

Exactly one and a half years ago I took a call from Morocco. It was my colleague Jean Atto, who works in Casablanca for the medical division at Dräger. He told me about his school project in Cameroon, in Bisso, a tiny village in the middle of a tropical rainforest. His commitment to the village was aimed particularly at the many young children of the village. He'd built a school for them, to cater for their educational needs and hence provide them with a future. The school was already up and running when it was destroyed by a powerful tropical storm. Help was needed, and fast!

The intervening period has seen a lot happen. I traveled to Bisso last summer. A few articles were published in dialog and many colleagues helped out by donating. Just because, because they trusted us.



The old school was destroyed in 2007 by a devastating storm. Jean Atto built a new one right next to it.

The new school is larger and more modern, meaning more children can be taught there at the same time.

Cameroon is situated in central Africa, on the Atlantic coast, and has a population of 18.8 million. Because Cameroon is such a long country and encompasses a range of landscape types, it is sometimes referred to as "Africa in miniature", as almost all Africa's landscapes can be found here: palm beaches and coastal plains, verdant rainforests, volcanic mountain ranges, expanses of savannah and steppe, and even the dusty, desert-like Sahel. Cameroon is home to over 200 different peoples and a huge variety of languages totaling 240, 100 of which also have writing. Here, children are seen as their parents' "insurance policies"; in other words, the children support the parents once they are grown, because there are no such things as pensions or unemployment benefits here. Sadly, 77 in every 1,000 children born in Cameroon die in their earliest years of life of a range of diseases; this is a sharp contrast to the figure for Germany, which stands at just five in 1,000.



The village of Bisso is situated approximately five hours by car from Yaoundé, not far from the small town of Nkoteng. The annual average temperature is 23.3 °C, with only minor fluctuations during the course of the year.

Yaoundé is the capital of Cameroon and the country's second biggest city, with a population of almost 1.3 million; it lies surrounded by tropical rainforest. The French name Yaoundé is a corruption of the name of the Ewondo, the original indigenous people of the area.

We used those to buy school supplies and pay teachers their wages. The school's future was now secured. The circle of those who cared about Bisso grew larger. The charitable organization "Future for Bisso e.V." was set up, an association whose task is to help out in Bisso and its surrounds. To provide education, clean running water, decent healthcare.

You can find more information at www.future-for-bisso.org. This year we organized a medical caravan that traveled to Bisso, and I kept a journal for all those interested in what's happening there.

NEWS FROM BISSO



THE TRIP TO CAMEROON

Who formed part of the medical team sent by A team of seven people were sent to Bissau, Guinea-Bissau, and Dr. Frank Steiner, formerly doctor at the German Hospital, would assist them from the 'Daguer' (Daguerrean) machine and a number of the same type with all the latest equipment and provisions. The team was led by a doctor, and the rest of the team were all medical staff. The team was sent to Bissau to provide help with the health of the people, who were suffering from a number of diseases.

The team was helped out by the German, a team of people with great experience. The team, among other things, had the equipment needed for a health check-up in the field.

Source: Bissau

October 3, 2011

Annica, Heinrich, Jean and I met up at Hamburg Airport on the Day of German Unity. Frank had left for Cameroon the previous day; he wanted to meet up with fellow doctors from the German development organization GIZ*. We arrived in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, at 8:00 p.m. We made it problem-free through customs control, a change from my last trip to Cameroon. Checks that we've had the required immunizations against yellow fever were extremely relaxed.

Last year, I had been picked out from a bunch of Cameroonians and ordered to receive the vaccination. Maybe I was also the only one there who hadn't got a wink of sleep due to my fellow travelers' snoring, and hence looked

correspondingly pale. I looked so overtired that it was probably no wonder I suddenly found myself in a dark vaccination room. The nurse drew towards me with her needle at the ready. I helplessly waved around my vaccination card. After a heated debate and much back-and-forth she gave in, and I was allowed to leave the tiny, stifling room.

This year there was none of that. We were picked up by a driver, crammed our stuff into the overloaded trunk and drove off into the night.

* Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

A short time later, we were stopped at the first checkpoint. More were to follow. A stretcher lay on our laps and countless drugs and toothpaste jutted into the small of our backs. Heinrich suddenly remembered that he'd forgotten an important shot he needed for dental treatment.

Urgh! We drove on through the bumpy streets. After a while we noticed that the trunk was open, and wondered how long it had been that way. The driver pulled over and shut the trunk, which was suddenly strikingly easy to close. We drove on to our hotel certain that we'd lost half of our possessions en route. Strangely, nothing was missing when we arrived.



So we checked into the Prestige hotel in Yaoundé. Frank was already waiting on the tattered leather couch beneath the skin shed by a king python. Together we headed off to a nice restaurant. It was Monday evening and therefore showtime. Various singers stood on stage amid a barrage of laser lights. As we returned to our hotel that evening, we worried about whether the crate from Germany would really arrive on time.

Yellow fever

Yellow fever, also known as "black vomit", is a virus transmitted by mosquito bites and prevalent in tropical and subtropical areas in South America and Africa. The only known hosts of the virus are primates and various types of mosquito.

In most cases, the disease manifests with fever, nausea and pain and resolves after a few days. Some patients, however, go on to suffer a toxic phase resulting in liver damage and jaundice (hence the name of the disease) which may be fatal.

WHO estimates state that 200,000 people develop the disease each year and 30,000 of them die.

One week earlier, Frank and I went to Revalstraße in Lübeck. Both of us packed our cars completely full of medications, toothpaste, anesthetic and other medical supplies for Bisso. Plus one or two packets of pencils, notebooks, leather balls and children's clothes.

October 4, 2011

It was loud outside.

The street in front of the hotel was full of life, the pot-holed sidewalk and street crowded with hundreds of people. Traders sold

SIM cards, sweaters, fish, soap and

everything you could possibly need day to day in tiny wooden sheds. Thousands of yellow taxis

darted here and there. Practically every car had a broken windshield.

Buses with huge luggage racks on top drove past the hotel.

In many places, the drainage system was composed of open rivulets.

That harbored the danger of landing directly into drain on getting out of a vehicle - or even sink your car into it. The jukebox blared music at full volume, almost all of it African. I sat out in front of the hotel and watched the colorful hustle and bustle go by. Young shoe sellers balanced one shoe on their head and held the other one in their hand, ready to make a sale.



Always watch out for the drainage system!

Our personal issue of the day: the crate. The crate from Lübeck. Where was it? Christian tried to find out. That left Hinrich with enough time to loan out the shot he forgot from a local dentist.

Afterwards, we drove to the only cashpoint in the city, located at the Hilton Hotel. It's there we met Jimmy, a fellow Bisso supporter. We organized ourselves an off-road SUV complete with driver for the journey to Bisso. We drove back and forth, from A to B and B to A. Met people of one kind or another. Bought provisions, especially water.

While we were doing that, we discovered that the crate was caught up in Paris. It was Tuesday, and we wanted to make it to Bisso as soon as possible. But it didn't make sense to leave without the crate containing all our supplies. And now everything seemed to depend somehow on that damn crate.



October 5, 2011

We were up early. Jean and Jimmy had already sorted out various mattresses for us. We'd all gone and bought ourselves camp beds for Bisso, which we'd brought with us from Germany. And now we learned that Bisso was awash with beds, but seemed to have a rather severe



The lap of luxury: Foam mattresses from the market

shortage of mattresses. The driver came with his transport. Christian called the head of the freight forwarding company in France. Frank used the hotel computer to write a certificate for customs providing the information that this was a matter of humanitarian aid, in the hope that this document would somehow be able to speed up the transport from Paris to Yaoundé.

The certificate went round the houses of a series of Dräger departments by email before finally reaching Christian's inbox. Without Christian, we'd have been in a very tight spot indeed - the crate would presumably have disappeared in some covert channel or other.

Suddenly there was good news: The crate was due to be loaded onto a plane in Paris at some point during the day, meaning we had a good chance of receiving it that evening. We began to hope. In the meantime, a few hundred euros were being transferred - money Christian would need to have the crate released from customs in Yaoundé. The driver packed the car to the ratters and rearranged it. Finally there came the call from Christian: The crate had arrived. It was Wednesday afternoon. We all squeezed into the full-to-bursting car. The plan



was for Jimmy to pick up the crate the next day with our driver. The great moment had arrived: We started off toward Bisso, leaving the city behind us. We passed innume-



A: Trip to the market

B: View from our hotel

C: Stall selling cellphone cards and other useful things

D: Sale and storage of cereals

erable market stalls, small villages, children playing, pigs, palm trees, wooden huts. Time after time, we encountered small checkpoints, were stopped and required to pay a little money. We usually stopped, chatted a little, paid and set off on our way again. Sometimes, when we'd got a nice speed going, it was enough for us to simply throw the money out of the window.

After a few hours on the road we reached Nkoteng, where we visited a small hospital. The nurse was asleep in front of the small building and looked rather creased and crumpled when she saw us coming. We explained briefly why we were there and she showed us around. A little girl, carrying her infusion bottle in her hand, was wandering into her room. The rusty beds had worn-looking plastic covers. There were no curtains at the windows, allowing the sun to beat down directly into the little room.



Welcome to the VIP room!

There were almost no medical devices to be seen. The so-called VIP room was distinguished from the rest by the fact that there was a sheet of plywood squeezed between the bed and the corridor behind it, in order to prevent anyone and everyone walking through the room. Sheer luxury. And this was the hospital serving the entire region. We took our leave and headed onward in the direction of Bisso, soon finding that our route was becoming more hair-raising. The forests thickened, the rough red road became muddier and bumpier. But although the area appeared remote, we saw people everywhere making their journeys on foot. Night began to draw in.

When we arrived in Bisso, it was raining, and looked somehow sad on this dark evening, possibly because the open fire in front of the house had a rather puny flame. We greeted the small group gathered round the fire. I've been in Bisso before, so I enjoyed seeing familiar faces again. We unpacked and took our belongings into the house. All we had left to do was put up the mosquito nets and fall into bed. And suddenly a scream rent the air...

In Africa, tarantulas are known as baboon spiders, because the way they climb resembles that of baboons. Despite their size, a bite from most types of tarantula may be painful, but is generally harmless to humans, unless they develop an allergic reaction. Many books compare such a bite with a bee or wasp sting; this, however, does not apply to all types. In some areas of South America, cooked tarantulas are considered a delicacy.



Giant baboon spider

.... ahhhhhhhhhh!

Two big fat giant baboon spiders had settled down for the night too - in Annica's room. This type of spider is not considered highly poisonous, although they certainly look like it. Not that we knew that at that particular moment, faced with their big eyes gleaming in the dark. The first of the pair in Annica's room met its end after just a few seconds at the hands - or rather the sole - of Frank's slipper. The second hairy creature was able to escape. We never found out where to. Goodnight!

It was pitching dark in the house. We set up petroleum lamps and lit candles. Some of us had headlamps. These devices enabled us to shed at least a little light on matters in the room, to avoid treading on any tarantulas that might still be around. We put our newly purchased mattresses onto the bamboo beds



and put up our mosquito nets, which proved quite a challenge. We tried using ropes, small tree trunks and finally nails in the wall. After much effort, we had a slightly skewed but comfortable-looking set up.

We sat by the fire a little before going to bed.



Annica slept like a princess. The wall was plastered and the mosquito net made it look a bit like a four-poster bed.

October 6, 2011

We were awake before the cock crowed, emerging from our mosquito nets at around 6:00 a. m. Just as last time, my skin was covered with little red blister-type spots. Was it the mosquitos? Jimmy, who had arrived in the night, brought the mattresses we still needed, before heading off again in the morning with our driver to fetch the crate from Christian, who had spent a lot of money getting it released from customs.

We sat on the small veranda belonging to the house, ate small balls made of dough and curd cheese (the main breakfast here) and drank a warm, milky drink. After this, Annica and I were off to the school.

It was Thursday. We went to see a third-grade lesson. There were 15 students in the class, with two different grades being taught at the same time.



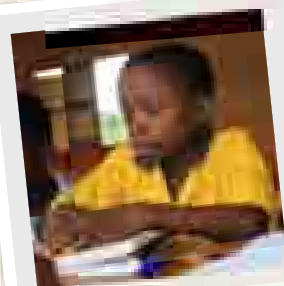
Bisso's school consists of three buildings, two of which still have ruined roofs. The third school is a new building. The buildings are grouped around an open space in the middle of which there is a flagpole for the flag ceremony which kicks off every school day, at which the flag is raised and the assembled children sing Cameroon's national anthem.

Afterwards, they go to classes. As I said, we were in a third grade class. The children stood up as we entered

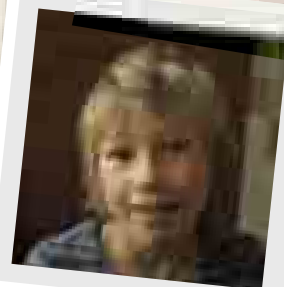
the room; we exchanged "Bonjour" and "Guten Morgen". The children sang us a song - a round! That was something I never managed to learn properly all through my long schooldays. There were two reasons behind our visit to the school: first of all, the school, of course, is one of the projects in Bisso that is closest to our hearts, and second, I wanted to get a partnership going between the Bisso school and an elementary school in Germany.



To get things started, I went to a German elementary school and gave a lesson on Cameroon and Bisso. Then I asked the children to say a bit about themselves and give me questions to take to the children in Bisso. "Do you get homework?" - "I want to be a dancer!" - "Do you have hippopotamuses in Cameroon?"



Nom: Bmar
Prenom: Mbarga
âge: 10 ans
I'd like to be very rich.
What do I need to do?



salut, je m'appelle Nick et j'habite dans le Amselweg 21.
Combien de hauteur a une palme et un arbre de bananes?
Combien de bananes a une arbre?
Vous avez combien de salle de classe?
Comment appellent vos professeurs et les élèves?
Est-ce que vous avez des vrai tableau?

Mbolo

Bonjour

Akiba

Merci

Ma me ne ...

Je m'appelle

Hello

Thank you

My name is ...

These were the questions I had brought with me to Bisso, hoping for answers. Soon I'll be giving the German children the questions their counterparts in Bisso want to ask them. I'm hoping this very long-distance partnership will work out. But for now, there we were, Annica, Thierry and I, standing in the Bisso school, asking about favorite music, soccer, Harry Potter, opticians' shops...

In the middle of the classroom was an enormous termite mound. The creatures had completely destroyed the floor, where there lay a few machetes. We pushed the tables together and gave a little lesson to the children, with the questions we'd brought with us from Germany. A highly disciplined, pleasant atmosphere

A termite mound in the schoolroom, which is gradually pushing the children toward one corner of the room - which unfortunately happens to be the one it rains in through.



was predominant in the class. That notwithstanding, there was a rather nasty situation: One of the four teachers was hopelessly drunk, reeling in front of the children and barking at them in an unpleasant manner. That evening, we wondered what to do with this teacher. Alcohol remains the biggest social problem in the village, particularly among men.

We were still waiting for the crate from Lübeck. By now it was late afternoon. Hinrich commenced carrying out examinations. The first patient was the chief village elder, whom everyone called simply Papa, followed by his family. As Hinrich didn't have any material, he wasn't able to pull any teeth. Thierry noted down the names of those needing treatment and which teeth had to be extracted.

While Hinrich conducted his examinations outside, Frank saw patients inside the house we were sleeping in,



where it was mostly dark, even though it was light outside. We placed three wicker chairs to a window which shed a little light into the room. In one corner of the room stood a motorcycle - the one on which Marius had recently had a fatal accident. Marius was the village's all-round good egg and made sure our project worked out in the village, organizing material for the school, ensuring the teachers got their salaries and giving the whole endeavor a bit of structure. Our crate finally arrived during the late afternoon. We unpacked it and put the materials in their places. Now everything was ready for us to really get going the next day.



At last! The crate has arrived.

Jean carrying medicines from the crate into the house..

We were up early once again. I went with Heinrich to see Francoise briefly. Francoise is one of the two female teachers in the village. She showed us the freshly cleared field behind her hut, explaining that it was to be the site of her

house. Her pigs were milling around what was to be her land. She then gave us a quick tour of her hut and her kitchen, with everything tidy and sparklingly clean. To the left of her house lives an old man who makes wicker baskets. His house, and hers, like all the houses here, are located directly on the road that leads from Nkoteng to Bisso. On the other side of the road stands the church, that was built decades ago by Jean's mother. Francoise is a staunch, Bible-believing Christian. On the way into the village, she showed us her small cocoa plantation with about 20 trees, growing under the wide umbrellas of the large tropical trees. The fruits, their yellow shade indicating their ripeness, shone out in the rich green of the forest. Thierry came to pick us up. The first patients came very early in the morning. Frank was not quite in the best of health, meaning his first day at work in Bisso was shaping up to be a challenging one. The impromptu waiting room in front of the house filled with people very quickly. We had decided to give priority to children, women and elderly men. At one point, our driver came to see Frank and revealed that he was almost



Francoise in her kitchen. Her neighbor makes wicker baskets for the market in Nkoteng.

blind in one eye and had also lost most of his sight in the other. That was, of course, not exactly reassuring for us to hear, after having been driven around the country by him for days through the most difficult of terrain.



Hinrich and Thierry

Frank examined patients while Jean acted as assistant and translator.



Hinrich, Annica, Thierry and I went to the school, where Hinrich gave a talk on looking after your teeth and how to use your toothbrush properly and Thierry acted as translator. Many of the children had brought their toothbrush with them and waved them in the air as we entered the schoolroom. Thierry clearly very much enjoyed explaining things to the children. Hinrich had brought a model of a set of teeth with him and told the children a few things about how teeth are structured. The children enjoyed themselves and were keen participants in the lesson. Thierry went back and forth through the rows of seats with the model and asked questions, which the children stood up to answer. Particularly good answers were rewarded with a vigorous round of applause. After this short dental lesson, Annica and Hinrich went outside, sat down at a table and had the children come to them one by one; Hinrich

used the headlamp that had played a starring role the day before in the hunt for tarantulas to examine the children's teeth. Those of the younger ones were in surprisingly good condition, and only two children were asked to come back to see him that afternoon. The children got a small gift as a thank you for taking part: toothpaste, a toothbrush and a small exercise book. While this was going on, Frank was busy in the improvised consulting room, seeing a great many patients. The line outside the house showed no sign of getting smaller, quite to the contrary: a heap of wood outside the house was also turning into a waiting area.



After examining the schoolchildren, Hinrich and Annica set up their treatment space under some palm trees, with a small table placed on a little hill with its legs bolstered by a few stones to prevent it sinking into the miry, russet red ground.

To the left of this were the graves of some of the village's important personalities. The waiting room was furnished by a bench. Treatment material was placed to hand and sterilized afterward. Chickens wandered around the scene.



At some point, the catch of the day was proudly presented: A pangolin which had been caught in the forest and was presumably likely to meet its end in a cooking pot soon.



Pangolins are also known as "walking pinecones", because they have large, overlapping hard scales which cover their entire bodies. If threatened, they can roll themselves into a ball. They live on the ground or in trees, according to their species, and are mostly nocturnal.





Before treatment, patients "paid" their "fee" and had their "insurance cards" "read".

Hinrich examined his patients with the assistance of Annica and Thierry. Many of the people who came for treatment were suffering from acute toothache, some of them for several years, but lack of money had deprived them of access to treatment. Of course, major surgical interventions were out of the question in the conditions we had, so treatment had to be limited to extracting diseased and painful teeth. The local anesthetic was a completely new experience for the patients, with the numb feeling it gave them causing particular consternation. Some of them, however, found the strange feeling in their cheek, as if one half of their face had detached itself from their rest of their body, rather amusing. By this time, the waiting bench was equally divided between those who had received anesthetic and those who hadn't yet, eyeing one another. A lot of teeth were pulled during the treatment session.



As our stay in Bisso had coincided with the country's election campaign, we received a visit in the afternoon from a few campaigners. There were election posters everywhere, most of them showing Biya, Cameroon's current president, who will probably also be the new one. There are pictures, posters and stickers quite literally everywhere: on trees, houses, cars, simply everywhere. Many people were wearing T-shirts and even dresses bearing the current president's image.



It started to rain, prompting us to move our impromptu dental practice indoors.

It began to get dark, but Hinrich kept on working for as long as he could see using his headlamp.

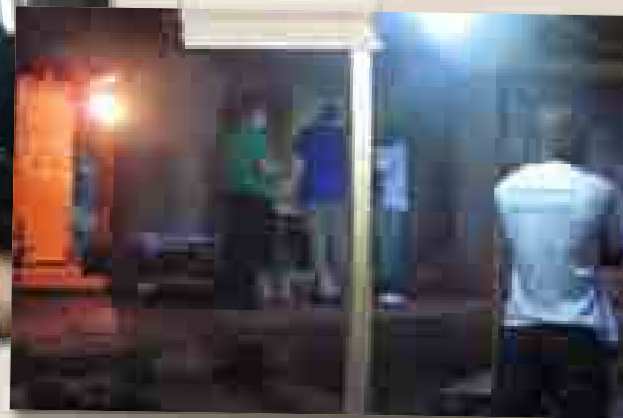
Frank and Jean had intended to close their doors at around 5:00 p. m.

However, the waiting room was still full of twenty people waiting to be examined, and they were still being joined by new patients. Daylight continued to dwindle. But what were we supposed to do? A lot of the patients had been waiting for hours already. Many of them were old and had made a long journey to be seen. We had no idea how word had got around, but people were still showing up.

The clouds of colorful butterflies gradually gave way to the chirping of the crickets. Darkness fell. Eventually, not even petroleum lamps could provide the necessary light to the consulting room. The first proper day of our medical caravan, which had begun early in the morning, had ended in almost total darkness. We'd already used a large part of the contents of the crate from Lübeck, on our very first day.



With Hinrich in front of me pulling teeth and Frank behind me examining his patients, I was busy with my pencil, trying to capture the essence of one or two characters on the scene.



October 8, 2011

We rose early again and sat down with the village's chief elder, whom we presented with some marzipan from Lübeck as a small thank you for his hospitality. The space outside Frank's improvised consulting room began to fill up noticeably. The sound of a small radio came from a wooden bench in front of the house. Suddenly we heard the news that the next day, which was Sunday, no flights would arrive in Yaoundé, and the passengers of the few planes that might arrive would probably have to stay in the airport initially. Sunday was the day on which Frank Glaesner and his family were due to arrive in Yaoundé. The further news stated that no vehicles except those related to the election would be permitted on the roads between sunrise and 5:00 p. m. We saw a conspicuous number of election campaign vehicles, big SUVs, passing our house. The news meant

As Cameroon and Bisso are close to the equator, it gets very dark very quickly. We treated patients as long as the light allowed us to.



Mtoulé Samuel, the chief village elder, is 73 years old. Behind him you can see the improvised "waiting room".

that Frank G probably wouldn't be able to get here on the Sunday or would have to stay at the airport. Frank had commenced seeing patients. Among the first was an elderly gentleman who was HIV-positive and wanted to be treated by Hinrich after seeing Frank. The two discussed the case and agreed what to do. Then our driver entered the dark consulting room and announced that he was off now. Off? Why? Hadn't we booked him and his car for five days, not for four? We showed and checked invoices, with the result that it became evident that the woman who had organized us the car had conned us. The situation necessitated us paying a couple more tens of thousands of CFA francs. The driver stayed. The whole time, Frank remained in his consulting room, examining his patients, and Hinrich worked under the chief village elder's corrugated iron porch roof.



The ban on driving which had been imposed for the following day meant Frank had to get back to Yaoundé, but the line outside his consulting room was getting longer and longer. Frank and Jean decided to issue the patients with numbers. Frank saw patients without a break, examining one after the other thoroughly and never having a moment to emerge from his dark consulting room, but the waiting room, the waiting wood heap, the waiting space outside was fuller each time we looked out of the window. That's strange, we thought,



until we eventually noticed that some patients were issuing themselves with numbers. We had three patients with the number 4, for example. What should we do? Many patients had come a long way to us. Hinrich and Annica even saw a patient from Limbe, a city on the Atlantic coast, a day's journey from Bisso. We were flabbergasted at how word of our presence had got around.

Frank tried to see as many people as he could, but there just wasn't enough time, meaning we were forced, with heavy hearts, to turn some of them away. It was a great pity, but we couldn't possibly have seen them all, because we needed to take Frank to Nkoteng, where we had to visit the local prefect. This, however, didn't work out, as all officials, including the prefect, were busy with events related to the election.

Our driver took us to Nkoteng, where he disguised our car as a campaign vehicle, sticking an enormous poster of Biya on the right-hand half of the windshield, which presumably meant that his sight from his second, almost



working eye was severely limited. He seemed to have had enough sight, however, to deliver Frank to the capital safe and well. Jean and I went into the town, where we ran slap bang into an election campaign event. A series of motorbikes raced past us, their riders brandishing posters featuring their favorite, which wasn't current president Biya, for a change. We were mobbed, surrounded by hands, arms and posters being stretched into the air and besieged by what felt like thousands of people telling us what their favored candidate had promised.



Once we were free of the campaigning crowd, we walked on. Two ladies from the village, one tall and one petite, invited Jean and me to have a drink with them. We sat together in a small bar as night gradually drew in. pigs wandered around and small traders sought a sale in the dark. The ladies were two of 10,000 sugar cane pickers who come to the area each year to earn a pitiful wage. Nkoteng was surrounded by small houses for the workers' accommodation. The sugar cane plantations between Nkoteng and Bisso were planted in the middle of the



tropical rainforest, parts of which had to give way to them. The petite lady asked Jean if he could find her a way to get to Europe. We sipped our cola and left, walking on toward the market. Hundreds of motorcycle taxis zipped about. As the darkness intensified, the noise from the numerous small bars did likewise, all of them turning up their basses to the max.

As our driver was taking Frank to Yaoundé, Jean and I took one of the motorcycle taxis, three of us sitting atop the small vehicle and traveling - without crash helmets - through the night to Bisso.

As we traveled, Jean tried to get hold of Frank G to find out where he was and how his family was doing in Yaoundé.

Sugar cane plantations

Working conditions on the sugar cane fields can be problematic. Child labor is a frequent occurrence, and low wages are endemic in the areas where sugar cane is grown. Plantation workers are paid the equivalent of approximately 60 euro cent per ton of sugar cane they harvest. A practiced worker can harvest about 15 - 20 tons in a day.





During my student days, my friends and I were the holders of the unofficial "how many people can fit into a Gaggomobil microcar" record - seven people, as many as fit onto a motorbike in Cameroon without the slightest trouble. Three people to a bike is completely normal. Without crash helmets, of course.

We passed the enormous sugar cane plantation, which belongs to a Frenchman who is an acquaintance of Sarkozy's and runs a great number of these plantations in Africa. We rode over a small airplane landing strip in the middle of the plantation; passed the factory, which is guarded like a high-security prison during the day. The motorcycle was a little overloaded, which we noticed particularly when we attempted to go up a small hill - 'attempted' being the operative word. We dismounted and walked a little through the night.

Although it was dark and, certainly for our sensibilities, we were in the middle of nowhere, we still met one or two people here and there on our way.

We reached Bisso after a short time. Annica and Hinrich had attempted to get into the African way of life and were dancing around the dwindling fire.



Sugar cane plantation

The villagers had got their drums out and were making music, giving us an opportunity to sit by the warming fire for a while.

October 9, 2011

Breakfast was prepared for us early in the morning - a real luxury for us, today as in the last few days. A lot of women were busy in the kitchen cooking for us; they were women who often seemed invisible, in a small kitchen which often had 15 people sitting in it. The women brought the food to the table and cleared the dishes away, which sometimes made us feel bad. I hope I'll be able to get used to doing things for myself again when we leave.

It was election day, and the school had been transformed into a polling station. Some polling clerks checked that everything was proceeding as it should. Although it was Sunday, we decided not to go to church. Annica and I, accompanied by a small group

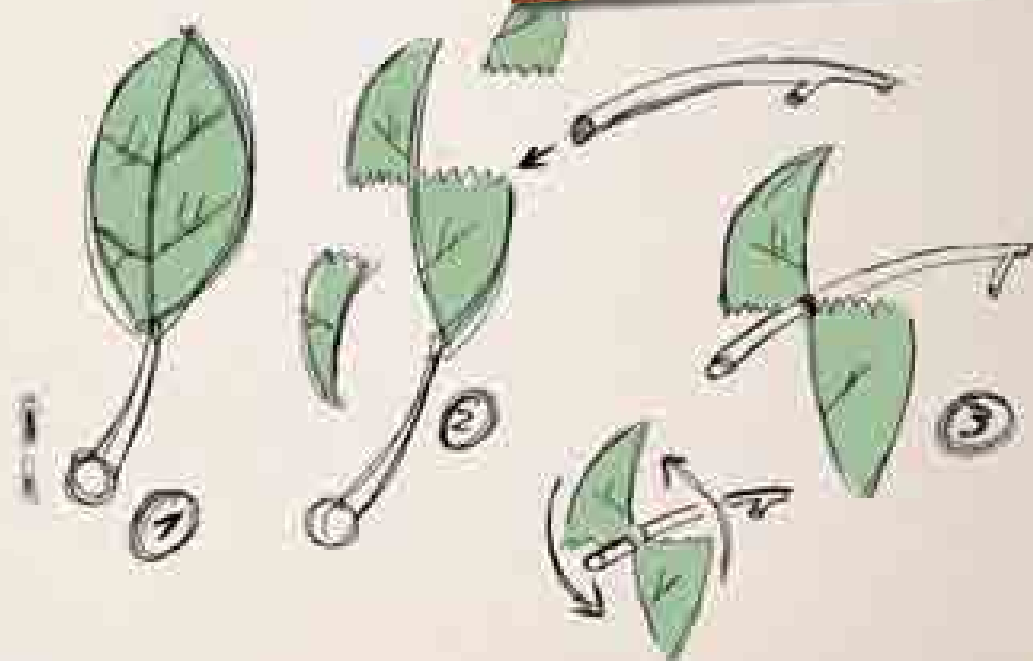
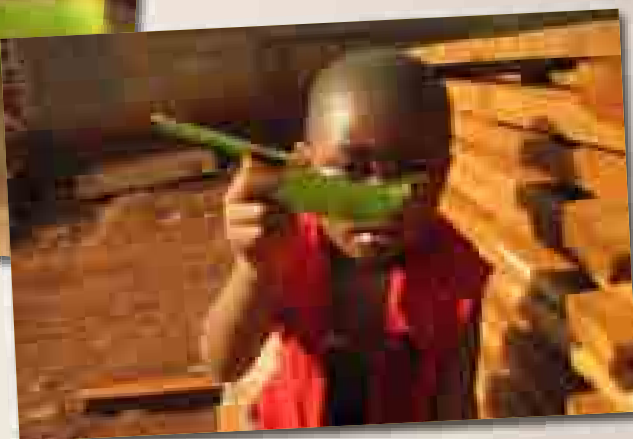


Working in the kitchen

of people, took a little walk in the area, in which there are apes and even a few gorillas. We passed the bathing place at the swampy river, where the children washed themselves and the women washed clothes and linen. Passing cocoa plantations that were dotted around here and there, we reached a few villages, many of whose inhabitants we had met before - especially the children, who go to school in Bisso. The children were making little helicopters using a leaf and a small stick. When they ran with them, the leaf spun in the wind.



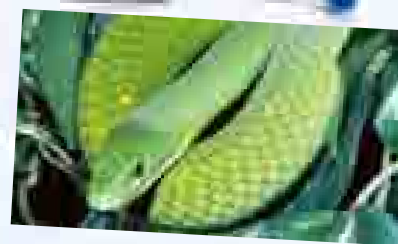
How to make a helicopter, Bisso style. No scissors or glue required. Just bend the two corners of a leaf, poke the stick through and off you go.



A short time later, we were joined by Hinrich, Jean and our familiar, blind driver. We drove to a cave which had seen inhabitants many millennia ago. On the way there, I noticed that I was only wearing flip-flops. Back in Lübeck, I'd told everyone to take good strong shoes with them which would provide a degree of protection from green mambas and so on. Now I was the one with the flimsiest shoes on. Great.

In front of the cave stood a typical mudbrick house. In previous years, the house had been occupied by three men sitting on a dark green sofa and drinking high-alcohol spirits out of colorful little bags. This time, the house was locked up. We went through the rainforest toward the cave, me in my flip-flops, which added insult to injury with their unbelievably unnecessary massage sole. We walked along a narrow path, the enormous trees towering above us. Eventually the path narrowed further, and then ended suddenly, with reeds blocking our way.

What wouldn't I give now for a pair of lovely, solid, closed trainers! But I'd left those last night in the tropical rain. They were soaking wet - but so was the path that we now had before us. The others told us that someone had had an accident here last year. I looked down and



The Green Mamba, which is found in broad stretches of central Africa, is a two-meter-long venomous snake with a light green color and a yellowish tail. These snakes are timid animals which prefer flight to combat; nevertheless, injuries due to their venom, a neurotoxin which is highly hazardous to human health, are repeatedly reported. Bites by this type of snake must be treated immediately with a species-specific snake serum to ensure survival. The venom contains a multiplicity of substances, including cardio- and cytotoxins (which impact the heart and tissue) as well as those with neurotoxic effects.

beheld the massage flip-flops, sunken in the reddish mud. Ahead of us were the cave and the place where I had really had a close encounter with a green mamba last year. What the heck - here we go through the dense tangle of plants. By now, my feet had received such a good massage that they were more or less the same color as the earth on which they rather precariously stood. We struggled our way up the hill.

No sooner had we reached the cave and were looking down over the rainforest from the top of the hill than a group of men with machetes appeared in the cave! Cue a great hullabaloo as to why we hadn't paid (in the hut that had been

deserted), with angry noisy words whizzing back and forth. Pay? Whatever for?



Postcards!!

Sometimes just putting the initial spark to an idea is enough to give people hope for the future.



After enough angry noisy words had been exchanged, it was time to swap ideas instead. "If you want money, you should clear the way to the cave for us" - "Nobody knows this cave!" - "Oh, so you spend weeks waiting in a little mudbrick hut although you know nobody's going to come?" - "Why doesn't anyone come?" - "There isn't any sign" - "If there was a sign and people really do come, then don't frighten them with big knives, sell them postcards instead" - "Perhaps a little bar?" - "A shop selling miniature replicas of the cave?" etc.

We all sat down around a large rock to create a mini-business plan, and the men put their machetes aside. It was quite funny; although some of the ideas

were rather crazy, they were still a real breath of fresh air. We planted ideas. The men joined in. Perhaps that's enough to inspire them to transform their situation into something better. Perhaps these ideas will be smothered by the second glass of spirits the men down, but perhaps they might just live a little longer.

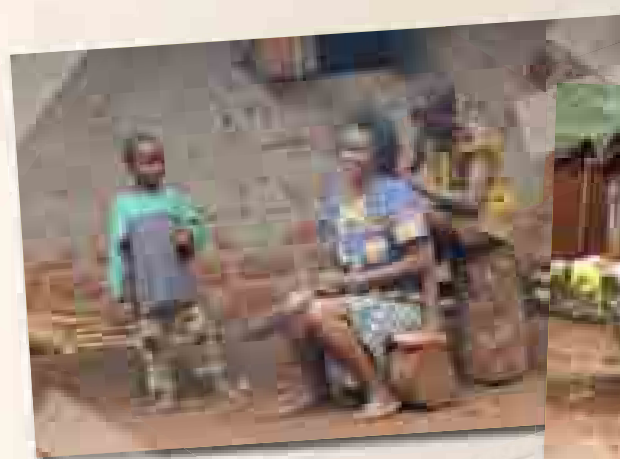
After an affectionate parting, we drove back to Bisso, where porcupine was on the menu. I hoped it wasn't a protected species.



Porcupines are rodents with sharp spikes which can cause inflammation. Contrary to popular belief, porcupines do not shoot their spikes, but they do use them to defend themselves against predators. In ancient Rome, roast porcupine was counted as a delicacy.



That evening, we held a meeting in the village - with not a Powerpoint presentation to be seen, how refreshing. We placed a few lamps in the middle and gathered around them. Item number one on the agenda was the school. For one thing, we didn't want the children to be taught by a drunken teacher, and for another, we didn't understand why nobody seemed able to repair a small hole in the roof although the village still had some building materials. (To satisfy those of you who are curious as to what happened next: we ended our working relationship with the teacher, and the roof was mended after our departure). It was an open, positive discussion, followed by an exchange of further ideas. One of them was to initiate a town twinning project, at which I was able to say that I'm trying to at least get a school partnership going, with my son's school and the elementary school in Bisso. This piece of news went down well. After this, I showed the assembled villagers the Dräger image calendar and image brochure and a back issue of dialog - all of which featured Bisso!



October 10, 2011

Our week in Bisso was drawing to a close. A week is not a long time, but a lot of things had happened during it, and the strangest of them was yet to come, today, on our last day. We got up, packed our clothes and planned to depart at around 9:00 a. m., although Hinrich and I thought it would probably be more like 11:00 a. m. We loaded our things into the car, and then Thierry and I went to the school, because I had forgotten something for the school sponsorship project. The school day was dominated by exams, meaning I only wanted to drop by quickly so as not to disrupt the proceedings.

I arrived just as the flag ceremony was being held. The children stood in rows behind the flag, which was raised to the sound of the children singing the Cameroonian national anthem. Two teachers stood in front of it. There was an orderly, disciplined atmosphere.

The teachers' dresses fascinated me. One of them wore a pink school dress which featured pictures of day-to-day school life - a figure at the black-



board or a computer. After the ceremony, the children went quietly to their classes and Thierry and I returned to the village. I found myself wondering whether the pangolin had been put out of its misery yet.

Now it was time to say goodbye. All the villagers gathered round the car, and each of us received a long hug. Tears were shed; it's a very special thing for all of us, us and the villagers, for us to be here in this small village. A small village with its lovely people, a village like so many villages all over the world,

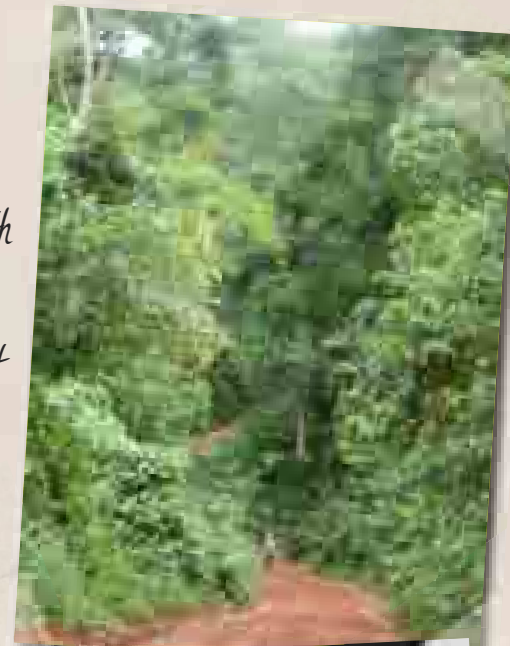


a village which is definitely not the worst off in the world. A village, the very village, that we want to help, in the hope that other villages will benefit from what we achieve here. So we said Tschüss, Goodbye, Au revoir... see you again, we'll be back.

We got into the car and drove back to Yaoundé. It was just after 11:00 a. m. Wow, that's what I call setting off on time! Almost as soon as we had a mobile signal, Jean's phone went. Brrrrrr! It just didn't stop ringing.

At about 1:00 p. m., Christian called us to tell us we had an appointment at 4:00 p. m. An appointment with the health minister of Cameroon! Hinrich and I looked at each other. Just great - an appointment with the minister, and we looked like we'd just come out of a cave. Unshaven and no doubt a little smelly, we sat in the full-to-bursting car and were driven through the forest by our half-blind driver. My pants stuck to me pale legs and my shirt hung down off me like a dirty sack. I didn't have proper

shoes, just some battered Teva sandals, Jean asked what size shoes Jimmy and I take. We both have continental size 44. We sped through the rain-forest to Yaoundé and charged through the city to Jimmy's little student apartment - one room, a bathroom and a kitchen. Time was running out. There was no time to shower, however badly we needed it. Phew. One of Jimmy's roommates stood in the kitchen and cooked a small antelope for us (is it an endangered species? No, fortunately). Hinrich and I went into the bathroom for a shave - without a mirror. Well, we did find a small one, the size of a young child's hand, with chopped edges. So we were shaving



more or less blind. Never mind, we're not going to be jumping into a pool of sharks with bleeding cheeks, just seeing the minister. I took my old jeans out of my suitcase, brushed off the last remnants of reddish dust and pulled them on. They were wet. Nice. Hinrich found a cleanish Future for Bisso T-shirt and put that on. Then I put on the trainers I had been provided with - size 44.



The right-hand path leads to the school, the river is straight ahead, and Bisso itself and the surrounding villages are on both sides of the road.

Hm - obviously Cameroonian shoe sizes were somewhat different from European ones. For a moment, I wondered whether I should emulate Cinderella's stepsister and cut off my toes to fit into the Cameroon-size-44 shoes. I left it, though; there weren't any suitable scissors around, and anyway time was running even shorter. So I squashed my feet into Jimmy's mini-running shoes, which were rather dazzling, with the strips on the feet shining like the full moon in a gray sky. Off we went. That moment saw the arrival of the freshly washed and starched clothes Jean had organized himself by cellphone. Hinrich and I felt positively shabby by comparison. But it was time to go.



This is the path to the river, where clothes and feet are washed. The washing is hung up on bushes to dry.



The streets were clogged with traffic, as usual.

How were we supposed to address the minister? Excellence, maybe? Hinrich was already practicing a bit, while I was relying on Jean or Christian addressing him first and thus enabling me to just repeat what they had said. We met Christian and one of his colleagues outside the ministry. Both of them had studied in Germany. We went up to the top storey together - three Africans in smart suits and then us, Hinrich and I.

An attaché led us along an endless corridor where all walls and doors were paneled in brown wood. We passed through innumerable doors. In the second last room we reached, the attaché had us sit down in the waiting room. We settled ourselves on the upholstery we had been pointed to - upholstery worthy of the name, to the extent that I was afraid that the brown leather sofa would swallow me up like a Venus fly trap. So there we were. My pants stuck to my skin, making it difficult for me to stand up when we were led into the minister's office.

Here, we were seated again, this time on somewhat harder chairs. I looked around. In front of me was a picture of the minister at a private audience with the Pope. To the left of it was a bouquet of artificial flowers and an African figure. Then I noticed that I had been given the first place in the room, which meant the minister would probably greet me first. Oh, help!



The Cameroonian flag is modeled on the French Tricolore, and divided vertically in the same way. It uses the pan-African colors: Green, the color of hope, symbolizes the country's rich vegetation, most of which is to be found in the south. Yellow stands for the sun and the savannas of the north, while red is a symbol of the blood shed in the struggle for independence and is also considered to be a "mark of sovereignty". The star represents the connection between the country's two parts.

What was the official greeting for the minister again? Why, oh why hadn't I paid attention? The door opened, the minister entered and made straight for Hinrich: "Son Excellence Monsieur le Ministre" - Phew, luck had smiled on me! He sat down on a chair. The flag of Cameroon stood in a corner of the room. We had asked Jean to apologize on our behalf for our unkempt appearance, which he duly did. After all, we had come direct from the rainforest.

Jean told the minister about our aid project "Future for Bisso" and talked about how lots of our colleagues at Dräger are involved. There was a picture on the floor with lots of photographs of new hospitals which were to be built or renovated.

Jean and Christian did the talking. The minister spoke thoughtfully and very calmly. There was an enormous cloudburst in progress outside, while the talk in the wood-paneled room centered around the future of medical care in the country and about how to provide doctors and nurses with further training in anesthesia, ventilation and emergency medicine. After a while, we took our leave and left the building. The walls of the last room we passed through featured portraits of all the current health minister's predecessors. Outside, the streets of Yaoundé were completely flooded. Our flight was due to depart at 10:00 p. m.



We dropped by to see Frank Gläsner and his family, said a quick hello and went on to Jimmy's apartment, where the antelope in the cooking pot was waiting for us.

Eventually, we could make no more progress due to the congestion on the roads. We left our blind driver's car and walked the rest of the way. I could barely feel my feet. Then we were there.

Shoes off, antelope to eat (delicious!) and then off to the airport.



It all worked out and everything was OK.

Frank Gläsner and his family picked up where we had left off in Bisso, with plans to spend some time looking after the school. We're looking forward to hearing their experiences. We'll be going back to Bisso one day, and hope that lots of you will support us in our endeavors.

Thomas Grütter

What happened next? Find out at www.future-for-bisso.org