

## Week ending 18.12.10

Sunday was a wind down from the party; for only the second time since we have been living here have I managed to sleep after 8am – normally the light and birdsong stirs us by 7.15 at the latest. Through the small part of the morning that I interacted we listened to a volunteer's recount of a 'concert' she had attended, held by Jamaican artist *Busy Signal*, playing about a mile from our home earlier that morning. I had warned her to expect a late start - despite the gates opening at 1pm on Saturday, for warm up acts to start at 6. She arrived at 11 to witness a 2 ½ hour running battle between fans and riot police/militia involving batons and tear gas – a wholly unimaginable scenario to our European views.

After helping to finish off the party egg-nog through the afternoon I attended beach touch rugby – played poorly – but before hand met with a holidaying Welsh rugby follower due to return to the UK on the following afternoon. He wished to discuss what help he could provide with the promotion of rugby here; hopefully a useful lead as Andy, a Rotarian recently helped to raise £45,000 from his community for the Haitian disaster.

VSO held a conference for those of us working in the Education sector for the first 3 days of the week. It's the third such conference I've attended and this time I was very much the 'old guard' with the most experience and time in the country. It was also a case of saying farewell to some volunteers who have come, and will be leaving shortly, within the time we have been here. I raised some concerns about the strategic planning of the management if VSO are to achieve their goals in light of government cutbacks; but really wonder whether goals will be reached while the volunteer basis is so transitory. The venue for the conference had wifi facilities so I was able to get up to date with communications.

Thursday was declared a bank holiday to celebrate the Islamic New Year. It's strange to have a random public holiday in the middle of the week instead of the Monday norm to which we are accustomed. The weather was cloudy so not really a beach day; we walked to a local 'illegal' settlement with some clothing donations from the couple I had met on Sunday. We had previously walked through the settlement, shocked by the poverty, and near shanty town-ness of the area in between more affluent areas and recently had been unable to pass through as fencing had been erected. The fencing had been built after the President had visited the area and declared it illegal, citing the quarry origins as being unsafe, and recommended its clearance by December. With the family and neighbour Lynn I carried a plastic sack over my shoulder and we were mobbed by children along the way. The settlement was still there when we arrived – we were introduced to an elder who received the clothes with thanks; but he did ask for sponsorship of some of their school children. He explained that the fencing had been placed next to the posh houses after the 'natural disaster' - heavy rains in September had flooded away some of their houses. In one sense it was a semi- King Wenceslas gesture but there's little sign of the sense of St. Stephen's feast – I think I have now seen THREE Christmas trees in the shops around here, while you're probably on your three hundredth encounter!

The validation workshop required from the work on creating a training manual two weeks ago was cut short by the bank holiday and instead supposed to include Friday and Saturday; but was completed by the panel on the one day of Friday. On this

occasion I was working with Gambians higher up the education hierarchy; some had to leave to attend a meeting with the Permanent Secretary of State for Education. Tom and I did complete editing the manual introduction on Saturday morning, so again stretched ourselves beyond Gambian expectations. And so my term ended, not in a classroom but producing potential direction changing policies - maybe I will have made a difference. The bottom line is – this is Africa and the rules are so different; you ask a Gambian for their opinion on ‘nearby’ Ivory Coast and Bagbo is the President, despite any international statements to the contrary, opposers are rebels, end of story.

On Saturday afternoon the kids were allowed their main concession to our Western lifestyle to visit Father Christmas on his only appearance at the one toy store in the country. The event didn’t hold the same engagement as last year but the kids enjoyed it with English friends (the beekeepers from Lamin) and I’m sure next year a visit to Santa won’t be held with as much anticipation as it can here.

So, on a personal note it is a second Christmas away from ‘home’, it sounds daft to say it but a bit of snow would be brilliant here, but other than that we’re soldiering on. Reviewing my work at our conference I suggested last year ‘I couldn’t see the wood for the trees’ but now I can see the wood amongst the trees so I don’t want to bore with more reflection. We are escaping the Gambia for two weeks in a chic resort in Senegal so will sign off here until January with

**MERRY CHRISTMAS & A HAPPY NEW YEAR**

From the four of us.