

Diary Entry 3

The following diary entries are Ron Hamilton's personal observations, musings and thoughts while commissioned by the World Bank to review governance and monitoring in the Strategic Grain Reserve in Kabul during 2012

Well, the work news is my round of meetings commence today, And, because the Agriculture Minister is now not available until Saturday, my scheduled day of departure, I am working on leaving on Monday. Mixed feelings about this. I felt a week was about right, before I arrived. I don't recall how I put up with the three weeks of my first trip. Mind you, I had a room with a view, then and didn't feel so closed in.

A group of us went "ashore" last night. To a place called The Green Village. Security all over the front with a manned, fully-optioned hummer across from the gate. A real ziz-zag entrance and security swarming all over the place. I was slightly amused that my New Zealand driver licence was deemed to be sufficient as an ID.

All this for what is basically a large motel – for several hundred, I was told. The equivalent of the American "r and r" place in Manila, near the water front. (Seafront) The bar area was crowded and we sat there for a while, drinking Russian beer – it is partly owned by a



Russian. A few of the patrons **1Leaving the compound (via iPhone)** wore hand guns. The food was Chinese – quite average. Hans advised that it was only two months back since "the bad guys" attacked the place. I doubt it was for the cuisine.

The group is interesting. Everyone has worked all over the world. Most seem to have a home in one country or another and visit it every few weeks. I guess organisations such as the Bank encourage professional gypsies. My team leader, a Dutchman, has a home in Costa Rica, for example.

Not much to say about the trip to the complex. It was dusk and dusty. Cars and trucks competing for space on the broken road surface. I smiled at the sight of a donkey and cart doing a "campervan" to the traffic accumulating behind it. The driver – as with campervan drivers – clearly didn't give a toss!

My meetings commenced today. The first was at the Afghan Seeds Authority, on the outskirts of the city. As with other Asian cities, there are so many contrasting sights that it is difficult to take it all in and do them justice in the telling.

The journeys end and finish by passing the British Embassy and some key office, plus the occasional park. All the major sites are sand bagged and protected. Guards everywhere. Incidentally, it occurred to me that the only Europeans one sees in the streets are guards. No tourists or residents. Well, I became a momentary exception, later.



One of the cemeteries - note the stones.

It is the shop displays which fascinate. Plastic toys, cooking utensils, balloons, meat, dresses, food, my first post office, banks of all sizes, the occasional hotel. And more. And repeated in each suburb. The roads are patchy. Side streets seem to be in a permanent state of repair. City workers are in bright orange boiler suits. A few were trying to lift heavy concrete slabs to empty deep drains. Piles of detritus were in evidence. And the Indian practice of refuse collection was prominent – leave it in scattered piles wherever it suits you. A few cages of scraggy chickens in a state that would make the most hardened battery-hen owner weep.

Barrows of all kinds of things. Sun glasses on one; bras – looking like coloured ostrich-egg egg cups, and food items. It must be water melon season – great piles of them. I was reminded of the book I am currently reading – the kidnappers of Kashmir booby-trapped water melons with hand grenades!

People in all kinds of attire, with the school kids standing out, thanks to their uniforms. Many of the school girls were in a long, loose black attire with blinding white head scarves hanging down front and back. School boys in blue shirts. I noticed men wearing a loose head scarf – to keep the sun off their heads.



Due to being lost, we arrived late but were still welcomed. My minder is Assad and he assisted with interpretation. He may not be short of money – big SUV and is just back from Paris. With complex reading tastes – today’s book was about emotional intelligence. “I sit in the car so long, I read improving books!”

This afternoon’s meeting was with Mr Osman¹. I think he was cautious about talking in front of Assad, my Rhodes Scholar escort. But discussion soon relaxed. It was once remotely possible that I could have spent a year working with him.

His new office is on the sixth floor of a building that housed government offices and a movie theatre (showing Pakistan movies – all guns, unshaven men and busty, pouting women. Well, on the posters they were! I have not yet seen any busty women in Kabul! And, I am still to find a building that has an elevator!



The rocket-detection blimp.

I was slightly uncomfortable about waiting on the footpath – which was packed with people. I stood out like a European clearly out of his depth. These are actual moments we are not allowed to have – I suspect the Bank’s security would be angry if they knew I was not in a protective compound. While we waited for the car to come back, we stood on the fifth floor and I iPhoned the view outside. It will be almost impossible to see the anti-rocket blimp in one view. And both trips took me close to the steep, mud-house covered hill sides. Every downpour must threaten them!

And so back in the Bank compound where I continue to provide viewing entertainment for the several men scraping and painting the exterior of my “cell”.

And I now have a passport and flights out! Monday – arriving in Auckland on Wednesday morning.

¹ Mr Osman was one of the MoF SOE team whom I worked with in 2009 and who, later, offered me a year long job in Kabul. I declined.