

CHALLENGES OF DRIVER TRAINING PROGRAMS IN SOUTHERN SUDAN

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Photo by Kim and Glen Edmunds

Glen Edmunds Performance Driving School (GEPDS) spent five months on assignment in Juba, Sudan, conducting a driver-training program that GEPDS specifically designed for Dyncorp International.

Juba, Sudan is located in southern Sudan on the banks of the White Nile River. It is the regional capital of Southern Sudan and the capital of the Sudanese state of Central Equatoria.

Working in Juba or similar places in developing countries can be very demanding and one faces many challenges on a daily basis. Juba has been plagued with civil war for the last 20 years and infrastructure and a functioning service industry are sorely lacking. One worker for an international company told us that living conditions in Juba are much worse than those that he experienced in Baghdad or Afghanistan.

Sanitation, poor hygiene and bad water quality are problems that one confronts on a daily basis. Common diseases include: malaria, dysentery, gastrointestinal disease and bilharzia. Intense heat, with temperatures up to 40 degrees centigrade can also add to health implications, with heat stroke and dehydration being common problems.

Much of the food, bottled water and soft drinks are flown in from other locations such as Kenya, Uganda, Khartoum and even the Middle East and Dubai. Electricity is usually supplied by generator and is often switched off at midnight. Generator power is not consistent, so food spoilage is not uncommon.

Accommodation tends to be in camps with a range of comforts, facilities and hygiene. Some have air conditioning, but many do not. Therefore, if you are in a camp without air-conditioning, sleeping is a problem, as the heat is too intense to get sufficient rest at night. And if you happen to have a hut or tent under a grove of mango trees, the mangos fall on the roof throughout the night making sleep impossible.

Our instructors stayed at a place where there were not only mangoes, but also frequent rebel gunfire from the opposite side of the river towards their camp at night. This was obviously another sleep deterrent.

Communication is a continuous problem, with both cellular phones and landlines down for long periods through out the day. The same goes for internet services. Broadband speeds are often slow and unreliable.



Road conditions are deplorable at best. Many roads have been demolished either by bombs during years of war and/or heavy rains and flooding. Currently there is only one paved road in the town of Juba.

ROAD HAZARDS

Any driver, anywhere in the world encounters road hazards on a daily basis and needs to be able to recognize these dangers so that he can react to them. Drivers in regions such as Southern Sudan encounter road hazards on a continuous basis. For those with years of driving experience in African countries, these would be challenging. For those with little time behind the wheel, and hardly any experience, these sorts of hazards can be life threatening.

Ruts are one of the many concerns. During the rainy season, roads are heavily rutted from heavy trucks. When the trucks get stuck, the drivers fill in the ruts with large rocks in order to get traction. They do not bother to move them again and leave them in the road after their departure. This can cause tyres to shred and suspension to break on the next unsuspecting motorist. These situations can of course cause accidents.

Wash-aways occur and are often invisible to the driver until the last minute. The drivers often slam on their brakes and the car slides into them.

The rainy season causes grass on either side of the road to be very tall. This inhibits visibility around corners where children play on the roads, animals cross, etc. Cattle and goats are the main livelihood for the local people and tend to roam and graze everywhere. If you are unlucky enough to hit someone's livestock it involves a lot of problems, including time involvement and financial compensation for the owner of the animal.

During the dry season, vehicles traveling on dirt roads cause huge amounts of dust, which make visibility virtually impossible. When a vehicle suddenly appears out of the dust coming right at you and you have very little driving experience you don't know where to go or what to do. Inexperienced drivers tend to swerve quickly, which often leads to crashes or rolled vehicles.

Four-wheel drive vehicles impose further problems in the sense that drivers do not understand their vehicles or know when to engage 4WD. Although the majority of the time is spent driving on unsealed surfaces, very few drivers realize that placing the vehicle in 4H (4 wheel drive - high) will give them much more control and stability on unsealed surfaces.

Four-wheel drive vehicles are very large and have a high centre of gravity. They are often improperly loaded with heavy equipment. Both of these factors make them unstable.

Vehicles have been a rare sighting in this region for many years and pedestrians, livestock and cyclists are not used to them. This causes a threat to themselves and motorists. One example is bicycles. They are heavily laden with large bags of charcoal traveling towards oncoming traffic on the wrong side of the

road. If they swerve quickly they often get thrown off their bikes or get hit by the vehicle. The cyclist is often armed and when they are driven off the road can become angry and shoot at vehicles.

Young children often ride motorcycles and it is not unusual for them to carry 3-4 passengers at a time. Since they are inexperienced and overloaded they often topple over in front of vehicles. This not only causes bodily injuries, but also car crashes as vehicles often veer off quickly to avoid them.

The advent of mobile phones into Southern Sudan poses road safety problems as it does in all countries around the world. The U.S. government reports that drivers are five times more likely to have a road accident when talking on the mobile phone while driving. And that is on sealed surfaces with well-trained experienced drivers. The rate in developing regions is probably much higher.

DRIVER TRAINING CHALLENGES

From a driver-training point of view, GEPDS found many obstacles to overcome during their 5 month contract in Sudan. Not only did the instructors have to teach the basics of driving in many instances, but also had to instruct drivers how to deal with the specific hazards and road conditions that prevail in the region.

Driving standards throughout Southern Sudan are substandard. Many drivers have been given licenses without any proper training. Many get jobs as drivers without ever having driven a vehicle.

In addition to this, the majority of vehicles donated to projects in Sudan are right-hand-drive, although it is a left-hand-drive country.

A study conducted by the Insurance Corporation of British Columbia (ICBC) in Vancouver, Canada concludes that right-hand-drive vehicles are over 40 percent more likely to get into a crash over similar left-hand-drive vehicles. There are many reasons why this is dangerous but one of the obvious ones is that it is much more difficult to see oncoming traffic when making a left turn. Overtaking also offers challenges.

Most of the local population, in Southern Sudan, speaks Dinka, Arabic and a spattering of local dialects. Driving students spoke any one or a mixture of all of these. Luckily, many also spoke Kiswahili, the national language of Kenya, so our instructors were able to instruct in an African language that most could understand. In other instances, interpreters had to be used. Illiteracy is high with only 46% of males receiving any form of education. Therefore, training manuals could not be used for instruction purposes and everything had to be transformed to a medium that they could understand. The GEPDS instructors often used the windscreen of a vehicle and a white board marker to get concepts across.

Finding an appropriate training area that was private, secure and devoid of land mines was the next hurdle. They initially

set up a training area on the end of a runway. However due to bureaucracy, this did not work out and we were made to leave this site and move onto a football field on the outskirts of the town. This site was very dusty during the dry season and was totally in the open with no shade. This meant students nor instructors got any respite from the intense heat all day long. Getting to this site was challenging in itself as the instructors and students had to run the gauntlet of two official roadblocks manned by young soldiers with AK47's each time they came and went from the site. This was very nerve racking to say the least.

Land mines are a very real threat throughout Southern Sudan. The Swiss Foundation for Mine Action (FSD) started a program in 2003 to clear the roads leading from Juba to Uganda and Kenya. However, many land mines along those routes and throughout the region are still undetected and cause reason for alarm. Officials from the United Nations Mine Action Office (UNMAO) in Sudan said on 6 April 2007 that the number of reported and registered land mine casualties in Southern Sudan during the past five years alone stands at 2,390. "Many incidents go unreported. We imagine the number is much higher in reality," said UNMAO's Elena Rice.

So whether it's finding a proper training area or trying to pass two large trucks on a single lane road, land mines are always at the forefront of your thoughts. You do not want to venture off the main road as land mines could be anywhere.

In addition to driver training, the GEPDS instructors also taught students in basic mechanics. Since there have always been very few vehicles in Southern Sudan, many drivers were not versed in pre-driving checks, the workings of a vehicle engine or how to do basic repairs. They did not realize for instance that not having the correct tyre pressure or tread depth could be very dangerous when traveling, especially on unsealed surfaces.

The students were taught to make sure their vehicles were in safe working condition before leaving the compound. We found that it is crucial to not only teach drivers these principals, but to give them a visual way of checking these important concepts on a daily basis as well. For example: marking a line at the correct pressure on the tyre gauges, marking the dip stick at the proper oil level and marking the radiator water levels. These all made it a very easy and uniform way for everyone to remember.

These simple daily pre-driving inspections helped to keep the vehicles reliable and reduce both vehicle down time and maintenance costs.

Even though Southern Sudan poses many challenges on several levels from health concerns to security issues, we found that our five month driver-training program was a huge success. The students were very grateful for the chance to learn new skills and took pride in their achievements. We hope that other organizations that work in Southern Sudan initiate similar driver trainer programs so that road crashes and fatalities with both motorists and pedestrians alike can be minimized.

