

Africa Update
Special Fire Edition
02 October 2007



Dear All,

Greetings from Zambia once again!

It seems that all of Zambia has gone up in flames over the last few months as properties have been burnt to protect against possible uncontrolled bushfires. This happens every year leading up to the hot months of September and October. In keeping with this tradition, my property has been burnt as well but not in an altogether planned way.

One afternoon towards the end of August, I turned into my driveway after a trip into town to find people running across my land and a small section of my land on fire. I assumed that these people were burning my property so I quickly approached them to ask what they were doing burning it. They couldn't speak English and my annoyance at the situation didn't make the communication any easier. Eventually they were able to communicate to me that some boys had lit the fire and run away. These people, my immediate neighbours, were kindly helping to put the fire out!

Once the fire was out, we immediately heard the sound of more burning on another section of the property. We quickly followed the sound to discover a second fire which was also promptly put out. We could then see a group of boys across the river and other scattered fires that had been lit on adjoining properties. I thanked my neighbours and left the situation at that.

The following week I was at home with two tradesmen working on the house. Late in the afternoon, I and the contractor, John, left the house to pick up a plumber from town. As we drove down the driveway, again my property was on fire but this time the fire was larger than the previous ones, had already burnt a fair area of land and no one was putting it out. I and John jumped out of the car, tore branches off trees and ran in different directions to extinguish the fire with the branches. Fortunately the fires were put out in 10-15 minutes but not before I was black with soot and dripping with sweat from the heat; not a pretty combination and no, I don't have a photo.

This second fire had again been lit by boys but this time on my neighbour's property. It had subsequently crossed over onto my property. Seeing the boys, my neighbours had pursued and caught one of them and taken him forcibly to the police station. Meanwhile, the fire burnt on until John and I saw it. I was summoned to attend Garneton police station the next morning. Police business there happens under a tree where a desk and chairs are set up.

On arrival at the station, I realized that my neighbour had been waiting patiently for over an hour in order to commence discussions. The captured boy had been moved to a holding cell closer to town at Mindola police headquarters. The Garneton police had no operational police vehicle which was severely limiting any further course of action. The investigation officer said that we had the option of him collecting a police vehicle from town early the next morning in order to collect the other boys from their homes for questioning. Because of the lack of available resources, this would only be possible if I could provide the police with some petrol money. I obliged which allowed the matter to proceed. The next morning I took my neighbour and two young boys (witnesses) to Mindola to have a meeting with the police, the arrested boys and their fathers. After some negotiations between the different parties, we decided to caution the boys rather than to charge them. By now, they had already experienced the reality of a Zambian police cell and the cautioning process was fairly intimidating.

The following Sunday, I had some young men come from one of the local churches to do some controlled burning of my property. This proved to be quite stressful as their concept of a controlled fire was quite different to mine. It ended up being quite windy and I found myself running from one side of the property to the other in order to keep myself satisfied that everything was under control. The Zambians are fairly relaxed in their approach to burning off because fires in Zambia are relatively easy to control. There are few eucalyptus trees here and fires left to themselves tend to eventually go out rather than build up. Even knowing this, I still wasn't relaxed. I'm very much Australian.



Fraser helping to control the fire



Breaking off mango tree branches to smother unruly flames

We burnt about half the property including the areas around the house and garden before I stopped any further burning. Because of the strong winds blowing at the time, I was concerned that if we kept going, the fire might spread to one of the neighbouring properties and result in compensation being requested.

Then just yesterday, I came back from town in the evening to find that another fire had swept across my land from another adjoining property. About another quarter or so of my property had been burnt in my absence before the fire self-extinguished. Fortunately, the previous controlled burning meant that this fourth fire couldn't spread to my house or garden area. In fact, throughout all of the fires, none of my non-land property had been damaged other than some scorched leaves on various trees.

Having just entered into the month of October, the rainy season will begin any day now and then the 5 or so months of regular downpours will prevent any more fires as Zambia turns lush and green. In the last few weeks the weather has become very hot so the rains will be very welcome.

As well as fires, other things have also been moving forward over the last month. All the electrical work and plumbing work required for my house has been

completed and the carpentry is currently underway. The tin roof of my house has just been repaired of leaks in anticipation of the rains and should be repainted in the near future.



*Some of the area burnt after the fourth fire; as with all my
possessions,
this 40 foot shipping storage container survived unscathed*



A house guest arrives after the burning off

The work on my house requires a great deal of my presence as the Zambian tradesmen have quite different ideas as to what I should have as opposed to what I think. Given that none of the tradesmen have vehicles, I am also constantly traveling into town with them to choose, purchase and transport the building supplies. This has slowed down my progress in some other areas but I am learning to become more relaxed in my approach to time.

Arrangements for the hire of a school classroom in Chingola are currently underway as I prepare to commence teaching a bible course there in the next week or so. Hopefully a course in Kitwe will also begin shortly.

My daily walks with Travis and Tina have become interesting as we endeavour to dodge roaming packs of aggressive dogs. Sometimes we have aborted our walks and turned for home because of this threat and once I lost Travis for 30 minutes when the pups scattered into the nearby scrub after an attack. So far we have managed without any injury but in the future these walks may need to be discontinued as my dogs reach adulthood and a fighting age.

Anyway, that's about all from me for this month. I trust you are well,

Mike



*Fire approaching a giant termite hill of which I have many
Photo taken from just outside my very close house
Not pictured here: Mike's anxiety*