

God Uses Mali Coup, U.S. Missions Team for His Good

Jake Hill* was wrapping up an evening of Bible storytelling with a group of Malian villagers when the news came in: Soldiers were attacking Bamako, the West African country's capital city. There was heavy gunfire, even explosions. It sounded like war.

What Hill didn't know was that low-ranking soldiers from Mali's army were staging a coup d'état because they were angry over President Amadou Toumani Toure's alleged lack of support for their fight against Tuareg rebels in the north. By March 22 they had overthrown Mali's government, captured Toure's presidential palace, suspended the constitution and closed the country's borders. Hill and the church volunteer team of seven were due to fly home to the United States the next day, but now it looked like they weren't going anywhere.

It was surreal for Hill as he sat in a small, tribal village under a star-filled sky in the peaceful African bush. The Southern Baptist church where Hill serves as a middle-school youth minister recently adopted the village; this was the church's second visit. Confusion about the situation quickly set in as word about the fighting spread, making it difficult to sort rumor from truth.

"It was like a big game of telephone—everybody got different information and you don't really know what to believe," Hill said. "I remember that Wednesday (March 21) when we heard that news ... we just went over to our tents where we sleep and we just began to pray. No one was crying out of fear or anything like that. We didn't know how bad it was, but we knew we were safe out in the village."

By Friday morning, March 23, it was clear that the team wasn't

going home as planned. Soldiers had closed Bamako's airport and placed a curfew on the city. The team had already spent six days in the hot, dusty village, with no showers and only mosquito-net tents to sleep in.

"Your immediate reaction is discouragement," Hill said. "But as you talk with other team members, you start to think, 'Maybe God's got a purpose for this.'"

He did.

Coordinating with Southern Baptist workers in Mali, the team decided to remain in the village for at least another day until safe transportation to Bamako could be arranged. Hill says the team realized it was a gift—more time to spend with a people whom they dearly loved and who needed Jesus. There are roughly 200 people who live in the village by Hill's estimate, and only a dozen or so are known believers. Persecution means many are reluctant to make their faith in Jesus public.

That night, God hit Hill with inspiration. Rather than teach Bible stories himself, he should ask one of the village's believers to teach instead.

"It would be really good for the people in the village to see the leaders of the church storying and to see us there trusting that they can teach God's Word," Hill said.

The job was entrusted to a local believer named Mohammed*, a middle-aged father whose love for Jesus was evident in the demonstrative relationship he shared with his children, uncommon in this culture. A group of more than 50, including 30 children and 20 adults, gathered to hear him share the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal from 1 Kings 18.

"He teaches this story and just teaches it perfectly," Hill said. "And I think what was so perfect about it was that he was an example and model to the other people there, that they don't have to hear the gospel or come to worship or gather as

believers only when the white people are there.

“That would have never happened if we [had returned] on schedule.”

Saturday morning brought another bonus. Planning ahead for a long-term investment in the village, Hill’s team came with money to pay for the construction of a mud hut that the church’s future volunteer teams would use for cooking and storage.

“First thing after breakfast we went out and started making the mud bricks out in the hot, African sun,” Hill said. “We were stomping the mud and the straw, felt like the Israelites a little bit. ... That’s another thing we would have never gotten to do.”

Hill carved the church’s initials in a few of the bricks as they lay drying in the sun.

“We didn’t just buy our mud hut ... we actually got to be a part of the process of building it and they just loved that. Anytime they see white men try to do African work they just laugh and think it’s funny, but they’re also appreciative and respectful.

“We definitely dig into the culture when we’re there,” he added with a laugh.

Saturday afternoon the team returned to Bamako. Thankful for a shower, food and the hospitality of Southern Baptist workers, they’ve returned to their lives and loved ones back in the States. Besides adding nearly a week to their trip, Hill says the coup didn’t detract from the reason they came to Mali in the first place—to share Christ’s love.

“The only thing the [coup] really did to us was mess up our flight plan and put some tension in our minds,” he said. “We saw a lot of answers to prayer this week and saw God do a lot

of great things.

“Maybe [the coup] actually helped us because it has freaked out all our families and our friends in America, forcing them to their hands and knees to pray for us because they’re scared to death, thinking that we’re getting shot at. We’ve been out in a village and they think we’re some kind of heroes or something. But we haven’t seen anything other than people who are hungry for the Lord.”

Hill does worry the coup might deter future short-term teams.

“Even the people of the village said several times as we were leaving ... ‘Please don’t let the war and the [bad] things in Mali keep you from coming back.’ ... That’s their fear—that we will become afraid of this and not return to them.”

But taking risks is part of the cost of following Jesus, Hill said. And waiting out a coup doesn’t compare with the persecution that many Malian believers face for embracing Jesus.

“I think it would be a good slap in the face for Americans,” Hill said. “[The Bible says that] if you’re truly going to follow Jesus you may not even have a place to lay your head.

“People need to realize these aren’t just volunteer trips. This is part of the Great Commission. This is part of being on mission with God and part of the cost of following Jesus Christ. ... If you can literally say that I’m willing to do anything to bring God more glory and to build His kingdom in heaven, then I guess you’re ready to truly count the cost of following Jesus.”

*Names changed

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