75. Crusty Bread Rolls

Life is good in South Sudan at present – and will probably remain so for the likes of me. Anyone who is receiving funds from other countries has a distinct advantage. When our first people came here, they were getting just over two Sudanese pounds to the dollar. For much of last year, the rate was 2.8 or 2.9. That is still close to the current bank rate but you can now get 3.5 from plenty of traders who buy their goods outside South Sudan and need dollars to pay for them.

So that is okay for me. Give me a dollar and I receive a lot more of the local currency. But what about the South Sudanese who trade in Sudanese pounds, get paid in pounds and purchase in pounds? A tin of peas or beans used to cost five pounds. In the last few weeks the price has jumped to ten. One orange, the only fruit in the market today, cost 2 pounds. One very small tomato – there were none available last week – cost one pound. One sister pointed out to me recently that a ‘50kg of sugar a few month ago was under 150 SDG. Ten days ago it was 165 SDG. Yesterday the same for 230 SDG.’ The price of onions has almost trebled. It must be tough for many South Sudanese. The price of diesel and gas has doubled – but that is not a problem at present as none is available to purchase!

I am not sure if the major cause is rampant inflation or more an under-supply of goods. Well over half the shops in Malakal are closed at present. Many of the Arab traders have left town – which is a pity as this is a place where Muslim and Christian civilians co-exist very cooperatively. The Arab traders have always been very helpful and pleasant. No-one knows if they will return or not.

The new country of South Sudan has said it will grant dual citizenship to anyone from the North who wants to stay here in the south. So far, Sudan has refused to be so accommodating. There is still a lot of negotiation to take place over such issues. Other key unresolved problems are the disputed border regions, Sudan national debt and the sharing of oil revenue. Most oil is extracted in the south and piped to the north for refining and shipped out through Port Sudan on the red sea. It will be years before South Sudan has its own refinery and, since it has no coast line, it will never have a port with an oil terminal. South Sudan is resource rich but surrounded! So it needs to build good relations with its neighbours - and seemingly has made a good beginning.

Not all traders have left town and not all prices have skyrocketed. There is plenty of fresh beef available from the Arab butchers and frozen chickens seem to be plentiful. The price increase on these items has been very minimal. There have been no eggs available for the past week but I hear some are coming, sometime! The Ethiopian baker who opened up last year and brought joy to many lives with the large, substantial bread rolls that he produced, has closed shop and we are back to dusty, crusty rolls that have very little inside that one identifies as bread. (Some photos of the top Malakal ‘hot bread shop’ are attached).

What is startling are the number of substantial homes and other building under construction. Some of the well-positioned in South Sudan are obviously prospering. For others, inflated prices are a problem. Flour is getting dearer. So will the crusty rolls get even smaller? A ‘taxi ride’ in Malakal – a seat in a four person cab following a set route – used to cost one pound. Now it costs two. So there will be no obesity here among the ‘ordinary’ people. The ‘ordinary’ people will walk even more than usual and eat even more basic food.

I saw my first ten pound note of the new South Sudan currency today. It is blue and could be confused by the unwary with the blue two pound note of the old currency. I can’t begin to imagine the confusion the changeover may cause. Yet I may be surprised. South Sudan has been brought to this point far more peacefully and capably than many expected. I continue to be grateful for the crusty bread rolls that are still on the menu. Do we really need to hope for heaven on earth all the time?
--Br Bill
Sr. Esperance

Sr. Rosa’s home-baked bread

The baker
Happy hot bread shop

The bread

The oven