

Haiti Update, Tuesday, February 16, 2010

I'm on my fifth day here and things are going well. It is incredibly hot and humid but I spend a good deal of my time in the office. Let me explain what the office is...

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies is occupying an area what was designed to be a Hilton hotel. The concrete structure was built before the earthquake but was never finished. No utilities were laid, no windows or doors installed, or walls finished. It's literally an open concrete shell. The grassy-rocky area around the building was recently bulldozed to make it flat. The dust was so bad they trucked in rocks to reduce the dust in the air.

The Danish and Italian Red Cross Societies share base camp management responsibilities, in the same secure area as the building. I am staying in the Italian run portion. We have portapotties and shower stalls, but no hot water. We get three meals a day, but they are really awful. I am, however, managing not to lose any weight.

I am sleeping in a communal tent with four other people: two Americans and two Italians. I tend to eat lunch with some American friends and dinner with a group of Americans, Israelis, and one guy from Belgium. After dinner I usually relax with a group of Danes, many from my work area. We have a beer, talk, and watched a movie one night in the R&R tent.

Speaking of work, there are about five of us (numbers change depending on rotation schedules) servicing computers, installing/servicing the network, and installing/servicing radios. I'm primarily repairing computers and supporting the network upgrades. There are some nasty viruses going around and we've had to reformat dozens of computers. I also had the pleasure of opening a printer and re-soldering parts. That didn't work, so I duct taped it and now it's running like new. I hope to install mobile radios in some vehicles, which I did not get the chance to do when I was in Panama two years ago.

I've only left the base camp once, to install a radio at the hospital. We drove about 30 minutes through some of the poorest shanty towns and filth I could have ever imagined. Broken roads, down power lines, emaciated dogs wandering through streets with tails between their legs, goats eating trash, people urinating in the streets, people burning piles of trash, women bathing on sidewalks, and people everywhere. Some businesses are starting to reopen but there are thousands of tents made out of anything they can find – plastic sheets, cotton sheets, even cardboard. The hospital was guarded by US military and more soldiers were patrolling inside. The Red Cross and Red Crescent emblem has a very good reputation in the country and there has only been one incident on Red Cross staff – a robbery on a back road, but nobody was hurt. We are not allowed out after 6 PM and always have a driver and another staff member with us. Rainy season starts soon, so I would not be surprised to see more incidents coming in the next few months.

I'm jointly deployed with the Danish Red Cross. Our main focus is computers and networking. The Spanish Red Cross also has a team and they focus mainly on radio equipment. We all work together to support the 250+ Red Cross staff in country. Office hours are 7:30 AM – 9 PM, 7 days a week, with breaks for lunch and dinner. There will be a Red Cross presence here for a long time, so we're starting to do more semi-permanent installations of equipment. I'm getting the chance to try new things and I'm learning a lot.

I'm finishing up day 12. It's been an interesting week since my last email, full of ups and downs.

I was able to switch camps, from the Italian-managed to Danish-managed camp (it's actually one large camp with divided management responsibilities). This is significant because I can now eat with the rest of my team, which I could not do before. I also switched tents and, while I still share a large tent with 5 other people, we each get a segregated space within the larger tent. It's only 7' x 4', but the privacy is nice. We even have a shelf so I can quit living out of my backpacks. Those little changes make a big difference after a 14 hour shift. I usually go back to my cot after work and read with a little lamp to relax.

We've been working on some fun projects. We have started changing out the network hardware from the initial installation to a semi-permanent installation. I spent a good amount of time on the roof running wires (after creating the connections from a spool of bulk cable) and building temporary devices to hold the routers and access points. It's a little dark now for roof walking, but I'll take pictures before I leave. We've also started wiring parts of the building to provide more stable Internet access.

The camp continues to grow. We were at 250ish last weekend and I think 50 more were supposed to come this past weekend. I was just talking to the Danish cook and he said the kitchen, built to prepare about 60 meals at a time, is producing between 100 – 120 meals at a time. The same strains exist on the showers and toilets (12 toilets total in camp). We've lost water a few times, but they mostly function well enough.

Friday night I made the mistake of taking my malaria pills on an empty stomach after falling asleep. I woke up in the morning vomiting and other stuff I won't describe. I ended up sleeping all Saturday except for bathroom breaks and two small meals. The Danish camp staff was very kind and brought me fruit and other food. I felt much better Sunday morning. Sunday afternoon six of us from the IT group took a compressed day off and stayed overnight in a hotel outside of PaP on the beach. We ate real food and enjoyed a nice day off.

I was back from my day off for about one hour before hitting the road again for an IT install. I went to the end of the city to a soccer stadium turned hospital to help prepare for the installation of a VSAT (very small aperture terminal) to get them better Internet access.

I spent today on a non-food item distribution to 550 families, which is a break from my usual work. The technique is a little different from what we do in the US, so I'll briefly explain (I just got back so I'm very tired). Prior to the distribution, Red Cross staff visit the area. Communities have formed, so they meet with the community leaders and locals are given responsibility for security (no police or military). Families are identified for distribution and given tickets. I was not involved in these steps, so I can't provide much more detail. Today we went back to the site with about 5 delegates (including me) and 20 local volunteers. 4 box trucks lined up on a hill in a "secured" area we started to unload. Wheelbarrows were used to carry items from each of the 4 trucks to the top of the hill. People gave their ticket to registration and take the contents of the wheelbarrow, which then goes back for the next trip. Each family got an empty rice bag, 3 blankets, a jerry can, rope, 2 tarps, a bucket, a kitchen set, and hygiene set. Several hours into the distribution, a short skirmish erupted when someone in line tried to attack a local volunteer. The attacker was injured in the process and taken to the hospital with a cut on the head – 28 stitches. The scene quickly got iffy and we began reloading the trucks while the community security tried to get things back in order. During the shouting a number of local volunteers took off their Red Cross uniforms and left, leaving us short-handed when we started working again about 15 minutes later. Nobody else was injured and we finished the distribution without major incident. As always happens, when we begin to pack up to leave, families start to crowd and beg for stuff. They show us their babies, shout, plea, and some just keep asking. We just have to say no and

try to get packed up. We all got back to base camp without further incident. There are several distribution teams, each doing about 6 of these a week.

What I think the media and others who criticize do not understand is the effort involved in even a small distribution. This was only 550 families of the hundreds of thousands that need support. It took days of planning, several box trucks, 30 volunteers, local security, local buy-in, and about 6 hours to physically hand out the stuff. This is six weeks after the earthquake. Can you imagine handing out food days after the earthquake? Of course there isn't enough, there never is. Then you factor in the damaged infrastructure (subpar prior to the earthquake), the existing poverty, and you have a perfect storm.

I've done a lot more travelling than I did when I first arrived and still can't get accustomed to the driving. No signs, no lane markers, lots of honking, constant swerving, and few lights. I don't think my words could give a good picture, so I'll just provide one quote:

Sohrab: is there a speed limit in Haiti?

Driver: not that I know of.

There are some funny moments during the long hours of work. Here are a couple more:

Iranian Guy: lots of people think I'm Danish because of my name.

Danish Guy: really, what's your name?

Iranian Guy: it's Danish.

Danish Guy: Really, what is it?

Iranian Guy: it's Danish.

Danish Guy: ok, but what is it?

Iranian Guy: it's Danish.

Danish Guy: OH, so your name is actually Danish?

Iranian Guy: yes, it's Danish.

Sohrab: how can I help you?

IT Customer: I need to get on the network.

Sohrab: ok, what's the password for your computer?

IT Customer: I don't know it.

Sohrab: then how do you log into your computer?

IT Customer: I just type it in.

Sohrab: OK, then just tell me instead.

IT Customer: but I have to type it because I don't know it without typing.

Sohrab: OK, then type it but tell me as you type.

..several attempts at typing later, I get the password and he leaves...

Sohrab's Team Member: That guy must be really good at something else.

After my last update, I spent the next day at a German Red Cross health unit site (I was at their hospital a few days earlier) with one of the Spaniards installing a VHF radio base station. I've attached two photos of the effort. We put a cinder block in the ground to mount the base. The mast was about 30 ft tall, with an antenna and flag on the top. We hoisted up the mast, secured it on the base, and provided stability with eight cables. We then installed the radio in one of their tents and programmed it. They are now able to have direct communication between the two German sites (12 km apart) and their mobile vehicles without a problem. The Spanish Red Cross media was there taping parts of the effort, I guess for a promotional video. During the taping, someone stepped on the radio wire (as we were hoisting the mast) and it snapped. The mast then jostled and we rammed the mount and knocked it out of the ground. I yelled "shit" pretty loudly. For filming purposes, he taped the mast being raised, then they left us in peace. We just had to bring the mast back down and fix it again. The photos are of the final, working product. We walked down the street after work to grab a burger at a local "fast" food restaurant. The burger wasn't the greatest, but after 2 weeks without a burger, it was just what I needed. Walking back, a little kid said "give me five" (a fist bump, actually, but I don't want to confuse those from a different generation). I did, then he said "Give me a dollar!" Standing in line at the restaurant was quite an experience. There is actually no line, but a mob waving their receipts at the woman behind the counter. A worker there eventually took pity on the poor Red Cross worker standing in the corner unable to reach the counter and gave us our food. No drinks were given, but I couldn't stand the mob any longer.

The base camp continues to get larger and larger. Some international staff are leaving and are being replaced by longer-term international staff. There are also over a hundred local hires around the camp doing various jobs and many others look to be just sitting around. I think the security around here is a little suspect. As an example, a local hire for IT was fired several weeks ago. He approached the security gate this week and told them he had an appointment and was given a new badge. He is now asking around for a new job. My boss escorted him out again, but I am certain this is not an isolated incident.

Quite a few people are getting sick off and on, including myself. I guess things like that happen when people wash their faces in sinks marked "drinking water" and poo on the toilet (rather than IN the toilet). They only clean the bathrooms once a day. You can imagine the 12 bathrooms after 250 (I just got the current count) staff and 100+ locals use them several times a day. I continue to be surprised by how little people seem to care about our shared space. There is constantly trash in the showers and I actually found a pair of dirty lady's underwear in the shower the other day, just hanging there.

Saturday (yesterday) was quiet. I spent the morning on the roof replacing more networking hardware and connecting cables to a neighboring structure. The Italian and Danish kitchens co-hosted a cookout (which they called a BBQ, despite my constant corrections) at night for all residents of the base camp. I offered to help on one of the four grills, and five of us grilled filets and pork for 200 people. It started to sprinkle mid-dinner and absolutely poured by the end. Everybody seemed to have a good time and there were not unusually long lines at the bathrooms the next morning.

Many people are starting to take days off over the weekend, especially Sunday, so another quiet day today. We spent a few hours in the morning installing a radio in a huge German Red Cross truck. I was assisting two Spaniards and learned a great deal during the three hours. I went to lunch with 20 Spaniards to a pizzeria not too far from where I supported the distribution last week. Driving down the street, you see building after building destroyed. You then turn into a small entrance and you're in another world, free of damage, trash, and suffering. Not a fancy restaurant by any standard, but decent. A wall around the property blocks the outside world and the occasional speeding motorcycle is the only reminder of the city surrounding this refuge.

Food in Haiti has been expensive, the few times I was able to leave base camp. A (large) personal pizza, coke, and ice-cream sundae today cost \$32 US. Grocery shopping for a few cokes and bags of chips runs \$30+ UA each trip. The local Dominos charges \$30 US per pizza.

I am preparing to leave PaP on an American Airlines flight this Wednesday. A three hour layover and customs in Miami then home. It's been an interesting three weeks on my first disaster relief assignment outside of the US. Hundreds of millions of dollars are coming into the country and it's hard to imagine there will be any lasting proof of the huge international effort. Everywhere you look the lack of a strong government is obvious, from poor roads to lack of building codes to lack of civil support for those suffering. The Red Cross, UN, Mercy Corps, Fire Fighters without Borders, MSF, and all the other acronyms in the world can (and will) spend months and years here, but I can't see how the life of the average Haitian will really improve. I have no way of knowing if the work I did here will have a lasting impact – when the Germans leave their hospitals, who will maintain the radio equipment? Will it just be taken down and put back into storage? Will it be sold so a starving family can afford a few more meals? If so, can you blame them? I would likely do the same if our positions reversed. I'm told by those I ask that Haiti is very different from other responses. In most other responses there is a very strong partnership in the IT field, with international and local staff working side-by-side, providing training for the local staff to maintain equipment long-term. This lack of partnership in our job function is the most disappointing aspect of the assignment.

One thing that will have a lasting impact is the appreciation I have for what we have at home. Trash pickup, paved roads, police, and running water are everywhere in the US and nearly nonexistent here. I saw two kids today sticking a straw into a cracked pipe in the street to try and get water.

I will likely make myself available for future assignments, once I build enough vacation time for the assignment and our wedding in October. I'd like to give a special thanks to Colin Chaperon for his years of support in the Red Cross and to Kim Kadesch for providing flexibility in my work schedule. I do miss home and can't wait to see how big Tiny is now (he's our baby puppy).

I've also attached a couple of Google Earth screenshots showing the places I have worked in my three weeks here. I've marked the Base Camp, the hotel we visited for the day off, where I worked on the non-food item distribution, and the two German Red Cross sites (hospital and health care unit).