Hi! Here is another famous "group" letter to tell you about our trip to Bili. On Sat. Jan 30 we met with President Kosse, President of CECU- the Free Church in Zaire, to discuss dates for a possible trip to Bili. He is from a nearby area, speaks a closely related language and had offered to take us on an initial visit to introduce us. As we discussed dates, the fullness of his schedule was very apparent. The more we talked, it seemed the only definite opening was Feb. 5-10 - less than a week away!

Impromptu major decisions are not our forte, but we thought about it a little, discussed it briefly with Margaret & Elaine (the senior Wycliffe people here), and decided to go for it. This set in motion a lot of activity. We had to decide what we needed to take, what of that we needed to borrow, who we could borrow it from, what to do about our cook, learn phrases in Lingala we may need for the trip, get the appropriate cash, etc. (By the way, Pres. Kosse spent 3 years in Chicago studying at Trinity Seminary & speaks English, which is one reason this trip was possible at this early point in our Lingala learning.)

On Tues. we had asked Jim Fultz, another veteran translator and our friend and advisor, to come up and discuss the trip. Tim Smith, a Covenant missionary and friend, was also here. He had just talked to another missionary who was completing a long "tournee" visiting all the Covenant schools. Galin had visited Bili. He said the people were unusually hospitable and very excited about our coming. He also had broken his chassis on the TERRIBLE road that we were contemplating travelling. The Covenant pastors had recently travelled north for a conference and had gone on a roundabout route that is twice as long but in better condition because it goes through the Zairean President's home town. There is a 3rd road that the pastors had chosen not to use because of a questionable bridge that had been down, but was rumoured to have been repaired.

Tues. night was horrible! Jim had strongly recommended that we not take the kids on a long rigorous truck trip. The original plan was to spend a day and a half in transit to Bili, 3 days there, and a day and a half back. That was looking optimistic. To go the long route would take longer (2 full days each way) and be more expensive. (We took Pres. Kosse's truck, but we paid the kilometrage.) We considered leaving the kids with the Smith's, but decided it was too long a trip - and may turn out to be longer if we had trouble on the road. We considered Brian going alone, but Barb was the one who felt like she really needed to SEE Bili to be able to start planning. (Barb going alone with Pres. Kosse didn't seem like a good idea.) We thought about trying to get a flight to Goyongo, our overnight destination, and borrow a truck from there to Bili. But, you can only talk to the pilots at 6:30 am and unless we went down to the radio early the next morning it would be Thurs. when we would be asking for a flight for Fri.

Underlying all this processing was the fact that really we were Pres. Kosse's guests on this trip. He was in charge. It was his truck; he should pick the route. Missionaries were used to being in charge. The advice they had given was based on us choosing the best way to make the trip. In the end we decided that we needed to talk to Pres. Kosse first. (That eliminated an early morning trip to talk to the pilots.) We had been planning on going into town for the day anyway, and had sent a message to Kosse with Jim that we would stop by his office. We decided that depending on his estimation of the road conditions, we would: all go, Brian go and the kidsand Barb stay, or try to get a flight. Kosse was fairly confident about the 3rd route and was going to talk to the people at Goyongo that day. And so it was decided, the Schrag family was going to attempt what some people made sound nearly impossible, to drive (ok really to ride) from Gemena to Bili!

Well, truthfully the build up was more dramatic than the trip. Pres. Kosse is a good driver. He always leaves late because one more person HAS to talk to him. The roads were bad, but only terrible in spots. We only used 4wheel drive for a minute on the way up. He even reached 60 kph at times, but then he's a fast driver. We actually left Gemena at 8:30. (We were ready at 7.) We stopped for about an hour in Karawa and arrived at Goyongo at 5. The kids did great. The questionable bridge was rickety, but passable. In Goyongo, we stayed in an empty missionary house and ate with the Woods- the only missionaries in residence now. Goyongo is a cluster of schools, including a seminary. The Woods will retire 7/94, and it's not sure if anyone will replace them.

Sat. we drove to Bili, about a 3hr drive. We stopped at the first Mono village, Kelo, where the church was decorated with palm frond arches and strings of bright yellow flowers. We were served tea, and fish and rice, and continued on. When we first got into Bili there were some cement buildings for stores (called "magasins"(magazen) here.) We came to a big palm arch across the road with more flowers and a man waiting with a bicycle. He asked us to slow down and sped ahead to let them know we were here. When we got to the turn from the main road to the church, there was a long line of people along the path to the church. We got out and shook hands with hundreds as they sang and waved flowers and palm branches. It was very moving and also a bit surreal.

Then there was a church service, what else! In the Ubangi, every occasion warrants a "losambo" and most meetings basically become a service. Actually this one was cut short. (I think we must have looked exhausted.) There was lots of singing, a formal welcome proclamation, we were introduced by President Kosse and Brian even said a few words. More singing, but no offering and no sermon. We had lunch with the Pastors and their wives and set up "camp."

There are 4 Mono pastors and one more who works for the denomination in Gemena. Here, Pastor is a title signifying a seminary education, not necessarily a job or position. We stayed in the house we will live in. It is 18 1/2' by 25 1/2', about 6 x 8 meters. It has 2 bedrooms, a large "salon", and off the salon 2 smaller rooms. (Into one there is a 6ft arched opening.) The walls are all 8' ft high. There are no ceilings, but it's open up to the roof which peaks at at least twice that height. The roof is thatch, from inside it looks like a wood frame with mats on top of it. The walls are all white, with mud packed underneath. (Like adobe.) There are no interior doors, we just hang curtains in the bedroom doorways.

We looked briefly at a Taba Zaire (the local tobacco company) house which is for rent.. A huge, cement house with many hours of electricity daily, running water, fully furnished and far from any Mono people! Taba Zaire has a big center with many such houses, well spread on a beautiful estate more than a kilometer out of the opposite end of town from the protestant church. Oh well, they do have an airstrip we can use and a very good garage with parts and mechanics. We did write them a letter asking about the possibility of buying some furniture.

I think that's about all for now. The whole experience was very numbing. There was the excitement of this is where we're going to be, the people we'll know and work with, the language we'll speak, etc. On the flip side it was also sobering: can we really do this? live like this? learn this language? I think we can, but there's always that moment of terror when we know we'll only make it with God. And, of course, that's the good part, because He's the one who got us into this in the first place, and he knows all the problems AND their solutions already. Yeah God!