

Alex Feedback.

Wednesday

I arrived back in Dhaka, sleepy eyed from the night flight from Dubai. It's a smooth process now, I know where to go for the visa, how to get through immigration quickly, which carousel the luggage will be on. As you exit the airport there is customs, where non-tourists have to hand in a declaration of any items they are importing. Normally I am traveling with suitcases and get waived through as a tourist or foreigner or both, they are really looking to tax Bangladeshi people bringing back high value and electronic items. However, this time I bought a big bundle (*full of shoe box gifts from school kids in Dubai*), plastic wrapped, just as the Bangladeshi's do...so the first customs man let me through, but another one realized that I had far too much luggage for a 4 days stay in Dhaka. I told him it was gifts for kids, he said it wasn't allowed, I said they have no commercial value and I'm not paying...so then we had a small crowd of customs officers debating the situation in Bangla, with most saying it was for the kids, its fine, but still this one wanted me to pay... luckily I was first through immigration and was in customs when it was quiet, but suddenly there was a few hundred people from 3 flights heading to the customs officials...with their hands full a couple of customs officers told me to go and the one who wanted to charge me tax looked on, wanted to stop me, but had his hands full and so I was free to head into the morning sunshine of Dhaka with all the gifts for the kids and having paid no tax...woo hoo!!

I quickly dropped off my bags, changed and headed out to the project to see what was going on...I arrived at the school to find a big tent put up where the children normally play cricket and



badminton...was it a party?? Sadly no...well at least not until later...inside were hundreds of children forming orderly queues. Dr. Musa, a local dentist and great supporter of the Dhaka Project had arranged for volunteers (*mostly dental students*) and bought all the supplies to be able to do a blood test for every child and employee at the Dhaka project to find out everyone's blood group! Here we go again, the children are already more vaccinated than me... and guess what, I have no idea what my blood group is either...so I joined the line!! So now I can tell you, my blood group is A positive!!

Back to the blood tests, myself and two volunteers went off to visit the nursery and pre-school, where the children are too small to come to the big tent for the tests, so we taken the tests to them. We were armed with my only ammunition to stop them crying...a big jar of sweets! As it turned out, very few of them actually cried, most were more distracted by my camera than anything else...in fact some of the teachers and catering staff were more scared of the needle than the kids! In the evening, with the big tent still up, the kids put on a little party/farewell send off to another volunteer from Holland called Anouska, so it did get used to a party after all!!

Thursday

When I was here in December we started new advanced school project, so I went over to the site to see the progress. It seemed to be going slow. The delay had been finding a good contractor who would do the work without ripping us off. Here they see foreigners and think the project is made of money, so they charge extra high rates, it doesn't occur to them that we run this on a shoe string and do it to help their country! Thankfully a reasonably priced contractor had been found and work had started 2 days prior to my arrival. After conversations with the site foreman I got up to speed on the general brick work, electrics, windows and plumbing. After meeting Murad, another local Dhaka project supporter, we managed to get 10 extra men on site and a late shift, so work continues until 1am in a frantic dash to get the school ready for the new school year which is now days away!

Maria is exhausted today. She has been here for 10 days already and I know the challenges of working in an environment like this can really wear you down. She is short staffed as it is, even though she has interviewed about 100 people in the last week, it is a real challenge to find quality staff. A lot of qualified people don't want to work in this area and/or don't want to work with the poor, their parents have sacrificed a lot for them to get a good education and so there is huge family pressure to work for prestigious large organizations and not small projects working with the poor – which isn't so glamorous. Sometimes we even employ people, but they don't last for a day or two due to family pressure. So Maria has been fighting against the clock, working understaffed and with loyal, but under qualified staff, to get the new school ready for the new school year because she has to return to Dubai to her job, which is the platform for everything that has been achieved here.

The main work of today was being on site, making sure the work is progressing in the new school. In order for them to work late shift, they need lights...unfortunately it takes weeks to get the electricity connected here in Dhaka, though Maria went to the electricity authority and apparently they will do it in 5 days...we wait in hope! So, we went to the school and borrowed twenty rechargeable lights from the children so that workers could continue after dark. The children normally use these lamps for studying, but as the school year hasn't yet started they can spare them for us for a few days! Together with Shimul, a teacher at the project school, we went back regularly through the day and early evening to check on the progress and push the foreman to get the fastest work possible out of his team! We also met the architect Okay so now we know who to call if things aren't up to speed!!!

Friday

First thing to do on a Friday is visit the site and check the progress, thankfully they are working and not sleeping!! Today we have a meeting with Trevor, the GM of the Sheraton hotel, whom I met on my last visit. He has been a great source of support to both Maria and the project for a long time now. At 10.30 we head over to the Sheraton and met Trevor, who was charming and relaxed as always. Visiting him in the Sheraton feels a world away from the project as we sat by the pool and had pizza and ice cream. Trevor is a star and has always offered assistance to the project, today we asked his assistance in training a purchasing manager to international standards. Thank fully he agreed to talk to his finance manager and ask him if he would assist us. I was hoping for a weeks training for Masud, our new purchasing manager, but

Trevor thought a week in each discipline (*purchasing, stores and receiving*) would be about right... and of course he had no complaints from us!! Thank you Trevor.

On returning to the project I headed straight to the site to check on the progress...and there has been progress, the walls are growing higher, rooms are taking shape, but most importantly, electricity is on the site! The electrician had borrowed some power from a neighbour and was installing temporary lights and powerpoints!!!

Saturday

Of course, first thing I do is go and check on the site. Progress is good and I have a look on the roof level (which is flat and ready to be built on). We have thought about building some more structure on the roof to make a canteen with the best views in Gawair!! Progress is being made, so I am happy. The rest of the morning I have been in the office, assisting with admin, writing documents and letters. I also sat down with Masud and made him a flow chart of how purchasing, receiving and stores work, giving him an overview of what to expect when he gets to the Sheraton. At lunch I went to check on the site and was happy to meet Onay there, it seems he believes, just like me, that as long as we keep on top of the work team and keep checking, there will be no slacking!! We discussed the idea of putting a structure on the roof and he thinks it will be no problem. Luckily he had a spare architect's drawing of the building on him, which he gave me. Back at the office I sat with Firoz and Maria, looking at the architect's drawing and working out how many children we can fit in each class room and all the supplies and equipment we will need to fit out the school (from chairs to printers and computers to UPS/IPS and generators). We have put together a list for Maria and Masud to take to Sheraton tomorrow when they go for a meeting with Trevor and discuss a training schedule for Masud. We have many problems with suppliers here, few will deliver goods, most try to over charge us and are unreliable. So having training and getting assistance from the purchasing department in Sheraton who can also point us in the right direction for good suppliers will be a huge boost to the project.

Must dash now as I have to finish off the last of my chores, say good bye to pupils and staff at the project, pack and head to the airport...until the next time!!