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## Africa Update

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Hi every one,

This month I want to focus on the current economic situation here in Zambia. Recent food price hikes and the current global economic crisis have hit Zambia quite hard. Mealy maize, the main staple food here, has almost doubled in price over the last year. The costs of many other foods and commodities have also risen sharply and the inflation rate here remains in double figures. Foodstuffs are slipping out of peoples' reaches and many people here have become hungry. I heard this week via BBC radio that the estimated number of hungry people in the world has just jumped another 40 million to 960 million people.

The above photograph shows two men as I found them last week sitting behind one of the unfinished buildings on my property. What were they doing there? They were looking for food for their families. The way they took the food that I offered them left no doubt as to how hungry and desperate they were. As I initially approached them, one of them, Jonas, even fell to his knees in a half begging, half "please don't punish us for being on your property" stance. They had already gathered some mangoes from the trees although most of them are not yet ripe. I'm not quite sure how Jonas and Matthews ended up on my property as they live in a very poor shanty compound that is an hour's walk away. I can only think that any food growing naturally around the shanty compounds is being scavenged very quickly at the moment.

Matthews has four children in his family. He has no work and there are no social benefits here. Like many people in the shanty compounds, his family is probably trying to find enough food to have their one meal a day. When Matthews' children wake up in the morning, they probably do not expect to eat breakfast because they never have it and it is not part of their routine. The same goes for lunch. Going through the day with no meals and feeling hungry is normal. Food is probably served once a day in the early evening with what ever food has become available during that particular day.

Some young hungry street children approached me in town yesterday and said "Christmas" hoping that I might have something for them. The reality is that Christmas day will be no different to any other day for these children or for the majority of Zambians this year. The thinness of some of the beggars on the streets of Kitwe at the moment is quite concerning, especially the children's.

A different and very sad looking boy named "Chiphiri" has also been approaching me lately when I drive into town. Usually he just wants to sit by my parked car and guard it for the Zambian kwacha equivalent of 30 Australian cents. Dressed in torn clothes that don't fit him, he pointed to his bare feet last week and asked for a pair of shoes. I realized that I had some shoes back at home that had been given to me to give away to someone needy. I told Chiphiri that I would try and get some shoes to him.

Chiphiri found me again in town this week and I had the shoes in the back of my car. He looked stunned when I actually gave them to him. I was concerned about whether they would be a good fit but Chiphiri put the shoes on immediately. Regardless of the fit, I could tell that those shoes were not about to come off again. It was only as he was walking away that I saw a big smile break out upon his face. This was not a dream.

I had asked Chiphiri about his parents and he had replied with “mother - blind” and “father - dead”. Chiphiri is on the streets each day begging to support his mother and perhaps even his siblings. That’s why he is not at school. I also



realized that he doesn’t really speak English; he only knows begging, survival words such as “hungry” and “Bwana”. Chiphiri’s story reminds me that there is a similar story of family tragedy behind each of the many begging faces of Kitwe.

I have one full time casual worker at the moment who maintains the grounds of my property. Mischeck has worked for me on previous occasions but I don’t always have enough work to keep him going. In the dry season everything stops growing and the gardens don’t require maintenance. I had no work for Mischeck for the five weeks leading up to November but Mischeck decided to visit me during the break to ask for food. Like the other cases already mentioned, he was desperate, and had lost a noticeable amount of weight. I was relieved when I finally had work again and could resume paying him. The unemployment rate here is about 80% and I am regularly asked for work.

This week, Mischeck took some of his pay and bought seed to grow some vegetables. In line with African tradition, Mischeck is expected to share what he earns with his extended family. His relatives are pitching in to help maintain the vegetable patch and they will all reap the benefits. It’s good to know that his small salary can go a long way. A couple of months ago I saw the house that Mischeck was building for his young family. He and his wife lost a baby to malaria last year but remain with a second

Jonas takes on an unripe mango

child. His wife had malaria herself this week but Mischeck had the money to buy her the necessary medication and she is currently recovering.

Mischeck's house of unfired mud blocks is built directly onto the ground which means that he has a dirt floor. The house comprises two rooms each the size of a small bathroom and from the outside, it looks like a small shed. It has one door at the entrance and no windows. The roof is constructed from some old damaged corrugated iron sheets that came from my carport. He was able to fit the roofing sheets just before the rains came which means that the mud walls have not been washed away. The roofing sheets are not attached directly to the house but are held in place under heavy rocks. This prevents them from being blown away during the wild storms of this current rainy season. This type of housing is common in the compound where Mischeck lives except that the less fortunate people use black wrapping plastic for their roofing. I probably don't need to tell you how this normally works out as the winds blow and the rains pour.



Mischeck clearing and preparing some ground to plant beans

These above accounts of recent events reflect the way that many people in Zambia are living. It seems that the economic situation here has slipped into greater poverty over the last year. This encourages me with the "Children of Destiny Project" even though my plans have been delayed this year. Necessary changes to my visa ended up taking 6 months instead of immigrations' two-week turn around policy. It has also taken 7 months to draw together the various reports, drawings, maps etc required to reapply for a water rights permit. I had found out earlier in March that my first application was rejected because certain requirements were not met. One of these unmet requirements, a contour map of

my property, was not listed as a requirement in my first application attempt and ended up being very difficult to procure (months of searching for someone who knew how to do it and then further months of follow up to make sure he did it!).

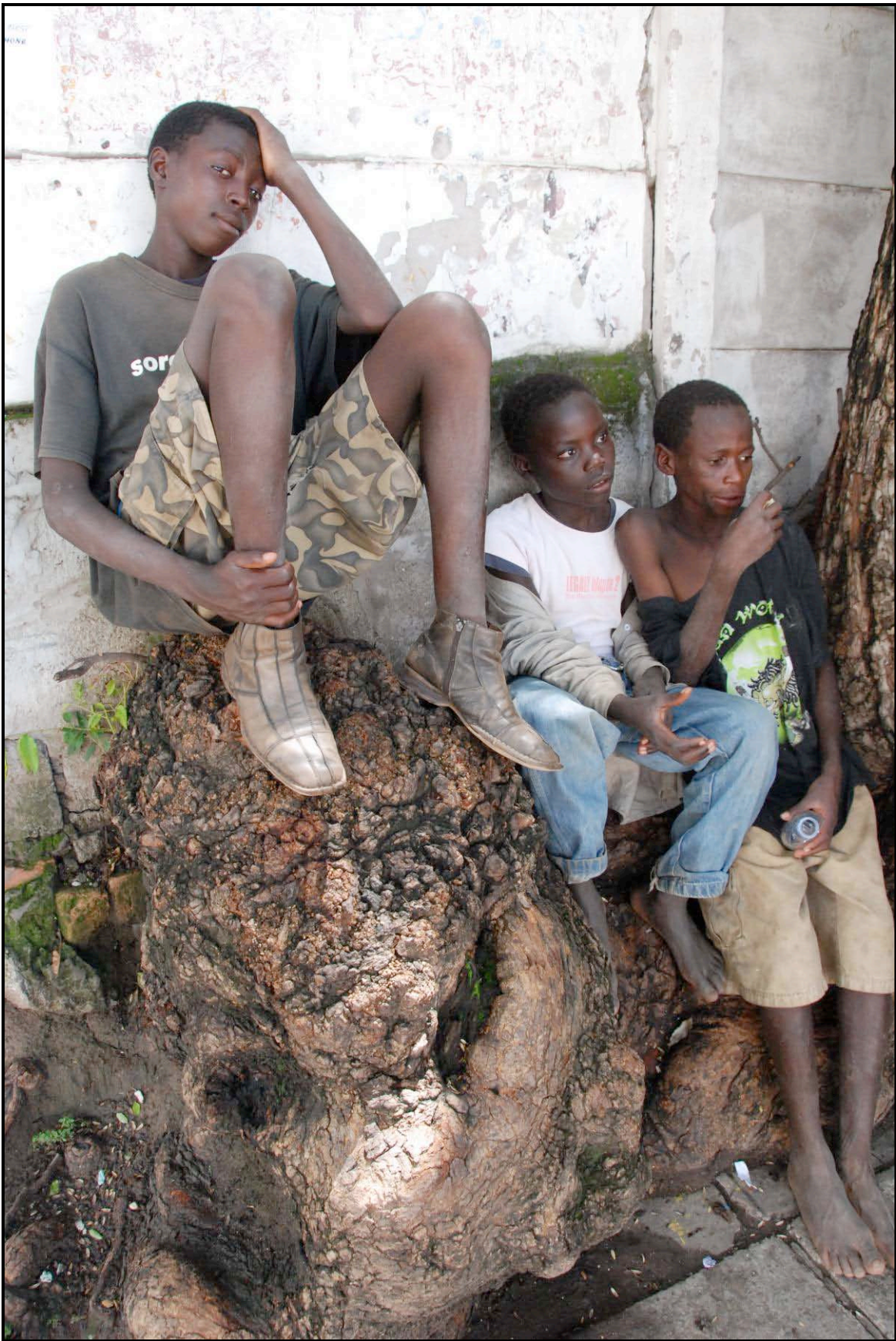
Anyway, my second application for a water rights permit has now been submitted and I am waiting for an outcome. It was interesting to watch the local water affairs officer's response to my application. Since recent changes in legislation, not many people have been able to come up with all the necessary maps, drawings and reports. The water affairs officer seemed quite excited to see all the components of my application completed and presented in one consignment. I suspect that this has been a rare occurrence so far.

Because it has been noted that people are struggling to obtain water permits, the Water Board in conjunction with the European Union, have appointed a consultancy company to prepare a report on how to improve the water rights application process. I was selected by the Water Board to give feedback as to how the application process might be improved. During my interview, the consultant stated that the current process seemed so arduous that most people would not be able to do it and would probably just extract water illegally. I could only agree. In fact I know that many local farmers here operate without permits.



Please note that I will be back in Australia again for the month of February. I look forward to seeing some of you then. For now though, I would like to wish you all a blessed and safe Christmas/New Year season. Take care,

*Mike*



A happier looking Chiphiri (shoes) with two younger street children