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The Bag Lady



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DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO, SOUTH SUDAN

or...what do you do with 3,500 quart-size plastic zipper bags?

When I was preparing to leave the United States to return to Goma last month, I received a message from Bill asking me to bring back between three to four thousand plastic zip-lock bags to make PEP kits. PEP (Post Exposure Prophylaxis) kits are pre-packed doses of medicine given to survivors of sexual assault to prevent the transmission of diseases like STIs and HIV/Aids. Sadly, sexual assault is endemic where we work in Eastern Congo...and providing lifesaving treatment, care, and counseling to survivors of rape is a part of that

work that Bill and I are involved in. Medical treatment is only one of the elements of care, but without a 30-day course of medicine (to be started within 72 hours) a good number of these innocent victims would contract HIV/Aids, a veritable death sentence on top of the terrible ordeal they have endured. The provision of prepackaged and sealed PEP kits can be lifesaving.

The problem is, plastic bags are not available in the area where we work in Eastern Congo (DRC) and they are banned (illegal) in neighboring Rwanda, our point of entry into Congo. Thus the call for me to purchase and bring back over three thousand zip lock bags in my luggage!

The trip back to Congo took me from North Carolina to Detroit to Amsterdam to Kigali, Rwanda, where a taxi drive across that small country would bring me to the border with Congo ... and Goma (our home). However, it was a bit of a risk, knowing that such bags are illegal in Rwanda, even if I was just transiting through.

The plan was for Bill to meet me at the airport in Rwanda (en route from South Sudan) in case there were problems with the 3,500 pieces of 'contraband' I was carrying from the U.S. ... but his flight was delayed. When I touched down in Kigali the pilot announced as we were taxiing to immigration that "anyone disembarking must remove all plastic bags from their personal possession and leave them on the plane". As I watched my fellow passengers remove a few bags from their carry-on luggage, I thought of the 3,500 plastic bags in my checked luggage being off-loaded at that moment!

I remember when I became a new Christian that one of the books I loved was God's Smuggler, the story of Brother Andrew as he brought Bibles into Communist countries where they were prohibited. He is known for praying "Lord, make seeing eyes blind" before he stopped at the border of a communist country for his car to be inspected.

Now, I know plastic zip bags are not on the level of Bibles, but I did have the assurance that God was in charge. As I put my checked suitcases (over filled with plastic bags) on the luggage cart and headed out through customs, I saw a line of 8 policemen waiting to check bags. Praying for safe passage, I walked right past them, not stopping and not being stopped ... me and my 3,500 plastic quart bags.

All of the kits are packed and on the way to those who need them!