

GAFSIP

Report on visit to The Gambia April 2012

Key issues

- What stood out most is the importance of a fully supported longstanding partnership providing training advice and support not just equipment – we saw too many vehicles, the product of generous donations from France and Germany sitting unused, because they were makes for which there were no parts available and no back up support had been provided.
- The importance of the professional, non physical, links – the AFRS recruitment criteria and tests are used, to ensure high quality recruits for example, and current fire service plans from the UK supplied via AFRS are being used to develop modernized Fire Service legislation and plans for the country..
- Staff appeared to be mindful of the need to maintain breathing apparatus, but it is not always apparent that this was implemented consistently: this is a priority for future training, particularly given the growing of complex multi-story development in the coastal region.
- The enthusiasm and commitment of the staff, particularly the health care staff, who are proud of their work, and of the opportunity to provide trainee placements for others. Firemen would like more paramedic training.
- The importance of the health clinics and the basic blood analysis laboratories as training centres to provide quality staff for other stations as this work expands, and its impact upon the provision of health care as part of the patchwork of provision. Healthcare comes from a range of sources, but every centre stressed the way in which the hospitals and various clinics work together seamlessly, and transfer patients and records with the minimum of bureaucracy (some lessons for the UK here!)
- A priority for the next visit is to meet the new Minister of the Interior to cement the continuing relationship.
- 250 new recruits were currently undertaking basic training, marking a major expansion in provision.

Visit Report

Kevin Pearson and Mike Drew travelled to the Gambia in April to meet the Chief Fire Officer and Government Minister and to visit a number of stations. It was eventually not possible to meet the Minister of the Interior because of an international official visit he was involved with. However a series of meetings with Roger Bakurin (RB) Chief of the Gambian Fire Service took place, and we were able to visit all but one station, covering a number of Regions (they have been renamed Regions, from Divisions). The new Minister of the Interior is reviewing the Fire Service Act, which currently dates from 1948, and AFRS has been able to provide documents to RB to assist in this process.

We saw the training centre at Bakau in operation and were able to visit all but one station.

The professional support provided by AFRS personnel and the Chief Fire Office in particular is undoubtedly invaluable. The Fire Service values deeply the continuing interest of Terry Walker and Dave Hutchings and they were much asked after.

Mike Drew



Training at Bakau



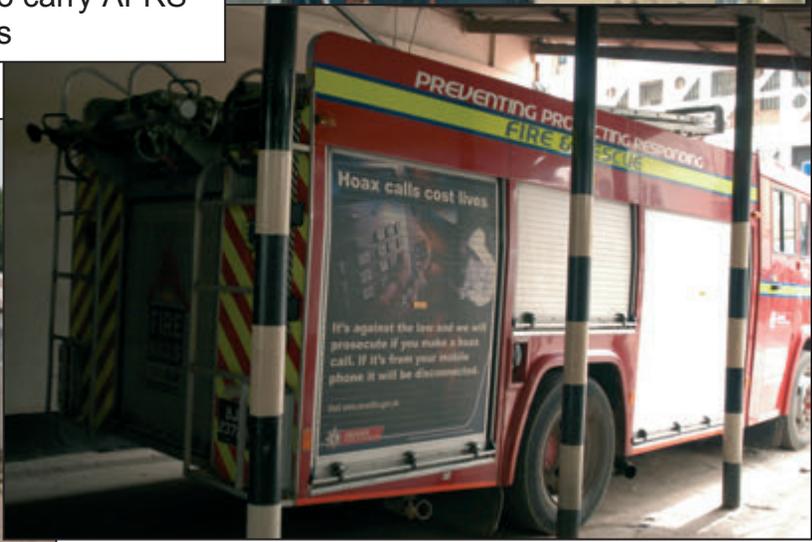
Reusing an on old Avon Incident Control Vehicle

Banjul - the sewing room busy making uniiforms for the new intake!



Banjul - vehicles continue to carry AFRS campaigns

Watching the trainees

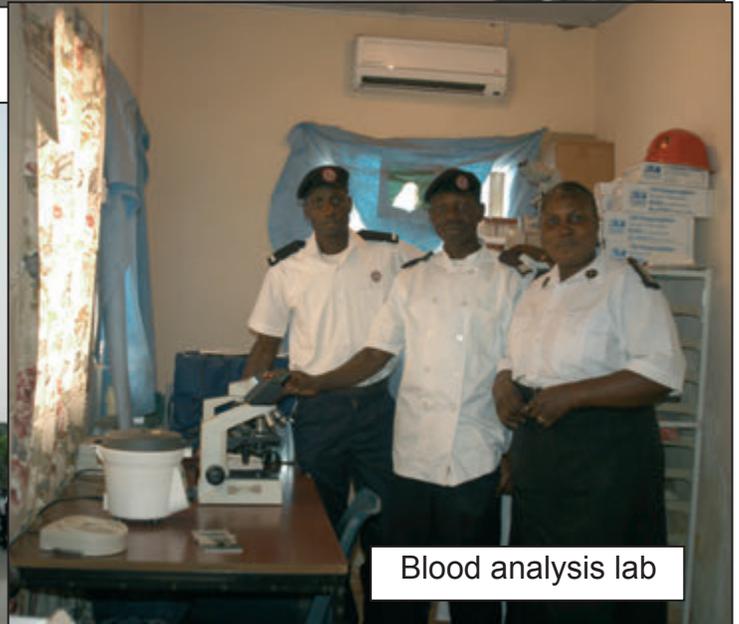




Soldiering on at Soma



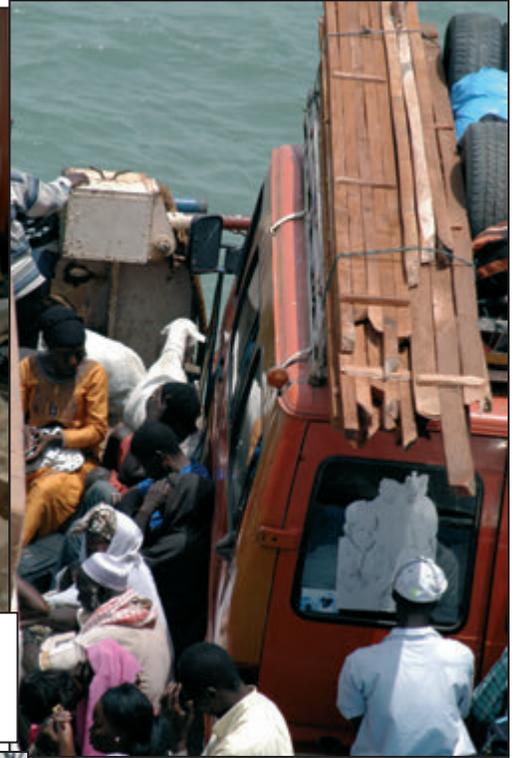
Serrekunda inspecting the vehicles and crews



Blood analysis lab



Crossing the river - sadly from 2013 this colourful experience will be no more. New jetties were nearing completion for use by larger modern ferries



Vehicles show their sponsorship labels (here the Lions)



Barra - the north bank of the crossing.





Brikama



Kanali



Kanali



Koli - a proudly maintained vehicle, but many still show their UK road fund licence and shipping documents in the window



Soma





Farafenni
 Top L Maintenance pit
 Top R - key handover
 Middle left - medical officer and case register
 Garden



Appendix 1: DETAILS

Banjul

The headquarters fire station, with the Chief's office; a tailor's workshop, medical centre and two pump fire station serving Banjul. The building was built in the 1850s and is one of the oldest in Banjul. It has had a variety of uses, including once being the police headquarters, but the police now occupy a much larger building opposite.

This was the only station where we were not met by the entire station crew lined up, coming to attention and saluting as the vehicle convoy drove in, with the Chief of the Gambian Service and Chief of AFRS taking the salute and then inspecting the crew. The fire service college at Bakau stressed to us the importance of this strong disciplinary approach. It meant officers often were standing to attention or at ease in ranks for our entire visit. This was not the case at Banjul, where there was no line up or at Brikama, which was much less formal.

The tailor's workshop is the only one in the fire service, and was busy making uniforms for the 225 recruits who are about to graduate from the fire training course. They buy in shirts, but then adapt them, but make the trousers. Two women and 4 men, all fire officers were busy at work. The woman officer who does all the epaulettes said it was very boring, but there was a good atmosphere. It will take months to prepare the new uniforms.

They also do work for the police – and for other branches of government, on a reciprocal basis, rather than under contract or for payment.

Welcome back to the world where things can be done because they are sensible and helpful without contracts, masses of forms and bureaucracy.

The clinic in the Banjul fire station has two fire crew who have degrees in healthcare from the University of the Gambia. Others on the team are medically trained locally. The medical facilities are small, but enable them to provide medical care for the crews, their families and the surrounding community. This includes primary care for accidents, including broken limbs and also wider medical care for illnesses such as malaria and gynecological support. They see about 40 people a day.

Whilst they have qualified nursing staff running the clinic, a message from both the clinics we visited, here and at Serrekunda, was that whilst the medical staff train the fire crews in basic first aid, they would like to provide more sophisticated paramedic training for them, and for others. They would welcome opportunities to have the sort of training relationship with paramedics as they have with AFRS fire crews.

Two tenders are at the station, both from Avon Fire and Rescue, one dating back to Avon County Council days, which following use at Avon had been used for a while at Bristol International Airport. The insignia for both were on it. The other is more modern, coming over in 2010. The Gambian Fire and Rescue Service does not erase Avon logos, or adverts, so the adverts, for example about reporting people who are making false alarm calls are still there, including the Avon number.

When engines come over, the tax disc from the UK, plus any shipping stickers remain on the vehicles. The only changes are to add the Gambia Fire and Rescue Service logo, and, in most cases, to convert to a local number plate.

The staff at the Banjul station travel considerable distances to work, and they have contributed to a fund that has enabled them to buy a bus to collect them all for work – and contribute to a fund to maintain the bus. The Fire Service is not involved, but does provide space for the vehicle.

Historically people had to call the fire station direct, but now there is a 118 cell phone number which is supposed to automatically detect the location of the caller and direct the call to the nearest

station. It is not yet entirely reliable, with calls sometimes being directed to the wrong station. This is being pursued with the telecoms company.

All staff, whether in the medical centre, tailors or otherwise employed are fully qualified fire crew. The only civilians are in Banjul. Administrative support services are provided by the Ministry.

There is evidence of capital investment everywhere – a new National Assembly Building funded by India, Taiwan road building, and so on.

Serrekunda

Serrekunda is now a city of 400,000 people, with a growing percentage of high rise buildings, 3-5 floors. It is the commercial capital, and has seen the bulk of the expansion of urban living because of the physical constraints to growth in Banjul itself.

Serrekunda station is the largest. It has four bays, and a variety of engines of various ages including a green goddess, and an ambulance. It has a practice tower, although there was no evidence of it being in use.

The station provides the mechanical workshops for the entire Western and Coastal Regions, with a number of trained mechanics. They have sheet metal working equipment as well for boy work, but this is also used to fabricate for example the supports for the verandah to the health centre, it also provides compound gates and other metal work.

The crew work 24 hours on and 2 days off. One crew member, the leading metalworker, explained he sometimes comes in on his days off to do metal work for staff.

Women crew members are allowed to work part time whilst pregnant, but then stop work three months before the baby is born and then have six months of paid maternity leave. Women have been fire crew since 1986. Whilst they are on leave, they still come in at lunch times and cook for the crew, in the open kitchen area at the rear.

The health care facilities at the station service the crews, their families and the neighbourhood. This station has a female leading medic, who qualified at Gambia University, and one other qualified person. They currently have three people training for their nursing qualifications. They see about 60 people a day. Their patient daybook shows the most common reasons for attendance are 'anemia' and 'malaria', but they can treat a wide range of conditions - including having delivered a number of babies, as the leading medic is also a qualified midwife. Most patients they treat and discharge. They keep some for a day to see if they begin to improve following treatment. If a patient is too ill for them to deal with, or does not improve, they take them to hospital by ambulance.

The hospitals are then able to deal with the patient quickly, and fast track them as they already have the patient history and symptoms as taken by the clinic. One of the staff explained that as the staff in the hospital will have taken the same course and may even be former classmates there is a high level of trust and mutual aid.

They have a small basic laboratory for analyzing blood. This is an important facility as many of the things they deal with are blood disorder related. There are few centres of this kind outside major hospitals. Three people from the laboratory are currently studying at the University of the Gambia, with the aim of setting up laboratories further inland.

The clinic works closely with other medical facilities so it will see patients where the wait for other clinics is too long. The willingness to work together, across health agencies and providers, and the complete lack of bureaucracy in transferring patients was in stark contrast to the UK approach.

The rapid growth of Serrekunda poses challenges for the service. They are encountering problems in finding addresses it is growing so fast, and there are no street name plates in most places. Buildings

with more than two floors are also growing in number rapidly. The fire practice tower at the training college in Bakau has had two more floors added in recognition of this.

Fires, of course, are no respecters of status. We were asked to pass on thanks to AFRS and GAFSIP from a General in the army, whose house caught fire, but was put out by the Serrekunda crew.

Bakau

Bakau is an active fire station on the coast, serving Bakau and part of Serrekunda, but is also the training centre for the Gambia Fire and Rescue Service. It carries out refresher as well as basic training.

Two hundred and fifty recruits are currently undertaking basic training. They have been in training for six months, and hope to graduate in October. They were all lined up on the parade ground for the visit of the Chief Fire Officer. The cohort is split into 4 drill groups, and they do a range of work in parallel as there is not enough kit for them to all do everything at the same time. They were practicing ladder work and hose drill. They were also demonstrating their drill and marching skills. The whole feel was of a more traditional style of fire service training than today in the UK. Talking to some of the trainees, they hoped to graduate in October, but seemed apprehensive and to feel the course is tough. None were willing to say they found it difficult, of course!

In groups of four they were practicing ladder work, they have been doing this for a while, and were now working in and out of a third floor window, but still looked very nervous. Later in the course they will have to carry equipment and dummies on the ladders, and then prior to graduation will have to show they can carry a person their own weight down the ladder. They do not have enough hard hats for them all to wear them as trainees, but share them.

When RB first entered the fire service there were 87 firefighters for the whole country. Now there are over 1000. This is a large intake of 250 recruits, as RB has authority to extend the establishment to 1500, about the same ratio as we have in AFRS area. This is proceeding despite a year on year cut of 10% in the service budget in The Gambia.

The capacity of the Gambian Fire Service to reuse equipment was underlined here, by seeing an Avon County Council (sic) incident control room vehicle now converted to a bus still in use.

All breathing apparatus support, beyond the work crews should be doing daily is done here, as well as training crews on the importance of daily checks. There was a massive breathing apparatus room, but it did not look well maintained, and a spot check on a vehicle's kit found it dusty and unmaintained.

The officers were keen to ensure we saw and photographed the sea rescue boat from AFRS, on which the crews are also trained and is available to provide coastal rescue from the site.

Koli

This is a small single vehicle station, which also has a disused Mercedes engine donated from Germany. This vehicle is not in active service as a result of a lack of maintenance training support or parts. The station covers the Presidential palace, and tourist areas, but also covers for Serrekunda when they are engaged on a shout or when the call is to a part of Serrekunda nearer to them than the main Serrekunda station.

The breathing kit here looked reasonably well maintained. When asked, crew indicated they do check it 'fairly often', with an officer adding they do it on every shift change.

Because of the complexity of many of the buildings served by this station, compared to the traditional building, the Station lead officer said they would use their breathing apparatus more than

many. It is only a small station, but was very well maintained, and they seemed a very thorough crew, possibly elite, as they cover the Premier's, homes of senior officials and big embassies. The longest serving officer there had been in service for 12 years, the youngest, a female, just two year.

Brikama

This is a very different type of station, serving very different needs. It is the oldest station outside of Banjul, and like Koli does not have a medical centre. The population covered by this station is lower in number and less densely populated than Serrekunda, but covers a very big geographical area going right down to Gunjar and the Senegal border.

It is located in the centre of town, right in the market area, but a large and shady traditional compound. It is showing its age and is not as well decorated as the other stations. They have recently been clearing some of the very large trees from the compound.

It originally had an electric alarm, but that was not reliable and now uses a manual alarm from AFRS 3 rings = fire, 2 = road, 1= ambulance. It has one active engine and an ambulance, both out on a shout.

The station officer who showed us round had been in service for 22 years.

The engine was out on shout to a bush fire 20 mins drive away. Because this area is more rural this is the majority of their calls, the emphasis being to try to protect the villages in the vicinity. The focus will be on clearing fire breaks. Whilst the towns such as Gunjar will have a fire hydrant they struggle to provide water to deal with rural fires, as the tenders have limited capacity. They do have water tenders which will travel to and fro to provide supplementary water whilst the main tender stays on site. Many, if not all, of the tenders we saw did not have the water tanks full.

The area has a considerable volume of traditionally built property, including areas like the market adjoining the site which is entirely rush and wood. There are few taller buildings, with a lot of rush roofs rather than metal or tile. So they do not need ladder work or breathing apparatus much.

Each station has a watchroom and a log, of all movements.

The station has a French fire engine, and an ambulance given to them, as a village nearby is linked to a French village, and the French village purchased this equipment, but without a support system in terms of maintenance training and a supply of parts they cannot use it. It is not cost effective to train the maintenance team in Serrekunda for just one French engine, but in any event parts would not be available. This illustrates the importance of consistency in the supply of equipment and associated training and support from the UK.

It also underlines the importance of getting arrangements with MANN in Gambia and in UK as we have just about reached the end of the Renault engines.

The Chief at Brikama was proud of the impact they are having in fire prevention work. Whilst fire safety checks on buildings, and fire regulations are national things handled out of HQ in Banjul, the local station can do fire prevention work. They have been working hard with the local Brikama radio station, with officers going on air to give fire prevention talks, and they think it is having a significant impact.

Barra

The station at Barra dating from 1999, and adjoining river rescue service provision covers the north coast. The new road provides ease of access over long distances.

Farafenni

This station has an extensive garden, and the staff were particularly proud of their crops. There is a mechanics pit, which is deep but not covered (health and safety rules are rather different!). We were struck by the ingenuity of the mechanics in making and adapting equipment and their manifest pride in their achievements. The clinic here is particularly well used. Records showed the majority of cases were blood disease related, notably malaria. This is a large station, close to the hospital. We formally handed over the keys to a fire engine for use at this station, delivered earlier in the year.

Soma

Here we found Avon County Council roundels on current vehicles, as well as an old Bristol Airport fire engine. In all the upcountry stations there were concerns about equipment maintenance, although there were clear training schedules and maintenance routines posted up.

Kanali

This fire station is on the edge of the President's home village. The crews and station was on high alert because of a visit from the President and an international delegation scheduled for the following morning. The crews here are relatively young and selected for this particular role.