

A week in paradise

by Hermann Oberli (Photos: H. Oberli), translated by Elisabeth Oberli

Monday, October 15, 2001 – No democracy

Today starts the court case of the ousted Prime Minister, Bartholomew Ulufa'alu versus the present „illegal“ government of the Solomon Islands. Mr Ulufa'alu was forced to resign during a military coup on June 5, 2000. The present Prime Minister, a puppet of the Malaita Eagle Forces, tries everything to stay in power. His latest trick: He tried to prevent the lawyer who represents his adversary in court from entering the country. Due to the fact that the plane was one hour early, the letter to the Immigration Authorities arrived at the airport only after the lawyer was already in town.

Tuesday, October 16, 2001 – No freight plane

It is getting dark early in the evening and black clouds promise more rain, as if the downpour during the last 24 hours was not enough. We hear the noise from the nearby airport of the landing cargo plane, despite the noise from the rain on our tin roof. Next morning's „Solomon Star's“ headline: „Plane crash at Henderson Airport“ plus a picture of the plane resting on one wingtip and one propeller. I hope that the long overdue computer for our new histology laboratory was not on this plane. There were 27 t of frozen tuna ready for export to Japan at the airport. The hospital receives a generous gift of the fish.



Wednesday, October 17, 2001 – No power

We are without power for a few days already. Since the privatisation of Solomon Islands Electricity Authority a lot of money has disappeared due to embezzlement, without any legal consequences for the culprits. The amount of debts is unbelievable. Mobil Oil has stopped delivery of fuel to all power plants in the country, unless it is on a „cash only“ basis. At the same time, one or two of the generators at the main power plant of Honiara are defective, and to remedy this problem, an engineer and the necessary spare parts have to be flown in from Japan. I wonder how long the emergency generator at the hospital will continue running and how long our supply of diesel fuel will last.

Thursday, October 18, 2001 – No water

SIWA (Solomon Islands Water Authority) owes SIEA millions of dollars of unpaid electricity bills. As of today, SIEA ceases all power supplies to SIWA water pumps. Most people have water storage tanks for the town water, feeding water into the house with an electric pump. But without power, the town water does not flow and the stored water in the private tanks is not pumped into the houses. Thank God for all the rain we have had, so at least the rain water tanks are full. The Fenner's (our neighbours) rainwater tank has some rust holes, so there is not really a lot of water available. In order not to waste precious drinking water, they collect water from the river Lungga with buckets to flush the toilet. But: On the front page of today's „Solomon Star“ is a picture of a man carrying a large crocodile, one of five caught in the Lungga River during the last few days. The Fenner's approach the riverbank rather cautiously from now on.

**Friday, October 19, 2001 – No operations**

The Central Sterilisation Department and the Laundry at the hospital are only minimally operational. We have to save the few sterile linen packs and instruments for emergencies. All operations are cancelled. I plan to send a few urgent e-mails from the hospital computer. But the sent items return within a short time with a virus warning. Kakworm has established itself in our system.

In our house we have power a few irregular hours every day now, for instance from 4-6 am or 5-7 pm. Of course the power goes off as soon as the computer has booted up. After 6 pm we live with candles, battery-powered flashlights and kerosene lamps. One of the latter is on until morning in our living room just to keep burglars away.

Saturday, October 20, 2001 – No Solomon Airlines

The morning news from our little battery powered radio tell us that the Australian Civil Aviation and Safety Authority has suspended Solomon Airlines Air Operators Certificate as of yesterday. This means no more Solomon Airline Flights to and from Australia, Vanuatu and Fiji. It is a safety precaution, they say.... No comment so far regarding the crashed cargo plane. Rumour has it that a tire blew up during landing. However, Solomon Airlines were still flying while Swissair was already grounded!

Sunday, October 21, 2001 – A parrot's life saved

Bird life in the trees around our house is abundant. The parrots are numerous and especially beautiful. One of them flies into our house and lies stunned in the grass. Chica, our dog, involuntarily released from her chain by Elisabeth, catches the poor bird and brings it to her mistress. It takes a lot of shouting and prying open of Chica's jaws until she finally releases the bird. It is very beautiful: Green head, orange collar of fine feathers, green back, red belly and blue underwings. Protected with a pair of garden gloves, Elisabeth puts the stunned bird into a box and carries it into the shade. 15 minutes later the box is empty and the bird hopefully back in the air.

Post scriptum of Wednesday, October 24, 2001

Last night the engineer from Japan cum spare parts has arrived in the country, Mobil has resumed to deliver a modest amount of diesel to the power plant, and since 5 am the electricity is on again in our house. So far, no interruption. The water pump is working, the rain has ceased, and the sun is out for a few hours. It is enough to dry the water inside our bedroom that dripped from the ceiling. The solar collectors heat the water on the roof and we enjoy our first hot shower in days. Air Vanuatu and Air Niugini take care of Solomon Airlines' stranded passengers, and for tomorrow I have planned a few major operations.

Life goes on....and: never a dull moment in paradise!