previously a conference had met in London in 2008 – the list of attendees was prominent; topping the list was the Vice President of the country followed by a succession of Ministers of State. In short I bottled it! To raise my head above the parapet and say that funding might be misguided amongst such a group, I thought, could invite no end of difficulties for the remainder of our stay (if I were allowed to stay as a consequence!). I sent an email to the VC instead requesting an appointment while pointing out that I had been trying to do as much since the middle of January.

On Tuesday morning I had arranged to visit Banjul Post Office with Ebrima, VSO logistics manager, to enquire about a missing parcel sent by Denise's family for Christmas. When it hadn't arrived by March an investigation had been launched that had reported the parcel had arrived in Banjul but that as it contained DEET (not DDT!) it had been confiscated. I had raised a query within VSO about the remainder of the package contents accepting that the DEET might be considered a dangerous chemical and, therefore, understandably withheld. Two VSO managers had made no offer of help when I highlighted our plight so I had tried to arrange a visit to the PO with the key holder of the PO Box, Alieu. When he had been unable to support me I had written to the Country Director here, pointing out that things were being stolen from the VSO Post Box for which she was responsible, and that her Managers weren't really doing anything to prevent this corruption. She had directed more support for me, hence the visit. We spoke with their chief of security who spent 5 minutes looking into it – by typing in the number of the UK postage reference into their computer without success. I pointed out that a longer investigation in the UK had informed us that the parcel had arrived and he had a serious security issue if he couldn't find it; they claimed it had not arrived so I suggested an aeroplane must have crashed mysteriously without making the headlines if they really were to be believed. They showed me their paperwork recording systems; I offered to look through them but that isn't allowed. They claimed 3 years worth of unclaimed packages that their staff, selflessly, use their own phone credit to reduce, apparently; I offered to visit the store to check for our stuff-but that isn't allowed either. I have to try and provide further details of consignment numbers so that their computer can resolve issues/ allow Police investigation. I may not be able to retrieve what is lost but as 3 other packages got 'lost' around Christmas, hopefully, the antagonism will make the Post Office here realise that picking on an NGO post box to line your pocket will cause inconvenience and make things better for future volunteers. Incidentally, US Peace Corps have near diplomatic immunity on their incoming post.

Wednesday was supposed to be the 'big sell' of the project from the North bank (a community group involving Alf- of weeks 20 & 29). Having witnessed their entertainment with a Tour Operator, in March, I had approached a rival tour operator to suggest that they could be offering the same experience to their customers – thereby doubling the number of visitors to the project. O.K. it's not teaching but VSO supports advocacy and I used to be a salesman so I am sharing skills that Gambians don't have. Unfortunately, they were wasted on this occasion; having set an appointment 2 weeks previously and confirmed it 2 days before the man we needed to see had been called out on the previous day to attend a conference to arrange the Kanillai festival. Kanillai is the home village of the President so it takes priority on the schedule whoever you are.

It was so disappointing, Alf & Gibrel had caught the first ferry, everything had been going to plan on timings (unGambian), I had got my pitch prepared but then it fell apart through a typically Gambian unplanned knee jerk response. We will have to revisit the operator to try again; Alf & Gibrel were less disappointed than I. I was able to give them some money for their nursery school, which had been donated by visitors from the Oxford-Brookes University ECD department, and discussed applying for a DFID sponsored fund to support their site development. They left happy; Alf left us with some batik clothes! Denise had originally been cautious about the prospect and promise that had been made but she was impressed with her dress, Abi's tabard and the 'suits' made for Bradley and myself (wait a week or so to check us out on Denise's blogsite).

I have been teaching the concepts of measurement education with my students recently and made a remarkable discovery on Thursday. For the first time in my teaching career I am not the heaviest person in the classroom! Only just! The students enjoyed the opportunity to get on a set of bathroom scales to measure their weight – some slipped extra weights and stones in their pockets to exaggerate their mass – but they insisted I should be weighed also. I found myself to be 2kg lighter than the heaviest member of the class. The lad concerned is 2-3” taller than myself so it should be the case but I know I am below a good weight for rugby but these Gambian students would fit ideally on BMI scale = no heart disease but little defence against malaria.

I have been able to set wheels in motion to create another rugby centre in the Gambia. Margaret Medland, the woman responsible for the current state of rugby affairs here has a scout troop named after her, and they have learnt to play tag rugby through her involvement and annual visits of the Kent RFU Junior coaches. I had borrowed some equipment, to facilitate the instruction of the 450 Trainee teachers at College, from her compound recently which triggered a request for my involvement. I set out on Friday afternoon, to visit a village off the beaten track, with a bag of tag belts to fortunately find myself sat next to the Akela of the Cub pack I intended to visit-some coincidence-but it made finding the place so much easier. Hopefully, in a couple of months I can start to report on competitive rugby between teams on the Gambia.

Next week involves co-facilitating a workshop up country in Mansa-konko; tomorrow I complete my walk of the coast of Gambia; with things condensed over the weekend this week's report for Saturday will have to be completed next week.