

GAVIN DEGRAW BLOG

Day 1: March 10, Nakivale Refugee Camp, Uganda

A series of near head-on collisions on a would-be highway made of clay and craters practically rattled every bone in my body loose by the time we arrived to the Nakivale Refugee Camp. I'd been preparing myself for the gloom I was about to be immersed in; the suffering I was about to see; and the sorrow I was going to be subjected to. And so we entered the arena and waited for the first stroke of ruin.

Oddly though, amidst the shanties and dusty roads, the bare feet and the bicycles overloaded with bananas, the glow of children smiling and waving at strangers dominated the landscape. Some of the most sincere joy I have ever seen.

What would make children smile this way? Are they just excited to see new faces? Or is it because they feel the possibility of hope? Or are they just full of love and don't know the severity of their own situations just yet? I can't be sure, but I was overwhelmed with this sense of welcome.

Once we got out of the vehicle, the reality of their living situation was reaffirmed by a meeting with the Commandant (who oversees the camp) who gave us an overview of what has been accomplished and what lies ahead. We proceeded to target different sections of the camp and each area was a completely different experience.

After physically handing out the mosquito nets at the first site to an eager group of refugees in need of them, we were led to another area of the camp where a group of Somalis lived and had already organized and implemented a way to ensure the proper use of the nets. One of the community leaders talked with us about his work in that particular area. He told us that since they've received the bed nets they've had zero deaths from malaria. That was exciting proof of the benefits of this project and was truly inspiring. After a lovely Ethiopian lunch, we were given an extensive tour of the hospital and had a chance to learn about the different types of treatments they offer to patients and soaked in the conditions of the facilities.

I was impressed to learn of the doctor's commitment there, as there is only one doctor and she works all the time – 7 days a week. She even joined us for the tour. And then as we walked out of the hospital on the hill, there was that incredible view of the endless countryside and a bunch of beaming smiles on the kid's faces. I played a little soccer with them for a minute with a piece of fruit until it finally gave way and we then congregated around the van. The kids were so much fun. They loved my camera! I've gotta get them a soccer ball...

Day 2: March 11, Oruchinga Refugee Camp, Uganda

We visited another refugee camp today. This camp was much different than the first one. It wasn't as large and didn't have as many different nationalities living on it. It was smaller and very organized as a whole. It was largely a Rwandan settlement and I respected their approach with how they referred to themselves. A reporter with the Associated Press who was travelling with us had asked the Commandant if there were Tutsis in the camp, and to this he replied that they don't label the refugees; they are all from Rwanda and that's all that needs to be said. He then spoke to us of the medical supply shortages they have been suffering, in the presence of the hospital staff.

We were taken through the hospital and the disrepair of the facilities was on display; not because they were featuring the problems, but because this is all that there is. Outdated nets hung over the patients' beds; still in use but in need of replacement. And still the clinicians were having some level of patient care success because of their commitment to each other and to humanity.

We visited the school and spoke with the students about malaria. A reporter, who was formerly an English Literature teacher, was extremely helpful in addressing them. When he asked who in the classroom had had malaria in the past, each and every student in the room raised their hand. It is a grim reality of their daily lives.

We soon met on a knoll and used to outer wall of a shed as our backdrop to allow about 10 kids to show us their educational artwork on some steps to prevent more cases of malaria. They each stood up in front of us and showed us hand drawn diagrams, some of them with a sense of humor (no details required), of the issue's effects and preventions.

So then was the actual distribution of the nets to the people and we decided to have the students assist in helping. The refugees fell in line as far as one could see down the barbed trail, passing by a model bed demonstrating the proper use of the mosquito net. It was our final day of distribution and I was feeling the success of this venture.

Still so much work to be done, but the appreciation on their faces is all the reward you need.

Day 3: March 12, Nakivale Refugee Camp, Uganda

Returning to Nakivale to meet the newly arrived Congolese refugees was the final day of our settlement visits. Only weeks ago, as many as 50,000 displaced souls seeking refuge decided to rest here, upon this landscape with heavenly beauty, speckled with the presence of white tarps; some as makeshift homes, others as makeshift schools.

It was as we ascended to the schools that you could feel the glimmer of hope in such a difficult situation. How could you not be inspired at the sounds of children singing their studies aloud joyfully as the teachers danced and led them along?! Such faces and smiles,

even on those obviously crippled from polio and other debilitating issues - still they sing. There is a new beginning for these surviving victims.

Soon the classrooms were emptied and the field was filled. It was here on this patch of grass that a theatrical play was performed, with activity, singing, and most of all, deep sincerity. The play was about the devastation of malaria and the prevention of it. Even a song was written for it. The disease is real and it is very present in these people's lives and it is making them ill and even killing them.

I had a chance to play them all a little batch of songs and sing for them. They like to giggle when you hit the high notes. I don't know if my style of singing is of a very Congolese approach. Ha!

But they were giving me the thumbs up and that was the same as a standing ovation to me on this particular day. It felt really good to interact and shake hands and just bring some fun to this place. Such a beautiful experience.

On our way out of the area we stopped along the road and decided to play some more music in a barren little area of the settlement. It was here that a great moment happened with a group of refugees who began to gather around. They decided to start singing along with me. And on this dusty road with the loom of great despair, you could see even the grown men begin to smile in celebration. It was a moment of community. A great moment.

I passed the guitar around to any foreign hands that sought to play it. And a few were capable of it. So they took a little time and played their native music. You could see how excited it made them. I asked one man who was playing quite well: "What is this song?" and he replied "It's Congan. This is Congan music." A few began to sing. The desperation lifted for a few minutes. It reminded them of home.