

S·V·P News 10

Sudan Volunteer Programme

Registered Charity No 1062155

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With Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the investment boom which has followed, English language skills have become even more necessary for those wanting jobs in administration, relief work or business, underlining the status of English as Sudan's second official language. SVP needs volunteers who can stay in Sudan for six months or more.



a playground in Atbara - photo by Rachel Walton

a note from the chairman of Sudan Volunteer Programme

This is the tenth issue of SVP News. It contains a selection of reports and stories from our volunteers in last year's programme. We hope others will be encouraged to join us in this worthwhile and necessary work. We thank all the friends, supporters and members of SVP-Sudan and SVP-UK whose donations and goodwill, ideas and skills, time and enthusiasm make our work possible.

SVP specially thanks all our volunteers - and their families - who give so much of themselves:
Dan McClarey Eve Sawyer Guy Sheard Dr Joanna Knowles Franklyn Ogilvie Helen McElhinney
Christina MacLellan Aly Verjee Harry Sandison Johime Lee Sharad Venkat Beth Oliver Anna
Harvey Judith Logan Jessica Gregson Andrew Dearing Lindsay Guttridge Andrew Guttridge
Andrew Rendel Monica Fletcher Christopher Milner Lea Zeppenfeld Matthew Everett Anna
Aylward Nicholas Kitchin Matthew Baker Kit Kidner Liam Morgan Rachel Walton Rosa Raco.

SVP thanks our members - we depend on your continuing support.

Ahmed Bedri

Chris Milner writes:

My parents were arriving in Sudan for a visit. For me, this was to be a fantastic personal experience but it was also an opportunity to discover how much I had learned since walking up the jetty towards Wadi Halfa three months earlier. Their visit represented a chance to sit in the markets, drink the gingered coffee, suffer the insufferable heat, and queue for buses with beginner's mind.

I had now lived in Omdurman for three months and had become somewhat accustomed to life in Sudan. The rush of colours, faces, smells, and sounds that had at first merged into a single overwhelming sensory experience had each disassociated into their constituent parts, and were now reaching the appropriate senses. At first, seemingly random events led me to Uud concerts, Sufi ritual, and river boat trips. Certainly large amounts of cake was consumed.

By the time my parents arrived, such 'programs' were to be expected and by not making any plans could in a way be planned for. Thankfully, other activities such as evenings watching Celine Dion videos could be avoided without causing too much offence.

My parents arrived late and we took a taxi back to Shuhadda from the airport. Immediately and for the first time, I realised how familiar the city had become, how easy it was to predict the conversation with the driver, and how comfortable I felt. This is not to say that I had pretensions as to understanding Sudan, it's complexities and contradictions preclude that after such a short time. But I was obviously beginning to understand my immediate Sudan a lot better.

In short, Sudan was not what it once was. It had become for me a real place in which people lived, including me and this gave me the freedom to both praise and criticise it. It was the university holidays and I think Mum and Dad were relieved that they would not be introduced to 150 pairs of eyes in one of my lectures at Sudan University. Instead, I took them along to meet my group of students at the Abdel Karim Centre. The 'AK' is a community led organisation that believes in creating an environment in which young people can learn, take control of their lives, and use the skills they develop to move Sudan forward. I liked it there very much.

The parents were an instant hit and the lesson plan went out the window (actually we always studied on the roof) and for two hours we all took part in conversations on many topics; from love to taxation. I really can't describe how proud these young people should be of themselves - not because of the hardship in which some of them live (although that is another story). Their generosity of spirit, willingness to give, willingness to accept, willingness to welcome, and enthusiasm for life was quite inspiring.

My parents and I were lucky enough to visit Juba together. However, for me, the highlight of their stay in Sudan was the party organised by the students at Abdel Karim to celebrate their visit. The amazing and sometimes tiring fact about being a volunteer is that in Sudan, everything is Sudan. You just cannot miss it. There is absolutely no danger you will miss it. Through my students and friends, I could learn about it. Through my parents I realised I was a part of it.

Andrew Rendel writes:

I had been to many weddings in Khartoum, but as this was only the second I had attended at which I knew either the bride or groom it would always have been special. In this case it was the groom whom



Teaching at the Abdel Karim Mirghani Centre - photo by Andy Guttridge

I knew. My colleague Abdel Rahman was to be married in his village south of Khartoum and the college was to be closed for the day to facilitate the participation of the staff and a select group of senior students. The school minibus was to be taken and only an hour after the appointed time we set off. After almost one hour of detour in the wrong direction to pick up the dean of the college from his home, we were finally on our way to Gezira. Gezira is a green open region south of Khartoum, famous across Sudan for its agricultural scheme built by the British colonial administration.

On arrival in the minibus a host of village children rushed out and the cries of "Khawaja Khawaja" brought more to come and stare at the strange white creature that had recently arrived. Soon I heard a few of the children change their cries to "Boosh Boosh" and asked my colleagues what they meant. It was explained that for many of the children the only white skinned person they knew was President Bush from the television, and naturally to them I was equated with him, much to the feigned horror and genuine amusement of my hosts.

Monica Fletcher writes:

It must be eight o'clock or so in the evening. We arrive, a group of five volunteers all together, at the airport, at least five hours late. It's Friday – the weekend holiday in Sudan. We weren't able to call ahead from Bahrain airport as the delay grew longer and longer. But when we finally stagger through customs, into the heat of January in Khartoum,

Mohammed El Fatih, SVPs Assistant Coordinator is still cheerfully waiting for us.

He rounds us up, and herds us into the cars he has organised. He and his friend are worried we will be cold – after all it's only about 20 degrees this evening, and they start closing the windows and trying to chat. Someone – maybe me? – mentions our anticipation of a first view of the Nile, so they take Nile Street, and stop the car by the Mogran (the meeting of the two Niles) so that we can have a look. We try to be enthusiastic but (aside from the fact it's very dark and you really can't see much), it's as much as we can do to stay awake, and soon enough Mohammed realises this and we don't stay long.



Sunset in Khartoum - photo by Monica Fletcher

Later he tells me that he was making final decisions about who is likely to be best off living where, who will get on with who, as he divides those of us not going to university accommodation between the two SVP flats; and eventually we are all delivered, introduced to our new flatmates, and finally left. A typical late evening for an SVP coordinator.

Mohammed becomes a familiar figure during our first days in Khartoum. The city is a little confusing, perhaps a little daunting when you first arrive: it all looks very foreign (there are the crowds, the sun, the sandiness of it, streets full of rubbish, pavements full of holes; and everything's all different – houses not quite like houses, streets not quite like streets); I understand nothing; I'm not used yet to the curiosity I attract when I go out; I don't know how even the simplest things work (buying vegetables, for example, is a little different here, and where do you find coffee . . . or cheese?); and it's hard to find landmarks when things are so unfamiliar - having no sense of direction, I manage to get regularly lost even between the Shuhada flat and Shuhada square in those first few days (or should that be weeks) – which is, I'll see later, quite an achievement: it's a simple matter of going straight on and turning right. Don't ask how long it takes me to find my bearings in Souq Al Arabi.

Mohammed helps to make things work. He shows us where to catch the bus from Khartoum back to Omdurman. Checks we know the way to the SVP office. Tries to insist we travel only with other volunteers to start with, and we protect him from the knowledge that we are managing alone.

When I go along to talk with the coordinator at the university where I am going to be placed for a new summer course, he comes along with me for support as we reach agreement on things like preferred class size, course duration, the course content, and the photocopying arrangements. Nothing dramatic, but it's helpful to have someone on your side who also knows the university and can help you explain why you want things the way you do.

When I go to teach in Dilling, seven or eight hours away from Khartoum by bus, Mohammed comes with me, and helps get me in touch with the right people at the university, gets them working on the timetable, and is there to make sure that they have indeed found me some accommodation.

More strategically, Mohammed proposed a workshop involving university and SVP representatives, which was held successfully during the course of the year, with a lot of input from Christina as well, during her brief stay as academic coordinator.

It gave people a chance to talk about what works and what

doesn't; what the universities want from the volunteers and what it is realistic for them to expect; how universities can help the volunteers and what support it is realistic for us to expect. A lot of talk, problems aired, some ideas for how to do things better in future.

The new volunteers get some training from the British Council. This was very useful for those of us who aren't specialist teachers – it helps build confidence and give you some new ideas, perhaps inspires a bit of added seriousness about the business of teaching. Again there has to be someone to suggest this, to sort things out, maintain the contact with the British Council, keep us aware of the arrangements, and even to sort out the present for Jenny (who trained us) first time round. (During a break, Mohammed also stops off to negotiate with the British Council librarian to get us some free internet access).

And of course, if you want to know when Igd Al Gilad are performing, where to go for the meanest milkshake in Omdurman, or to clarify the dialogue of Starwars, obviously you need someone in the SVP office who can help.

Most of the people I meet will not become friends, and our conversations are typically only light, though there is at least one SVP volunteer who seems regularly to end up getting whole buses involved in earnest debate – on the existence of god, perhaps, let alone touching

on politics or what's going on in Darfur.

There would never be enough time to take up all their invitations. And it would be a little impetuous to try: would I come and live in Darfur, I am asked after less than 10 minutes of conversation, by Ahmed (let us call him) a Darfuri visiting Khartoum briefly, who currently has less than four wives so could do with another; would I spend time with Mohammed who owns a shop in the souq, who is unabashedly interested mainly (as so many are) in whether I could marry him in order to help with a visa for the UK – I get many such requests, not all of them joking.

But though typically the conversations may only be fleeting, still people are very welcoming and very curious. They are generous as only the Sudanese can be: it's not only invitations that they offer. They will often insist on paying my fare – at least before the bus prices are put up to great public protest. One woman tries to give me her shopping – she has been out buying henna and spices, and wants me to try things Sudanese. People offer work (would I like to get involved in importing pipe drilling equipment from Europe?). And above all they are generous with themselves: they talk about their families, point out their homes, tell me about their studies, or work, or (too often) their struggle to find work.

The popular view is that foreigners aren't supposed to travel on buses – not many do. But one of the advantages of the poverty of an SVP volunteer is that you have no choice but to get on the buses. And being elbowed aside in the each-man-for-himself scrum to get on, then joining in the cooperative rituals that make sure everyone pays and gets his or her change, and learning to click your fingers to bring the bus to a stop – all this is part and parcel of coming to feel at home in Khartoum.

Andy Guttridge writes:

Of course we were thrilled when Attahil invited us to attend church with his family, and accepted his invitation without hesitation. The congregation entered, and looked at us with much curiosity. Although all the congregation were Nuba people, the Nuba have many different languages (said to be 99 in number), and so that everybody could understand, the service was conducted in Arabic. We understood very little of what was said, other than words and phrases like 'Allah' (God), 'Insh'allah' (If God wills) and 'Hamduli'lallah' (Thanks be to God). The use of these phrases was interesting to us, as we tend to associate them with Islam. The other thing that we noticed was how many of these non-Muslim women were wearing headscarves.

The most enjoyable part of the experience for us was the singing. We couldn't join in with the words, but we clapped along with vigour. The only accompaniment other than the clapping was provided by two girls playing large drums. The sound was fantastic and incredibly hypnotic. Towards the end of the service, we were invited to speak to the congregation. Attahil offered to translate, although we did manage to apologise for the poor level of our Arabic in Arabic! We said a prayer for

peace for all the people of Sudan, and this seemed to go down well. After the service, we were invited back to Attahil's house, where his wife and sister had prepared a wonderful Sunday feast, with Fu'ul, several different meats, and the sweet spaghetti which the Sudanese seem so fond of.

Attahil had built his house himself, and although they have no electricity or running water, they have a wonderful and cosy home in which we felt very comfortable and welcome.

We felt honoured to have been a part of such a special experience, and to have, yet again, been made to feel so welcome. As with pretty much everybody who has been to Sudan, we will always remember all the Sudanese, whichever part of the country they come from or tribe to which they belong, as being the most amazingly kind, generous and hospitable people you could ever hope meet.



Maulid Celebrations- photo by Judith Logan

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