

June 27, 2008

We (Megan and I) met Flory at Bujumbura Post Office at 8:00am and took private car to Burundi/DRC border, approximately 30 minutes drive, providing an opportunity to ask him questions about himself and the organization. He he was born in eastern DRC but left to attend school in South Africa. He actually lives now in Burundi, just across the DRC border in the capital, along with his wife. He travels frequently across, seemed very familiar with the crossing procedures and has a special passport/visa that allows him to cross back and forth without paying the full \$40 each entry to DRC and \$20 to Burundi.

He didn't seem to mind when I asked him about his travels to UK, though he didn't volunteer information. He was in Belfast and Coventry, for just over a month, attending an International Peace-building Conference. He said a church in Coventry hosted him, but did not mention who was footing the bill for airfare, etc. At that point he started to seem reluctant to discuss his involvement, so I switched topics to the school.

The school opened in 2003, and the current enrollment was ~220 students in primary and 2 years of secondary. The vocational school used to have ~35 students, but had lost many when they raised fees, so at the time of our visit there looked to be only ~15 students.

Our visit unfortunately fell right after the end of the term, so many primary students had gone home. They called some from nearby villages to come to meet us, so we were greeted by ~30-40 primary students who, under the supervision of several teachers, sang for us and recited poems. The students seemed happy to be there and very eager to be around us. The majority lacked shoes and were wearing torn/old clothing but it was unclear whether this was primarily because they couldn't afford other clothing or because it was a holiday and their good clothing was at home being washed. (From my time in Uganda I've learned that most of the shoes available in Africa are uncomfortable and most kids dislike wearing them. If you see a barefoot child 5 times out of 10 if you look in their bag, they will have at least flip flops, they just don't want to wear them.) Nevertheless, the children were obviously living in poverty. Flory introduced us to the school's headmaster, who didn't speak any English, but spoke French fluently and seemed both capable and genuine. After the student's performances and songs, we went on a tour of the buildings.

There are two main buildings. One long block, consisting of ~4 classrooms, as well as 2 additional rooms which were both under construction, and a smaller block of 2 larger classrooms. They plan to turn the one unfinished room into an office/staff room, and the other into a library. The rooms still needed the walls and floors finished, as well as doors and windows. The completed classrooms have rough concrete floors and open windows with bars for security. The desks are wooden and locally made, but there were definitely not enough to accommodate 200+ students at one time. Later, as we discussed the

challenges facing the school, the headmaster confessed that due to space constraints and lack of full-time teachers, often the students attend in “streams”, meaning half come in the morning, half in the afternoon. This is common among poor schools in Africa, though obviously not the ideal situation.

The day of our visit the vocational school was conducting end-of-term exams, so I was able to take some pictures of the carpentry practical work (cutting boards) and theory work. The vocational school currently consists of a building program, a carpentry program, and a sewing/knitting program. Flory hopes that in the next few years they can add a medical/nursing program to the offerings. The building and carpentry programs seemed dominated by 16 to 20 year old boys, while the sewing program seemed to include a wider range of ages, women as young as 16 up to ~30 or 40 (it is next to impossible to gauge people’s ages there). At least 2 of the women in the program there that day were visibly crippled, and Flory pointed out the special sewing machines that were designed to accommodate their disabilities.

After a tour of the school, we sat down with Flory and the headmaster to discuss the school and the challenges they face. Finances was, not surprisingly the biggest challenge, and both voiced their appreciation of Posterus for its support. They mentioned that another organization, in the UK I believe, had sent books for their library, but that all the books were in English, and hence not very useful. The students can barely speak French, most still exclusively speak the local language. Apart from construction costs and school maintenance, the greatest financial need was teacher’s salaries. Currently teachers are paid “bonuses” (rather than official salaries) of \$20 per month. Most of the teachers also work in other schools or have side jobs to supplement their incomes. The government schools were claiming to pay an average of \$60 per month to primary teachers, though salaries are often delayed or never arrive. The headmaster was worried about a recent government promise to increase public school salaries to \$120 a month, making it harder for private schools to attract and maintain teachers. With salaries of \$60 delaying though, this looked to be an empty promise, at least in the short run.

To raise money, the school had started asking parents to contribute extra toward teachers salaries. They have a “PTA” that meets 3 times a year. They had also recently lost many of the vocational students when they increased the amounts charged for the various programs to help buy materials (increased from very small amounts to very small amounts in absolute terms - the equivalent of ~\$5 for the sewing program, ~\$10 for carpentry). They were hoping to use the multifunction machine (whenever it actually arrives into the country) to generate some extra income for the program.

I stressed the importance of communication, giving examples of regular status updates and check-ins, even if no new news was available (such as in the case of the multifunction machine) to reassure donors. Flory seemed to understand, and he has good access to internet from Bujumbura, so the excuse of lack of access shouldn’t be

accepted. He also had a digital camera and took pictures while we were at the school and was able to email them, so he's capable of sending pictures in the future.

Overall we had a very positive experience and it seemed like the headmaster and teachers were very dedicated to the community's children. They are very eager to get more financial assistance though and seem to be unable to raise much more locally. Many (if not most) of the children are orphans (East Africans usually use the term orphan to describe a child who has lost one parent while total orphan means a child who has lost both parents) and were dependent on friends or relatives for housing and basic needs. The area of Kiliba in general was poor and desolate, though the nearby city was thriving with returning refugees, so there is hope that if the (relative) peace continues, prospects for the surrounding villages will improve also. Repatriation will bring many land disputes however, so the peace is highly dependent on how that is managed. While in Burundi we visited a refugee camp where ~10,000 DRC refugees were held. They maintained that returning now would be suicide, as territorial and tribal conflicts were still active.

**Summary of costs:**

\$2 - taxi to post office

\$32 - transport to DRC from Bujumbura

\$40 - DRC visa

\$20 - Burundi re-entry visa

\$20 - transport from Kiliba back to Bujumbura

\$50 - Uganda re-entry visa

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\$164 - total