

186. Of Patience and Pain

Two years ago, in Australia, it took me about 15 minutes to renew my heavy-duty vehicle driver's license for ten years – valid until May, 2027. Here, I obtained my Sudan Driving license for five years in late 2009. Quite some time after independence in July 2011, I was told, *'This is a new country. Your old license is no longer valid'*. Eventually, I gave in and obtained a South Sudan license for five years. Quite easy to do actually. I was instructed to pay 400ssp (about USD 100 at the time) and I received my five-year license with a receipt for 300SSSP! Patience, Bill, it is the police whom you need to have as your friends.

So it was in 2017 I again had to get a new license. *'Sorry we only issue 5-year licenses to South Sudanese. You can only get a one-year license.'* Our local driver Emmanuel, took the money, paid and I obtained a one year license issued in the state of Central Equatoria (CE). Two months later we heard that a CE license was no longer valid as it had CE on it. All licenses must now have SSD on them rather than CE. I chose to continue to drive with my CE license, backed up my Aussie license but was never stopped. Two weeks ago, I tried to renew my current license. Emmanuel took my money down but was told, sorry, the driver must now be finger printed and give a specimen signature. So I went through the route of the Church officers and sent along my fee and photo and current license. The photo was rejected as 'scanned'. It wasn't but was a genuine passport photo. So we took a new photo. I am who I am – even if they think I should look different!

Last week, while I was in Wau, three other Religious I know well, went to be fingerprinted and give signatures. It took about 45 minutes and they got their one-year licenses. Yesterday, a Mill Hill priest and myself followed the same pathway - except that it took three hours and a driving test (1000ssp each) was added on to the procedures. It was all amicable and sociable but such a waste of time. I was told I have passed and now wait the issuing of a new license. The unspoken policy, which I can notionally understand, is get all the money you can from the foreigners! But it is a painful test of patience and civility!

I feel like saying that don't you realize our organization, *Solidarity with South Sudan*, is training 122 nurse and midwives and 106 teachers while paying for all their food and accommodation, is distributing many millions of ssp (thousands of USD) in humanitarian aid, especially in Riimenze where we are the primary supporters of more than 6000 displaced people who do genuinely appreciate what we are doing for them and conducting pastoral and agricultural training – all this while the South Sudan members of parliament recently granted themselves USD40,000 each as bonuses to get new vehicles or houses.

The signing of a new peace agreement – one that does look a little more promising than previously signed, but ignored, agreements – has seen the exchange rate fluctuate wildly. I have changed money in recent weeks from as high as USD1 = SSP315 to a low of USD 1 = 200.

In some of our locations it has been down to 150SSP per USD. Currently, I would expect about 220 ssp per USD in Juba but less elsewhere. It seems to me there is some very profitable manipulation, to the benefit of a few, going on somewhere. Prices of most commodities have not fallen much at all. So it is more pain for the local people – and also pain for us as we had adjusted their salaries to the high inflation before this bizarre downturn of the exchange rate. The truth is the people are no better off as prices have not fallen; we are worse off (as we get less SSP per USD) and some people somewhere are making a lot of money.

The price of a very large pot in Yambio was quoted at 60,000ssp when the local exchange rate was 150. I said to the priest asking for help for pots for his seminarians, *'That is ridiculous. No pot should cost USD 400.'* I asked Sr Alice to investigate – she discovered better pots in Juba are available for 20,000ssp. Transporting a pot, even by air, does not cost ssp40,000. There is no system here to discourage such gouging.

What about the peace agreement? We are hopeful long-term but not optimistic short-term. Too much of the country is out of control. There are too many poor people suffering from the callous indifference of those with resources. *'The rich get richer and the poor get poorer'* - a hard cycle to break! But I think the country is becoming safer. That is a blessing.

- Br Bill