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South Sudan

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Dear friends,

The newest nation in the world!

I promised I would update you all on the newest country in the world – so here it is, a very special link letter! It's not every day you are privileged to be present at the birthing of a new nation.

The week leading up to independence found me in Juba, the capital of the South. I was there for Across management meetings (once a year all the managers and sector heads are gathered together for this!) and I have to say I was so glad I was there! Immediately we arrived, the sense of hope, of ownership and of future dreams was high!

As we approached the city, security was tight, which is to be expected when you are to be hosting many dignitaries from around the world in a matter of days. However, the army who were searching our bags and the car before allowing us to proceed, were also in a jovial mood; we were able to share some jokes and laughter together as they carried out their duties. We all piled back into the car and continued our journey to the Across

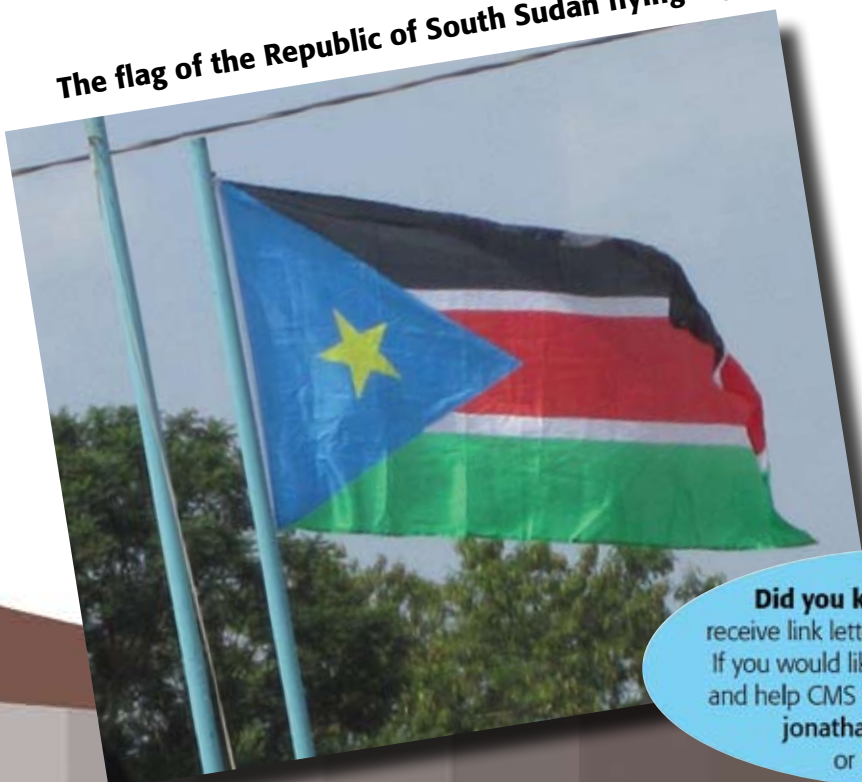
offices, where we were warmly welcomed by our friends and colleagues.

There were so many of us present that we stayed off the compound at a guest house. Each morning, an Across vehicle came to pick us and take us to the office. The journey every day was amazing.

The streets were clean (even being washed as we travelled on them the day before the big day – our offices are close to the Government ones) and billboards everywhere were congratulating the Southerners for reaching this far. There were so many lovely messages, but also some sobering ones remembering those who had died in the struggles and were not now enjoying the celebrations. There had been a real effort made on the city, and it was a pleasure and honour to be there and soak in this atmosphere.

The day before independence we managed to finish our meetings in the morning, and shortly after lunch, we all piled into the landcruiser once again – and off we went! We often do a vehicle 'swap' when

The flag of the Republic of South Sudan flying high



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The sun setting for the last time on the old united Sudan



The deserted streets of Yei, with everyone celebrating in Freedom Square

staff need to travel between Yei and Juba locations, with a landcruiser coming from each location, meeting in the middle and swapping all the passengers and luggage over and turning back again! I am sure that this causes much interest from the local population as they watch this spectacle; of course there is all manner of clambering over the vehicle as luggage is also on the roof! It was a jovial journey and we were all looking forward to the following day's celebrations.

The evening before, I took a picture of the sun, setting for the last time on the united country of Sudan. Sadly I don't have the first sunrise! The day dawned, and we got ready to walk into town. This was Yei like we had never known it before. The streets we walked through were deserted – everyone it seemed was in Freedom square celebrating. Usually it is very sensitive taking pictures in the streets, but this was an opportunity we couldn't resist, although we didn't go further into the town.

The atmosphere was amazing, just amazing! There were many army people around ensuring safety, but nothing was needed as people were so happy to have reached this day! I had to pinch myself a couple of times to believe I was really there at such a moment. I felt really quite emotional as we reached the square and saw the whole community there celebrating together. It was quite simply – an awesome moment, and not one that I think I will ever experience again!

There is a selection of photos throughout this link letter of the different banners which had been made by different community groups. Statements such as 'we shed our blood to achieve', 'Free at last' and "*it was like a dream, our mouths were filled with laughter*" (quoting Psalm 126, a very relevant Psalm for South Sudan) were on so many different banners, and very moving to read, as was one from the Yei Muslim community, asking to be able to work together to build the new country.

Banners





A man in Freedom Square clutching his bible and a maize plant - he told us we needed the Lord and hard work to build this nation



Loading the car to take us back to Yei

Oh God bless South Sudan!

Below are the words to the ending of our new national anthem, which I cannot tell you the number of times I have heard – over the independence period, the radio playing it numerous times whilst in my garden, hearing young people passing and singing it!

Let me put the full lyrics here for you:

Oh God we praise and glorify you, For your grace on South Sudan.

Land of great abundance, uphold us united in peace and harmony.

Oh motherland we rise, raising flag with the guiding star,

And sing songs of freedom, with joy.

For justice, liberty and prosperity forever more shall reign

Oh great patriots, let stand up in silence and respect,

Saluting our martyrs whose blood cemented our national foundation

We vow to protect our nation – Oh God bless South Sudan

When it is sung here, it is sung with much pride, seriousness and lust, and it makes me think of home! I wonder how many of our young people even know our anthem, let alone stand to attention when it is sung. Another reminder of how, sometimes, we take our freedom for granted.

One of my link churches recently asked me to make them a short two-minute DVD for their advent service on what freedom really

is. I asked some of my friends in Across, and a nearby village where we are working if I could record them and they were only too happy. I found myself being surprisingly humbled as I listened to what these amazing people had to say about freedom:

"Freedom means we have the right to live, without being massacred."

"Freedom means we can use our own resources for our own benefit, like the oil and other things."

"Freedom means the ability to develop and exercise your potential."

"Freedom is allowing your mind to be used by Jesus Christ."

"Now we are becoming developed, our children are getting educated."

"Freedom of movement" (this was something everyone I recorded mentioned)

"Freedom is making sure your country is secure and you protect your own people."

How much of this would we have related to freedom? It makes me think certainly!

Other news...

We have just received news that we have funding for the next three years, although it is very tight, and means we will also be needing to find some small funding from elsewhere, especially in years two and three. We are so chuffed though. You may

recall in the last link letter that I had said we had put Sam (our new member of staff) on a contract in faith, and within about a week of doing this, we had a request from the Reformed Mission League (GZB) in Holland to write a proposal, which they have granted! It was such a confirmation to us that we had done the right thing! Good old God – again!

As you know, we are working in some of the communities that the Participatory Awakening Process (PAP) programme works in (if you do not know what I am talking about, please look at older link letters, on www.cms-uk.org), working very closely with them. As part of the PAP process, communities are trained on gathering information from their community in order to discover the real needs. In one community we are working with, Goja, we are about to do this process again but looking at the children and their needs. We will be looking at families, who heads them, mother, father, jointly or other children, parenting, orphans, health, disabilities, early marriage. I am both very excited and also very daunted about this – as it will lead to action – but here I feel 110% out of my safety and comfort zone!

This community is active, many good things are happening and the topics above are things which they already identified as needs within their community. The process will be that members of the community, who were involved in this the last time with PAP, will train others and then go house to house to find the info. Although we will be interested in what the survey will throw up, this is purely for the community! After this is complete, the findings will be collated, and presented to the community at a meeting, where the community will then decide what they want to do to improve whatever they find out. This is where the rubber will hit the road; can we support the community in what they want to do?

Traditionally development has typically meant an NGO going into a community to do a survey, collating the results, then going to the community to tell them what they need (in their eyes!). The method we use I believe leads to true and lasting development and transformation, allowing the community to identify issues and work to resolving them. We may suggest that if the community identifies a solution, that some training may be needed to further empower them, say on child protection or child health etc. I am so excited, but also so

daunted, I have not studied this in depth (I did a module on development at All Nations Christian College, but it was very different to what we are now doing) and am a children's worker with a children's nurse background (from too long ago!) not a development worker. Nevertheless, I believe that when Jesus talked about coming to give us a full life (John 10:10) this is the holistic full life where all things are important. To only focus on what we see as the spiritual side does the children a disservice, and is not a true representation of Jesus, who was concerned about the whole person.

So please pray for us as we travel on this road less travelled with the community, Sam is in a similar position to me, with lots of experience in 'children's ministry' as it is more traditionally seen, but not in this area, so we will be learning (and making mistakes!) together. I am so happy that we are able to work closely with the PAP team (at times feeling one department), who will also offer guidance and support in areas where we feel weaker, and of course, being weak in these things means that we will have to rely much more heavily on the power of the Holy Spirit than we might when we are doing something we know well! Not a bad thing at all!

So you can see that life is far from boring, and we are relying greatly on the many prayers that we know are given on our behalf to keep going. As we are coming up to the Christmas season, I pray that each of you would know the real peace and love of Christ as you celebrate.

Grace and Peace

Ruth x