

Dear Friends,

Heiney Update, Feb. 2006

Wanted to get this letter out right away so that you can praise God with us for His unending protection! This past week we have had planned for some time a big meeting with our national church here in Guinea. Three men from the US (Ron Mudge, Paul Mueller, and Ken Greinke), representing LCMS World Mission, were to arrive here on Sunday night and travel to the Forest Region to meet with the missionaries and the church leaders.

After Tim left on Sunday evening to pick everyone up I began to get emails alerting us to the fact that Ken had been delayed and would not be coming in until Monday night. This meant we had to rethink how we were to do everything. Now, instead of Tim and I traveling up with Ron, Paul, and Ken, I would stay in Conakry and bring Ken up the next day. So on Monday morning, Tim, Ron, and Paul left for Gueckedou. Our church is centered in Gueckedou and the national church leaders were making all kinds of preparations for our visit. Some time on Monday I got a text message from Kristen (Schmaltz, medical missionary located in Kissidougou) saying that there was some trouble in Gueckedou and that she wanted everyone to meet in Kissidougou, avoiding Gueckedou. Since Tim didn't have his phone with him there was no way to contact him, so Kristen was to try and put some church people on the road coming into Kissidougou to watch for them and stop them from continuing on to Gueckedou. I described the vehicle. I also said I would try and get a message to Jon (Oetting) and Tim (Norton), but when I texted I heard from Sharon Oetting that they didn't have their phones either!! Now I also had to decide if Ken and I should go on to the Forest or stay in Conakry. After Ken and I talked we decided that we would head out early the next morning and stop in Kissidougou, not going on to Gueckedou until we were sure everything was OK (at this point all I knew was that there was trouble with an election and who would actually be put in as mayor...much too difficult to explain here, but suffice it to say, the majority opinion was threatened.)

So Ken and I headed out the next morning. A couple of hours into the trip I get a message on the phone: "TRYING TO GET OUT OF GUECKEDOU. KEEP TRYING KRISTEN." Well, there was no phone connection at all and even my texts were not going out. We were also assuming that all were in Gueckedou and trying to get out. We continued on, certain now that we would only go as far as Kissidougou. We kept to the plan and arrived in Kissidougou about 7:00 PM, meeting Tim on the road as we came in. He brought us to the hotel where we heard the rest of the story...

Kristen was, of course, unable to contact anyone, so they all went sailing into Gueckedou. Kristen was in Gueckedou waiting in case anyone showed up. She was at the hotel. When Jon and Tim Norton came in the streets were deserted, but they saw people throwing rocks at buildings, but they continued on to the hotel. Tim, Paul, and Ron came into town, but at the main bridge they were stopped from continuing on to the center of town, so they waited on the edge of town. While waiting, they noticed a truck coming out of town with his windshield all smashed out. They considered turning around but were concerned about where the others were. Later, after dark, they got some soldiers to bring them in since they'd seen our other people go into town. At this point it seemed like the soldiers were taking control of the situation. The church leaders all came in and plans were made to continue with the meetings the next day.

The next morning started out calm. People seemed to be unconcerned and in good moods. They had done their juju and were now considered invincible to gun shot wounds. There was some chanting outside the hotel and some gunfire, but just warning shots to keep everyone under control. (Tim says that he himself was eating breakfast on the floor but everyone else ate at the tables, ignoring the shots. Tim wasn't taking any chances of a wayward shot!!) As the morning went on, though, word started coming in that people had been killed and some wounded. Later word came that the Prefect (a government official) had been hit in the head with a rock and was bleeding. Smoke began rising from burning vehicles on the Prefectoral hill, not far from the hotel. The Prefect's guards had been involved in the killings, so the people decided that the Prefect had to die. By then the mood had changed completely. No more joking, everyone was very serious.

At one point it got calm in the streets, and the missionaries decided that this was the time to get out. The hotel people told them, however, that now was not the time, but the time would come in about an hour. He would tell them when. The missionaries contacted the church and told them to come to the hotel, that in an hour they would be leaving town. This was the time when we got the message from Tim that they were trying to get out of Gueckedou. About an hour passed and there was no sign of the church people and the phones had stopped working. All of a sudden the hotel people got news and said that the people had to leave NOW. The soldiers were controlling the streets. The people had left to get their juju so that bullets would not harm them, so there was a small window of opportunity. Once the people came back, all would break loose. The missionaries hadn't seen or heard anything from the church, so it was hard to leave, but the hotel folks insisted they had to get out. Tim Heiney and Tim Norton went out to scout things out and they saw an armored vehicle on the main intersection on the main road to the bridge. They found some soldiers and they agreed to come and escort them out of town. So the two vehicles rolled out with the soldiers without incident. They waited on the other side of the river and waited a couple of hours, hoping the church leaders would come out of town. They sent back messages into the area. One man got through to the hotel and said that the church people had been there, but couldn't get to the houses of our leaders as the fighting had already started. When it was obvious that no one was going in or out, the team reluctantly headed to Kissidougou without the church people. Later that day Kristen got through to one church member to let them know where everyone was, and to encourage them to follow to Kissidougou if they could get out.

It was hard to get word from Gueckedou as phones were unreliable and cars were not going in and out. As I mentioned, Ken and I arrived that night, so we were all together for dinner. The next day we met and were in prayer for the church people left behind. Rumors were starting already as to how many were dead or wounded, but I don't know that we ever really found out the true numbers. We met together the first day (which should have been our second day of meetings in Gueckedou) and did what we could on our end. By the next day we finally began to see church leaders trickle in. Elder Yasseh, Robert, and Julien all made it out and we could spend some time with them discussing the future of the Guinea Lutheran church here. Alfred, another leader who was to be part of the meetings, never did come, but we heard he was fine. By now it was Thursday and we had to leave that night to get back to Conakry and meet two more Area Facilitators from Nigeria and Kenya who were arriving on Friday afternoon. We traveled all night and are now back in Conakry. We heard that things have calmed down. Word was that the same thing was happening in Ouende Kenema on a worse scale than Gueckedou. We also heard that there were delegations from Conakry that were sent in to oversee the whole transition. Someone said yesterday that all is calm again and people are traveling back and forth.

Many praise items in that letter!!

- * Praise God that our girls decided to stay here in Conakry and were not with us. Had they gone, and had Ken not been delayed, they would have been with us through all that.
- * Praise God that all were able to get out at a good time and safely.
- * Praise God that the death level was small. It could have erupted into mass chaos.
- * Praise God for good meetings. Even with all the disruptions and problems we got a lot done.

God is good. He is in control at all times and we thank Him. Thank you also for your prayers. We know that we are covered in prayer and God answers those. Please continue to pray daily for our team out here and for the church and its leaders.

Love in Jesus!!

Tim, Beth, Katie, and Andrea Heiney