

Week ending 2.10.10

I didn't realise how much my fishing contribution had taken out of me until the Sunday evening when I went to my beach rugby session; jaded was the best excuse I could find for a lacklustre contribution. The heat may also have been a factor. This week has been one of the hottest and the phrase 'darkest Africa' more appropriate as dark steamy skies that haven't brought much rain have pushed humidity levels up to the sort they suggest in Bear Grylls survival jungle treks. And whilst he gets whisked away to his air-conditioned hotel after dark we are still lacking electricity most of the time. This is draining the morale of Denise and myself; the utility providers have made a radio apology, and news has it that they have now received the parts required for a necessary overhaul so things will get worse before getting better. This is written by candle light – I get the laptop recharged at the VSO office.

On Monday Bradley woke up asking to go to the clinic; as he has had too many needle experiences there it was a sign of how ill he felt. After a 2 ½ hour wait the diagnosis was a chest infection but as he had suffered breathing difficulties he was put on an electronic nebuliser in an observation room. We may slate the NHS for hygiene in the UK and while the clinic is amongst the best in the Gambia, whilst in the room an auxiliary/cleaner was summoned to scrub algae from one of the corners, adjacent to a bed; I also killed 4 mosquitoes which weren't full of blood, but a worrying brown mottled liquid.

On Tuesday I went to college, as much to convince myself I could continue with my time off but also to collect some paperwork that I had previously requested. The consequence of the paper evidence was to highlight a mistake in the calculation of my allowances. As the College is so poorly supported by official departments, whilst pay has been rising for teachers nationwide (the basis for my allowance then subsidised by VSO) this had not been recognised within the College. I have been suffering a pay freeze for a period from before my arrival equivalent to approximately £10 a month; a further increment has left me £25 a month further behind fellow volunteers. I am due a back payment so I should be grateful but it has been good practice for the austerity measures I face on return to the UK.

The remainder of the week passed without major incident – Abi did have her first day off school since arrival, with a stomach complaint which has developed into a sore throat, and I did manage to teach a large Ugandan to swim. The living conditions are challenging in further ways. Our chopping board managed to develop a white mould overnight when left on our one work surface, toadstools also grew the same night by the sink, and my pair of 'decent' leather shoes have grown the sort of mould you get on week old bread(this despite silica gel packets in the wardrobe where they were stored).

The college year restarts on Monday so another anniversary approaches. I won't complete this academic year at the college but I will have to make my own learning of the last year count if I am to create a more lasting legacy. The legacy I would like to leave is a sustainability that would enable VSO to extricate itself from the Gambia; the problem I fear is that proving my effectiveness is not what the local VSO office really wants - as that would deny them their 'gravy train' of easy European funded aid. VSO have rationalised their strategies, and undoubtedly costs, over recent years but there must be a better way of allowing the developing world to develop without the skew of non-governmental organisations such as the UN development project which allows disproportionate wages for cleaners and security guards (frequently sleeping on the job) to earn more than the nation's professional teachers (even those not on Gambia College book's!).