

Pilgrimage to Rokon: Vision of a University

by Dane F. Smith, Jr.

An Episcopal University (EU) vehicle took us August 19 to the EU headquarters in Juba at the compound of the former Bishop Gwynne College, now Bishop Gwynne Theological School. There we met with Rev. James Aruma Ilarios, Deputy Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, George Taban, Acting Dean of the School of Theology, Registrar Paul Issa, Joseph Uyikuru, Operations Officer, Joseph Agar, head of student affairs(?), and Joseph Ajang, Examinations Officer. (We also encountered Bishop Zechariah Manyok Biar of Wanglei (Jonglei), a part-time professor.) The last three accompanied us as we picked up Jackson Arifa, the Assistant Bishop of Juba, who took the place of the still abroad new Bishop of Rokon, Emmanuel Lomoro Eluzai. That proved a happy circumstance because Arifa is part-time on the faculty of the EU and knows Rokon well. He proved dexterous in moving us past a check point where the authorities initially insisted that James and I show a registration document we did not have.



Staff of Episcopal University plus Asst
Bishop of Khartoum Jackson Arifa

Rokon is about 65 kilometers northwest of Juba on a wide dirt road, which the rain and heavy lorries have left with deeply rutted areas. The land is flat and increasingly populated by trees as we moved north with numerous *jabls* – mountains in Arabic, but in this area spiky rocky hills. We passed several large herds of cattle owned by Mandari, a Nilotic group that lives in Equatoria. As we approached Rokon, Ajang called our attention to the beginnings of the university campus plot – 2 square kilometers – that borders the road on the northwest. We soon passed the cornerstone sign found on the cover of our annual report. We continued on some 12 kilometers into Rokon itself and the diocese office. There we were greeted by Diocesan Secretary Malish Francis, the Rev. Barnaba, Provost of St. John church, and several archdeacons. We spoke with Rev. Ruth, local coordinator for the Mothers Union and wearing clerical collar,

who stressed the importance of helping women with gender-based violence and trauma. The core of the diocesan compound is an orphanage created by missionaries which still serves 20 kids.



Diocesan staff at Rokon



We received a warm welcome. I thanked the group in Arabic to surprise. A good deal of time was spent explaining what happened to money provided by a Frenchman we met in Salisbury, Sebastien Dumortier, who had funded a borehole and support for two schools. He had requested that we ask about his contribution, an inquiry which was actually forwarded to Bishop Jackson by our friend Ian Woodward. On our way back to the campus, we visited the borehole (pump broken) and St. Joseph's Primary School (temporarily closed because it ran out of money). St Mary's School in the archdeaconry of Keri was closed because the area is in rebel hands. The woman who worked on the project for Sebastien and the late Bishop Francis Loyo has returned to Uganda. It was implied that any records Bishop Loyo might have kept about the project are missing or non-existent.

Back at the campus – which those without vision might characterize as an untamed wilderness -- we visited on foot, in grass as high as an elephant's eye, the three successful boreholes. At this point they are basically narrow well shafts protruding from the ground and sealed.



Borehole 1



Borehole 3



Borehole 2

There are no connecting pumps. The intention is to connect the wells via pumps and pipes to a storage facility on the highest point of land in the campus, from whence water can be piped to various parts of the campus, including for access by the local community. At this point, however, there appears to be no money for the solar pumps at the wells, nor for the pipes. Our university friends are concerned that if the pumps and initial connection pipes are not installed soon, there is danger that the well shafts will be tampered with, perhaps by youths or others seeking access to water, for example by men cutting trees for charcoal production. They are eager to have the pumps and initial pipe installed and to make the boreholes relatively untamperable.

We were given the July EMI report on the EU. It lays out in detail a desirable phased action plan to include drainage, water, electricity, construction, and transportation, to accommodate an initial 2000 students (5000 eventually). Phase 1A begins with the erection of a fence around the entire property at a cost estimated at \$876,000. Curiously, the report appears to be out of date on the

water situation, stating that successful boreholes had not yet been drilled. Neither Phase IA nor any other phase includes the cost for installing solar pumps for the boreholes and connecting them to storage on the most elevated area of the property. Clearly, the erection of the fence would be helpful for the protection of the boreholes. Phase IB includes construction of academic and student housing at a cost of about \$25 million. With Phases II and III and some desirable options like athletic fields and a retreat center, the total is estimated at more than \$76 million.

Our final stop at Rokon was at the Episcopal University sign, where we posed in the manner of the Primate and Eeva John and then trekked behind to the actual cornerstone with its inscription.



Our return to Juba was remarkably quick – 1 ¾ hours – followed by a final session with Vice Chancellor Aruma and a late (4 pm) sandwich lunch.

There is great excitement and large hopes about the university among what seems to be a very committed senior staff. Adequate and timely funding remain a huge obstacle to its realization under the present plan.