

You may remember that early this year Chris French was involved in a road accident in Malawi as a result of which a woman sadly died. The following account is taken from a report to fellow trustees and is given, together with lessons to be learned, in the hope that it will forewarn others.

“In Malawi there are ‘procedures’. I am glad to say I knew what those procedures were and was able to conform to them, though I did not necessarily think the order of occurrence was the best. Many people say that one should drive on and report to the police, but the question to be asked is ‘Can you actually do that?’ I could not. I knew there was a risk of being lynched, but I did stop to put her in the pick-up and go to the police point, even though it was in the opposite direction to the hospital. I certainly was not prepared for what happened at the hospital, where she was literally dragged out of the back of the ambulance onto a stretcher and consequently died of her injuries.

I was glad that I had a Malawian SIM card in my telephone, thus enabling me to phone my son-in-law, Matt, without going through the international system, and glad that he knew the system of recompensing the bereaved family.

I found the police kind and helpful, but they were nonetheless determined to do their duty and take me through their requirements. In my case it was a vehicle check in Blantyre and then to the police headquarters to be interviewed before taking me back to the crash site for an accident report and an inspection of skid marks and the width of the road. This took a long time, and there was no way it was going to be circumvented because of being a white man.

The next stage, I think, was potentially the most dangerous for me. The policeman dealing with me realised he possibly had to return with me to Blantyre, after which he would have been required to find his own way back to his post and home. This would have been risky and very late for him, so he arranged for me to be taken by someone else, to which I in retrospect foolishly agreed.

I had already met the policeman who was given the task of driving me back to Blantyre, and he seemed friendly, which meant he was co-opted into doing other jobs on the way. This was initially fine; all these visits went ahead and everything seemed in order. We then took a back road to the airport and I became concerned about our true destination. Prior to this I had phoned Matt to tell him where I was so he would have some idea. When we took the back road to the airport I phoned him but couldn’t describe where we were at this juncture I wished I had in place some sort of password to indicate my concern. Thankfully we arrived safely at the police station, where I was charged and bailed and was advised by everyone including the police to plead guilty, even though it went against the grain. Two days later, in court, I was fined and allowed home.”

Lessons

- Discover the requirements expected from foreigners when in a fatal accident (don’t rely on expat knowledge). This includes the expectations of the bereaved family as well as those of the authorities; don’t leave it to the moment.
- Always advise someone where you are going and by which route. Have a local SIM card in the telephone with plenty of credit available. Carry the number of the I.M.P. office and the British Embassy telephone numbers with you just in case you don’t get sympathetic policemen.
- Don’t get impatient with the authorities; you are going to lose a couple of days.
- Take plenty of advice about the plea in court from the authorities, reliable local people and expats.
- Carry with you things such as blood group details and any allergy information in case you are injured.
- You cannot cover every eventuality, but you can be prepared and it is sensible to be so.
- *Be aware that country requirements will be different. Please don’t rely on hearsay about what to do.*