

Thursday 27th December 2007 – Election Day

We had decided that election day was going to be our family Christmas Day. We had been busy at Heshima over the Christmas period so we planned to close for the elections to enable our staff to vote and to give us some time together as a family.

As I had recently had a caesarean I was still feeling a little sore and tired. My haemoglobin levels were still very low and the doctor had put me on some tablets to build up my red blood cells. Steve helped me prepare the turkey and put it in the oven as I was unable to lift it. He had bought a ridiculously large turkey for the four of us and I teased him about it. He laughed and said, that if there was trouble over the elections and we would need to stay in for a day or two we would have enough to eat! We also had a 2kg Christmas Pudding, that one of the teachers had made for us, and that was able to last for a long time too!

I fed baby Ella and we ate our breakfast before the children opened their presents and then Steve went to vote in Usoma Primary school, which is in the rural community on the way to Heshima. There were long queues in voting stations in town but it was quick for Steve in the rural school that we had worked with so closely as part of Heshima's charity work.

He turned up with a few supplies from the supermarket just before lunch time and we enjoyed a traditional English Christmas dinner together before relaxing to watch one of the children's DVDs in the afternoon. We then played some of the games they had received – scrabble and 'what a performance' and laughed together. It was a lovely Christmas day and the first day we had been able to spend together as a family since the baby arrived, as Steve had been so busy at Heshima previous to this.

In the evening, after the children went to bed, we were able to watch the results trickling in. We took bets on who would have won tomorrow!

Friday 28th December

Today was declared a public holiday. We switched the TV on expectantly in the morning to find out who had won the elections, only to discover that they hadn't finished counting yet. At the moment Raila was in the lead and there was a general feeling that he would win.

Once again, until the results were announced we felt it was safer to stay at home. So we had another family day and enjoyed turkey sandwiches! Half way through the morning we had a phone call from Heshima, to tell us that some visitors had arrived but had been stopped at the gate by a number of youths from the local area. They would not allow them to enter and asked them why they were coming

to support a Kikuyu business in the middle of elections. Eventually they were compelled to turn around and leave.

Election results continued to trickle in throughout the day – Raila continued to be in the lead, but people were beginning to feel frustrated and anxious that the results were still not out. They couldn't understand why, and people began to speculate that maybe there was some interference in the results.

Saturday 29th December

Another day with our lives on hold. Still no news. And in this case no news is not good news. People are now suspecting rigging and are beginning to get angry. Our chef and bar man phoned from town to say that people were getting agitated and that there was no transport. They said they were unable to get to Heshima. People had begun to gather on the roads and had started to build bonfires in Kisumu, to prevent people from travelling anywhere. Grace and our staff at Heshima phoned us to tell us that a big mob had gathered outside Heshima with tyres, threatening to burn it. Steve phoned one of our neighbours and asked him to go and speak to the group and try to calm them down. He went and said many were drunken youths – but that he managed to disperse them.

However hours later, they regrouped and we got a panicked phone call from Grace. Grace lived on site and looked after the place for us. We needed someone to stay there to look after the campers that arrived in the evenings. Grace is Kikuyu. She has lived and managed Heshima for just over five years and has many friends in the community. She has a three daughters: one fourteen, and one five and the other four years old. She was also looking after her eighteen year old niece, Koi. Her children went to school in the local community and she had many friends there. They were the only Kikuyu family that we employed on site – all our other employees were from the local Luo community or from Kisumu town. On Saturday morning, she had washed all the bedding for our two room's accommodation with a local lady Benta. They had just hung them out to dry when one of the waiters said that the mob outside were threatening to break in and kill them. Grace and the children quickly hid some of their clothes in the garden and were then told to run for their lives. They didn't have time to grab their money or their important papers or even their shoes. They simply ran to the river on the far border of Heshima and crossed it. A man was bathing and saw them. He shouted to the others that they were escaping and they ran through the undergrowth along side the lake shore, hiding wherever possible. As they were leaving Penninah, Khadija and Benta were crying. These were local Luo ladies who worked for Heshima and who loved Grace and her family. Benta was distraught – she questioned how she would she be able to feed and educate her children if they burnt Heshima.

Grace phoned us as she was running, asking us where she could hide and what she should do. Steve explained that she shouldn't try to come to town as it was

much too dangerous. People had set light to the streets and were looting and burning buildings. Ukwala supermarket was being emptied by an angry mob and we could see people running down the road outside our house with mattresses, food stuff, mobiles, bikes etc that had been looted. Once the looting finished they set fire to the store. We heard that there were not many police around, to prevent the looting.

I became worried that it would not be long before the same thing happened to Heshima, but Steve tried to reassure me that the local community were excited and the young people were simply intimidating and full of bravado and that we shouldn't be worried. He advised Grace to stay in our neighbour's house – Mike to be safe or to go our old rented house about a kilometre down the road. In the end, the waiter that had helped her escape took them to his grandmother's house and found some transport that could pick them up early the next morning to take them to our house, before the trouble started again.

At night, the children were picking up on our anxiety and so we decided to pray together as a family. It is at times like this when you realise that you have no control over what happens, and realise that you need to trust that someone does have some control. Dan and Layla prayed that all their friends would be safe. Layla's best friend is a Luo girl. It made us realise how the children don't see any differences – it is the adults who focus on difference.

We watched the results in the evening. Kisumu's riots were shown on TV. Raila was still in the lead. The elections council were being questioned on the delays and about possible rigging. They said the results would be announced tomorrow as there were only 18 constituencies left. We began to worry that they were preparing us for Kibaki's 'win'. We knew if Kibaki won now, after three days of seeing Raila in the lead, there would be big trouble in Kisumu. There was already terrible chaos outside, with people's worry and frustration – but if Kibaki won we knew things would get a lot, lot worse.

Sunday 30th December

We were woken at about 6.30am by a frantic banging on our gate. We both sat upright in bed, scared. Henry, went to the gate and found Grace and her family had arrived by a taxi. They were traumatised and dazed. They had passed five dead bodies on the road and had seen many burnt out and looted buildings. They felt sure they would be safe in Milimani. They were very shaken and arrived literally with only what they were wearing. Cynthia and Esther didn't even have their shoes.

The GSU arrived in the town and we could hear machine gun fire as well as shots of tear gas. Some of the shots were very close by. It felt like we were in a war zone. I kept looking at our walls and gate and started to worry. It would only take one person to get over the wall to open the gate to all the rest. It suddenly

felt like a very false sense of security and I began to worry about the safety of my family against mobs that were frustrated and angry and not open to reason.

We now also began to worry about food. There was only a little turkey left, a few potatoes and some Christmas pudding. Not very much to feed four adults and six children. Our Australian friends managed to get hold of some fish and they sent some down to us. That was a relief.

By 4pm some students from school were texting me that the school had been set on fire and looted.

The election result was then announced – our worse fears had been confirmed – Kibaki had won, and minutes later our staff at Heshima phoned to tell us that Heshima had been over-run by an angry mob. They set about destroying it and looting it as they had done the shops in town. What they couldn't steal, like the trampoline and the tree house, they burnt. It was such a terrible waste. Hundreds of children made use of these resources every day. Our computer was burnt as was our lorry. Mattresses, tents, toys, freezers, kitchen equipment etc. were stolen and our growing library of books were burnt. It was heart breaking. Two years of hard work went up in smoke in minutes. The dream we had been working towards for 8 years had gone. We sold up in London two years ago to set up this centre and now we had absolutely nothing to show for it. None of it could be claimed back on the insurance as the insurance doesn't cover riot damage. It was incredibly painful. I think one of the hardest losses was the computer as it had all the photos of the development of Heshima on it. It also had all our workshops and team building ideas on it. When I heard the news in the lounge I tried to hold myself together for the children. Koi, Grace's niece however, started to cry as she had lost all her clothes and her school certificates. Grace's monthly wage was still in the house and had been burnt along with her clothes and TV. The children were upset, they couldn't understand why everyone was crying. I went to my bedroom and hugged the baby. What sort of world, what sort of life had I brought her into? She was the only one blissfully unaware.

Steve followed me into the bedroom and we clung to each other in desperation. Trying hard to hold it together, trying hard to make sense of it all. We tried to reassure one another. "They can steal and burn all our possessions but they can't burn our ideas. We still have the hundreds of successful ideas of things to do with both children and adults in our heads. We also smiled at the irony of the name. Heshima means 'respect' in Swahili. We set it up to promote respect amongst people of all tribes, cultures, races and economic boundaries. We obviously have a lot more work to do!!!

Minutes later the phone rang and one of the Kikuyu teachers from school asked for a place to stay. His home had just been burnt and everything in it. He escaped with his two small boys and wife but neighbours were scared to house them incase they also suffered for helping him out. He wanted to know if we

could pick him up but the streets were still too dangerous to go out on and so we gave him directions and he arrived at 9pm. We put him and his family in Layla's room and Dan and Layla shared a room. Grace and her family took our spare room. The house was full. When he arrived he brought more horror stories of the suffering and burning of Kikuyu properties. I felt sick. Layla told me she felt scared. I didn't know how to reassure her as we all felt scared.

Monday 31st December

It's New Year's Eve – but there's nothing to celebrate about it. After the baby's 6am feed I had just fallen back asleep when we were suddenly woken by the sounds of shouting and banging outside. I put on a T shirt and heard an angry mob banging and rattling our gate and the gates of our neighbours. The neighbours on both sides of us had already escaped and so we felt very vulnerable. Grace let out a desperate cry, and grabbed the children and took them into the back garden to hide them. She put them up the mango tree to hide as there was no other hiding place. We locked the door to the house and Steve phoned one of our friends who was a police officer. He promised to send some police around immediately to disperse the crowd. I felt my legs were going to give way. What if they didn't come? If the crowd got in I was sure they would kill us – we were trapped – there was no way out.

I phoned my Australian friends who live 5 minutes away. They told us to pack our bags and that we should phone them when the police had arrived and dispersed the crowd and then they would come to get us. The police arrived, as promised and the crowd was chased away. I got the children in and explained they had five minutes to pack. Dan, our eight year old boy, was thoroughly methodical and focused. He was the only one amongst us who found a suitcase and he packed all his Christmas presents and his new pyjamas. My little girl trailed me around the house, shivering inspite of the tropical heat and saying she felt sick. She managed to eventually find one book, her new swimming costume and some photos to take with her. I found our passports and our birth certificates. I packed a couple of clothes and some photos and Steve found our title deeds and tried to hide the computer hard drive in the garden so we may be able to salvage some of our work if we were able to return.

Once the street was quiet our Australian friend arrived, with our police friend. He was armed and came with tear gas. As we were packing the bags into the car, Layla asked, "Are we taking the baby?" and when I reassured her that we were, she then wanted to know if we could also take the dog. Sadly, I couldn't be so positive on the dog. We threw our belongings in the car and they drove us five minutes away to the safety of a hotel. Mr Kamau and his family couldn't afford the hotel fees and so they had to go to the police station for asylum. We paid for two rooms: one for us and one for Grace and her family. We were scared to leave our rooms, not wanting anyone to know our identity.

The baby was crying, wanting her 10am feed and probably picking up on our anxiety. As I went to feed her I realised her dirty nappy had spoilt her clothes and that I didn't have any more clothes to change her into. I had forgotten to pack them. I had to undress her, wash her little sleepy suit and hope it would dry soon. I wrapped her in a blanket to keep her warm. Another friend heard about our plight and brought us all some lunch which we ate in the room.

My Australian friend told me the police and GSU had taken firm control of the town and that he would accompany me back to the house to pick up a few more belongings. I was in a lot less danger than the rest of my family and so I went back to get some baby clothes and our degree certificates. I also picked up some more photo albums, the vases my grandma's had left me with, the hard drive hidden in the garden and the dog. These things, the Australian family agreed to look after for us – as they were less of a target. The amount of lifting and the panic of being back in the house, made my stitches from the operation start to bleed. I felt lucky that I had had my baby three weeks ago. If I had gone into labour now she would have died, as there was no way we could have reached the hospital. Yet there must be some women in labour now. I couldn't imagine how terrifying it must be for them.

An afternoon in the hotel helped us to calm down. Another friend phoned us to say he had checked on the school and it was the building behind that had caught fire and not the school itself. This was a relief. It meant I would still have a job at least and that all my files of 20 years of teaching would still be intact. The news gave me a little hope. Perhaps our house could be alright after all and then maybe we could still stay on. I love Kisumu and it felt like home. I didn't want to leave in spite of it all. Sitting in our hotel room on the top floor I looked across the lake and watched the sun setting. It looked so serene and so beautiful, it was hard to imagine that everything was not normal outside.

In the evening the Australians joined us at the hotel for a meal. There are no fresh vegetables left in Kisumu and no fruit so we had lamb chops and potatoes. The children were tired. And baby Ella is unsettled. She is not feeding as well as she was. As we are all in the same room, her night time feeds disturbed the whole family. Dan came over to try to comfort her as she seemed to have a terrible stomach ache.

Tuesday 1st December

No-one is celebrating New Years Day. Whatever happens it's going to be a hard year as there has been such terrible suffering for so many people. We decided not to stay in the same place too long so no-one would get to find us and so we moved up the road to another hotel. The children were able to swim here and there was a playground to play out on. There were also a number of families in our position – all trying to find somewhere safe to hide. But I continued to worry

that it was a very false sense of security. We were in a calm side of town, but things could erupt again and a big mob would be able to break in.

We wanted to believe things were improving. Everyone kept telling us they were, and when I heard that one of the supermarkets had just opened I decided to accompany my Australian friends there to get some provisions. However, when we reached Nakumatt the queue to get in was about 3 hours long. I was still not feeling well enough to stand for 3 hours and besides, the baby would need a feed. We decided we could manage for a day longer without the shops and they drove us down the main street before taking me home. I think it was when I saw the main street that I realised that we were still not safe. Every Kikuyu business, including the Kikuyu owned banks had been absolutely destroyed. The Kikuyus were being singled out and targeted systematically. There was no ignoring the fact. We could not be safe in Kisumu. Because of our business and charity everyone in town knew Steve by sight and they knew he was a Kikuyu. The Nyanza club was giving us a false sense of security but I realised we could not relax there. We had to get tickets out somehow and we had to find tickets for Grace and her family too.

The Australians invited us to their house for lunch. Whilst there a friend in the UK who had heard us on the news had spent the afternoon trying to find us plane tickets. We couldn't find them here as none of the travel agents were open and we were scared to travel the 4km road to the airport. She had found us 4 tickets. The only four tickets for the next four days. Although very expensive, we agreed she should get them for us and she phoned the reference number over to us as we were unable to print out the e-tickets she had bought us, as we had no access to internet.

Now our biggest worry was Grace and her family. There were not enough air tickets for her and her family and we didn't want to leave them behind. Steve spoke to the police and found they were organising to evacuate some of the Kikuyu refugees on buses with a police escort. They said they would tell us when this had been arranged for so that she could go to the police station then. Meanwhile we arranged to pay for another night for them in the hotel.

We told the children we hoped to go to Nairobi tomorrow and they seemed excited. They said they wanted to get to somewhere safe. Layla keeps saying she wants to go to Spain to stay with her grandma. It's been incredibly difficult for them as we have been so stressed and so busy with the baby when we haven't been making our next plan that we haven't spent much time with them. They have had to leave everything behind. They don't know where they will be from one day to the next and of course they are scared and unhappy. I want to make everything alright but I can't.

The Australian family have a goodbye drink with us, before we return to the hotel. Whilst there a sixth form student from school comes round to ask if he will be

doing his re-sit paper on Friday. I have no idea, and don't know how to find out what Edexcel's policy is in this situation. I tell him I will try to find out. Then at 7pm, we say goodbye to our friends we pretend everything is normal and say we will see them in a couple of week's time. They tell us to have a lovely 'holiday' in Nairobi. We try not to cry.

We are worried about tomorrow. So much could potentially go wrong. We could be stopped on the road and the car set on fire, and everything stolen; the plane may not come; they may not accept our e-ticket without the print out; there may be trouble in Nairobi so we may not reach our friends. Yet they were all risks and uncertainties we felt we had to take. Once again, we prayed together as a family and then fell into an exhausted sleep.

Wednesday 2nd January

Dan is 9 years old today. I had planned a party for him at Heshima with story telling and games. Now he will spend the day on the run instead. I hope we make it. We get up early and there's a phone call from the police. They have a bus ready to leave and advise we take Grace and her family to the police station now. We wake them up with the news.

Breakfast is not ready as staff haven't managed to make it in yet so we all leave without tea or toast. A friend picks us all up. We were worried to take a taxi incase the driver betrayed us in some way. It's horrible all this fear and mistrust of people we have loved and worked with up till this last week! We take Grace and her family to the police station. There are well over 100 people there, all hoping to get on the buses. We give her money and wish her well and then leave her there. We are assured she will get a place on the Nairobi Bus.

We then drive through the town, once again to the airport. There are no road blocks and the journey is surprisingly smooth. There's chaos at the airport. Hundreds of people all trying to get seats on planes out. The Sikh community have chartered a plane to Entebbe. We meet so many people on the run. Many Indians were targeted because they employed some Kikuyu people. All had sad or frightening stories to tell. Yet while we wait in a long queue to get into the airport, we are reminded of what we do have, by the number of people from the town: over 20 different people come up to "Congratulate!" us. At first I wondered what for and then as they ask to see the baby I am reminded that we have new life in the middle of so many murders and deaths. Yes, we are still lucky, as though we have lost so much we have also gained something very special too.

The queue hardly moves. The Kenyan Airways staff had difficulty getting in so the plane is delayed. Eventually we get to the check in counter and find we are on the list! Once again we feel so relieved! We were so worried they wouldn't be able to find us and we would have to go back. We arrived at the airport at

7.30am and the plane came in just after 11am. The relief was tangible as we finally took off to Nairobi.

There's a major fuel shortage so we had difficulty finding someone to pick us up at the airport. There are no taxis. A friend thankfully had filled up a couple of days ago and so could come and get us. The relief at getting to our friend's house was immense. As we turned into his plot we saw a building site opposite. There was a lot of rubble around and the wooden struts ready for the roof. Dan looked at it, and said, "Look what they've done here!" and the driver had to explain, that this hadn't been burnt down, it was being built. I felt so sad that this was now his first thoughts and view of the world.

In the afternoon, I found I could finally cry! We had made it. All our friend's prayers had been answered. We were safe. Or at least as safe as everyone else in this city. All the tension and adrenaline that had kept me together for the last few days seemed to dissolve and I kept bursting into tears for no apparent reason.

Dan is quiet and withdrawn and not at all himself. As soon as he arrived, he asked where he was sleeping and then he quietly unpacked all the toys in his suitcase. He lined them up on his bed and surrounded himself with them for an hour or two, not coming out to talk to anyone. It was as though he was reconciling himself to the fact that this was it. This was what he now possessed.

In the afternoon we were interviewed by the Kenyan press for a short piece on the need for peace in the country. No-one wants to see this beautiful country collapse. We heard the shocking news of the people being burnt in the church in Eldoret and cried. It feels like the start of the ethnic cleansing that happened in Rwanda. We all want it to stop before it's too late. At the end of the interview, Steve looked so tired. "Why do they hate us so much?" he asked. "It's not you," our friend answered, "It's what a group of people are seen to represent."
"But I can't get rid of this label, 'Kikuyu' – it's what I am. And I can never change that. Why can't people also see me first and foremost as Kenyan?"

In the evening, Dan unwrapped the small selection of presents we had managed to carry for him. Two presents from his grandparents are still in the post office, waiting collection, if it has not burnt down. Daniel loves animals and had asked for a book on snakes, which we had managed to find him. As he unwrapped it, he looked happy, "I can add this book to my collection!" he said and then it dawned on him that he no longer had the rest of the collection of animal books as they were in Kisumu and he started to cry. Our friends baked him a cake so he was able to blow out his candles. But he missed sharing the day with his friends and hoped they were all alright too.

In the evening, Steve phoned Grace to check she had reached Nairobi okay. She hadn't and was angry and scared. The bus had gone to Kericho but found the road blocked by fires and protestors. It had to turn around and go a different way and so it then drove to Kisii, but when it reached Kisii, it also got stuck. They had been taken to a school to sleep. She felt abandoned. "We worked for you for years, and you just flew out to Nairobi and abandoned us!" Steve looked distraught and exhausted.

Thursday 3rd January

In the morning Steve managed to phone a contact he had in Kisii. A man who worked for Securicor in Kisumu had been recently transferred to Kisii as the manager there. He asked him to go and check on Grace and her family and see if he could do anything to help. He got back to us to let us know it was not safe for the bus to proceed or go back and so they would probably have to stay in the school for a week until things calmed down but he would keep checking on them.

The British High Commission phoned me about Ella's emergency travel documents. The problem is she doesn't yet have a birth certificate or any official documents and so getting a passport is difficult. However I have her vaccination records and the antenatal records before having her, which may help. They will let me know their decision on Monday.

Lots of students and teachers from school have also started to phone me to find out when school is going to open. Everyone is so desperate to hear a sign of normality. I have postponed it for a week till the 15th January in the hope that things may return more to normal by then. We all hope so much that it will, but fear it can't. Many of my students are sitting their exams in January and they are worried about their futures.

It's hard to know what will happen next and what we will do next. Everything is still so uncertain. The opposing party has postponed the rally today, they are holding a meeting with Desmond Tutu to try for a peaceful solution to the crisis in the country but plan to hold the rally tomorrow. We are worried there will be a lot of violence in its wake. The whole country seems to be waiting – we want peace but we need the leaders to be proactive in finding a solution to gain that peace. The alternative is too frightening to consider.

I don't know what will be best for my children. They are withdrawn and suffering and because I have spent so much time with the baby and in planning each next move they haven't had the reassurance and time they need to help them try to come to terms with what has happened. They need to feel safe and they need some attention. If school really can open next week, and if we still have somewhere we can return to, then it may be useful for them to go back to a routine they know. It may help them to feel safe and they will be with other children who have gone through similar experiences. Talking things through together may help them to recover.

If however, things continue to deteriorate I think they would benefit from going to stay with their grandparents in Spain, where they will get the love and the attention they need to begin to recover and to feel safe again. There are so many 'ifs' that it's difficult to make any plans at present.

The baby is also suffering. She had been so good, but now she is crying a lot inbetween feeds and seems unhappy. Perhaps she is also picking up on our tension. Her big brother and sister give her lots of hugs and reassurance whenever they can. They seem to gain comfort from being able to hug her.

In the afternoon we gained so many texts and e-mails from friends all over the world who showed us they were concerned. Some of the most moving of these were from Luo people we knew and worked with in Kisumu who were as shocked and upset by the terrible events as we were. It reminded us that the attacks were not personal. The people that attacked us and others didn't know us personally, instead they just saw the label, 'kikuyu' and wanted to attack that. Once again all the messages reminded us of how much we still have! You can't put a price on friends and family.

The other piece of wonderful news we got in the afternoon was that Grace and her family had reached Nairobi safely. It was such a tremendous relief. Some parcels arrived for the Securicor man that Steve had phoned by a small light aircraft and he spoke to the pilot who agreed to take Grace and her family back to Nairobi on his return flight. It was such a miracle. Sadly however, there are still over 1000 Kikuyu people in the police station. They have no money and no food. One family have a 2 day old baby with them, probably the mother gave birth in the school. The situation for them all is critical and there is no system in place to take care of them all and to feed them.

This awful mess shows how much Heshima is still needed. If things settle down we want to be able to build Heshima back up and work with lots of the schools and our communities in breaking down these dreadful stereotypes behind the 'labels' that have been exploited to cause such dreadful suffering for so many people. At the moment however, it is more important that we can help to feed the displaced people who are taking refuge in schools, churches and police stations across the country. If you would like to help please send donations to Heshima at our head office at 26, Meadow Road, Barking, IG11 9QS, Essex. We have people who can help feed these desperate people in Kisumu and Kisii.

So now we sit and wait helplessly to see what will happen next, and like the rest of the country we pray that sense will prevail and there will be peace. The alternative is too horrific to think about.

If anyone wants any further information on the work of Heshima please look on our website to see what we did before it was burnt down: www.heshima.org.uk