

Life is so unpredictable, even more so in Cambodia!

Monday started as a normal day with its usual challenges. Our kids had breakfast and went off to school as they have done for the past year or more.

I was working on emails when I got a call, first from Palynath to advise that upon leaving the property for town she had encountered a large group of people from the kids community, which was gathered outside the property and then shortly after from Conchetta to say the so-called 'grandfather' of Thuy & Lors was hanging around.

Upon closer inspection we discovered 10-12 persons – some relatives and others, including 2 soldiers - were indeed gathered at the front gates with a small group inside, demanding to see the kids and to take them back as they were not being fed properly and were being abused!!!

This was planned and the group was prepared for a long wait, as they had their lunch with them... waiting is something Cambodians are very good at. They had made themselves at home under the trees in the shade and virtually set up camp.

Concerned for our kids welfare and safety – the unwarranted stress of suddenly being faced by the group and the tugging, poking, prodding etc. - Emily & Chris walked up to meet the kids at school, while I drove round to collect them all in the minivan.

As Conchetta & Sofi were in town we decided to all meet up for lunch and an ice cream away from the gathered crowd.

Palynath & the Khmer team were left to face the group who were claiming the children were saying that they were not being provided enough food! Unbelievable... 3 square meals a day + snacks & treats! In their community they are lucky to have 2 basic meals a day!

At this point I should add a kind of footnote – unbeknown to us the families and relatives had been visiting the kids at school. This had been ongoing for some time. Chan had told them that they were not fed enough and so a family member was bringing him and who else we do not know, food at school every day! How was this funded? The round trip from their community to us and back is approximately 80kms... so no cheap or easy feat!

Looking back there were many tell tale signs we simply did not pick up on... behavioural issues when the kids came home from school most days, we were putting down to the outside influence of other kids at school... when it was the fact they were being forced to lie and hide what was going on from us. We should have been more vigilant in picking up on the signals that were coming our way. Our kids were 'spooked' into believing we no longer had their best interests at heart.

They were perplexed rather than excited about going for lunch and an ice cream. Again this should have rung alarm bells, but we put it down to them seeing the large group gathered outside the gates – LITTLE did we know that they were in on the whole thing and they KNEW what was happening and it was this sudden change in the big plan that was causing them grief!

Palynath allowed the gathered crowd to talk freely with the whole Khmer team and ask whatever they wanted pertaining to the welfare and health of the kids BUT we insisted there was no way they were seeing the kids without a proper arrangement being in place, so that we could prepare the kids for the visit [*again we had absolutely no idea they were already seeing their relatives and people from the community on a daily basis, so in reality it actually made no difference at all!*].

11am Tuesday was the eventually agreed upon time and date for a proper visit. This had been the agreed method of visitation rights from the beginning. They would have 30mins to spend with the kids and to ask them whatever. Reluctantly they dispersed but not without first demanding more from us – such as travel money, fuel money and more.

It should be mentioned Lors had been pretty ill for the best part of a week, the previous week, his weight was dropping and he was not able to go to school, which had led us to being very concerned ... so off to the doctor. 10 blood tests later + injection and doctors fees = \$75 - he had nothing wrong with him. Was it all the stresses of what was happening at school and how he was lying to us? We now think this was the case. Why?

Well one day last week a man, with 5 children appeared at their school – it later become apparent this was Lors' natural father whom he had not seen for 5 years! – **we must point out that on the legal foster documents it stated that both Thuy & Lors [same mother different fathers] had no parents – both believed to be deceased! This was a blatant lie & Lors knew it.**

It is from this point on that things started to deteriorate rapidly to the point that when we returned to the MBC at 2:30pm after having taken the kids for their safety, to a nice lunch and ice creams they all announced they wanted to leave us!

Well I cannot begin to describe the slap in the face this was... floods of emotions, shock, tears and horror covers it best!

After a long series of one on one discussions with us and various members of the team they were all very adamant they were going, in fact there was a sense of relief, happiness and even excitement at leaving.

As hard as it is for us to understand – they were glad to be going back to their old lives. **No running water, no clean safe drinking water. No healthy, varied & nutritious food. No clean beds, laundered clothes & shoes. No more support, and care or English classes. No more travel and experiences like that i.e. their beach holiday!**

To say we were all feeling betrayed and shell-shocked is an understatement! A year or more of our lives had just been unravelled in an instant.

Only one of the kids was completely against the idea of leaving. He had originally agreed to leave BECAUSE of his brother Lors, but he didn't really want to go, nor did he want to leave his brother. A highly distraught Thuy stood strong and decided however he would not go – despite Chan trying to convince him otherwise. Lors didn't show an ounce of emotion at Thuy deciding to stay nor did he appear to care either way. He was very smug about the whole situation. We believe he thought he was going to be joining his father and the new family!

Palynath drew up the legal document detailing the relatives' deceit and behaviour for the community chief to sign and we bundled the kids in to the van and headed off to their community.

At 5:30pm we said goodbye for the last time to our MaD kids. One by one they climbed out of the van – some sobbing others crying – we hugged and said goodbye to each other. Faint sobs of we'll miss you coming from most of them as we looked into their sad eyes!

As we drove off in a cloud of dust, we left behind 7 kids whom had become an integral part of our lives, who had touched our hearts and those of the volunteers who had spent time with them... we could not help but wonder; **why?** Did they REALLY understand what they had just done? What will become of them? The journey home was silent, laden with deep sorrow & sadness!

We can only hope the past year has given them a basis from which to grow as individuals and that they will remember us all!

We have since learned from a senior community member in a phone call that the families had been promised by an NGO working in the community all sorts of amazing things i.e. the kids, if returned will go to a new orphanage in the community, the same 3 square meals a day, schooling and English classes etc. ALL within the confines of the community! Easy access to the kids! No travel to see them! Saves time & money!

Who knows what else has been promised, but it was enough to rally the 'troops' in the community, literally with 2 soldiers accompanying them to the MBC, to unite a divided community in working hard on getting to our kids, creating the 'grass is greener on their side of the fence' and convincing them to revolt and go along with this deceitful plan.

The lies told about our NGO, myself and our volunteers, have become part of their dirty fight to discredit us but this has now gone beyond a personal issue and become something the whole community is embarked upon and is engaging in their naivety believing the lies implicitly.

Given the history and backgrounds of some of the kids i.e. Sophat who is deaf & mute, Klouy who is still a baby and Mao who is now becoming a young woman and is thus very, very vulnerable. We have reported the whole situation to the Ministry of Youth and Children's Affairs for them to follow up on the safety of the children.

Sadly having done what we can there is very little else we can do!