

Crisis in Zimbabwe

By Hugh J. Pickering-Carter



Having recently graduated from the Department of War Studies at King's College London, I immediately enrolled on the International Citizen Service (ICS) for the summer of 2016. ICS is an overseas volunteer programme affiliated with the British Government's Department for International Development (DFID) which works with numerous global charities by funding the travel of British nationals aged 18-25 to the world's poorest communities. This includes destinations as far and wide as Africa, Asia and Latin America. The Service's core aim is to reduce poverty in the developing world - its motto; 'Challenge yourself to change your world'. Over 20,000 people have already participated in the scheme with the number of volunteers applying and working abroad on the increase. My team's particular posting to Zimbabwe would have a twist, however, with the entire group being repatriated to Britain for reasons of safety and security in amongst the country's increasingly unstable political environment.

Acceptance onto the ICS programme firstly involved numerous steps. This included an assessment day which provided an introduction to the programme, as well as incorporating interviews and a series of group-based activities. On successful completion of this stage the next element of the selection process involved a coordinated fundraising effort for Progressio; the charity with which I would be assigned to work for in Zimbabwe. This required each individual to raise £800 which I finally achieved through generous donations from family, friends and colleagues for undertaking a 18.5km run in London. On top of this, was a weekend training session which enabled me to join and get to know my new team and learn more about ICS and Progressio's 70 year history. Following the completion of said steps, checked all the necessary paperwork and received a vast concoction of vaccinations (8 in total!), it was eventually time to go.

Diary entry: 06/07/2016

'Final prep. for flight to Zimbabwe. All taken care of besides Cholera vaccine – suppose I'll have to be extra careful of water supplies over there! Said farewell to everyone. Looking forward to it.' (10:45)

On Thursday 7th July 2016, our team left for Zimbabwe, travelling via Heathrow Airport – Addis Abba – Harare. On arrival, the group's first week was spent living in a series of compounds on the outskirts of Harare and Bulawayo. During this time we underwent orientation of the local environment and had briefings on cultural awareness, safety and security. It was during this period that 75% of the team and 50% of team leaders also went down with the joys of Typhoid. Everyone in disarray and constantly visiting the loo, I must say the team leaders did a mighty fine job of ferrying our group to and from an already

designated clinic for prompt treatment with antibiotics. I am pleased to report everyone fully recovered with no complications.

Diary entry: 14/07/2016

'Woken at some God on earthly hour this morning. Cold showers. Been at briefings all morning/afternoon. Recovering well from Typhoid infection. Most of group have also recovered well. The antibodies and injections have been successful it seems.' (14:22 local time)...

... 'Still at briefing. Has been running for far too long. Drawn out in many respects. Time to return to the compound and nab one of the hot showers before the other chaps do!'. (16:43 local time).

From here three of the teams remained in Bulawayo where they would stay for the duration of the posting. We, however, were transported approximately two hours by coach north-east to the town of Gweru. On arrival our team of nine were broken down into four pairs and one single and subsequently assigned to a host family. The family my colleague and I stayed with consisted of a grandmother, her son and his wife and their four sons. One would be forgiven for thinking nine in one house would be mayhem but it all worked out remarkably well!

Diary entry: 30/07/2016

'We're almost at one month of our posting as a team. Weather's still hot [It was actually very cold when we arrived] and only likely to increase until we leave. All well at home – called yesterday morning. A local volunteer unfortunately collapsed a few days back due to blood pressure issues. He's recovering well in hospital. Keeping up the exercise to ensure when I return I'm where I'd started! Heading into town this afternoon.' (09:56 local time).

Our job in Gweru was to raise awareness of HIV and AIDS with the local community and assist in financial projects, including promoting the importance of accounting and networking within the wider remit of business. Based at the Midlands Aids Service Organisation's (MASO) regional office, we worked for up to three weeks before crisis ensued. It became quickly apparent one morning via certain social media posts that one of the teams based in Bulawayo had suddenly been arrested and subsequently detained in a local prison. It is claimed this was due to a tip off by locals that British volunteers were working in the country without the necessary visa paperwork, although not at the time confirmed one way or the other.

With the help of the British High Commission and after presenting the necessary UK documentation the now shaky party *were* eventually released 24 hours later and put on the first return flight to London. Based on a threat level analysis of the situation carried out in Britain (ranked on a scale of 1-5, with 5 being critical), the threat was at its highest level and fears for the safety of the entire group were rife. This was heightened by Zimbabwe's already deteriorating political climate with riots, protests and violence spreading within the major cities. Consequently, the entire posting was called to an immediate halt and all other teams were recommended to stay away from the office, be vigilant and remain indoors until further notice. At this stage it was difficult to inform the host families of why *were* no longer travelling to the office without creating further panic; especially since a radio broadcast had already detailed the incident. We as a team were lucky, however, in so far as the charity's local contacts in the area had a good working relationship with the police. Nonetheless, at the time in question all volunteers expectations and fears had to be managed. The major issue at this stage was maintaining enthusiasm amongst the group and dealing with feelings of disappointment. Five days later the remaining teams, including myself, were repatriated to the UK.

Having been prematurely returned one month early, we were soon invited to a debrief session. This included a thorough run down of the circumstances which took place in Zimbabwe and the reasons for why pulling out the entire team was the safest option for all concerned. It was reported and finally concluded that because local authorities were suspicious about the work one of the Zimbabwean contacts was carrying out [which said team of British volunteers were assisting] the group were detained for precautionary measures. This, coupled with an increasingly destabilising political environment, was enough to ultimately pull the plug.

A final part of the programme and something with which I am still to complete, involves an element of 'Action at Home'. My intention is to write a letter to my local MP and have a meeting with him to discuss the wider impact of international development and raise awareness of the ICS programme. I hope that this article also goes some way to further highlighting the work that ICS does and the invaluable opportunities it provides for young Brits wishing to challenge themselves and make the world a better place.

In conclusion, despite having experienced Typhoid and having almost been detained myself, I am thoroughly glad to have taken part in the ICS programme. It was an excellent experience, made all the more exciting in my opinion by the events which unfolded. Most importantly the opportunity enabled me to meet new people and travel to a part of the world I had previously unexplored. Indeed, to have been recalled a month early was a shame but the work we did manage to carry out was not wasted and reports following our sudden departure state that the Zimbabwean volunteers did a splendid job of finishing what we had started.